

Founding Address of SOFAS

(Opening Greeting, SOFAS Kobe 2026, 24 September 2026)

Atmospheric Studies: A Plural Field of Possibilities

Yuho Hisayama (Kobe, Japan)

When I began working on cross-cultural phenomenology of atmosphere at TU Darmstadt under the supervision of Gernot Böhme, there was no broad platform bringing together the different strands of research on atmosphere across cultures and disciplines. There were important traditions and initiatives, but no common forum in which they could readily meet. To work on atmosphere then was, to an extent, to work alone. Yet one conviction was clear: atmosphere was a subject of real importance, and one that could be adequately explored only across cultures and across disciplines.

Many years later, this inaugural conference in Kobe marks the founding of precisely such a platform. Scholars, artists, and practitioners from different backgrounds are gathering to establish the Society for Atmospheric Studies, SOFAS. That so many are coming together here from far and wide—and that others are joining us online across many time zones—is something we do not take for granted, and something for which we are deeply grateful.

The theme of our first meeting is “New Frontiers and Possibilities in Atmospheric Studies.” Atmosphere is not simply one more object to be added to the existing catalogue of research. Atmospheric experience unsettles several of the distinctions on which modern institutionalised scholarship has long relied, and its intellectual promise lies precisely in that unsettling.

Consider first the distinction between subject and object, beginning with a familiar question: Is an atmosphere a private feeling, or does it belong to the surrounding world? A tense atmosphere may be sensed by several people in a room at once, and yet be experienced bodily and differently by each. Atmosphere belongs neither wholly within us nor wholly outside us. We do not stand before atmospheres and observe them; we find ourselves “always already” affected by, and involved in, them.

It likewise exceeds the familiar division of the senses. The conventional model of the so-called “five senses” is historically and culturally specific. A “bright voice,” a “heavy silence,” a “cold atmosphere”: such expressions suggest that atmospheric perception often operates synaesthetically, before or across its division into separate senses. To study atmosphere is also to ask how lived-bodily perception is organised at a more fundamental level.

It also unsettles the separation of space and time. Atmospheres are commonly understood

in spatial terms: they surround us, fill rooms, settle over landscapes. Yet they are no less temporal. A coming storm may already be present as *kehai*, a Japanese word for the felt sign of something that is not yet there or is no longer there—something approaching, or something that has departed but still lingers as resonance or trace. Atmosphere belongs to a lived time-space, a “thick present,” in which anticipation and withdrawal are woven together.

And it complicates the distinction between sensibility and intellect. What we feel is shaped by what we know, remember, and expect—consciously or unconsciously. The atmosphere of a historical place, for example, may be profoundly shaped by our knowledge of what happened there. Feeling and understanding are neither clearly divided nor opposed; in atmospheric experience they are often inseparably intertwined.

Atmosphere thus repeatedly crosses these boundaries. Part of the conceptual elusiveness of atmosphere lies precisely in its refusal to remain within these divisions. Various strands of what is often called postmodern thought have sought, in different ways, to unsettle or move beyond such divisions. The study of atmosphere, however, allows us to pursue this effort through the concrete textures of everyday experience. Atmosphere brings us to the threshold between what can be described and what can only be sensed.

Along similar lines, breath is one place where the literal and lived senses of atmosphere meet without being merged. In the rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, we take in the air that sustains the body and find ourselves in the mood of a room, a city, a season. To breathe is already to be exposed to what surrounds us, and to share in something that no one privately owns. In this way, breathing reminds us that bodies are porous, and that this porosity is not a failure of boundedness but a condition of atmospheric experience.

Atmospheres, however, are not only matters of comfort, harmony, or beauty. We may be carried by them, absorbed into them, manipulated through them, even governed by them. Political, economic, social, and technological life is shaped by forms of atmospheric power, including, in some contexts, what has been called atmospheric violence—forms of power that are especially difficult to recognise because they often work indirectly: invisibly, seductively, or under the appearance of ease and gentleness. Atmospheric Studies must therefore be descriptive and critical at once, asking how atmospheres orient behaviour, distribute attention, exercise power, and shape inclusion and exclusion. Such knowledge can move readily from analysis to design, and that passage calls for critical reflection on the purposes, conditions, and consequences of shaping atmospheres. This is, in the end, a question of agency: how can we sustain the possibility of responsible action without returning to the fiction of a subject wholly detached from the atmospheres that affect us, sustain us, and at times overpower us?

Nor is it incidental that this society is being founded now. We meet at a time when international cooperation itself has become fragile in many parts of the world. We meet as

artificial intelligence and virtual environments make it increasingly possible to generate and personalise immersive environments—and with them to modulate atmospheres—by design. And we meet while the physical atmosphere in the most literal sense—the air we breathe and the planetary conditions that sustain life—is undergoing profound transformation. Of course, these are very different phenomena. Yet each reminds us, in its own register, that what surrounds us is never merely a passive background. Atmospheres shape how worlds become perceptible, habitable, desirable, threatening, or shared. The mood of a political moment, the engineered environments of digital media, and the changing conditions of the planetary atmosphere all pose, in different ways, the question of how human and more-than-human life takes place within conditions that both exceed us and act upon us. At such a moment, the study of atmosphere is not a luxury. It is a way of asking how we inhabit a shared world, and how that world is being transformed.

SOFAS should not bind Atmospheric Studies to a single worldview. The plural in “Atmospheric Studies” is far more than a grammatical choice. It expresses a methodological and institutional commitment to multiplicity and polyphony: to a field that grows through different perspectives, traditions, practices, and forms of knowledge, and through the encounters—and sometimes the disagreements—between them.

We want SOFAS to be cross-cultural. Our vocabularies of atmosphere are themselves historically situated and culturally inflected, and there are many terms through which atmospheric or respiratory experience can be approached: *Atmosphäre*, *Stimmung*, *ambiance*, *mood*, *qifēn*, *fun'iki*, *qi* and *ki*, *prāṇa*, *pneuma*, *spiritus*, *Geist*. These terms are not equivalents, nor do they belong to exactly the same conceptual register. That is precisely why their differences, asymmetries, and partial untranslatability can become resources for thought. Even the Japanese name of this society, *Fun'iki Gakkai*, is not a perfect equivalent of its English name; that non-equivalence is not a defect to be corrected, but something to think with.

Now I am using English, and much of our work together will be conducted in it. This is a practical necessity, not a claim of linguistic priority. English, like every language, brings with it particular ways of articulating what can be felt and said. Some of us, myself included, are speaking in a language we did not grow up in, and some of what matters most will be easier to say in another. Let us be patient with one another—with hesitations, with words left in their original form, with meanings that arrive slowly—and treat the effort of translation as part of the work itself rather than a preliminary to it.

We also want SOFAS to be cross-disciplinary. Of course, it does not begin on empty ground, for it takes its place within a rich intellectual landscape shaped by New Phenomenology and the aesthetics of atmospheres, everyday aesthetics, somaesthetics, research on architectural

and urban ambiances, Sensory Studies, Respiratory Philosophy, affect theory, enactivism, environmental humanities and many neighbouring fields and initiatives in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences alike. Its purpose is not to replace these traditions or networks, but to create a shared space in which they can encounter one another across disciplinary boundaries.

The contributions gathered at this inaugural conference already show how broad this field can be: from philosophy and phenomenology to literature, visual culture, sound, performance, and digital media, including video games; from architectural, urban, and ecological atmospheres to political, technological, medical, and historical questions; and from martial arts, calligraphy, and other embodied practices to theoretical reflection. The programme also moves across forms, from written scholarship to the exhibition and performances that accompany our meeting. What holds these approaches together is not a single theory, but a shared willingness to take atmospheres seriously: as dimensions of experience, as forces that shape our relations with the world and with one another, and as occasions for rethinking established forms of knowledge. Together, they invite us to attend more closely to the tenuous yet forceful dimensions of our shared worlds.

A society, however, is not only a way of thinking; it is also a set of practices. Over these days we will adopt our regulations, introduce our yearbook, *Atmosphaerica*, hold our first general assembly, and give the floor to early-career researchers whose work will carry this field further than any of us can now foresee. The Kobe Institute for Atmospheric Studies, KOIAS, is pleased to offer a home for this first gathering, which has been made possible by the JSPS Core-to-Core Program and by the generous support of our sponsors and partner institutions. To all of them we are sincerely grateful. But SOFAS belongs to no single institution, country, tradition, or discipline. It belongs to those who take part in it. Our hope is that the circle beginning here will continue to widen: across cultures, disciplines, and generations.

Against the relative isolation of those early years, the sight of such a community gathered here is nothing short of extraordinary. Thank you so much for coming, for sharing your work, and for helping to bring SOFAS into being—a mode of being that could hardly be anything but atmospheric, hopefully in the best possible sense.

Welcome to Kobe.

Welcome to SOFAS.