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## Short Circuit

# We Can't Breathe

Kasia Ozga



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### Interview and Introduction by Anna Jamieson.

IN THE SPRING OF 2015, INSTALLATION ARTIST KASIA OZGA PRESENTED *WE CAN'T BREATHE* AT LA GALERU, FONTENAY-SOUS-BOIS, NEAR PARIS. Ozga's installation featured two inflatable metre-tall lungs, made from flimsy red parachute fabric, that expanded and contracted at regular intervals. Rising and falling against lurid pink walls, the lungs and wider installation could be encountered in two ways; either within the gallery space, where viewers experience the mechanical sounds of a motorised leaf blower; or externally, visible through the large windows from the street outside. In this way, the building itself is animated, the kinetic sculpture acting as an organ that allows it to breathe. The effortless act of breathing becomes a dramatic, performative act, framed within the spectacle of the suburban Parisian space, as the installation can now be viewed via a video that functions like an archive, documenting both the installation and responses to the sculpture. Its attendant performativity therefore, warrants a reaction, an audience, a crowd.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the social relevance of Ozga's work complicates a ready interpretation of the lungs as metaphors merely for the action of breathing. The materiality of the installation disrupts this simplified idea further, signifying and questioning wider issues about the slippages between, not just sculptural form and exhibition space, but machine and organism, science and politics. These familiar interstices are theorised in Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), which rejects the superimposed boundaries between machine and body. Rather, Haraway calls for the entanglement of these two

putatively oppositional forms, stressing how contemporary machines embody ambiguities between the natural and artificial. This, in turn, highlights an unsettling reality: 'our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert'.<sup>2</sup>

The materialism of Ozga's lungs — part motorised mechanism, part squishy, familiar material, reminiscent of soft play areas — raises wider questions surrounding embodiment. As a whole, the installation explores the social, cultural and political implications of artworks which function across the unsteady, provocative world of machine-cum-organism; or as Ozga describes it, the combination of the 'organic and the technical'. By reading her art installation through Haraway's argument, which identifies the cyborg as both a 'fiction mapping our social and bodily reality' and 'an imaginative resource', we can situate her work within a space where fiction and reality are blurred together, whilst precluding typical notions of public and private.<sup>3</sup> Ozga's installation, like Haraway's cyborg, becomes a coded device, rife with social and political implications which colour the viewer's perception of the piece and the overlapping 'places' it occupies and evokes — from the physical space of the gallery to the sociological positioning of the viewer, mobilizing the inherent social responsibility of our own bodies within the wider political discontent and environmental challenges. These themes are all crucial to Ozga's practice; in this sense, emphasizing the inability to breathe becomes a mark of socially engaged artistic interventions in the urban sphere.

**Anna Jamieson:** What came first: your idea for a kinetic sculpture, or to create a piece centring around breathing and the lungs?

Kasia Ozga: It was a convergence of things. I was interested in exploring the lungs, and here was a way to work with that concept and to transform this small static building into something active. I liked the idea of physically activating the space. Most of the installations within it were static. By injecting movement in and around the [gallery] space, in this central part of town, I wanted to emphasize the installation's participatory potential.

I was also thinking about scale. It's something I work on a lot; making objects, organs or extremities from our body on a monumental scale. And then, more questions: what kind of metaphor can that take? By housing these lungs within this building with these windows, it brings to mind the idea of the house itself as a body, evoking further interpretations and ideas for the viewer.

**Q.:** Could you elaborate on the materials and techniques used in the installation?

I first created a paper sculpture of the two lungs that took into account the proportions of the gallery space and windows. I then cut the prototype into a paper pattern that I scaled up to size using the red parachute fabric. At the same time, I collaborated with a sound engineer on the electronic components of the work. We disassembled a leaf blower and attached the motor to an arduino controller to mimic the breathing rhythm. I also built a tube structure from PVC pipe to deliver air from the motor to the soft sculpture. Finally, I painted the walls of the interior of the gallery space and hung and lit the work.

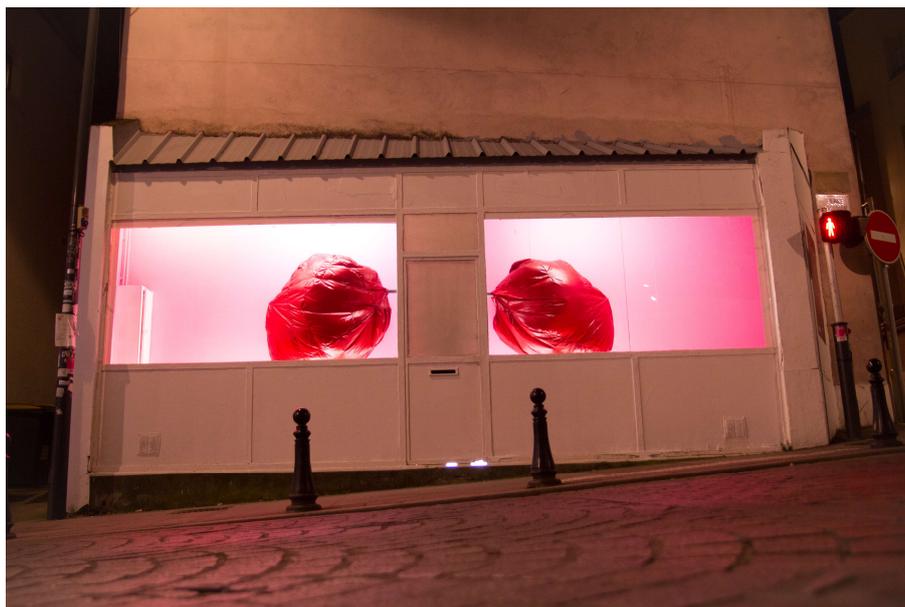


Figure 1. *We Can't Breathe*, 2015 © Kasia Ozga. Image courtesy of the artist.

**Q.:** There's an intriguing relationship within the installation between the natural and mechanical sounds of breathing; a sense that the natural sound of breathing is embodied within the piece, ostensibly replaced by the drone of the leaf blower. Was this a deliberate choice?

I wanted people to associate the installation and sculpture with their own breathing, in that the sound of their breathing becomes attuned with the object, bringing them back to the body and the breath. It's not about an external experience, but rather the relationship between this metaphor and their own bodies. The concurrent and overlapping nature of the viewer's and the machine's 'breathing' patterns also evokes the porous boundary between the organic and the technical, as explored in Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*.

**Q.:** How do you consider the theme of embodiment within your work?

It's a central part of my practice, in the sense that for me the human body is not only a screen through which we see the world, but also a mechanism that enables us to interact with and change the world. It's an interface. So when I use a part or an organ of the human body to represent a theme through my artwork, it's because I want to think about an essential part of our existence as human beings, and that we all share. Furthermore, this leads me to reflect on the ways in which our perception of the outside world is shaped by cultural, political and social questions. We can use our physical presence in the world to address those questions through praxis: in turn activity informed by critical reflection.

I see the human body as not merely a screen through which we see the world, but also as a mechanism that enables us to interact with and change the world (alluding to Merleau-Ponty's sensory objects and objects to be sensed). It is an interface produced from an accumulation of parts and an extension of the senses. When I use a part of the

human body in my artwork, it's a form of synecdoche, through which I explore an essential, shared part of our existence as human beings. By referencing lungs but also alluding to the form of the human heart and the pulse that animates the body, the installation *We Can't Breathe* confronts the viewer with a larger-than-life representation of human organs at work.

In a cultural landscape dominated by ever-present disembodied information shared via virtual media, I am interested in how the related notions of embodiment, incarnation, and presence represent the transformation of thought into action by physical means. By locating and activating my installation in a concrete place over a set period of time, I foreground the physicality of the organs themselves and the processes they participate in. Located behind glass, as though in a display case, the work literally and metaphorically reflects the body of the viewer, who is encouraged to identify with the piece, re-enacting the self-awareness of one's embodiment that manifests in Lacan's mirror stage. The piece confronts an easily understood representation of a body with the shared tangible reality of urban space, insisting that everyone has an experience of both of these even though that experience is complicated by cultural, political and social factors. I maintain that we can use our common physical presence in the world to address injustice through praxis, activity informed by critical reflection.

When making this work, I was really interested in thinking about the La Galeru building as a body in relation to a piece by the artist Erwin Wurm (*Fat House*, 2003) that is both a home and a work of art. Wurm explores the ambiguous relation between interior and exterior; for the artist, a home is a shelter that protects us while preserving our status/safety/health within. In my work, I anthropomorphize an exhibition space by giving it a pair of lungs, rather than a speaking mouth. The edifice as a whole becomes a body among other bodies. I ask if buildings were bodies, what would they breathe in and out? What (social, political, urban) conditions allow some buildings and bodies to flourish and others to decay?

**Q.:** If we think of breathing as part of this interface, another way to experience both the body and society's relationship to their political and cultural environment, how does breathing relate to these social, political and environmental issues?

It's a fundamental physical process, but at the same time it's ultimately ethereal. Palpable; yet, at times barely visible. And whilst the results of breathing are observable, there is something in the moment itself that is almost magical, not easy to think about in concrete terms. In this sense, it represents a liminal space, a space for the imagination and interpretation, where there is room to be creative, to project different ideas upon that space, but also to interact with the world in different ways. It's a poetic space that is also tied to a material reality. It can evoke opposing notions such as the beginning and end of life and moments of sublime inspiration, while tying these reflections to the here and now, to the breaths that I am taking as I respond to your questions.

**Q.:** The video you made about the installation, which is a form of

documentation of the artwork and its viewers, shows the interplay between public and private and therefore carries a sense of trespassing, as you are viewing an internal organ that you don't usually see in this scale, and in the form of a sculpture. Did you hope to elicit this reaction from the viewer? And how did people ultimately react?

People reacted in a variety of ways; some walked right by, staring at their smartphone and others stopped and laughed or looked confused, or turned around the corner to read the [caption on the] wall that explained the project.

There's definitely a sense of potentially unsettling the voyeur, but at the same time, there is a carnivalesque aspect of this balloon-like form that appears at regular intervals, where you have to wait for it to inflate and come down. So it's almost representing opposite tendencies, inspiring joy through this balloon, carnival idea, and something very big, red, deformed, interior, oozing. I wouldn't say it provokes disgust, that's too strong, but definitely something strange.

**Q.:** Can we talk about your choice to create an inflatable work?

This was the first time I had made an inflatable work. I had just seen inflatable (union) rats in New York for the first time, had been looking at work by Annette Messenger, Nils Völker, and Jimmy Kuehnle, and I wanted to explore inflation as a re-occurring process. Would it have been different if I had made some kind of animatronic work, which is a soft sculpture on a hard kinetic armature, instead? Perhaps. But I liked the idea of inflation because there is something so simple about it. There's an economy of means. It is just air, a motor and fabric. In sculpture in general, and in the works I'm making now, there's frequently this question of armature and skin. Here, there is no armature. The armature is ethereal, constantly moving, in the form of air. So it challenges what we normally associate with sculpture.

I'm also interested in how far we can get away from 'sculpture'. Can a sculpture be anything? Does it need to have something there to remain as a representation of the human body.

**Q.:** In terms of monumentality, it's interesting to think of how the work functions as a monument when it is deflated.

For me, the sculpture is the whole building. The pink of the interior walls, the object itself, the mechanism. The deflated work brings to mind Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's original Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks from 1969; an anti-monument in which a monumental tube of lipstick was blown up like a balloon when student protestors used the sculpture as a stage for protests including rallies against the Vietnam War. Whereas inflation evokes vitality and virility, deflation evokes weakness and impotence. As such, the deflated lungs recall those who are powerless and oppressed in our contemporary world and while the work itself arouses all of us into action on their behalf.

**Q.:** What was the inspiration for the title of the installation, *We Can't Breathe*?

I had been to a protest about the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, and it was a slogan which people kept shouting within the Black Lives Matter movement. It seemed like a really apt metaphor. I think I had the idea for the sculpture before I had the title. I wanted the work to have a general relationship with the body, but also a specific relationship to that specific moment in time. I was and continue to be very concerned about police violence in the US and oppressive policing tactics, so it was something I wanted to highlight. Not in a way that would make the work a direct denunciation of the situation, but more something that would invite people to reflect on the status quo. What does it mean for someone not to be able to breathe in an urban context? What social and political structures, decisions or situations contribute to that? How are we complicit in that? It is an invitation to reflect on that: as breathing both as a very physical thing, but also breathing and existing in space. What makes that possible? What makes us able to fully breathe in a situation and what constricts breathing? What makes some bodies able to deploy themselves with full autonomy in some spaces and what makes other bodies have to constrain their movement?

**Q.:** So breathing becomes a metaphor for social activism?

Yes, I was interested in this metaphor of social questions, in relation to policing. But when the work went up, the interpretation in the media was more related to the environmental questions. I think it was the time of the Paris Climate Accord meeting, so these issues were in the air. So a lot of interpretation was that it was a denunciation of the polluted air in Paris.

**Q.:** And you were relaxed about that interpretation?

I think that a work is just an object I put in a space; it is co-curated between the object, the space it is in and the viewer. It's out of my hands. If I'm able to inspire people to interpret it in different ways that's fine. I think these interpretations change. It's interesting for me to see those initial reactions, depending on the context the work is in, followed by the video documenting this. I think if people read about it that will inspire a plurality of interpretations.

**Q.:** Another metaphor the work suggests is the passing of time. Is that something you think about in your wider sculptural work?

We think of sculpture as distinct from video or time-based media, and that 'sculpture is more about space'. But I don't think that's true. Because sculpture installation occupies a space for a certain amount of time, and it has a specific relationship to time in terms of its duration, it ends up inspiring questions about how long things last, how long we want them to last, and how much time we devote to them. There are a lot of questions relating to time that static, or not so static, work can evoke.

**Q.:** What about the sculpture's ephemerality? Whilst it exists now through its video documentation, what about its physical aftermath, within an archive or a specific space? And how does this relate to some of your practice-based questions about the environment and our relationship with it?

I definitely conceived this as a sculpture for “X” number of weeks within the space. If I had had the space for a year, I don't think I would have made the same kind of work. I wanted it to be strange and unsettling, but also a beautiful spectacle that people would stumble upon, before it disappeared. The space is now taken over by different projects, so the work is now a memory; that at one moment, this house was breathing.

**Q.:** So the space becomes layered, like a palimpsest? And in that sense, the breathing of the lungs, and the layers of breath, imbue the space with memory?

When I look at the video and see the people walking around it and stopping, there's really the sense of everything being together. The movement of the building, the people and the sculpture — they are inseparable. In terms of time, there's so much regularity to people's day-to-day. And the regularity of the breathing is part of that, until it stops. And what does it mean for a body to be alive, and then not? How can an artwork connect to those of us living and breathing in the space around it?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kasia Ozga's *We Can't Breathe* is on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/122677701>.
- <sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), p. 160.
- <sup>3</sup> Haraway, p. 156

## Works Cited

Haraway, Donna, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).