

Editorial



IN ITS FUNDAMENTAL ROLE TO BIND THE HUMAN BEING TO LIFE AND NATURE, THE FIGURATIVE MEANING OF BREATHING HAS TRANSITIVE QUALITIES. It is inspired by a multicultural approach to wellbeing, and it effects a plurality of approaches to ways in which meanings are generated.

Breathing is an act that is life-giving and life-sustaining, but we might also see it as an expression of an irreducible self; ‘breath as personhood’. In speaking about selfhood in relation to her reconciliation with her terminal illness in a 2002 interview, author Carol Shields commented that death is just ‘a breath away’, that the person goes right up to it; a choice that underlines the crucial place of breath in our relationship to ourselves, as that transition point from life to death, but also, its place on the very edge of those dimensions.¹

In exploring the multiple planes of breathing in artistic productions, the contributors to the Autumn Volume of *Dandelion* consider many expressions of personhood and its invocations: thus each, in a unique way, activates the agile and supple sensibilities of breathing both as a verb, in the continuous present, and as a concept.

Breathing is endowed with transformative qualities. While this theme immediately speaks to us about the air we breathe, the polluted environments we inhabit, and the changing climate we confront daily in the raging elements, it also injects new life into ideas related to embodied worlds – be these experimental narratives, interactive media, expanded cinemas, or poetic forms – among others. Throughout its cross-pollinating offshoots, and in its forging interconnections amongst disparate and discrete, yet whole, entities breathing inspires our imaginary and appeals to the human sensorium.

Breathing moves, animates – it affects. It may imply malleability and mobility and become a metaphor, as it does in Masuda Qureshi’s article ‘Mobile, Malleable, and Modified: Tapestry in Early Modern Literature’, which inspires and re-weaves a new approach to the history and narrative of tapestry. For Qureshi, tapestry as a physical object becomes alive through the writer’s and reader’s inspired revelations.

Pauline Suwanban’s ‘From Exhalation to Transformation: The Female Body in the Orientalist Romance’ tells us about the heroines’ erotic romances

and their experience of sexual desire, when sigh, speech and exclamation cause corporeal changes. We read about breath as a powerful means of expression; giving breath to a female character means giving her the power *to* express, *to* exist. The female body is daring, for it can challenge gender norms, and notions of fixed gendered bodies and sexual difference.

Greta Adorni's 'Breathing Through the Medium: Representations of Refugees in Contemporary Art' lays out a substantial analysis of contemporary artistic representations of refugees, including the functioning of breath as both affect and metaphor. Drawing on Jill Bennett's notion of 'empathic vision', but also on Giorgio Agamben's philosophical take on biopolitics and the 'Muselmann', Adorni's article shows us the significant possibilities that exist for a complex, layered and powerful encounter with the ongoing humanitarian crisis through the dynamism of affect and thought that artworks can mobilize for us. Bennett's theory, which Adorni sees evoked by the examined artworks, is based not simply on feeling something for someone, or imagining how this would be, but rather in feeling something for someone when it is difficult to feel it.² The artistic representations of refugees identified here by Adorni seek to activate this form of empathy, which is potentially generative of a socially-aware political dimension. Thus, we may sense breath emerging as not only a foundational sign of life, but also a sign of the precariousness of that life – indefatigably pivoting and hovering around matter and body, tugging and tearing at their sides, and living in the interstices of worlds apart, yet ensuring an active looking within spaces that promise critical encounters.

Through Christine Slobogin's art review 'Breathless Rictus: Ken Currie's *Krankenhaus*', and Anna Jamieson's interview of artist Kasia Ozga 'We Can't Breathe' about her eponymous time-based sculpture installation, we are introduced to two very different artworks that draw their affective power from the literal viscerality of breathing. This emerges most notably from the arrested breath of Slobogin's contribution, whose critical enquiry conjures up macabre visions of medical bodily interventions, and from the encounter of the grotesque with the metaphysical in Jamieson's interview. Through Slobogin's review, we witness the dissection of a single painting, in which the precarity of breath – that belonging to the figures in the painting, the viewer in the gallery, and to some extent, the reader – surfaces again and again as we encounter a kind of nightmare of affect.

In Jamieson's interview of Ozga, we can appreciate the multivalence of breathing stemming out of the idea of the art object as a form of embodiment, conjoined with the artist's symbolic use of materials. In 'We Can't Breathe', breathing is counter-intuitively connoted by performative and participatory action. In our unsettling reality, as Donna Haraway writes: 'our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert'. Ozga's fascinating yet grotesque mechanistic sculpture of two gigantic inflatable lungs interrogates the flexible potentials, and at the same time the limits, of both machine and organism, art gallery and urban spaces.³

Indeed, in many ways, *breathing* promotes the union of the physical to the metaphysical; it raises questions of shifting spatiotemporal boundaries, and of a partial erosion of the empirical constraints that we may experience as digital beings; yet, it also sheds new light on thinking about those constraints in liminal and interstitial ways.

The theme of artificial breathing, the mechanical extension of human life, together with images of encased lungs, cosmic constellations and domestic objects are how artists Judy Goldhill and Fay Ballard enunciate their journey

through their personal memories of parental loss. In her essay 'Air, Light and Matter Recalled' Judy Goldhill writes:

As I watched I felt that I was witnessing a tempest; the elements were wild, the sun rages through the wind and cloud. It was mesmeric. I read this force of nature as a metaphor for the breath of life that united my father and me.

The art exhibition *Breathe* was held at the Freud Museum (London) between May and July this year, and Carly Robinson's and Elizabeth Pimentel de Çetin's joint review of this exhibition, *Breathe: Making the Invisible Visible* provides an insightful and sensitive interpretation of forms of grief, its expression in art, and the ways in which it can invoke breath as 'a way forward' – while navigating personal histories and experiences of mourning and melancholia.

Dylan Williams' poems around the theme, and his methodological approach to creative writing, which is also somewhat ironic, provides a compelling and evocative meditation on the emotions, particularly anxiety, to which breathing attends and the ways in which the natural and spontaneous act of breathing is implicated while attending to ordinary and at times compelling tasks.

By drawing on installation artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and on feminist theorist and media artist Trinh T. Minh-ha, Donatella Valente's video essay 'Breathing in Apichatpong' reflects on the technical abilities of the video camera to 'breathe', which is to write and reshape space, and create a woman's 'fourth dimension' where she locates a new realm of awareness and activity. Through her 'seeing and being' in the digital domain, poised between stillness and speed, woman thus outlines a new video aesthetic.⁵

Finally, through the critical reflections brought together in this issue, and beyond them — in the films, art installations, sculptures, drawings, paintings, histories, writings, videos and photographs on which they draw — *Dandelion* seeks to invoke a meditative journey, and a dynamic and affective encounter with the symbolic, metaphorical, and metonymical interpretations of breathing, outlining its interdisciplinary parameters and affording a rich exploration of what it means to breathe, through the arts.

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Cover Image

Spiration, Suffolk. © Judy Goldhill. Courtesy of the Freud Museum.

Notes

- ¹ Carol Shields and Eleanor Wachtel, 'Ideas of Goodness', in Eleanor Wachtel, *Random Illuminations: Conversations with Carol Shields* (New Brunswick, Canada: Goose Lane Editions, 2007), pp. 179-180.
- ² Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision* (Stanford (Calif.): Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 10.
- ³ You can view Kasia Ozga's video *We Can't Breathe* on the artist's website: <http://kasiazozga.com/portfolio/we-cant-breathe/>.
- ⁴ Fay Ballard and Judy Goldhill, *Breathe: Exhibition Catalogue* (London: Freud Museum, 2018), p. 38.
You can view Judy Goldhill's video *Pneuma* on the artist's website: <http://www.judygoldhill.com/work/Images/47/pneuma/slideshow/1/>.
- ⁵ You can view Donatella Valente's video essay on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6INCp2jq2M>

Works Cited

- Ballard, Fay and Judy Goldhill, *Breathe: Exhibition Catalogue* (London: Freud Museum, 2018)
- Bennett, Jill, *Empathic Vision* (Stanford (Calif.): Stanford University Press, 2005)
- Wachtel, Eleanor, *Random Illuminations: Conversations with Carol Shields* (New Brunswick, Canada: Goose Lane Editions, 2007)