

BREATHING/SPEAKING

*While breathing, we touch this world.
While dreaming, we create this world.*

Noritoshi Hirakawa, 2017.

Have you ever been by someone's side as they took their last breath?

My grandmother's last breath was a physiological event distinguished by a poetic rhythm. My close and absorbed analysis recorded her long drawn-out, deep and laborious breathing as innnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn ouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuut innnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn ouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuut. The labour of breathing; its composition, arrangement and its gaps indicated the end was near and when the final breath came it did so suddenly and loudly – a deep groan more than a breath.

There is another kind of breathing at birth. Birth is a very different physiological event from death when I consider the three births and one death I have been present at. The first birth my own, I have no recollection of (and yet I exist as a result of). The second birth was my daughter's and the third my son's; their first breath coincided with their first utterance, a cry, the sign of life. The first breath conjured a message in communion with the world, the uttering of *I am here*. The first breath is the first stanza. The last breath, a groan, brings silence signalling a departure; the end of the poem.

Here, I have drawn a relationship between the breath and poetry. This coupling encompasses the breaths relationship to words, to speaking. This poetic relationship is also a philosophical one defined by Gaston Bachelard as 'poetic breathing', where words are formed through the act of breathing: "[...] speaking quietly, rapidly, shouting, whispering, intoning – we would discover an incredible multiplicity of poetic breathing. [...] an economy of breathing at work."

Initiated in the first breath are the conditions of human intimacy. The first breath is after all like our first word. Bachelard saw the breath as one with the speech act: "It is really breath that speaks [...] then the lips gently separate and seem to aspirate the air." This notion of *breath speaking* is also explored by Judith Butler in her examination of the poetry written by Guantanamo Bay prisoners: "What I sense is the ultimate source of these poems from Guantanamo is the simple, almost primeval, arithmetic of breathing in and out. The origin of

life and the origin of language and the origin of poetry are all there, in the first breath, each breath as if it were our first [...] what keeps us alive as we inhale and exhale the universe.”

INHALE

Julie Rrap’s recent works invoke poetic breathing. In her large-scale photographs, *Re-making the World* (2015), the artist is exhaling, blowing forth tiny digitized versions of herself. Like star dust or tiny molecules her digitized figure hurtles through black space. Here, she breathes herself into the universe; her way of “re-making the world.”

In her new work *Blow Back* (2017-2018) she offers this performance to others. Inviting thirty-three women artists to *perform breathing* for her camera, *Blow Back* continues Julie’s allegorical take on the creation story that she started in *Re-making the World*. The etched forms of each artist’s exhalation on the glass demonstrates Julie’s creative force. Not content with the invisibility of breath, this work harnesses the ephemeral breath, visualising and giving form to something that is formless. This desire for form is not surprising from an artist whose practice has centred on materialising and refiguring the body, where each iteration sees the body perpetually frozen in the image or preserved in all its fragments in bronze, aluminium, silicone or wax.

In *Blow Back* the breath’s invisibility-made-visible also recalls the wonderment of seeing the sign of my breath on a pane of cold and steamy glass, the cold car window for example or walking to school and seeing the plume before me in the cold air of a winter morning. Another image that comes to mind is Gabriel Orozco’s breath stain on the shine of a black piano in *Breath on Piano* (1993).

EXHALE

When I entered Julie’s studio in 2017, I understood I was there to breathe for her. Standing against a black backdrop and facing her camera, she instructed me to breathe in, hold still, and breathe out. With my long breath a rhythm unfurled; my exhale in time with the drawn-out sound of the slow camera shutter. We repeat this performance over and over. Each time, as I am poised to inhale I close my eyes. This performance reminds me of many attempts to maintain a regular meditation practice, and my failure to fulfil the transformative promise of

breath work. Breathing for Julie reminds me I am living as a body, I am not simply the involuntary announcements that my mind makes day in and day out. This performance, like the finished work itself, draws me back to my breath, bringing me back to my body.

The breath's ability to ground us in our bodies is central to Luce Irigaray's understanding of the other. Irigaray notes that while breathing is "essential for our bodily existence" it is also essential for relational existence. Without breath there is no speech, no word and no communion. For Irigaray the breath is essential to our being in the world with the other. It is essential to what she sees as our innate "desire for sharing" and our desire to love and be loved. Irigaray calls for a "cultivation of breathing". This cultivation hinges on an awareness that breathing is what keeps us living and therefore keeps us connected to ourselves and to others and to the world.

This relational existence is interesting to consider in light of Julie's recent practice. For most of her career the artist has used her own body and yet recently there has been a turn toward others to co-create her work. This turn involves collaboration and for her participants, friends and artists, we receive the brief opportunity to become installed in the theatre of her mind. Like in *Re-making the World: Artist's Dreaming* (2015), Julie asked thirty artists to sleep in her studio, while a video camera positioned above filmed them sleeping for an hour. Against a white mattress and covered by a white bedsheet we see still bodies asleep. Presented on monitors, the work initially reads as a series of photographic lightboxes, until one notices the subtle rise and fall of the figures under the sheets. The sleepers, like the women in *Blow Back* are breathing and as durational videos they almost go undetected as moving images, if not for the breath.

These works, like Irigaray's philosophy of breathing, offer us a rejoinder – they make us stop and we remember to breathe. When I gaze upon these images I am reminded that I like the women in *Blow Back*, am breathing and as I see their breath *I am breathing with them*; breathing in and out the same air and breathing with and in the world of the other.

INHALE

Moving along the wall from one breath form to another, one woman's portrait to another, from one artist's face to another, I am reminded that like Julie, each of these women is a

creator, an artist, a thinker, a maker. This is significant in a world, an art world, dominated by mythology that is gendered male. And to this, *Blow Back* is the collective woman; here she *speaks a breath* that states *I am here/We are here*.

EXHALE

Cherine Fahd, 2018

References: Gaston Bachelard (1988), *Air & Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications. Judith Butler (2009), *Frames of War. When is Life is Grievable?* London: Verso. Luce Irigaray, "To Begin with Breathing Anew" in Lenart Skof and Emily A. Holmes (Eds.) (2013), *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp217-226. Lenart Skof and Emily A. Holmes (Eds.) (2013), *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.