Out of Breath
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Published by University of Minnesota Press

Albano, Caterina.
Out of Breath: Vulnerability of Air in Contemporary Art.
University of Minnesota Press, 2022.
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Preface

In each breath we take there are two gifts.  
The air that fills our lungs prolongs life.  
Giving that air back to the world refreshes the soul.  
For each one of these Gifts, each time we receive it,  
We must must give thanks.

These verses are both a complement to and an inspiration for Hossein Valamanesh’s sculpture *Breath* (2013). Made of delicate tree branches cast in bronze and arranged in the shape of a pair of lungs, Valamanesh’s *Breath* evokes the intrinsic relation of life to air and breathing. It also alludes to the symbiotic organic and discursive connections that air and breathing establish between one who breathes and their surrounding environment. Such relations are at the core of this book, which focuses on breath and on what it means to breathe, especially when breathing is encroached upon by the forces that dominate the environments in which we live, be they pollution, economics, politics, violence, or infection. Hence, this book is also about the vulnerability of both air and breath.

I have been interested in the breath for a number of years, though this book began in the spring of 2020 during the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic, based on a 2019 paper I presented at the conference Art

and the Anthropocene in Dublin; it was written almost entirely during the United Kingdom’s second and third national lockdowns in London where I live, and further revised in June 2021. Occasional references in the chapters record these different stages. The Sars-CoV-2 pandemic has brought to the fore many of the issues around air toxicity and harm to breathing that are central to my analysis. However, the pandemic itself can be linked to the precarity of air and what can be regarded as endemic breathlessness—whether in terms of poor air quality, ecological violence and conflict, or the policing of bodies through the control of air. In this sense, Out of Breath is part of the growing interest in air and breath across the arts and humanities, social and medical sciences, legal studies and activism. Perhaps what this book demonstrates, as a result of the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic, is the critical and affective significance of breathing and of the gaseous environments in which we live. The latter are, at the same time, physical, discursive, and ideological. They relate to the intersecting of ecology, economics, and politics, and to the interweaving of social and cultural conditions and practices with ingrained histories and their present articulations. Breathing is both a response to and a manifestation of such atmospheres. We breathe the air in which we are immersed; we breathe its matter, its information, and its emotional charge. We also share the air in which we are immersed, exhaling our own internal atmospheres. Through breathing, we both affect and are affected by air and what air is made of and represents. In trying throughout to engage critically with these entangled relations and their complexities while maintaining an attention to the embodied breath, I address themes as diverse as the ethics of breathing, air ecology and violations of air, toxicity and the politics of breathing, and the vulnerability of breath itself.

Guiding my analysis is a consideration of artistic practices. According to Chantal Mouffe, “There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art.”

tices have, in other words, the potential to critique and challenge today’s atmospheres of breathing. All the artworks I consider are critical practices, if not overt practices of resistance. They engage reflectively with the ethics, ecologies, and politics of breathing by rendering visible what physical and metaphorical toxic clouds obfuscate (to refer to one of the works I examine) but also by mobilizing affect in drawing attention to breathing in its physical, psychological, and figurative inflections. Rather than including images in the text, I provide links to the artworks themselves, whenever possible, so that works can be accessed, at least partly, through online images, clips, or documentation.

The book is organized into four chapters. The first chapter focuses on the ethics of breathing as embodied and performative. The second deals with air pollution and toxicity, addressing issues of visibility and arguing for an ethics of breathing in terms of being and action. Here I also introduce the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic through a consideration of its implications for breathing and what breathing signifies. The third chapter examines air contamination through an analysis of radioactive contamination as a blueprint for other abuses of air. The chapter addresses forms of knowledge production at the intersecting of historical legacies and futurity. The fourth chapter returns to the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic, and more specifically to the debate surrounding face masks, by examining it through the lens of an ethics of breathing. The chapter further addresses the vulnerability of breath vis-à-vis the systemic use of suffocation and breathlessness as a means of control and hegemony. This is brought to bear on a reflection of the deaths by suffocation of Eric Garner and George Floyd. This chapter draws on the previous discussion on ethics to argue for the potential of resistance in breathlessness and for the right to breathe.
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