

# Traces of Breath

## An Experiment in Undoing Data Through Artistic Research

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces an attempt to undo data through artistic research. It especially draws on the concept of the artistic research exposition to argue that it is possible for artistic practice in itself to be both the subject and object of inquiry. In the formation of such expositions it is not data but different elements and materials which form a composition that performatively reveals an aesthetic or material thinking. Additionally, the processual and entangled nature of the body is addressed. The particular research interest from the perspective of which the chapter is written relates to the somatic practice of cultivating breath. It is the emergence of sense generated by this embodied practice that informs the formation of materials and construction of a poetic exposition that is likewise discussed. The chapter concludes in a poetic exposition on breathing and breathwork. This exposition is an experiment that aims at substantiating the arguments presented in the chapter.

**Keywords:** Artistic Research, Exposition, Poetic writing, Cultivating breath

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces an experiment that questions data on the basis of, on the one hand, the performative nature of artistic research and, on the other, the

becoming nature of embodiment. The chapter begins by reasoning about the chosen approach to data through discussing the artistic research exposition and Bruno Latour's views on the body. It concludes in a poetic meditation that, while tracing intermittent moments of a random practice of breathing, considers the vicissitudes of cultivating breath. Therefore, the chapter both attempts to offer some insights into a creative alternative to the notion of data and presents a short piece of research to demonstrate its cause. More concretely, the final meditation is a piece of experimental writing that interweaves descriptions of experiences of breathing, recollections related to breathwork as well as theoretical insights from especially biomechanics (Calais-Germain, 2006), psychotherapy (Lowen & Lowen, 1977; Victoria & Caldwell, 2013), affect theory (Brennan, 2004; Gibbs, 2001), body studies (Blackman, 2008, 2012; Latour, 2004; Leder, 1990) as well as feminist philosophy and gender studies (Ahmed, 2006, 2010; Irigaray, 2002, 2013). These elements are indebted to my work as a professional contemporary dancer, movement educator and artist-researcher. During the more than twenty years in this field, I have become acquainted with diverse dance techniques and somatic practices in which the regulation of breath is used as a means to support dance and movement performance. Thus, one of the objectives of writing this chapter has been that of learning more about breath and breathing, a process I have been on occasions more closely and others more loosely engaged with for several years both through practical exploration as well as research (see e.g. Rouhiainen, 2012a, 2012b, 2015).

## OFFERINGS FROM ARTISTIC RESEARCH

The manner in which data is related to in this chapter finds impetus in the trajectory of artistic research as it is discussed in Northern Europe. Following recent argumentation in this field, the experimental poetic writing that the chapter includes is considered an exposition. The term relates to the means through which artistic practice in artistic research becomes the medium of research (Kirkkopelto, 2012). What is denoted by exposition is artistic practice as an aesthetic manifestation that exposes, reveals or shows something while simultaneously making the performativity of this showing apparent. In Dieter Mersch's (2015) view, events of appearing in which such appearances of something are produced that include contradictions and instabilities and that resist resolution or closure involve a reflexivity. He argues this issue to be at the core of the manner in which art generates knowledge (Mersch, 2015). Indeed, exposition in artistic research has been described as a "redoubling of practice in order to artistically move from artistic ideas to epistemic claims" (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014, p. 15). What such a redoubling of artistic practice can establish is "a reflective distance within itself that allows it to be simultaneously the subject and object of an inquiry" (ibid.). As a consequence, artistic

processes or outcomes in themselves can convey both “a thought and its appraisal” at the same stroke (*ibid.*).

What is also worth noting in this context is that artistic practice is not strictly speaking involved with gathering or constructing, analyzing and interpreting data. It deals with the configuration of compositional elements and materials that come together as forms of aesthetic or material thinking. The process of generative interplay between the artist and the materials is a thinking ingrained in the making. Here materials too have agency and both tacitly and explicitly inform what the artist does, so that in the end it is difficult to discern exactly who is producing a work. Therefore, instead of regarding certain materials as data and others as interpretative theoretical frames, this chapter concludes in an exposition in the form of a written performative arrangement. It aims to allow a sense of breath to take flight and find solutions through elements from here and there that come together in writing without their category being considered as this or that (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002). Initiated through the process of me actually breathing, the composition of chosen quoted materials and personal accounts of breathing in the poetic exposition redouble, mirror and, in the end, produce its own embodiment of breathing. It is in this fashion that the chapter distances itself from understanding data as something that can be collected and known in any simple manner. It undermines data as a kind of evidential archive that is regarded as a fixed and separate entity, an external object analyzed and interpreted by a researcher in order for her to retrieve reliable knowledge about reality (see e.g. Denzin, 2013; Koro-Ljungberg & MacLure, 2013).

To elaborate on the above position further I follow Mika Elo’s (2014) line of thinking. He argues that the “the task of an artist-researcher operating in the interstices of different media can be likened to the task of the translator” (Elo, 2014, p. 31). When faced with the challenge of bringing forth the feel of an artistic practice, the artist-researcher is to find “medium-sensitive ways of articulating his or her epistemic interests and of looking for productive contact points between different modes of articulation—without any pre-established hierarchies, which could limit what is exposed” (*ibid.*, p. 32). For the purposes of this chapter, Elo interestingly bases his views on Walter Benjamin’s formulations on language. According to him, for Benjamin language is something that precedes the separation of the sensible and intelligible and is not limited to expression in words. Rather, all perceptible articulations can be understood as languages, as forms of the emergence of sense. There is a non-sensuous similarity between language, gesture and vision (Manning & Massumi, 2014). Languages thus extend the spoken and written. In this line of thinking, perceptual articulation of physical practice can be related to on the same footing as other forms of similar linguistic expression. This is a worthwhile note, since the subsequent piece of research is indebted to such practices. With the kind of understanding that Elo introduces, language is further

qualified as an “immediate impartability” that brings things into relationship in an expressive event (Elo, 2014, p. 30). Kathrin Busch (2006) discusses Benjamin’s views by pointing out that in this event expression *through* language communicates content and expression *within* language allows for indeterminable latent meaning to be exposed. The latter poetic character is related to the form of articulation and is something directly conveyed. It is not wholly translatable into meaning, rather it is something reminiscent of atmosphere. This characteristic is sometimes considered to be language’s magical quality. Elo suggests that it is derived from language’s way of continuously relating to other languages for sense-making as well the fact that language is never fully present to itself. There is a limit and an inexpressible or insensible operative in language (Busch, 2006; Elo, 2014).

## ON EMBODIMENT IN WRITING

In addition to considering the artist-researcher as a translator who does not appreciate pre-established hierarchies, categories and the like in order for the emergence of sense to find expression in an event of exposure, what further informs the stand the article takes on data is Bruno Latour’s (2004) performative conception of the body. According to Lisa Blackman (2008), he relates to it as an articulation or “an association and concatenation of heterogeneous elements which *produce* what we take entities”, such as the body, to be (Blackman, 2008, p. 122). The elements or objects forming such articulations or assemblages are in themselves complicated, entangled and multiple. They never even strictly speaking pre-exist the relational connection which produce and enact them as very particular types of objects. Furthermore, being related to time and changing circumstances, articulations never quite remain the same, entities are in a continuous process of becoming. Therefore, in Latourian terms, the body is understood as a mixture of processes that cannot be disentangled and it is its relational connections that articulate what the body can do and become (Blackman, 2008, pp. 122–123). In this sense, the different kinds of intertwined texts this chapter subsequently introduces as a poetic articulation of a sense of breath, could be regarded as its materials, the entangled elements that produce the enaction of embodied breath that the text accomplishes.

More concretely, the following writing addresses the emergence of sense in a writing that interweaves awareness of moments of actual breathing, anecdotal accounts of them, and chosen excerpts from research literature. This it does in order to expand on articulations concerning the cultivating breath. Working as a translator, placing the found and construed translations on an equal footing, this approach could be understood to bare similarities with how Monica Prendergast (2009) describes poetic inquiry to be a combination of what she defines as literature

voiced poems and researcher voiced poems. The first are responses to literature or theory and the second relate to reflective and creative autobiographical writing (Prendergast, 2009; see also Leavy, 2015). Even if this article considers data problematic and turns to work with interlinking what could be understood as derived materials and generated new material, for the ends of situating the experimental writing as a piece of research, pointing out, even if only partially, the contexts that inform the formation of the utilized materials is called for. This is what I have up to now attempted to introduce and continue to do with a few more insights.

In part, the materials did not pre-exist the writing of the article, and in part, as excerpts from previous writing by others, they have been transposed by the immaterial lure of physically cultivating breath and probing its nature. As its basic element, a concrete practice of breathwork informs the mode of writing and sense of breath, embodied relations, references and insights articulated in the poetic exposure. Latour (2004) relates to this by stating that: "Acquiring a body is thus a progressive enterprise that produces at once a sensory medium *and* a sensitive world" (ibid., p. 206). He explains this by stating that "By focusing on the body, one is immediately—or rather mediately—directed to what the body has become aware of" (ibid., p. 206). In the subsequent poetic exposure, breathing and its world is viewed from the position of an artist-researcher engaged with both the cultivation of breath and experimental writing in order to share traces of the immaterial process of the practice of breathing. Here the immaterial especially denotes the experiencing body's ability to feel and register such phenomena that are not easily seen, known or understood and that undermine the knowing subject (Blackman, 2008, pp. 132, 134). The immaterial has induced an affective impact, a force that directed the reading and writing done in constructing the poetic exposition. The process of writing itself was a weaving back and forth between sensations, percepts, memories, reading passages and a processes of writing that appreciated the sense of breath they conveyed and searched for ways of forming a breathing text. None of the passages the writing involves were chosen and formed or convey meaning without their relation to each other. The experimental writing aims to allow the on occasion only very silent and on others keenly noticeable and versatile quality of breathing to inform its rhythm. My hope is that that together the elements of the text form a complex articulation or expressive event. In order to further substantiate the potential abundance of reality Latour (2004) opines that scientific "Generalizations should be a vehicle for travelling through as many differences as possible—thus maximizing articulations—and not a way of *decreasing* the number of alternative versions of the same phenomena" (p. 221). Indeed, in his view, for us to become more sensitive to differences is to become more embodied (Latour, 2004). The following section of the chapter presents the actual exposition on breathing. In order to appreciate the nature of artistic research expositions, I will let it speak for itself from here on.

## A POETIC EXPOSITION

*How to grasp the immaterial within the material?*

*I lay still with agility. Acute curiosity. What is this that is taking place here?*

*The moment gesticulates into an extended cessation of breathing.*

*Undisturbed stillness.*

*Then, the reinvention of inspiration.*

*Embodied gratitude*

*Is it really so that breathing is mere “movement that is performed in respiration”?*  
(Calais-Germain, 2006, p. 13)

*What about the body’s potential for mediation?*

*Neither movement nor bodies “arrive in the neutral. How we arrive, how we enter this or that room, will affect what impressions we receive. After all, to receive is to act.”* (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37)

*I have performed like this before, simple.*

*Confidence in the familiar routine of standing in the center of attention.*

*A sudden loss of awareness.*

*Scanning in vain, sensations closed down.*

*Hiatus.*

*The frightful realization that my body stopped breathing.*

*Shivering bodily profile and a fluttering heartbeat.*

*Is this what it feels like to be stared at by a strange group in close proximity?*

*“An arrival takes time, and the time that it takes shapes “what” it is that arrives.”*  
(Ahmed, 2006, p. 40)

“... an arrival points towards a future that might or “perhaps” will happen, given that we don’t always know in advance “what” we will come into contact with.” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 40)

*Confronted by the not-yet-known.*

“... to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31) *or move away from them.*

“Spaces are not only inhabited by bodies that “do things,” but what bodies” *in themselves* “do” leads them to inhabit some spaces more than others.” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 58)

*Withdrawal, disengagement, fear.*

*Some are dedicated to the idea that* “breathing patterns correspond with coping attitudes.” (Victoria & Caldwell, 2013, p. 217)

*The amazing responsiveness of respiration and its uncanny autonomy.*

*To consider that* “... breathing is affected by conscious and unconscious attempts to stave off strong emotion or uncomfortable states.” (Victoria & Caldwell, 2013, p. 217)

*How am I breathed through moment by moment, situation by situation?*

“An emotion is among other things a breathing pattern.” (Heller, 2012, p. 35 as reported by Victoria & Caldwell, 2013, p. 218)

*What does breathing engender for me to witness?*

*And what does this have to do with the fact that even* “research has shown that the psychological is distributed throughout the body”? (Blackman, 2008, p. 57)

*Where does breathing really happen?*

“Healthy breathing is a total body action; all muscles of the body are involved to some degree.” (Lowen & Lowen, 1977, p. 24)

*Breath as pervasively assembled motion.*

“Movement always starts from a superposition,” *that is* “a formative zone of indistinction,” “a mutual inclusion of sequential forms” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, pp. 40–41, 156 n14).

*And "... to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning 'effectuated', moved, put into motion by other entities, humans and non-humans. If you are not engaged in this learning, you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead." (Latour, 2004, p. 205)*

*She sits quietly on a chair with her feet supported by the floor—*

*calm as if sunken deep in her thoughts.*

*A passing surprise of such a retracted manner of beginning a class.*

*Routinely finding my place, I settle to observe my breath.*

*Undisturbed minor gestures of us all fill the room.*

*A deep dive into the weightiness and subtlety of my body embodying the situation.*

*Presence with ease, neither this or that provoking our sharing.*

*What examples can silently accomplish.*

*Indeed, "Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear." (Gibbs, 2001, p. 1)*

*What is more is that "... entrainment may also depend on body movements and gestures, particularly through the imitation of rhythms (effected by sight, touch, and hearing) ... Rhythm has a regulating role between two or more people. The rhythmic aspects of behavior at a gathering are critical in both establishing and enhancing a sense of collective purpose and a common understanding." (Brennan, 2004, p. 70)*

*Shared breathing.*

...

*She was far from being retracted.*

*She was in the comforting silence of a transubstantiating breathing.*

*What if "Being in the rhythm (...) you are and have to be in the present moment (...) Being in the rhythm will automatically make you loose yourself in the movement. You will adopt the rhythm as an embodied dimension of yourself. The rhythm will strengthen your pre-reflective orientation to the environment and your action" (Stelter, 2008, p. 223) and this all was transmitted to us.*

*A teaching was going on through her.*



“(...) to learn, in the best cases, is to learn from someone’s experience. To teach is to transmit an experience. What is taught is guaranteed by the life of the one who teaches (...).” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 58)

“It is impossible to appropriate breath or air. But one can cultivate it, for oneself and others. Teaching then takes place through compassion.” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 79)

*Here potentially* “The fact that breathing is rhythmical and constantly changes helps us to relate to its changes in accommodative ways. We realize that we need to be flexible (...).” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 72)

*Compassionate transmission stutters and stumbles in solitude:*

*Waiting to become still I observe my breath to the extent my concentration allows for.*

*Thoughts meander.*

*No easy surrender*

*Exhale deeply.*

*It might help.*

*Techniques and routines take charge.*

*In the midst, I recognize a familiar holding:*

*Shallow breath, movement in the belly, chest immobile and a long pause after exhalation.*

*Finally, the first inklings of yielding.*

*Unto what I do not know.*

*Impatience. I stop.*

*The burden of cultural inscription and anticipation—layers and layers of them in breathing.*

“(...) practices do not simply describe the body, but rather create what the body might become, and in that sense both enact and have the potential to do the body differently.” (Blackman, 2008, p. 126)

*I have learnt my practices well, no easy surrender.*

*After all, "Movement always happens behind the thinkers back, or in the moment he blinks." (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 1)*

*... to embody another practice, a practice that "seeks slowly to rework the parameters by which experience is defined—but (...) does so by a process of engagement with and examination of experience." (Boon, 2015, p. 41)*

*Simply to sit and wait and follow.*

"Bodies tend towards some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not ordinary but instead are effects of the repetition of the "tending towards"." (Ahmed, 2006, p. 58)

*Tending towards a not doing.*

"The point is simple, what we "do do" affects what we "can do". This is not to argue that "doing" simply restricts capacities. In contrast, what we "do do" opens up and expands some capacities, as an "expansion" in certain directions that in turn might restrict what you can do in others." (Ahmed, 2006, p. 60)

*Sitting and waiting and following...*

*Sitting and waiting and following.*

*Nothing seems to call for any particular attention, almost like doing nothing.*

*In the unaccountable interlacing of a mundane flow of minute sensations and perceptions*

*a fragile calm.*

"To remain silently attentive to the breath comes down to respecting that which, or who, exists and maintaining for oneself the possibility to be born and to create." (Irigaray, 2002, p. 51)

*Silent sitting now a standard late afternoon routine,*

*a form of recovery by being lost in silence,*

*neither this nor that,*

*often broken off by taking notice that it had turned dark.*

"A culture of breath is accompanied by a culture of silence." (Irigaray, 2013, p. 220)

“Breathing in a conscious and free manner is equivalent to taking charge of one’s life, to accepting solitude through cutting the umbilical cord, to respecting and cultivating life, for oneself and others.” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 74)

*Livingroom floor, pillow, sitting crossed legged, this time a timer at 15 minutes.*

*Observing the gradual rhythmic pulse of my breath, nothing else.*

*Awareness occasionally slides into one thought or another,*

*only to gently return and become anchored in breathing.*

*Quietude, depth, expansion, belonging—*

*timelessness*

*before the time is out.*

*No wonder it is written that* “While we can modulate our breathing at will, it is primarily an automatic function (...) Watching the breath come in and go out for minutes or hours, one is saturated by the presence of a natural power that outruns the “I”. Breathing simply happens and happens and happens (...) Moment to moment, breathing actualizes our one-body relation with the surrounding world. Inside and outside, self and Other, are relativized, porous, each time one takes a breath. The air is constantly transgressing boundaries, sustaining life through interconnections.” (Leder, 1990, pp. 171–172)

*Further teaching is on offer.*

“Silence is a place of possible encounters between human beings, more generally between living beings who do not speak the same language and do not obey the same values, the same ideals. Such a silence corresponds to a breath that is not yet determined or expressed in a certain way, according to certain rules, a certain logic, and this can be respected and shared as life itself beyond its various embodiments and forms of expression.” (Irigaray, 2013, p. 221)

“Being autonomous at the level of breathing, of breath, is essential to reach a relation without conflict to and with the other.” (Irigaray, 2013, p. 217)

*A new orientation.*

“Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way and know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view. So in following these directions, I arrive, as if by magic.”

(Ahmed, 2006, p. 16)

*By magic the immaterial spirit of breath*

“Nothing is more material than mysticism. Through sustaining living attention by concentration, the mystic enters into a timeless state that eventually yields an experience that is evidently sensual and spiritual.”

(Brennan, 2004, p. 159)

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