

Being-in-the-Breathable: An Annotated Walk

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Abstract

This article explicates Robert Bean and Barbara Lounder's 2017 collaborative artwork and public pedagogy project, *Breathing-in-the-Breathable: An annotated walk*. The authors contextualize the artwork in relation to its site, the ruins of a nineteenth-century tuberculosis sanatorium in the small Polish town of Sokołowsko. This site is a place historically associated with disease, healing and deadly conflict. The participatory project utilized an event score, objects, sound and embodied movement in exploring how the atmosphere and environment became explicit and weaponized by the use of gas warfare during the First and Second World Wars. Along with the site itself, the concept of 'Being-in-the-Breathable' (Sloterdijk, 2009) provided Bean and Lounder with a framework for this collaborative public artwork. The artists adopted walking as a creative method that disturbs histories, ideologies and habits, while simultaneously creating new networks of meaning spanning temporal frames, spaces, disciplinary boundaries, and embodied sensorial modalities (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). The authors illustrate key points in the 90-minute artwork with colour images documenting the event.

Keywords

Atmosphere; public art; participatory art; climate change; embodiment

On July 23, 2017, artists Robert Bean and Barbara Lounder, the authors of this paper, presented an artwork in the form of an annotated walk that explored breathing, the phenomenology of weather, and the politics of climate change. The walk was commissioned by *Festival CONTEXTS 2017: International Sokołowsko Festival of Ephemeral Art*. The site-specific, interactive artwork responded to the contingencies of the nineteenth-century sanatorium in Sokołowsko, Poland as a site of healing as well as a geography of deadly conflict. Established by Hermann Brehmer in 1854, the sanatorium in Sokołowsko was the first centre in Europe for the climatic treatment of tuberculosis and was a significant precedent for sanatoriums such as Davos, Switzerland, which was the location of *The Magic Mountain* novel by Thomas Mann. In Bean and Lounder's interactive project, allegorical and literary references to the history of breathing, atmosphere, weather, conflict and healing were incorporated into the collective experience of walking at this unique site. *Being-in-the-Breathable* was an annotated walk with 80 participants, which unfolded as a 90-minute walk along 2km of the paths of the sanatorium grounds.



Figure 1: Sokołowsko Sanatorium, Poland, 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean.

The title of the project has a specific origin: 'Being-in-the-Breathable' is a term that Peter Sloterdijk uses to describe how the atmosphere and environment were made explicit by the use of gas warfare during the First and Second World Wars. The deployment of 'atmoterror' weaponized the atmosphere as an environment. This tactic continues to be utilized in contemporary warfare, as we know from the sarin gas attacks in Syria. Atmoterrorism is pivotal to understanding the projected consequences of global climate change. The atmosphere, the last common space that all people share, lost its innocence when it was used as an environmental weapon. In *Terror from the Air*, Sloterdijk references the following statement made by Elias Canetti in 1936, in a speech given on the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of Hermann Broch:

Air is the last common property. It belongs to all people collectively... And this last thing, which has belonged to all of us collectively, shall poison all of us collectively... (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 100)

Due to the chronic pulmonary pathology of tuberculosis, natural climatic treatment in elevated quarantined atmospheres was presumed to be of medical benefit to the patients. Prior to the twentieth century, sanatoriums functioned as luxurious spas as well as infirmaries. Access to many of these sanatoriums was based on wealth and status. Franz Kafka hoped to go to Sokołowsko for treatment but was unable to afford the expense. The sanatorium in Sokołowsko featured 300 beds, open-air terraces with chaises longues, hydrotherapy, an observatory, a visitor's guesthouse, and gardens for strolling. It was not until the advent of X-rays, antibiotics and other medications that tuberculosis would be contained. The Sokołowsko sanatorium is currently being restored by the *In Situ Contemporary Art Foundation* to function as a cultural centre for arts festivals and symposia.



Figure 2: Sokołowsko Sanatorium, Poland, 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean.

The most familiar artifacts in the cultural history of tuberculosis, from Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, to Puccini's *La bohème*, present the disease within decidedly Eurocentric frameworks of meaning. Until the late 19th century, when the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* organism was identified and described, most representations of consumption were highly romanticized. After the 1880s, medicalized and scientific approaches began to prevail, and images and narratives of tuberculosis informed by the new discourses of public health and sociology emerged (Morens, 2002). It is only in recent years that tuberculosis, its treatments and representations, as well as the policies around it, have been critiqued in relation to colonization, racism, and carceral and class oppressions. In Canada, the treatment of TB in Indigenous communities—whose members currently experience much higher rates of infection—continues to take place

within the historic, colonial regimes of residential schools, loss of territorial land, the reserve system, and forced migration and relocation (Common, 2019; Hogan, 2019).

The 80 participants in *Being-in-the-Breathable* carried out walking activities that centred on the internal experience of breathing and the haptic sensation of weather through scored experiences that utilized movement, performance, objects and sound. At the outset of the walk, each participant was given a printed event score to introduce the actions that would be part of the walk. The first segment of the event score concerned the establishment of *quarantine*, the separation of subjects in space and time,ⁱ in order to prevent the spread of disease. Each participant ‘performed quarantine’ by pivoting slowly in a circle, arms outstretched, establishing an empty space isolated from others. This action recalled the quantification of breathing that influenced the design of the sanatorium: each body breathes 15 liters of air per minute and each patient in the sanatorium’s chest ward was provided with 75m³ of air and 5m³ area of light.

Quarantine: quaranta giorni

Each body breathes 15 litres of air per minute.
This requires space and time. Turn slowly in a circle with your arms outstretched, to establish an empty space around you that is isolated from others.

“In the “chest patient ward” there was a 75m³ area of air and a 5m³ area of light for each patient.”

Jerzy Supady, Tuberculosis treatment in Poland at the turn of the 20th century (until 1914)

“This air had special properties. Although it accelerated the metabolism, the body was still able to store protein. Of course it could heal sickness, but its first effect was greatly to enhance illnesses that everyone carried latent within them, because the impetus and stimulus this air gave the whole organism brought illness to exuberant eruption, so to speak.”

Thomas Mann, The Magic Mountain



Severe snow blowing (dust+sand)

Figure 3: Event Score: “Quarantine: quaranta giorni,” 2017. Photo credit: Wikicommons, public domain.



Figure 4: Quarantine: walking event, 2017. Photo credit: Polak Grzegorski.

Keeping the quarantine space described by extended arms, participants then walked across the lawns of the main sanatorium building, stopping in the shade provided by a grove of mature trees to consider breathing as a simple ‘respiratory economy’ of inhalation and exhalation. First, the participants were instructed to hold their breath for as long as possible, and the question of who controls respiration was posed. Then, standing face-to-face, partners performed a sequence of synchronous inhaling, exhaling and humming. This action created an awareness of the interface of inside and atmosphere that happens in breathing.

...air is the medium and breathing the mechanism through which the outside environment is embodied. Air carries the weather, climate and particles from the environment into the body. Humans embody the climate of their environment through air, just as fish embody the climate of their environment through water. (Wainwright, 2017, p. 13-14)

We adapted strategies from somatic practices such as pranayama, group dynamics, and psychogeography for this project. Theorized by Guy Debord in 1955, psychogeography is the spatial and literary practice of the *Situationist International* for mapping emotional, psychological and political meanings of urban spaces. Debord recognized walking, in particular the practice of the *dérive* (drift), for its radical potential to challenge habits and provoke new understandings of the city. The following excerpt from his *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* summarizes Debord’s central concerns with human feelings and behavior:

Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The adjective psychogeographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (Debord, 1955, as cited in Coverley, 2010, p. 89)

In addition to the event score, *Being-in-the-Breathable* featured objects and tableaux that were linked to the topics introduced at points along the walk. At one point, participants inflated three beach ball globes and engaged in a spontaneous game of volleyball. The conclusion of the walk was marked by an interpretation of Joan La Barbara's 1974 *Circular Song* composition, performed on accordion and accompanied by the lighting of several multi-coloured smoke bombs.

Air memories

Adapting to environments, or being killed by them.
Stand face to face with another person. Silently, inhale at the same time as your partner, through your nose. Exhale simultaneously, making a continuous humming sound, until all the air is gone from your lungs. Repeat this two more times. Change partners and repeat this cycle three more times. Change partners again, and repeat this cycle three more times.

"...air is the medium and breathing the mechanism through which the outside environment is embodied. Air carries the weather, climate and particles from the environment into the body. Humans embody the climate of their environment through air, just as fish embody the climate of their environment through water."

Megan Wainwright, *Sensing the Airs: The Cultural Context for Breathing and Breathlessness in Uruguay*



Majdanek, 1988

Figure 5: Event Score: "Air Memories," 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean.



Figure 6: Air Memories: walking event, 2017. Photo credit: Polak Grzegorski.



Figure 7: Walking, 2017. Photo credit: Polak Grzegorski.

Contagion and the Commons; up in the air

A globe is not a sphere. It is hollow and has no substance, only your breath. We look at it, but we are not in it. Inflate the globes and toss them from person to person.

“Air is the last common property. It belongs to all people collectively... And this last thing, which has belonged to all of us collectively, shall poison all of us collectively...”

Elias Canetti, *“Hermann Broch Speech for His Fiftieth Birthday”*
Vienna, November 1936

“A crisis, says one dictionary, is “the point in the progress of a disease when a change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; also, any marked or sudden change of symptoms, etc”. This crisis could be the death or the recovery of a more democratic, more inclusive, more generous America. Where we go from here is up to us.”

Rebecca Solnit, *Victories against Trump are mounting. Here's how we deal the final blow*. *The Guardian*, June 18, 2017



Figure 8: Event Score: “Contagion and the Commons; up in the air,” 2017. Photo credit: Wikicommons, public domain.

Our project began from the position that walking is a creative medium and methodology. The history and contemporary practice of walking assert that it is a means to generate thought and knowledge through embodied experience. An active awareness of walking and mobility as a diverse and creative act cultivates an opportunity to consider a deeper comprehension of embodiment, environment and space. Walking is a sensorial experience; the senses provide both proximal and distal relationships to the world that inform our understanding of place. Throughout *Being-in-the Breathable*, participants’ attention was directed towards their own internal experiences of breathing and the haptic sensations of weather, through actions that utilized movement, touch, sound and kinetic interactions. At the same time, allegorical references to the history of breathing, atmosphere, weather and healing were incorporated to establish deeper connections to the site of the sanatorium and the temporal contexts of war and climate change.



Figure 9: Contagion and the Commons: walking event, 2017. Photo credit: Polak Grzegorski.



Figure 10: Finale + "Circular Song" [Joan La Barbara]: Accordion Performance by Marek Kocon, 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean.

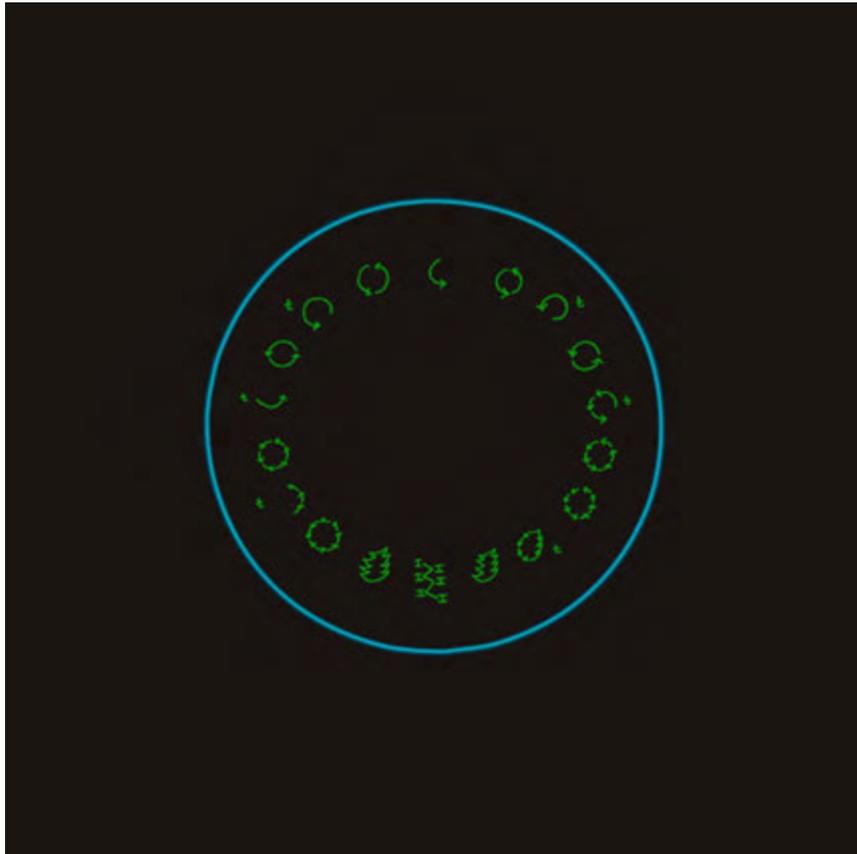


Figure 11: Event Score: Atmosphere + “Circular Song Score” [Joan La Barbara], 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean.

Walking, as collaborative public art, simultaneously disturbs histories, ideologies and habits while creating new networks—more accurately meshworks—of meaning spanning temporal frames, spaces, disciplinary boundaries, and embodied sensorial modalities. Starting out, pausing, doubling back, turning, and turning again, walking, like writing and reading, proceeds in a roughly linear fashion while inviting deviation.

Walking is pedagogy when consciously practiced as research-creation. As self-directed movement that crosses spatial expanses over time, walking is always shifting and in a state of becoming. Walking destabilizes assumptions and challenges habits, and—because walking is the re-enactment of others’ walks over the same terrain in the past—is always with others, whether in actuality or as traces. In the case of a site-specific walk, a mesh of historical, topographic and multisensory experiences and realizations is created. These experiences exceed the coordinates and timeframe of the event itself and create layers of interlocking, sometimes overlapping points of reflection and insight, lines of memory and yearning, and connections with others. The complexities of walking experiences include political and public dimensions when participants become aware of others who have walked before them.

... the movement of walking is itself a way of knowing. A knowledgeable person is distinguished from a novice not by the sheer amount of information packed into his or her head—information that would in any case be perpetually obsolescent in an ever-changing environment—but by observational acuity and an awareness of the consequences of actions. (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 5)



Figure 12: Sokolowsko Sanatorium Installation: “Tuberculosis”, 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean.



Figure 13: Sokolowsko Sanatorium Installation: “Tuberculosis” and “Bird in an Air Pump”, Joseph Wright of Derby (1768,) 2017. Photo credit: Robert Bean

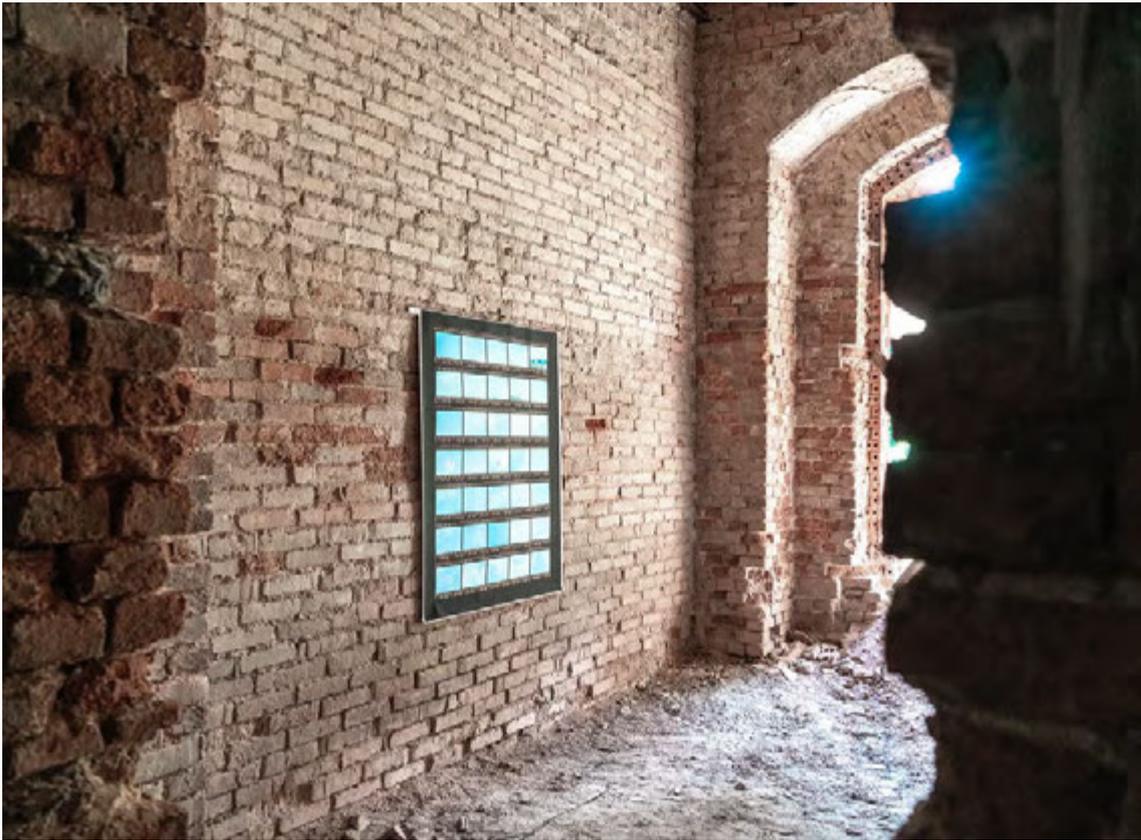


Figure 14: Sokolowsko Sanatorium Installation: “Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1988” (2017). Photo credit: Robert Bean.



Figure 15: Sokolowsko Sanatorium Installation: “Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1988” (2017). Photo credit: Robert Bean.



Figure 16: Sokółowski Sanatorium Installation: “Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1988” (2017). Photo credit: Robert Bean.

Engaging in diverse modes of research-creation and experiential learning, the route for the walk was created through two days of wandering and exploration on the grounds and in the landscape surrounding the sanatorium. The event score, composed of actions and annotations, was prepared in advance in response to the Sokółowski sanatorium as a historic site for climatic and atmospheric healing. The score was left unpaginated and unbound so that

the annotations and events could be ordered and adapted to the final path used for the public walk. The process of bringing the varied elements of the walking event together was developed through questions and possibilities that arose from the proximate knowledge acquired through a psychogeographic approach to the landscape surrounding the hospital. This experience was integrated with the annotated knowledge of tuberculosis, the anaerobic environment of vacuum chambers, chemical warfare and the evolving crisis of climate change. The rhythm of the final walk was open to responsive methods and involvement that emerged when group participation and co-creation were encouraged. In this respect, walking as art and pedagogy provided an opportunity to address the relation of life and art through observations that John Dewey introduced to aesthetic experience. He writes:

A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. (Dewey, 1934, p. 3)

The use of spoken and written annotation during the event provided a cognitive and pedagogical basis for the multi-modal aesthetic experience of walking. In this context, *atmosphere* as both air and affect were brought together.

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Robert Bean is an artist and writes on art and cultural history topics. Bean's artwork is in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Canada Council Art Bank, Global Affairs Canada, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany and the Donovan Collection, University of Toronto.

Barbara Louder is an artist who uses walking as a creative method. She has presented her work across Canada and in the UK, USA, Poland, New Zealand, Germany and Bulgaria. She has participated in artists' residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts and Open Studio Printmaking in Toronto.

Bean and Louder are founding members of the collaborative art and mobility group, Narratives in Space+Time Society (NiS+TS)

ⁱ The origin of the word 'quarantine' is the 17th-century Venetian term *quaranta giorni*, which means forty days. During the Black Death epidemic, visitors to Venice were quarantined aboard their ship for forty days to ensure that they were plague-free.