

# **MEDIATED BREATH:**

INTERFACES BETWEEN BECKETT'S INTERMEDIAL *BREATH*, FRIED'S THEATRICALITY  
AND THE VISUAL ARTS.

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PhD Thesis

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Stacy', written over a horizontal line.

Signature

25 April 2013

Date

## ABSTRACT

*Mediated Breath* examines a wide range of possibilities of understanding and redefining the context in which the corporeal function of breathing is represented in art, during the performative turn, and in relation to contemporary debates around presence and relational aesthetics. The thesis aims to examine Beckett's *Breath*, both as a minimalist art work in order to see how it might contribute to debates led by Fried around minimalism and (anti)theatricality, and as a text for and related to contemporary intermedial production in order to explore how intermedial art practices contribute to new understandings, for example of the body's intermedial relationship to the world. The above issues are addressed, in relation to the special significance that respiration acquires by means of an artistic system.

The thesis examines, in particular, Beckett's *Breath* (1969) in the spectrum of intermedia aesthetics, high-modernist art criticism and theories on theatricality, so as to comprehend Beckett's ultimate venture to define the borders between a theatrical performance and a purely visual representation, in the context of the interface between the theatre and the visual arts. Beckett's playlet demonstrates a decisive moment in the history of theatrical experimentation, in part because of the new relationship it developed towards the formal possibilities of the theatrical event. The exposition of the components of a medium in skeletal form is pivotal for understanding aspects of Beckett's intermedia practice.

*Breath* is analysed, alongside Michael Fried's seminal essay on minimalism "Art and Objecthood" (1967) and the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" (1949). Beckett's final piece of discursive writing, considered within the context of its subject matter, the tension between abstraction and expression, the dilemma of artistic expression and the impossibility of expression in painting. The "Three Dialogues," also, illuminate specific aspects of the playlet, principally Beckett's decision to eradicate the text and the human figure, hence, the interest lies in the ways that Beckettian aesthetics translates into practice. This reading attempts to provide a theoretical model for thinking about the intersection of critical discourses in the visual arts and the theatre, more specifically about the notion of anti-theatricalism in the theatre and the modernist anti-theatrical impulse in the visual arts. In this perspective, *Breath* serves as an indication of the formative, productive role of anti-theatricalism in the theatre and not as an external attack on it.

*Breath*, as a representative piece of minimalism in the theatre, is paradigmatic of Beckett's aesthetics of impoverishment and his fidelity to failure. As such it resists recuperation and can be seen as a critique of the conditions of art making, display, marketing and interpretation, in contrast to minimalist art, which became dependent on these processes.

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1 Old Irish joke

2 Insley, Will in Droll, Donald, Jane Nicol (ed). *Abstract Painting: 1960-69*. New York: The Institute of Art and Urban Resources, 1983: n.p.

3 Hobson quotes Beckett as saying (when he was interviewed as the dramatist of the year, after the production of *Endgame*), 'I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine...Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned. That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.' (To Hobson, Harold. 'Samuel Beckett-Dramatist of the Year,' *International Theatre Annual*, 1956: 153.)

4 Beckett, Samuel. *Worstward Ho*. London: John Calder, 1983: 13.

5 Latour, Bruno. “Air”, in Jones, Caroline. (ed) *Sensorium*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006: 104–107.

6 Connor, Steven. 'Beckett's Atmospheres.' Gontarski, S.E. and Uhlmann, Anthony (ed). *Beckett After Beckett*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006: 52.

7 Mallarmé, Stéphane. 'Brise Marine' (1887) in Hartley, Anthony. (ed.) *Mallarmé*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965: 29.

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8 Beckett, Samuel. *Murphy*. London: Calder, 1993: 5.

9 Beckett, Samuel. *Malone Dies*. New York: Grove, 1951. *Malone Meurt*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit 1951, English translation as *Malone Dies*, New York: Grove Press, 1956, London: John Calder, 1958. Quote found at [http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett\\_quotes.html](http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett_quotes.html). Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

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## INTRODUCTION: In The Same Breath

I don't know whether the theatre is the right place for me anymore<sup>10</sup>

Morris has projected a sculpture of steam jets; Andre made a monument out of sand dropped into a conical pile from one floor above; Le Witt has hidden elements of his serial projects within other elements where their existence must be taken completely on faith, as will his buried cube at the airport mentioned above. Hermeticism, dematerialization, total intellectualization has an increasing appeal. The complex concept buried in an impressive mass of purely physical bulk or else dispersed into thin air, but remembered, related to the idea of archeology itself. The pyramids started out as architecture, but once the tombs were closed, they became sculpture. Over the ages they have become objects rather than functional enclosures, but a part of their fascination lies in their unseen cores, in the uses for which they were originally intended. Someone defined the major characteristic of sculpture as “Just Being there,”<sup>11</sup> a statement also made by Robbe-Grillet about Samuel Beckett's plays.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing could be more overdetermined, unpredictable, nonlinear, and even mysterious than the notion of a writer's ‘legacy’<sup>13</sup>

“Mediated Breath,” introduces a critical framework that discusses the interplay and interconnectedness of media and the dynamic tension between theatricality<sup>14</sup> and the visual arts in the spectrum of Beckett's *Breath*<sup>15</sup> (1969). Argumentation builds upon the investigation of Fried's

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10 Samuel Beckett's comments to actress Billie Whitelaw, during the rehearsals of *Footfalls*, quoted in an interview Whitelaw gave to Kalb, in Kalb, Jonathan. *Beckett in Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 235.

11 Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote about Beckett's drama, citing Heidegger that the key to his work is to be there, to be present on the stage. As he wrote, ‘the condition of man, says Heidegger, is to be there. The theatre probably reproduces this situation more naturally than any of the other ways to represent reality. The essential thing about a character is that he is on the scene: there. Thus once more, right up to the final image, we have the essential theme presence. Everything that is here; off the stage there is nothing, non-being.’ In Robbe-Grillet, Alain. ‘Samuel Beckett or Presence on the Stage.’ *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989: 111.

12 Lucy R. Lippard's text “10 Structurists in 20 paragraphs” was written for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Minimal Art,” organized by Enno Develing at the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, The Netherlands, in 1968, which was one of the major exhibitions on this subject organized by a European Institution. Harald Szeemann's, *Attitudes Become Form*, followed in 1969, as a tribute to Conceptual Art. The emergence of Conceptual Art is considered by art theorists as minimalism's avant-garde successor.

13 Cohen, T., J.H. Miller, B. Cohen. ‘A ‘Materiality without Matter’?. *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001:xvi. Quoted in Lerm Hayes, Christa-Maria (2007) ‘Re-inventing the Literary Exhibition: Exhibiting (Dialogical and Subversive) Art on (James Joyce's) Literature’, *Working Papers on Design 2*: 6. in <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpdesign/wpdpvol2/vol2.html>>. Website [Date of Access 20-11-2012].

14 Theatricality, both as a productive and as a receptive, phenomenon.

15 Samuel Beckett's *Breath*: Stage directions: 1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about 5 seconds. 2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about 10 seconds. 3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about 10 seconds and immediately close as before. Silence and hold about 5 seconds. Curtain.

seminal theory “Art and Objecthood,”<sup>16</sup> (1967) and Beckett's aesthetic theory in the “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit”(1949)<sup>17</sup>; both discourses are considered in relation to disciplinary or medial entanglements.<sup>18</sup> The thesis, however, attempts to disentangle these impediments and provide new ways of thinking within inter-media synergies. In the explorations below, we follow how these two theories and concepts come into existence and critical validity, and how, through the process of negotiation between theatricality and the visual arts, they may be useful for analysing *Breath* as an intermedial playlet that lead to a reformulation and reinvention of the theatrical experience. The study mobilises an analysis grounded in complexities and attempts to contextualise *Breath* within the intermedial cultural discourse of visual practices and, especially, minimalism and to make a contribution to intermedial Beckett criticism, (a discourse that has not developed yet<sup>19</sup>).

The anti-theatrical associations between the theoretical systems of Samuel Beckett and Michael Fried, illustrate that both the theatre and the visual arts appropriate similar conceptual systems and share a common theoretical ground about issues of representation. In this context Fried is perceived as a modernist art critic, who has written about the theatre and has criticized theatricality and Samuel Beckett as a playwright who attempted to formulate an art theory. Beckett's challenge to the theatre was to create an intermedial playlet that resists character

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Cry: instant of recorded vagitus. Important that the two cries be identical switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath. Breath: amplified recording. Maximum light: no bright. If 0=dark and 10=light, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back. In Beckett, Samuel. *Breath and The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986: 2.

16 Fried was involved in a long term art-historical project that was primarily completed in three books. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), *Courbet's Realism* (1990), *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (1966). His book is a prologue to his art-historical trilogy and a sequel to the historical problematic it analyses. Fried's texts in a chronological order: “Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons” (1966), “Morris Louis” (1966-67), “Jules Olitski” (1966-67), “Art and Objecthood” (1967), “New York by Anthony Caro” (1967), “Ronald Davis: Surface and Illusion” (1967), “Two Sculptures by Anthony Caro” (1968), “Recent Work by Kenneth Noland” (1969), “Caro's Abstractness” (1970), “Problems of Polychromy: New Sculptures by Michael Bolus” (1971), “Larry Poons's New Paintings” (1972), “Anthony Caro's Table Sculptures 1966-77” (1977). When he wrote “Art and Objecthood” he was a Diderotian critic, as he stated, without knowing it. Fried doesn't address the topic of postmodernism nor discuss conceptual art, performance art, or other such developments (that lie beyond the scope of his criticism). “Art and Objecthood” and Fried's critical position have drawn intense criticism. By and large Fried didn't reply to his critics, however, he replied at his revised book on what he thought were misunderstandings of his views, which is a reply of sorts. His long term art-historical project was firstly an attempt to develop an account of the evolution of a central tradition within French painting from the first genre paintings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze, in the mid-1970s, to the emergence of modernism in the art of Edouard Manet and Impressionists in the 1860s and 1870s. The core issue for that tradition concerned the relation between painting and beholder, which is to say that it was an issue that Fried invoked in “Art and Objecthood” when he accused minimalist art of being theatrical. Fried came into his own as an art critic and theorist only in the fall of 1966, with “Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons” and with “The Achievement of Morris Louis,” which he expanded to form the text of his book on Morris Louis.

17 I will refer to this essay as “Three Dialogues,” although the complete title as it appears in the original publication is “Three Dialogues: Tal Coat, Masson, Bram van Velde.” “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,” was published in the second “Transition,” edited by the art critic Georges Duthuit (between 1948-1950). The “Three Dialogues” was largely ignored for nearly a decade following its original publication in issue five of “Transition” (1949).

18 Mieke Bal argues that concepts can travel from one discourse or context to another...‘concepts are able to carry across their particular histories but at the same time they are in a state of disentanglement or deterritorialisation, thus providing new ways of thinking within their newly found territory.’ In Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002:17.

19 See Middeke.

representation, textual production and theatricality, while Fried imagined a visual art context that would be liberated from the notion of theatricality. A number of affinities and differences can be traced between the two writers. It was in fact Fried who mentioned that the need to defeat theatricality is nowhere more evident than in the theatre, however, Fried was critical of intermediality and installation aesthetics.

Critical problems that pertain to the term theatricality are examined in relation to Beckett's interrogation concerning the nature of theatricality, of the theatrical text, character, form and the objectification of art, by illuminating aspects of the formal achievement of a playlet that was written on the paper table cover of a café and that reshaped the contours and possibilities of the theatre. Beckett's thirty-five second, characterless, *Breath*, is examined as the formation of an intermedial artwork that emerged in the sixties and challenged ideas concerning theatrical representation.

Chapple and Kattenbelt define intermediality as 'a powerful and potentially radical force, that operates in-between theatre, performance and other media; in-between performer and audience; and in-between realities - with theatre providing a stage space for the performance of intermediality.'<sup>20</sup> Both of the constituent parts of the term "intermediality," "inter-" and "media," designate "between-ness." This study attempts to contextualise *Breath* within the intermedial cultural discourse of the visual arts and, especially, minimalism is justified in several respects in the analysis below: firstly, *Breath* is situated in-between realities, secondly, it can be characterised as a "technicule,"<sup>21</sup> thirdly, it is the culmination of Beckett's late style in the theatre, that is characterised by an aesthetic of media cross-fertilisation. *Breath* is interpreted both in the context of this cross-fertilisation, namely, the multifaceted nature of Beckett's choice of media in an oeuvre that included text, stage, film, radio, television, mime, and performance and in relation to Beckett's "reductionist"<sup>22</sup> representational strategy.

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20 Chapple, Freda and Kattenbelt, Chiel (eds). *Intermediality In Theatre and Performance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006: 12.

21 See Cohn.

22 See Hauck.

*Breath* is intrinsically intermedial given that it operates in-between realities (art and body/biology/life/non-art), in-between the boundaries of artistic media (theatre and visual arts/installation art), the verbal and the visual, the audible and the scenic (sound as stage presence), in-between visibility and invisibility (light and darkness), in-between presence and absence/emptiness, embodiment and ambiguity of corporeal experience, in-between life and death (movement and stasis) and in-between an inhalation and an exhalation (silence and sound). Each chapter focuses on these different aspects of intermediality, and the term (intermediality) is treated in the context of the quasi-generic and inter-generic features of Beckett's late style in the theatre and the de-centred field of subjectivity and its polysemous modes of absence and presence.

The above issues are addressed, by focusing on the question of the relation between the work [of art] and what is outside of it (surroundings, author, painter, reader, beholder), through an examination of the artistic use of, and critical commentary on, media and of the artistic treatment of the process of the physical act of respiration, as it is traced in the work of Samuel Beckett and in the artworks of other artists who represent different art disciplines.

The concepts of this study are developed in three sections, the first section is entitled: *Respiration, Discourse and the Question of Medium Specificity*, the second section: *(Re)presenting Breath*, and the third section: *Breath in the Expanded Field*. The first section charts a chronological parallel between Beckett's piece *Breath*, as a representative piece of minimalism<sup>23</sup> in the theatre (one of the shortest theatrical pieces ever written and staged), written two years later (1969) and Michael Fried's writing in 1967 of "Art and Objecthood,"<sup>24</sup> in an attempt to formulate a basic framework for thinking about the intersection of critical discourses on (anti)theatricality, in the visual arts and the theatre, more specifically, about the notion of anti-theatricalism in the theatre and the modernist anti-theatrical impulse in the visual arts. Nevertheless, the thesis intends to go beyond

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23 The thesis treats *Breath* as a minimalist piece because of its size, which is uncommon for the theatre, however, in terms of stage design aesthetics, the playlet also shares common elements to conceptual art practices. The conceptual aspect of the piece is emphasized by the presence of the heap of horizontal miscellaneous rubbish and because of the fact that absolute form and structure is given to a formless notion like respiration.

24 Originally published in *Artforum*, 5 (June, 1967): 12-13. Republished on several occasions, most importantly in Battcock, Gregory (ed). *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. New York, 1968: 116-47.

a linear and chronological reading and illustrate that some of the larger issues at stake in the critique of theatricality have ramifications that go beyond the confines of the post-war American world.

In order to demonstrate these claims, the first chapter examines Beckett's *Breath*, as a minimalist art work in order to see how it might contribute to debates led by Fried around minimalism, presence and (anti)theatricality. The focus of this chapter is also on how the “Three Dialogues” can be applied to a work like *Breath*, so as to illuminate specific aspects of the playlet, principally Beckett's decision to eradicate the text and the human figure, hence, the interest lies in the ways that Beckettian aesthetics translates into practice.

*Breath* is seen in relation to the expanded field of art practice, whose origins can be traced to the same period that *Breath* was written in and to the inter-generic and quasi-generic features of Beckett's late works for the theatre, while the study focuses on the period of the sixties and seventies, the moment of the evolution of the minimalist paradigm. Minimalist aesthetics are primarily analysed in the context of the intersection of visual art theory and theatre theory. The chapter consists of a detailed exposition of the concept of objecthood that is central to the critique of minimalism,<sup>25</sup> while the potential of the concept is examined for the analysis, creation and for understanding particular aspects of art and theatre practice. *Breath*'s intermediality is examined in relation to Beckett's reductions, the fact that his plays approximate the representational conditions of visual art works is, as Hauck observed, 'a purely accidental by-product of the generally “reductive” (by reducing) process of composing plays.'<sup>26</sup>

Fried's linkage of theatricality/objecthood to time and his binarism between mere presence and pure presentness is considered through a close analysis of temporalities<sup>27</sup> and temporal

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25 This seminal theory expressed the anti-theatrical aesthetic prevalent within modernism and marked one of the most vexed points of intersection of critical discourses in the visual arts and the theatre. See Auslander, Philip. 'Presence and theatricality in the discourse of performance and the visual arts.' *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Fried's polemic was directed not against the theatre per se, but against certain categories of sculpture, “the new art of minimalism,” which he labeled “theatrical,” as regards the terms of its appeal to the viewer. Adding to that, he dealt centrally with the idea of the bodily experience of the minimalist work, the body's orientation and the points of view, that made it so theatrical.

26 In the relentless adherence to this process, Beckett has not only created a number of theatrical paintings and sculptures which are as memorable as those of the greatest visual artists, but he has also come as close as it may be possible for a practicing dramatist to get to defining the boundaries between a theatrical performance and a purely visual representation. Hauck, Gerhard. *Reductionism in Drama and the Theatre: The Case of Samuel Beckett*. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica 1992: 77.

27 In his *Laocoön*, Lessing defined separate mediums of art through their differing temporalities, painting and sculpture are “spatial and simultaneous” while prose, poetry and music are “temporal and successive.”

unfolding in the production and reception of *Breath*. The playlet's temporal unfolding and its compositional methodology lies in the dialectics between duration and instantaneousness that is associated to installation aesthetics and to a durational modality of production and reception. *Breath's* temporal unfolding is seen as an equally important component for its composition as its materiality (lighting and stage design). *Breath* does not represent time, it takes place at present time, by composing an “aesthetics of presence” but also an “aesthetics of absence,” (missing figure). Beckett reduced *Breath* in time and space to the point where it is frozen temporally and spatially, like a visual art work.

Beckett's *Breath* manifests attributes that are characteristic of the visual arts (like flatness, presentness or instantaneousness, a visual art concept, that can be applied to theatre and performance), thus it questions the theatrical terms of spectatorship and has the potential to absorb the beholder into a complete and fully realised image (tableau).<sup>28</sup> *Breath* operates (or oscillates) between a sound “tableau”<sup>29</sup> (installation art) and the pictorial, two-dimensional (static image). According to Fried's critical framework theatricality and absorption<sup>30</sup> affect how an artwork manifests temporalities and the ways it is received (spectatorship).

According to Fried, the effect of absorption is a “perfect trance of involvement” that draws the beholder in a prolonged concentration on the artwork.<sup>31</sup> This effect is achieved by artists who intentionally ignore the viewer, instead, they focus intently on an object in the painting, such as painters: Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, Carle Van Loo, and others. Fried draws from Denis Diderot, who wrote during this period, stating that Diderot's ideal for painting 'rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist, that he was not really there, standing before the canvas; and that the dramatic representation of action and passion, and the

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28 Stephen W. Melville notes that the tableau is the 'seam along which modern theatre and painting have been historically bound to one another.' For an analysis about the “tableau” see Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy and Melville, Stephen W. *Seams : Art as a Philosophical Context*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1996: 115.

29 The idea of tableau perhaps first came to light in Yves-Alain Bois's book *Painting as Model*. Also, in Clement Greenberg's idea of painterly specificity as centred around qualities of flatness and optical events. Hubert Damisch's complex sense of thickness addressing the Minimal Art paradigm and Jean François Chevrier's formulation of tableau, in relation to photography. See <http://tableauproject.blogspot.com> .Website Accessed [20/11/2012]

30 See Finch, Mick. Theatre/Spectacle - Absorption / Lived Time. Painting and Time, Conference Paper. Hull School of Art and Design, (17 & 18 April) :1998. In <http://www.mickfinch.com/texts/theatre.html> . Website Accessed [20/11/2012]

31 Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painter and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988: 103.

causal and instantaneous mode of unity that came with it, provided the best available medium for establishing that fiction in the painting itself.'<sup>32</sup>

Fried has carried through an art historical project that argues the centrality of a dialectic or quasi-dialectic of absorption and theatricality to French painting from the eighteenth century on, by relating absorption to the effect of the tableau. The term “tableau” shares a lot of common characteristics with installation art since it ties painting and theatre to each other.

In this framework, the chapter incorporates the analysis of artworks, so as to highlight the treatment of respiration in other art media, and considers *Breath's* “temporalities” in relation to two-dimensional works inspired by respiration. These paintings are representative of movements like optical-art and abstract expressionism, such as: Bridget Riley's *Breathe* and Gerhard Richter's *Breath*.

Moreover, the second chapter focuses on Beckett's theory in relation to the dialectics of abstraction and expression as well as his aesthetics of failure. Beckett is a theatrical writer with a distinctive relationship to theory and art discourse; in view of the fact that he attempted to express an aesthetic theory. The analysis of the “Three Dialogues,” tracks the trajectory of Beckett's experimentation with form and narrative and investigates the progressive simplifications and reductions in Beckett's oeuvre, seen as a self-reflexive concern with medium, genre and the creative act. The “Three Dialogues,” Beckett's final piece of discursive writing, is considered within the context of its subject matter, the tension between abstraction and expression, the dilemma of artistic expression and the impossibility of expression in painting.<sup>33</sup>As Hugh Kenner's comments in the book *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*, the ‘ostensible subject of these dialogues is painting, a manageable metaphor for any art.’<sup>34</sup>

The aim of this approach is to construct a model for thinking about Beckett's dialogue with art

<sup>35</sup> and art's dialogue with Beckett, namely, about the continuing relevance of Beckett for the arts in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid: 103.

<sup>33</sup> See Cope, Richard. *Re-reading Samuel Beckett's Three Dialogues with George Duthuit Within Context of the Continuum it Nourished* (Thesis Ph.D). London: South Bank University, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Kenner, Hugh. *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*. New York: Farrar, 1973:

<sup>35</sup> See Oppenheim and Cope.

the twenty-first century and how influential he has been for visual artists, composers, musicians, dancers, choreographers, architects and other artists<sup>36</sup> and more specifically about the metaphor of painting in his works and his “painterly writing.”<sup>37</sup> The enduring impact of Beckett on the visual arts and his direct or indirect collaborations with painters<sup>38</sup> is, also, taken into consideration.

The second chapter elaborates further on Fried's theory and its negative reception and provides a critical overview of Fried's controversial theory by questioning Fried's high-modernist narrative about the viewing experience of visual art, as either a pure optical experience or as a strong gestalt. Forty five years after the writing of “Art and Objecthood,” the seminal essay appears to be redundant, as since the 1960s the art world has clearly taken a performative and durational turn. Moreover, the chapter is critical of Fried's binarism between modernist presentness and minimalism's real time by arguing against Fried's claim that the worst aspect of minimalism is the manifestation of unlimited durationality. The chapter concludes by recognising the paradox that Fried established a discourse, that made it possible to theorize postmodern performance, a phenomenon that is virtually the antithesis of the hermetic modernist abstraction Fried sought to protect.<sup>39</sup>

The third chapter focuses on Beckett's *Breath*; on the historical and aesthetic context of its production and reception, on the visual and aural disposition of *Breath*, on the formation of “a new type of visual and aural text,” on the reductive process of composing plays and on the quasi-generic, inter-generic features of Beckett's late style in the theatre. *Breath* is paradigmatic of this attempt to

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36 Beckett has influenced the works of some of the leading artists in several Modernist movements and many canonical post-war artists. International artists like Jasper Johns, Bruce Nauman, Steve McQueen, and Doris Salcedo have indicated their indebtedness to Beckett's work and legacy. Composers like Philip Glass, Morton Feldman, Mark-Anthony Turnage, filmmakers like Atom Egoyan and dancers like Maguy Marin, Martin Arnold, Dorothy Cross, Stan Douglas, Gary Hill, Bruce Nauman, Gregor Schneider, Ann-Sofi Sidén, Zin Taylor, Allison Hrabluik, Avigdor Arikha, Geneviève Asse, Georg Baselitz, Hans Jørgen Brøndum, Claus Carstensen, Jean Deyrolle, Hans Martin Erhardt, Max Ernst, Sorel Etrog, Manfred Garstka, Winfred Gaul, Edward Gorey, Stanley William Hayter, Deltas Henke, Jasper Johns, Charles Klabunde, Leif Lage, Bun-Ching Lam, Louis Le Brocquy, Christian Lemmerz, Joseph Mugnaini, Karlheinz Richard Müller, Roswitha Quadflieg, Robert Ryman, Sergent-Fulbert, Bram Van Velde, Henry Hayden, William Stanley Hayter, Werner Spies, Louis le Brocquy, Sorel Etrog, Charles Klabunde, Deltas Henke and many others. See Word and Image: *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Text/ Mot Et Image: Samuel Beckett Et Le Texte Visuel*. Atlanta: Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

37 See Oppenheim

38 Maude, Ulrika. ‘Beckett and Aesthetics, and: Images of Beckett (review),’ *Modernism/Modernity*, 11.4, (November, 2004): 845-848. Knowlson, a scholar of every letter, notebook and diary that has been recovered, charts Beckett's interest in such paintings as Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*. Beckett's admiration of “the old masters,” is well known. Beckett saw the canvas in 1971, in the capital of Malta, Valletta, while on holiday there with his wife Suzanne. Shortly afterwards, he began to work on *Not I*. The figure of Auditor, Beckett wrote to Knowlson was inspired by Caravaggio's painting. It is, however, unfortunate that the reproductions of art works in the book are in black and white. Colour appears to have been especially significant in the case of works such as Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Observing the Moon*, which in part inspired Beckett to write *Waiting for Godot*. Knowlson stresses in particular the shades of browns and greys in the painting, and the reader is left to guess what they may have looked like in a colour plate.

39 See Auslander.



transform language into a kind of erasure and to find a means to literature's end (to the notion that language must be shattered), in order to reveal what was previously “unseen.”<sup>40</sup>

Beckett's *Breath* is interpreted both in the context of contemporary art and performance practices, including visual art, film, music, and cross/inter-disciplinary work, in view of the multifaceted nature of Beckett's choice of media in an oeuvre that included text, stage, film, radio, television, mime, and performance. The study is structured around visual art and theatre discourses of the same period that Beckett's *Breath* was written and an investigation of key moments in the history and theory of the theatre and the visual arts, so as to identify its original context, explore the aesthetic implications with more depth and open up the possibility of a new context - one that relates to both the original and the current context. Therefore, the critic, as Pattie suggested, ‘should not impose a periodization on Beckett’s work; rather, he or she should examine Beckett’s work in relation to its time – without expecting that a simple correlation between the writing and the time might emerge.’<sup>41</sup>

This chapter reviews hermeneutic perspectives of the formal principles that underlie the playlet's structure and pattern. *Breath* can be seen as constituting the traditional “well-made play” with a remarkable precision to the pyramidal structure.<sup>42</sup> Ruby Cohn argued that these acts form a symmetrical whole: Act I, is repeated by Act V - the cry; Act II is repeated by Act IV.<sup>43</sup> The archetypal use of cyclic form is to be found in *Breath*, symmetry, repetition and inversion form a cyclic structure. The playlet shares all the elements of the “well made” play, the “rising action” of the second “act,” the pause, the climax and the third “act, the culmination, the apex, the exhalation (advancing), death (declining) (i.e., complete exhalation) constitutes the “falling action” and the fourth act of the play, which is followed by the reiterated cry, the “resolution” of the play, and the final silence before the curtain descends. Its formal structure shares the classic aristotelian narrative

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40 Art provides access to that which is unknowable, unformed, and even “visually unrepresentable.”

41 Pattie, David. *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*. London: Routledge, 2004: 246.

42 According to Hutchings, the formal aspects of *Breath*, based on the dramatic technique postulated by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des dramas* in 1863. Hutchings argues that the initial pause and the first cry, representing birth, constitute the introduction and “inciting moment” of life in general and of this play in particular; secondly, the inhalation, a symbol of growth and development. See Hutchings, William. ‘Abated Drama: Samuel Beckett's Unabated Breath.’ *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 17.1 (Calgary, Canada, 1986): 85-94: 88.

43 Cohn, Ruby. *Just Play Beckett's Theatre*. Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980: 4.

technique of tumescence and detumescence (namely a dialectics of inflation, deflation). However, Beckett employs this classic form of Aristotelian (inhalation-deflation) in its complete reduction, with no overtones. Beckett wanted to avoid interpretations of the playlet, both of its content and structural concerns. It is no wonder that Beckett has called the play “a farce in five acts.”

*Breath* subverts this classic structure/form, through a highly articulate process of erasure and constant disruption of the processes and the kind of terms that surround representational theatre, reorients reflections concerning the formation of genre, character, place, action, situation and language, turning towards processes and contexts, through which the limits of the work are yet to be defined. The exposition of the components of a medium in skeletal form and the decision to eradicate the subject are pivotal for understanding aspects of *Breath's* anti-theatrical, intermedial structure and visual dramaturgy. *Breath's* “visual dramaturgy”<sup>44</sup> is based on the lack of the figure and is enhanced by the fact that the playlet is not subordinated to the text but structured in an intermedial composition.

Therefore, the third chapter is focused on Beckett's art practice and visual dramaturgy, as well as on *Breath's* “stagings” by visual artists (Hirst's, Tynan's, Navridis', Adriano and Fernando Guimarães') and directors (Gontarski). The interface between staging performance and displaying art can create a new “genre” that can suit to the purposes and approaches of both Beckett *Breath's* and contemporary art. However, some versions of Beckett's playlet fail to understand *Breath's* anti-theatricality as they fail to re-invent its minimal context (by adding inessential elements) and Beckett's constant desire to expose the components of the medium, he is using, in skeletal form. The decision to present the human body<sup>45</sup> in these works,<sup>46</sup> is in contrast to Beckett's central decision to eradicate the body/subject from the stage. Consequently, certain of these art works disregard (fail to

44 The concept of “visual dramaturgy” is analysed at Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006: 93.

45 According to Gontarski, the rubbish is seen as a metaphor for the human body, which is finite and disposable, something that reminds us of Hirst's allusion to medicine as a reflection of the human organism.

46 For example in Adriano and Fernando Guimarães version of *Breath* their images foreground the regenerative potential of the embryo. Corollary productions/versions of *Breath* by Adriano and Fernando Guimarães like the *Breathó*, feature an actor (or actors) submerged in water who responds to an authoritarian and apparently arbitrary bell that commands and controls his (or their) submersions and resurfacing; hence it controls his (or their) breath. In one version, actors immerse their heads in buckets of water at the bell's command. In another, a single fully clothed actor is submerged in a massive fish tank, the duration of his submersion regulated by the bell. In a third image, submerged actors, again fully clothed, are grotesquely contorted in a bathtub and viewed from above. In each case, the actor's breathing appears subject to or regulated by an arbitrary, external force, in this case a bell or buzzer. (See Gontarski, Stanley E. 'Redirecting Beckett'. In Guardamagna, Daniela & M. Sebellin, Rossana (eds). *The Tragic Comedy of Samuel Beckett*, Beckett in Rome, 17-19 April 2008. Università degli Studi di Roma.' Tor Vergata" o Editori Laterza. 2009: 327.

see) the existential and ontological importance of Beckett's decision to eradicate the figure of the performer by presenting the “absence” of the human subject.

The fourth chapter considers the ramifications of the eradication of the subject/actor/figure in *Breath*, as an anti-theatrical strategy that highlights the intermedial structure of *Breath* and its relationship to installation aesthetics. The theatrical implications of emptiness and its effect on the spectator are seen in conjunction with Beckett’s decision to reduce the stage of the figure (body and subject). The absence of the actor entails a fundamental emptiness.

In order to demonstrate these claims, the chapter analyses the interchange between non-textual frames of representation in performance and text oriented drama that results in a redefinition of the concept of the character in contemporary performance. A gradual revision of character’s representation that is based on complex models of representation beyond narrative and language is observed. Character has dissolved into the flux of performance elements. Playwrights have abandoned many elements long thought essential to drama, including plot, action and character. As Gruber argued in his book, *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama*, ‘the idea of character haunts us in the theatre like the absence of some pictorial metabolism in a colour field.’<sup>47</sup>

Beckett’s anti-theatrical project integrated strategies in order to eradicate the presence of the character. Beckett's theatre is a theatre of corporeality, however, in *Breath* Beckett designs a space emptied of the presence of the body. Presence is generated, despite the fact that the referent is materially absent. The human icon and body is emptied, the body is placed beyond the visual spectrum, however, respiration is produced by the body and entails presence. The chapter considers Les Essif’s approach to drama and performance in relation to a new poetics of space for the text, based on emptiness. Essif formulates a dramaturgical view toward the fusion of the “empty” body of the actor, with the material emptiness of the theatrical space, based on the juncture between theatrical space and the body of the actor (a meta-dramatic fusion).

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47 Gruber, William. *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994: 10.

The presence of the miscellaneous rubbish as the primary stage prop on stage cannot fill the fundamental emptiness that is caused by the lack of the figure (subject and character). In conjunction with the lack of character, the reception of the notion of emptiness is related to Beckett's anti-theatrical stance in *Breath*. Beckett's work reveals theatricality through the emptying of theatre and this is accomplished when theatre is recurrently emptied of theatre.<sup>48</sup>

The fifth and the sixth chapter (third section) intersect in their discussion of intermediality. Both chapters examine the ways intermedia practice (and the diversity of installation art) is sustained and expressed in a contemporary context in relation to artworks about respiration. The third section addresses issues of intermediality, of visual and aural representation, spectatorial engagement, theatricality, minimalism, corporeality, presence and immateriality, by examining the creative processes undertaken by artists in presenting their aesthetic ideas through the use of diverse artistic media<sup>49</sup> in the scene of breathing. Methods of making respiration perceptible are examined through the use of auditory, olfactory, kinetic and tactile propositions and often through the viewer's participation. This section examines selected artworks that capture this visually restricted organic function. Respiration as an "immaterial" and invisible medium often exceeds the sphere of representation and textual signification, thus reinforces the role and potentiality of the concept within the art object, to the point of projecting "dematerialization" (in the sense of a de-emphasis on material aspects and form).

The fifth chapter focuses on intermedia practice and on the use of technology and analyses versions of intermediality for a broader understanding of the term. The aim is to contextualize the notion of intermediality and address the impact of Beckett on contemporary art practice,<sup>50</sup> as well as

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48 See Sarrazac, Jean-Pierre. 'The Invention of 'Theatricality': Rereading Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes.' *SubStance*, (98/99, 31.2 & 31.3), 2002: 57-72.

49 Such as painting, sculpture, video art, film, photography, installations, sound installations, performance art, land art, body art, kinetic art (the art of movement), conceptual, environmental art and poetry.

50 The chapter concentrates on the impact of Beckett's work on contemporary art practice. By redefining in a very specific and radical way, the nature of the dramatic text, Beckett opened up areas of aesthetics that contemporary artists are only beginning to fully explore, these areas are by and large related to what was previously beyond the scope of representation. The enduring impact of Beckett on the visual arts, his legacy and his direct or indirect collaborations with painters can be examined and researched in six contemporary curatorial projects in London, Paris, Barcelona, Toronto, Dublin and Norway, that formulated innovative responses to this canonical writer and that dealt with three forms of cultural representation: theatrical writing, visual art and the art exhibition (*The World as a Stage* at Tate Modern in London, *Objet Beckett*, at Centre Pompidou in Paris, *The Theatre without the Theatre* at MACBA, Barcelona, *18: Beckett* in Toronto, *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Painting* at the National Gallery of Ireland and *Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better* in Norway.) These exhibitions examined theatricality, minimalism, presence and relational aesthetics with regard to Beckett's work. James Knowlson and Anthony Cronin both noted that while living in London Beckett was a regular visitor to the major London Art

Beckett's experimentation with media and technology in relation to the complex contemporary media culture. Beckett explored some cardinal aspects of technology and wrote texts that deployed media so as to create dramatic effects and simultaneously challenged the limitations of the artistic medium. In particular, *Breath* is an amplified, mediated respiration, as Ruby Cohn suggested, might be called a “technicule,” dependent as it is on technology. The scenic directions, as Cohn wrote, 'stipulate that the two recorded cries be identical and that the light and amplified breath be strictly synchronized. The elemental symmetries of life on earth rely upon sophisticated theatre electronics.'<sup>51</sup> *Breath's* innovative use of medium, technology and its apparently simple staging is one of the reasons that artists continue to produce this work in new media<sup>52</sup> and formats.

The sixth chapter provides a broad overview of the topic of breath that relates meticulously the inquiry of respiration with more recent art. The introduction to the issue of breath-related art in the twentieth century, takes advantages of the possibilities that a thematic approach offers for bringing together art from different time periods within the same conceptual frame. Through this examination on works about respiration, the chapter examines potentialities of knowledge that emerge from the intersections of art and science and that orientate our notions concerning the artistic work in new intermedial directions. The selected contemporary art practices are characterized by the transformation of completed or finalized objects into open works,<sup>53</sup> in spatially expanded and intermedial situations. These art processes raise various issues concerning methodology from philosophical, aesthetic and scientific perspectives.

Beckett's work is juxtaposed with selected works by other artists, with pieces that in some sense echo Beckett's world and aesthetics and offer an alternative to a particular history of modernism, that is related to the idealization of forms. These art practices represent diverse

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Galleries. Beckett could spend as much as an hour in front of a single painting looking at it with intense concentration. Thomas MacGreevy introduced James Joyce to Beckett and other prominent writers and painters of the day. The two men became life-long friends and wrote to each other regularly. Beckett met MacGreevy in Paris in 1928 and MacGreevy later became director of the National Gallery of Ireland (1950-1963).

51 Cohn, Ruby. *A Beckett Canon*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001: 298.

52 In the Beckett on Film project (2002), British visual artist Damien Hirst directed *Breath* using the voice of comedian Keith Allen. In this project, funded by the Irish Film Institute, the Irish broadcasting network RTE, and Britain's Channel 4, virtually all of Beckett's stage plays were committed to film by a wide range of artists. Some of the project's artists worked regularly with Beckett texts, such as director Harold Pinter and actors Alan Stanford and Barry McGovern. Other artists involved in the project have not worked regularly with Beckett (Anthony Minghella and Neil Jordan).

53 See Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

historical moments, art methods and theoretical perspectives, however, most of the artworks challenge the ideological effects of specific narratives of high modernism that focus on the separation and hierarchization of artistic media.

The selected artists (in chapter five and six) explore and revise, in diverse ways, the condition of the modernist art object and its historical trajectory into their art practice by shaking up the notion of a unified and “disembodied” visual field. The embodied intermedial experience entails a politics of spectating in contrast to a modernist purified opticality. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century developments in installation art transform the audience into the key site of installation art.<sup>54</sup> The development of intermedia art over the past decades culminates in a focus on the spectator's body, as a sentient and active “agent” in a reciprocal relation with the work of art. These approaches are considered as ultimately ideological and political, since spectatorship in itself becomes a self-reflective act.

The spectator becomes a participant in these intermedia works that not only demand her/his active perceptual engagement, but often also generate explicit awareness of this activity. Maaïke Bleeker introduces the term “seer”<sup>55</sup> for “spectator” in order to denote the activity of the former and the passivity of the latter. Most of these artworks challenge the ideological effects of specific narratives of high modernism that focus on the separation and hierarchization of artistic media. Thus, the “seers” are not reduced to a state of unquestioning awareness or a wholly passive relation to the object as a detached subject: interaction, engagement, and response are required for the aesthetic experience of intermedial art. The political is traced in the revision of the condition of the modernist art object and its historical trajectory into selected art practices (by representative artists of movements like conceptual art, performance art, land art: such as Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Marina Abramovic, Lygia Clark, Art & Language, VALIE EXPORT etc). Certain of these artworks return us to the body of the spectator as a space that is both sentient and active, this

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54 See Oliveira, Nicolas de, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry. *Installation Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994. New edition, *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.

55 Bleeker, Maaïke. *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

process has ideological ramifications.

In conclusion, the thesis argues that Fried would endorse Beckett's anti-theatrical strategies in *Breath*, however, without accepting its intermedial ramifications. Beckett employed his anti-theatrical strategies in *Breath*, with the use of intermedial properties towards a “new genre,” however, Fried like other modernist critics (Greenberg<sup>56</sup>) have been critical of intermedia practice. Beckett's opposition to the “traditional unity” of the work and to medium specificity is against Fried's fixation with art's autonomy and medium specificity. Beckett deconstructs medium-specificity in the theatre by approaching the visual arts, moreover, the specificity of both the visual arts and the theatre has become difficult to define in Beckett's intermedia aesthetics.

The point where the two writers' systems might intersect (excluding their anti-theatrical stance) is the emphasis on control over the notion of the work of art, both in its production and its reception. Beckett with his writing and directorial vision, maintained the strict construction of his texts and strict control over even the smallest details of the various productions of his plays. Since his death, in 1989, his estate has shown itself committed to the same policy. This attitude shows a positivism and a “closure”<sup>57</sup> that Fried would appreciate. It was Fried who insisted that a work of art had to be self-contained, and that it required a control over the external circumstances of reception that is impossible to implement in the theatre. Beckett attempted to implement this approach in the theatre, however, in a sense he “failed.”<sup>58</sup> Performance and visual artists or directors continue to produce his plays in their own ways, beyond Beckett's stage directions; certain of these experiments

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56 In 1981, Greenberg wrote that, 'what's ominous is that the decline of taste now, for the first time, threatens to overtake art itself. I see “intermedia” and the permissiveness that goes with it as symptoms of this. In Greenberg, Clement. “Modern and Postmodern,” *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003: 25. Or Greenberg, Clement. 'Intermedia.' In Greenberg, Clement. *Late Writings*. Edited by Robert C. Morgan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003: 93-98.

57 As Connor argued, we should be cautious of the limitless enlargements of Beckett's oeuvre, given that his work is, also, based on restrictions and on a specific aesthetic framework. Beckett's work has been subject to huge enlargement-across genres, media, languages and cultures. Beckett has been made the centrepiece of what might be called a contemporary aesthetics of the inexhaustible that, as Connor argued, ‘assumes the sovereign value of endless propagation and maintains a horror of any kind of limit. Having perhaps helped in some of my previous work to recruit Beckett to this aesthetic, I would like now, in this talk, to argue that Beckett is in fact a writer who is governed by the principles of limit and finitude, principles that are in fact both philosophically more provocative and politically more responsible than the cult of endless exceeding that has attached itself to Beckett.’ In Connor, Steven. *Borderless Beckett*. International Samuel Beckett Symposium, Tokyo, 29 September, 2006.

58 According to Gontarski, amid the restrictions on performance imposed by the Beckett Estate, its attempts to restrain if not tame or subdue the recalcitrant artwork by its insistence on faithful and accurate performances, a faith and accuracy no one seems able to define, a resilient and imaginative set of theatrical directors and artists continues to redirect Beckett by developing a third way, through radical acts of the imagination, by folding the authorized, legally owned object, like a ready-made in a gallery, into another context, like storefronts, disused or abandoned buildings, or museum installations. They thus assert the heterogeneity of Beckettian performance without violating the dictates of an Estate-issued performance contract'. In Gontarski, Stanley E. 'Redirecting Beckett'. In Guardamagna, Daniela & M. Sebellin, Rossana (eds). *The Tragic Comedy of Samuel Beckett: Beckett in Rome*. (Conference, 17-19 April 2008. Università degli Studi di Roma). Tor Vergata Editori, Laterza, 2009: 327.

are successfully undertaken and some are not (criticism in chapter three).

The enduring binary between live and mediated performance, as well as the binary between the theatre and the visual arts is mainly founded on different representational attitudes towards the live body, the human figure, corporeal presence, subjectivity/subjecthood and agency. The human body is either physically present or technically represented/mediated in video, film, television and the digital. Intermedial exchange (in the theatre and the visual arts) has managed to reconcile this binary by integrating a variety of technical media into a large medial framework. The blurring of the boundaries between the theatre and the visual arts just like the question of intermediality in installation art and the problem of theatricality are significant issue in aesthetics.

Theatricality was applied as a term to installation strategies after the late sixties, however, both the theatre and the visual arts introduced similar innovative practices that attempted to abolish the separation between audience and stage, spectator and exhibition space. Modernist aesthetics have been critical of theatricality, of the hybrid nature of installation art and intermedial practice. Theatre has usually played two different and incompatible roles for high-modernist aesthetics: that of its paradigm and that of its opponent.

## **I. Paradigm Shifts**

The history of art has experienced several significant paradigm<sup>59</sup> shifts that have reframed modes of spectatorship and long-established notions of the visitor, the audience, the listener, and the spectator. Currently, medium specificity is set against a critical backdrop and diverse artistic strategies introduce unfamiliar situations, forms, media and materials and engage audiences to embrace new and hybrid forms of immersion, viewing, responsivity, and modes of participation.

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59 The sixties' artworld transformation that the thesis charts has been seen in conjunction with Kuhnian paradigm shifts. Theorists like Caroline Jones have traced significant affinities with the persuasive account of the enterprise of science put forward by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and art and complexities between the artworld and Kuhn. The contemporary critic and theorist Hal Foster refers to the paradigm as embedded in the context of a historical shift specific to this mid-1960s moment; the paradigm's identification as Modernism (or its scion) is left intact.



The terms “participatory”<sup>60</sup> and “relational”<sup>61</sup> have become increasingly important, for the visual and performing arts, in describing both an aesthetic of making and an ethics of spectatorship. Art practitioners are also constantly on the search for innovative ways to engage participants in their work, by shifting the meaning of the art object, completely to the experience that is made with and through this work. The focus on individual artistic practice, the experience of the artistic process and the attitude of the creative act are some of the guiding principles that inform the expanded and unbounded relationship between space, subjecthood, objecthood and artwork.

Modernist art critics (like Fried and Greenberg), however, claimed that these practices and the performative and theatrical elements would destroy the essence and autonomy of the individual arts. The position of modernist discourse, in opposition to the theatrical and performative elements of the visual artwork, was also related to a general attitude against “conventional” realistic representation and artistic illusion.

Parallel to this, the modernist genealogy of critics was wary of the dangers of categorizing art as an event. According to this reading, the tendency of categorizing art as an event means that the viewers do not appreciate the artwork itself, rather its broader cultural context (i.e. Abstract Expressionism, colour field painting, as opposed to a specific painting by Pollock or Rothko). If art becomes nothing more than a cultural event, then it adversely compromises the way in which art can be appreciated; hence, response will be conditioned by surrounding socio-historic circumstance, that will avoid consideration of the artwork as an independent entity.

According to this view, the artists do not define what the final work exactly is and the work’s

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60 The participatory shift and practice in the arts has been often appropriated by post-conceptual, socially and politically engaged art, or by art activism.

61 See Nicholas Bourriaud on Relational Aesthetics. Bourriaud has been an effective advocate for the contemporary tendency to emphasize process, performativity, openness, social contexts, transitivity and the production of dialogue over the closure of traditional modernist objecthood, visibility and hyper-individualism. However, his theories have received criticism in terms of the implicit ideological implications. His positioning of relational art as the heir to the twentieth century avant-gardes has been criticised. As he argued, ‘whatever the fundamentalists clinging to yesterday’s good taste may say and think, present-day art is roundly taking on and taking up the legacy of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, while at the same time challenging their dogmatism and their teleological doctrines.’ In Bourriaud, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses du Réel, 1998 : 45.

However, as the Radical Culture Research Collective mention in their critique of relational art, ‘the main limitation of relational art – and one that negates any claim it makes to the legacy of the avant-gardes is that relational art refuses the radical project of the avant-garde legacy, as they argued ‘while we would defend relational art from its conservative and reactionary critics, we would also insist that it not come to stand in for the radical project it falls short of – and indeed refuses. Undoubtedly, the avant-garde tradition continues to be transformed by its own process of self-critique. But it does not give up the radical, macro-historical aim of a real world beyond capitalist relations. And it doesn’t settle for the experience of gallery simulations.’ Radical Culture Research Collective (RCRC) *A Very Short Critique of Relational Aesthetics* published on transform.eipcp.net. December, 2011. Website [Date Accessed 20/11/2012]

aesthetic values are contingent upon the many variables that shape the viewer's experience. These additive components mean that the viewer can relate with the whole, having a more encompassing experience determined not only by the work but by the different elements of the artistic experience: the event, the architectural space, etc. Modernist criticism, however, suggests the elimination of these additive components and the exclusion of the viewer, as the work is closed to the outside and has an inherent structure.

Midcentury aesthetics was partly dominated by a rhetoric of isolated and purified opticality.<sup>62</sup> This discourse argues that, the structural concerns should be contained within the work of art. The modernist sensibility is in favour of the difference between formal and conceptual frameworks; the distinction between conceptual and formal frameworks is formulated in relation to "non-artness"; namely, to the primacy of the literal over depicted shape. This is often identified as a problem related to three dimensional art; the conceptual framework is reduced to "non-artness" and the notion of "non-art" is sought in the three-dimensional.

Clement Greenberg formulates this idea in relationship to "non-art." By acknowledging that the cutting edge works have the look of "non-art" at their "arrival," that meant that most painting that looked like "non-art" was considered as art, though not necessarily a successful work of art. The look of "non-art" had to be sought in the three-dimensional and Greenberg argued that minimalist work has gone so far in the extreme of being "non-art" that it is as "non-art" as "a door, a table or a blank sheet of paper."<sup>63</sup> According to this reading, minimalist art, remains too much a feat of ideation and not enough anything else, as he stated, 'its idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered [...]. There is hardly any aesthetic surprise in Minimal Art... Aesthetic surprise hangs on forever - it is there in Raphael as it is in Pollock - and ideas alone cannot achieve it.'<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, the minimalists' failure to formulate anything but interest in their work marks a

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62 See Jones, Caroline. *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

63 Greenberg, Clement. "Recentness of Sculpture," in Exh. Cat. *American Sculpture of the Sixties*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art Publications, 1967. Rpt in Battcock, Gregory (ed). *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995: 180.

64 Ibid: 183 and 184.

deviation from modernism, because if a work is merely “interesting,” it is not aesthetically comparable to modernist works preceding it. The problem here lies not only with the “non-artness” of the minimalist work, but in the fact that these artworks are not concerned with the pictorial or structural elements contained within the work of art. The same problem occurs in conceptual art, however, modernist genealogy is concerned with artists who attempt to resolve this kind of conflict and support that by abandoning pictorial or sculptural elements the problems presented by art’s development are not resolved.

Nevertheless, twenty-first century discourses in performance and art history re-articulate these high-modernist aesthetic positions with a view to developing an aesthetic that can respond to contemporary issues. Contemporary discourse interrogates the platitudes and the tone of certainty that prevails in formalist criticism. In view of the fact that, a “specific knowledge of art,” as Didi Huberman noted, 'ended up imposing its own specific form of discourse on its object, at the risk of inventing artificial boundaries for its object - an object dispossessed of its own specific deployment or unfolding.'<sup>65</sup>

Reflective rather than prescriptive, discourses that were critical of the high-modernist formalism realised the limits of interpretation in art and argued in favour of the ambiguity of meaning and the plurality of interpretations of the art work by introducing disorder, chance, mobility, and indeterminacy within its structure. They also focused on the ideological<sup>66</sup> and contextual issues surrounding the artwork. This study does not focus on modernism's broader context, as far as definition and versions are concerned (literary studies, art), but, principally focuses on high-modernist accounts in relation to anti-theatrical discourse, by working with a specific theoretical framework and doesn't attempt to map out an area that interprets and examines distinct approaches to modernism and the polemics between continental (European) modernism and Anglo-American.

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65 Didi-Huberman. Georges. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005: 3.

66 See Francis, Frascina. *Art, Politics and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999.

The thesis reflects on the inflected meanings of terms like minimalism and theatricality across the disciplinary boundaries of the theatre and the visual arts. Nevertheless, it also, question some of the dominant, modernist narratives about the viewing experience of visual art, as either a pure optical experience or as a strong gestalt, in relation to minimalism, and the differently inflected meanings of minimalism across the disciplines of theatre and the visual arts. Scholars have been debating the interrelations of the arts for centuries and the contemporary focus has shifted to the intermedial relations between the various arts and media. This intersection between different media principally concerns the relation between the arts of time (theatre, music, literature, film) and the arts of space (the visual arts). The progressive intermedial networking of the arts with one another, and as a consequence the tendency toward the elimination of the boundary between art and “non-art,” follows in the wake of the aestheticization of the lifeworld.

The selected artworks about respiration (chapters 5 and 6) propose a contemplative act between the beholder and the art object as an extension of the physical senses, in contrast to a modernist focus on visual form and to a notion of the eye as a purely abstract organ, cut off from the bodily senses to which it is connected. By challenging the viewer’s expectations of the experience of coherent, bounded, and unified form that can be organized as distinct media or in terms of a stylistic scheme, the artworks explore the act of the viewer on the art object. Marcel Duchamp’s constant questioning of the nature of the work of art and his emphasis on the work of art’s “completion” by the spectator highlights this openness (chapter six examines conceptual art's treatment of respiration in the works of Duchamp, Beuys, Manzoni, Weseler).

This embodied vision questions some of the dominant narratives about the viewing experience of visual art as either a pure optical experience or as a strong gestalt. Through this process, the artists contest the perception of work by revered figures within the modernist tradition and discourage the ability to evaluate artists by media and forms. The depiction of formless visual shapes (respiration) that become metaphors for conceptual forms is a very interesting challenge for

the visual arts; the challenge of finding a form for formlessness, of showing a form that has no form. Bataille described the formless as subversive of the traditional duality of form and content and as Krauss states, the formless has its own legacy to fulfil, its own destiny - which is partly that of liberating our thinking.<sup>67</sup>

## II. Medium Specificity and The Expanded Field

The thesis argues that *Breath* serves as an indication of the formative, productive role of anti-theatricalism in the theatre and not as an external attack on it. Frequently, anti-theatricalism restricts the use of theatrical metaphor and retains a suggestion of negativity about the formal codes of theatre. However, the anti-theatrical discourse can be decidedly imprecise, particularly in the contexts that it is used and depending on the discipline that examines it. The interdisciplinary mobility of the concept of theatricality, in the threshold between the theatre and the visual arts is considered here.<sup>68</sup> According to the theorist Shannon Jackson, it might be imprecision and self-contradiction that make theatricality so resilient and often anti-theatrical discourse links theatre with the degradations of artifice, as 'they appeared variously in Plato's condemnation of its tertiary status, Austin's repudiation of its "etiolated" form or even in naturalistic theatre's attempts to avoid its own artificiality.'<sup>69</sup>

It is noteworthy that despite the spatial and participatory engagement of the audience in works of art from minimalism to relational works, the theatrical has diverse manifestations and is not interpreted, with consistency, in the visual arts. It can be quite disorienting for a theatre historian to learn that the traditional terms of one's own workaday world are the very same terms used to mark the disruption of visual art traditions, as Shannon Jackson argues, 'whether that disruption is celebrated as a liberation from the object or castigated as the end of art as we know it.'<sup>70</sup> As mentioned, the chapters of the first section look at theatricality, in the context of aesthetics

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67 See Bois, Yves-Alain & Krauss, Rosalind E. *Formless. A User's Guide*. Cambridge : MIT Press, 1997.

68 See Bal, Mieke. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

69 Jackson, also argued that visual art has had a tougher time reconciling anti-artifice discourse with its own enmeshment in a history of pictoriality, so its anti-theatrical discourse often invokes different-though still varied-terms. Jackson, Shannon. 'Theatre...Again.' *Art Lies: Contemporary Art Quarterly*, 60, Winter, 2008. <http://www.artlies.org/article.php?id=1682&issue=60&s=1> . Website [ Date of Access 20/11/2012 ]

70 Ibid.

and discourses of the sixties, chronologically parallel to the writing of Beckett's *Breath* so as to comprehend the nature of these approaches, that have as a focal point the act of perceiving in art. These discourses, depending on the discipline they represent, have different understandings of the referent in words like "theatre" and "theatricality." According to Ragnhild Tronstad, theatricality is a relational concept, connected to the functioning of metaphor, as she argued 'theatricality relates to real life in the same way as the metaphor relates to literal language. Theatricality's way of being is structurally identical to that of metaphor: their creation is contingent upon a gap, a deviation, a difference. The degree of deviation creates different degrees of theatricality.'<sup>71</sup>

The term theatricality derives its meanings from the world of theatre, but various theorists have abstracted the term from the theatre and have applied it to many aspects of human, social life and the visual arts. However, there is a danger in the flexibility of the uses of the term, as Davis and Postlewait argued, 'making it everything from an act to an attitude, a style to a semiotic system, a medium to a message, can mean too many things, and thus nothing. If it serves too many agendas, it is in danger of losing its hold on both the world of theatre and the world as theatre.'<sup>72</sup>

The ways in which certain features of anti-theatricality play out in theatre practice and theory are considered, by examining Beckett's *Breath* in more depth within its historical context (third chapter). The intention is to establish a co-ordinate for the text within a new context - one that relates to both the original and the current context. One of the central arguments is that Beckett's work reveals theatricality through the emptying of theatre. The last paradox of theatricality may very well consist, as Sarrazac wrote:

of the (Beckettian) task of being done (again) with theatre while constantly dreaming of beginning theatre all over again. For theatre can only be achieved outside itself, whenever it is able to let go of theatre, and this can only be accomplished if theatre is recurrently emptied of theatre.<sup>73</sup>

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71 See Tronstad, Ragnhild. 'Could the World become a Stage? Theatricality and Metaphorical Structures.' *SubStance*, Vol. 31, No. 2/3, Issue 98/99: Special Issue: Theatricality, University of Wisconsin Press (2002): 216.

72 Davis, Tracy, Postlewait, Thomas (eds). *Theatricality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 3.

73 Sarrazac, Jean-Pierre. 'The Invention of 'Theatricality': Rereading Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes.' *SubStance*, (98/99, 31.2 & 31.3), 2002: 57.

These contextualized and historicised readings of Beckett's oeuvre situate his plays in the late modernist context by drawing connections and points of convergence between Beckett and late-modernist art theorists, such as Michael Fried (as well as Beckett's own aesthetic "theory"). The chronological chart is drawn despite the different geographical (different versions of modernism, United States, Continental Europe) and cultural contexts and does not attempt to resolve the differences between these theories, but rather to rethink the relations and the common ground between the different geographical and cultural milieus.

Nevertheless, the second chapter acknowledges and critically engages with the rigorous critical reception of Michael Fried's controversial theory and of modernist aesthetic value judgments and narrow ideology, by exposing several concealed assumptions that underlie the criticism of minimalist art. Fried's evaluative criticism, the binary structuring of his themes and the evaluative hierarchy he sets up between theatrical and anti-theatrical art has been considered as anachronistic, conservative, unrepentantly formalist and idealist. A series of misconceptions and suspicions have marked this criticism but lately, after Fried's introduction to his criticism,<sup>74</sup> his writings have received a different acknowledgement and a more detailed discussion.

"Art and Objecthood" represents a breaking point from modernism; this version of modernism is defined by Clement Greenberg and further modified by Michael Fried, emphasizing the essential, integral, formal values of the work. Continuity is also an integral part of Greenberg's modernism, as he states '[n]othing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity.'<sup>75</sup> The break thus becomes prophetic in art history, as later years would point to the different genealogies of modernism to be created, refuted and reincarnated again. However, this study doesn't provide criticism of these different versions of modernism, but rather focuses on Fried's theories.

Fried's art criticism, and his own reconsideration of his theories (in 1998 and from a 1998

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<sup>74</sup> Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998.

<sup>75</sup> Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting," : 779. See bibliography.

perspective) in the book *An Introduction to My Art Criticism*,<sup>76</sup> is an important object of analysis precisely because it stages with rhetorical style the oppositional logic and lack of self-reflexivity that characterizes some practices of art history and art criticism. The second chapter focuses on certain key moments of Fried's critique in order to expose the presuppositions that Fried covers over with the veil of authority, provided by Stanley Cavell's writings and predominantly by a loosely Kantian structure of aesthetic judgment.

Michael Fried turned to Immanuel Kant, the author of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*<sup>77</sup> and the *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>78</sup> however, without taking into consideration the ways Kant managed to open and reopen the question of aesthetic knowledge, by defining the play of its limits and its subjective conditions. Fried failed to discern, consciously or unconsciously, the specifically "critical" aspect of Kantianism that has shaped and informed generations of other scholars who grasped, resynthesized, re-schematized and elevated the Kantian or neo-Kantian critical methodology, and who opened new doors for their discipline, instead of turning to theoretical schematism and closure.<sup>79</sup>

This study critically engages with theories conditioned by a more fundamental schematism wherein the modernist history of art has itself, in advance, set the limits of its own practice. By imposing its own specific form of discourse on its object, and by implicitly assuming such imperatives, modernism confronted the risk of inventing artificial boundaries for its object of analysis - (an object dispossessed of its own specific deployment or unfolding). This discourse schematizes for itself the limits of its own practice: henceforth, it advances within the closure of its "specificity"- which is to say that it constructs its own criteria of demarcation and its own closed field which includes platitudes and discards the notion of the open<sup>80</sup> work of art. Parallel to this, the refusal of a discourse of specificity to examine critically the real extent of its field is analytically

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76 Fried wrote in this book from a 1998 perspective, the book reprints, though by no means all, of the art criticism Fried wrote between the fall of 1961 and 1977. See the book: Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

77 Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. (tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

78 Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. (trs. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood) New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

79 See Pettersen.

80 See Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.



examined. Hence, the study interrogates some paradoxes induced by the particular discourse when it stops questioning its own uncertainties.<sup>81</sup>

High-modernist discourse fails in dealing with certain issues related to this research as it assumes and insists on the gap between that which it describes and its description - whilst it discards the experiential, immersive presence of the art object that becomes sublimated to a visual referent, that mutes its particularity. To write about respiration as this study endeavours is to be engaged in the far-reaching consequences, for a general notion of aesthetics and open sensorial engagement.

Therefore, the third section focuses on the interdisciplinary interest in the artistic, cultural and scientific ramifications of the corporeal function of respiration, in relation to theories about the body, visibility and representation. The sixth chapter debates respiration as a physical act, an interactivity that produces, invents and “demands” the viewer/spectator/listener’s participation and examines the artistic preoccupation with the visualization of the process of respiration that is associated with techniques of representational subtraction and minimalism, while it puts on view breath’s intrusive actuality and immediacy into the field of representation. The notion of breath is treated as a trope and a point of intersection between the scientific and the aesthetic paradigm by examining some scientific observations that have developed on the topic of respiration and the ways scholars have treated the respiratory system as an autonomous discipline and have written works about its practices for dealing with both the nervous and visceral systems of the body.

This inquiry into the complexities of respiration, as an area of cross-disciplinary focus, suggests that there are legitimate ways of finding biology in art and culture. This process can offer a glimpse into a possible new reading of breathing, one that intertwines the aesthetic with the biological. Adding to that, an interdisciplinary approach to this corporeal function brings questions about the relationship between aesthetics and science. The critical point in representing respiration

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<sup>81</sup> See Didi-Huberman. Georges. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005: 3.

is the meeting of art and science, that includes finding adequate procedures and materials to transpose this natural process into the artwork.

Aesthetics often exchange insights with the sciences and the integration of a philosophical perspective into artistic inquiry allows us both to imagine and to construct a connection between a scientific and an aesthetic paradigm. Biological metaphors are often manifested in discourses of the relations of human nature to art and various biologically based theories of aesthetics see biological phenomena and aesthetic practices in a shifting and reciprocal relationship to each other. Moreover, there is an ongoing parallel between the “visualization of energy” in the scientific and in the artistic domains. The preoccupation with the visual as paradigm is found in both domains; however, in the artistic domain there is a belief that the primacy of visual perception (the interplay of the visible and the invisible) maintains an ontological status.

The notion of respiration, places emphasis on the language of physicality and of the human body as a primary force of signification and reveals the “sensuous” nature of form, that prioritizes an immediate response to the artwork, due to the fact that the act of immediate perception is primarily located in the body. The “sensuous” approach that surrounds the selected artworks about breathing focuses on an audience perspective of a corporeal experience and on the interpretive capabilities of the human body.

The intermedial intersects with the sensorial; sensory perceptual and sensate approaches to artistic practice and analysis are intended to understand the potential of corporeal language, beyond the written and verbal text, reflected in the aural, visual, tactile and haptic resonance they embody. In art we find diverse languages such as the verbal, the corporeal, the visual, the aural and the technological. Nevertheless, the somatic is often unrepresentable and inarticulable and is dominated by the semantic. Respiration highlights the potential of the body as the site of signification and as the modality for, and site of, experiential interpretation.

Breath, as a medium, is commonly understood as the physical basis of the organism and of

the body's manifold sensory apparatus. However, a fundamental reading of the term emphasizes its formative value as a communicative agent between the individual, the outside world and time. The act of mediation is a process; in this sense the medium of breath, always internalizes a singular engagement with time. Any medium has the effect of reshaping the way in which we, collectively and individually, perceive and understand our environment. In the context of this study, the interest lies in the special significance that mediation acquires by means of an artistic system. The invisible and “formless” notion of respiration provides artists with the aptitude of experimentation with the formal possibilities of the artwork.

The selected artworks about respiration offer an alternative to the modernist fetishisation of forms while they critically address and highlight several of the theoretical issues underpinning the viewing experience and the subjectivity of the viewer's own gaze, both in relation to the performative turn, high-modernist discourse, and to contemporary discourses about opticality, theatricality and presence.<sup>82</sup>

### III. Beckett's “Aesthetics of Failure”: Ideology and Negative Dialectics

The sixth chapter treats the respiratory system as an intermedium; in this case the term suggests a location in the field between the general area of art media and that of the “medium” of life. Respiration presupposes a relation to found biological phenomena and to the notion of non-art. Artistic experimentation includes movements into non-artistic fields and the exploration of technological and scientific innovations. The non-art approach is intimately related to Beckett's attempts to challenge the medium he is working with and to Beckett's relation to the aesthetics of “failure.”<sup>83</sup>

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82 Artists have evolved techniques of concentration on aspects of the physical and have looked at the different manifestations of respiration and the ways in which it becomes perceptible. Breathing and issues of spectatorial engagement are ultimately interconnected. Our respiratory system can be affected by being aware of someone else's breathing and scientists have argued about the involvement of respiration in the interaction of our visual and motor systems. See Caroline Jones.

83 The notion of “failure” in performance is currently an area of growing concern within the field. See [www.institute-of-failure.com](http://www.institute-of-failure.com). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2010]

Failure is central to the account of human subjectivity within the existential/phenomenological philosophical tradition, and as Power Cormac argued, there are analogies to be drawn between the notion of performance as failure and the phenomenological account of human consciousness as perpetually attempting/failing to realise itself and its own possibilities.<sup>84</sup> Performance fails to exist in perpetuity like an object. Unlike a visual art piece, a theatrical performance is disappearing as it is being experienced. Peggy Phelan emphasises the contingent aspects of performance by considering that its most irretrievable failure of all is its “total disappearance and non-existence.” Phelan celebrates staging disappearance in performance: “representation without reproduction.”<sup>85</sup> Embedded in this notion is the singularity of live performance, its immediacy and its non-repeatability.

Beckett's “aesthetics of failure,” as it is analysed in the “Three dialogues,” implies the failure to represent (to fail means to fail to represent). Beckett negotiates this paradoxical state of artistic impotence, and non-representationality, as he argued: “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, failure is his world.”<sup>86</sup> However, the inevitability of the artist's failure, becomes an expressive resource for Beckett. Beckett has an idiosyncratic approach towards failure, his writing emphasizes the fissures the gaps, and breaks in the circuit that constitutes the “object” of theatre, the performance is premised on the failure to achieve the fullness of presence. Moreover, Beckett's “aesthetics of failure” is a conscious strategy against triumphalism and in favour of indeterminacy, characteristic of his art of impoverishment.<sup>87</sup> Beckett's art as Terry Eagleton argued, 'maintains a compact with failure in the teeth of Nazi triumphalism, undoing its lethal absolutism with the weapons of ambiguity and indeterminacy. His favourite word, he commented, was “perhaps”. Against fascism's megalomaniac totalities, he pits the fragmentary and unfinished. In his Socratic way, Beckett preferred ignorance to knowledge, presumably because it resulted in fewer corpses.'<sup>88</sup>

84 See Power, Cormac. 'Performing to fail: Perspectives on Failure in Performance and Philosophy'. Published in Meyer-Dinkgraffe and Watt (ed.) *Ethical Encounters: Boundaries of Theatre, Performance and Philosophy*. Newcastle: CSP: 2010.

85 Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge, 1993.

86 In the 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit', in Esslin, Martin (ed). *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall (1965): 21.

87 Knowlson describes that, Beckett once remarked that his friend James Joyce, 'was always adding to his material, whereas he realized that his own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding'. In Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press, 1996: 416.

88 Eagleton, Terry. 'POLITICAL BECKETT?' *New Left Review*, July/August 40, 2006: 67.

The expressive recourse of failure is examined in relation to respiration and the human form, by focusing on Beckett's decision not to depict the human figure. The central absence, in *Breath*, is the absence of the human figure/body. The revival of interest in respiration in the new millennium is suggestive and is partly the outcome of the re-emergence of the rhetoric of the human body and of presence, upon the field of theory. The ever-closer relationship between the sensuous and the technological and the culture of the technologized body have also an effect on the biological phenomenon of respiration. Breathing is related to notions of immediacy, liveness and real presence; however, breath's "representation" involves a form of mediation.

The actor's corporeal presence fades and vanishes on the electronic platform in a way that might be understood to foreground the illusions of substance and presence themselves.<sup>89</sup> The notions of presence hinge on the relationship between the live and mediated. Notions of immediacy and the relationship between live, mediated and simulated performance may deepen an understanding of the performance of presence. The advent of new media forms and the increasing integration of contemporary performance and media has generated new engagements, practices and understandings of presence in performance.<sup>90</sup>

Live performance requires bodies present on stage, however, there are two kinds of bodies on the contemporary stage: the human and the mediatized body. In live performance, the authentic human body is physically present and there are also technical methods to represent the body as in video, film, television and the digital. The move away from objects toward concepts or ideas means that the body might no longer be physically (materially) present. Phelan advances a basic definition of performance as "representation without reproduction," arguing that performance "becomes itself through disappearance." In a culture 'obsessed by materiality and its own preservation through recorded images of itself, performance fails to fully coincide with itself, it is less to do with preservation and materiality than emptiness and disappearance.'<sup>91</sup> There is a debate in performance

89 See Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Routledge, 1999.

90 See presence in *Performing Presence: from the live to the simulated*: an international conference, Centre for Intermedia, University of Exeter, UK, (26-29 March): 2009.

91 Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge, 1993: 146.

theory<sup>92</sup> in terms of the ways the mediatized replaces the live and in terms of the relationship between the live and the mediatized. The integrity of the live has been supported in contrast to the “co-opted” nature of the mediatized, however, more unifying approaches see the live as something that can incorporate the mediatized, both technologically and epistemologically.

In this context, Beckett's *Breath* is mediatized (recorded respiration, lack of the live performer) but it integrates liveness; the body is absent, however, the process of the respiratory system is ubiquitous. In our respiratory system lies the essence of human experience. Nonetheless, in Beckett's late theatre the absence of the human body discloses a subjectivity that is beyond embodiment. The absence of the performer generates the intensity of a “disappearing presence.” As Herbert Blau argued, ‘its very corporeality being the basis of its most powerful illusion, that something is substantially there, the thing itself, even as it vanishes.’<sup>93</sup>

Beckett is interrogating the dialectics of presence (liveness) and absence. The presence of miscellaneous rubbish in juxtaposition with the absence of the human figure. The “terror” of the decay of humanity and death, as seen through the presence of the rubbish heap (waste) coexists with the sublime, the life giving force of respiration on *Breath*'s set. As Burke put it, 'terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.'<sup>94</sup> *Breath* oscillates between the sublime expression of life, that is respiration's basic characteristic and the presence of rubbish alludes to a sense of “negative representation.”<sup>95</sup> Adorno's “negative” and “positive” representation is unfolding in the dialectic of birth and death in *Breath* and *Breath*'s relationship to a post-Holocaust reality and its ideological context turns out to be central. Beckett's choice to fill the stage with rubbish in *Breath* is not just an allegorical statement about the human condition as it is often stated, it is an ideological<sup>96</sup> statement that encapsulates a post-Auschwitz reality. What we see

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92 The debate concerns the conflicting theories of Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander.

93 Blau, Herbert. *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theater*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982: 132.

94 Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761. <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/burke2.html> . Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012].

95 The history of negative presentation in the visual arts after 1945, see 'Mourning and Cosmopolitics: With and Beyond Beuys,' forthcoming in Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, ed., *Beuysian Legacies: Art, Culture and Politics in Ireland, Europe and the U.S.* (Berlin: LIT). Ray, Gene. *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Ray, Gene. *History, The Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear*.

96 Beckett was one of the few modernist artists to become a militant of the left rather than the right. See Eagleton.

in his work, as Eagleton mentioned, is not some timeless condition humaine, but war - torn twentieth - century Europe. It is, as Adorno recognized, an art after Auschwitz, one which keeps faith in its austere minimalism and unremitting bleakness with silence, terror and non-being. His writing is as thin as is compatible with being barely perceptible.<sup>97</sup> *Breath's* stage becomes a stagnant landscape filled with nihilism uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger.<sup>98</sup>

According to Gene Ray, “terror” and the sublime go together and are even inseparable, adding to this, for Burke, there can be no sublime without terror, and wherever there is terror, there is also, at least potentially, the feeling of the sublime. Both notions (terror and the sublime) are connected with the magnitude of nature to overwhelm humans. The aesthetic response to respiration can be treated as sublime, given that it is the ultimate physical (natural) phenomenon, a life giving quality that strike us with its perplexity and with its “non-representational” qualities that are associated with temporality. Beckett’s *Breath* reveals the constraints and limitations of representation while it opens up its frames.<sup>99</sup> This “openness”<sup>100</sup> is considered as an ideological stance since the open work, as Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes argued, is 'already a political manifestation, a statement of the active role and the recipients’ freedom, which it theorises.'<sup>101</sup>

The philosophical and aesthetic questions dealt with throughout the thesis are wide-ranging but gain their specificity through the focus on the experimental contours of Beckett’s *Breath*. In turn the consequences of this investigation are worked out in the specificity of respiration, but are far-reaching in terms of a broader aesthetic interdisciplinary sensibility.

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97 Eagleton, Terry. 'Political Beckett?.' *New Left Review* 40. July/August 2006: 71.

98 As Knowlson argued 'If the starved, stagnant landscapes of his work are post-Auschwitz, they are also a subliminal memory of famished Ireland, with its threadbare, monotonous colonial culture and its disaffected masses waiting listlessly on a Messianic deliverance which never quite comes. See James Knowlson at Eagleton, Terry. 'Political Beckett?.' *New Left Review* 40. July/August 2006: 71. Also see Cunningham, Conor. *Genealogy of Nihilism*. London: Routledge, 2002.

99 Artists working with the medium of sound and vision, had already found ways to represent silence, absence and emptiness (notions not associated with representational art), Beckett attempted to do the same by adopting similar practices.

100 The term “Openness,” as discussed in Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

101 Lerm Hayes, Christa-Maria. 'Re-inventing the Literary Exhibition: Exhibiting (Dialogical and Subversive) Art on (James Joyce’s) Literature.' *Working Papers on Design* 2, 2007. In <<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpdesign/wpdvol2/vol2.html>> .Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

**SECTION I: RESPIRATION, DISCOURSE AND THE QUESTION OF MEDIUM SPECIFICITY** ‘The sixties came from an empty room’<sup>102</sup>...

**CHAPTER I: ‘...It's the shape that matters...’<sup>103</sup>: *Breath*, Art and Objecthood<sup>104</sup>**

Minimalism has ushered art into real time and real space, to borrow a pair of phrases from the art talk of the late sixties. All the old hierarchies had collapsed. In real time, no work of art is timeless. In real space, the art object is no more privileged than any other physical thing.<sup>105</sup>

The abstractness of minimalism makes it less easy to recognize the human body in those works and therefore less easy to project ourselves into the space of that sculpture with all our settled prejudices left intact. Yet our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject of this sculpture - even when a work is made of several hundred tons of earth.<sup>106</sup>

This chapter charts a chronological parallel between Samuel Beckett's piece *Breath* (1969), as a representative piece of minimalism in the theatre (one of the shortest stage pieces ever written and staged), and Fried's writing in 1967 of "Art and Objecthood" in an attempt to formulate a basic framework for thinking about the intersection of critical discourses on theatricality in the visual arts and the theatre, specifically about the notion of anti-theatricalism in the theatre and the modernist anti-theatrical impulse in the visual arts.

This chapter demonstrates these claims by juxtaposing Michael Fried's polemics of

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102 Insley, Will in Droll, Donald, Jane Nicol (ed). *Abstract Painting: 1960-69*. New York: The Institute of Art and Urban Resources, 1983: n.p.

103 Hobson quotes Beckett as saying (when he was interviewed as dramatist of the year.; after the production of *Endgame*), I am interest in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine... "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned." That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters. (To Hobson, Harold. 'Samuel Beckett- Dramatist of the Year,' *International Theatre Annual*, 1956: 153 -155.)

104 An extract of this chapter has been presented at *Beckett and Company, A centenary Conference on Samuel Beckett and the Arts*. Part of the 2006 global Samuel Beckett Centennial celebrations and in collaboration with the London Consortium; Birkbeck, University of London; and Goldsmiths, University of London. A three-day celebration of Samuel Beckett's continuing impact on contemporary arts, jointly hosted by Tate Modern and Goldsmiths, University of London.

105 Oppenheim quoted in Ratcliff, Carter. *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art, 1965-1975*. New York: Allworth Press, 2000: 25.

106 Krauss, Rosalind. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. New York: Viking Press, 1977: 129. Quoted in Bleeker, Maaik. 'Passages in Post-Modern Theory: Mapping the Apparatus.' *Parallax*, (14:1), 2008: 56.



theatricality and Beckett's anti-theatrical strategies. Samuel Beckett is a playwright who attempted to formulate an art theory and Michael Fried is perceived as a modernist art critic, who has written about the theatre and has criticized theatricality. This chapter focuses on how the “Three Dialogues” can be applied to a work like *Breath*, so as to illuminate specific aspects of the playlet, principally, Beckett's decision to eradicate the text and the human figure, hence, the interest lies in the ways that Beckettian aesthetics translates into practice.

A number of affinities and differences can be traced between the two writers; Beckett created a work that resists character representation, textual production and theatricality, while Fried imagined a visual art context that would be liberated from the notion of theatricality. Anti-theatricalism emerges in response to specific notions about the theatre. For this reason, the chapter examines the modernist version of anti-theatricalism, that attacks not theatre itself but the value of theatre.

### **1.1 Beckett's Aesthetic Theory**

Beckett is a theatrical writer with a distinctive relationship to theory and art discourse; in view of the fact that he attempted to express a coherent aesthetic theory. His final piece of art criticism, the “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,” was published in the second “Transition,” edited by the art critic Georges Duthuit (between 1948-1950). The “Three Dialogues” was largely ignored for nearly a decade following its original publication in issue five of “Transition” (1949) but soon after was considered as a special key to Beckett’s work and critics have examined the ways in which Beckettian aesthetics translates into practice.

Beckett’s final piece of discursive writing is considered within the context of its subject matter here, the tension between abstraction and expression, the dilemma of artistic expression and the impossibility of expression in painting. The “Three Dialogues” have also been related to some well-known writings, on modernist painting and abstraction, from the post war period and in critical

relation to broadly contemporaneous writings on modernist painting. The “Three Dialogues” is a text that attempts to articulate a thesis, but “fails” to do so. The failure of the text to articulate its thesis renders the text a failure itself, a failure that parallels the argument within the text. Thus, the text becomes a paradigm of its own thesis, or non-thesis.<sup>107</sup>

Beckett’s final piece of critical writing often represents for critics a platform from which to investigate his aesthetic. Beckett published the “Three Dialogues,” (the pseudo-dialogues between ‘B’ and ‘D’) in 1949. ‘B’ is, often, identified as Beckett by critics, therefore ‘B’s’ discussion about modern art in the dialogues is often attributed to Beckett. In an oft-cited passage from the dialogues, Beckett writes that:

B. - Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.

D. - And preferring what?

B. - The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.<sup>108</sup>

The critical context around the “Three Dialogues” and its relationship to art and aesthetics is multifaceted. These dialogues differ from modernist discourses, both in terms of methodology and argumentation, although they seem to share some common ground. There is an extensive debate among critics about the text and as to whether it expounds a coherent theory of art and artistic expression. Theorists like Lois Oppenheim admit that it is difficult to argue that Beckett ‘developed any real aesthetic, in the sense of a theory of artistic expression.’<sup>109</sup> Beckett’s oeuvre can be considered as an experiment in literary analysis that evades exegesis and hermeneutical systems. In *Breath*, the evasion of exegesis, becomes even more subtle, as Blau inquired:

what is it there in *Breath*, that mimicry of a play, with its two vaginal cries, what is it being remembered, except remembered being, being bygone, if it ever was, always nostalgia for it, or something more than being, with nothing there onstage, except a litter of rubbish, as if some token of the

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107 See Cope, Richard. *Re-reading Samuel Beckett's Three Dialogues with George Duthuit with context of the continuum it nourished* (Thesis Ph.D). London: South Bank University, 2006.

108 Beckett, Samuel. *Proust and the Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: Calder, 1965: 103.

109 Oppenheim, Lois. *The painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000: 3.

ruins of history, which gives another dimension to the birth astride of a grave.<sup>110</sup>

Beckett's language is aporetic and "evades" exegesis in the form of representational subtraction. The interrogation was for Beckett, as Locatelli suggests, 'the function of art (and thus the function of art is, in a sense, epistemological), art has always been this - pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric.'<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, the publication of Beckett's letter to Duthuit sheds light on his thinking about aesthetics. This study shares a same line of reasoning with scholars like Richard Cope, who situates the "Three Dialogues" in a contemporary context that paralleled its original context and who provides a re-reading of the text that reveals its relevance to contemporary art historical questions and concerns. This research offers a reading of Beckett's art discourse in critical relation to broadly contemporaneous writings on modernist painting.

Cope compares, the "Three Dialogues" to Clement Greenberg's theory of Modernist painting and attempts to demonstrate that although "Modernist Painting" and the "Three Dialogues" may seem to share a similar agenda, the methodology and outcome is vastly different. That is to say, that the former is stressing the possible and the latter remains within the impossible. Cope argues, that within the argument of the "Three Dialogues" and its insistence on impossibility, there is ample scope for the continuation of painting, as a valid form of art that questions the nature of art by undermining its possibility.

According to Cope, Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" represents a significant attempt to make painting possible in a time in which it was perceived to be in crisis. Cope argues, that the "Three Dialogues," seen as a piece of criticism, deserves to be considered more frequently in the debate surrounding the relevance of painting for contemporary art and is able to extend this questioning to other forms of expression. The thesis of "Three Dialogues," can highlight the

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110 Blau, Herbert. 'Apnea and True Illusion: Breath(less) in Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, (49.4), 2006 : 460.

111 Carla Locatelli concludes from the above passage that in Beckett's view, a 'pure interrogation' can only be structured as a subtraction (of rhetoric from the rhetorical question). In Locatelli, Carla. *Unwording the World: Samuel's Beckett's Fiction after the Nobel Prize*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990: 172.

problems inherent within the painting process. As he suggested, it can:

bring into relief the possibility of remaining within these problems as a solution to the impossibility of overcoming the problems means that the text can be read as being of paramount interest to both artists and art critics alike, when considering the contradictions of painting, the possibility of its impossibility and the impossibility of its possibility.<sup>112</sup>

The analysis of the “Three Dialogues,” tracks the trajectory of Beckett's experimentation with form and narrative and investigates the progressive simplifications and reductions in Beckett's oeuvre, seen as a self-reflexive concern with medium, genre and the creative act. The exposition of the components of a medium in skeletal form is pivotal for understanding aspects of Beckett's intermedia practice and *Breath* in particular.

## 1.2 The Concretization of Abstraction

As a formal movement, minimalism is restricted to those artists (primarily in post war America)<sup>113</sup> who shared a philosophical commitment to the abstract, anti compositional, material object and is understood in relation to the critical discourse that appeared between 1963 and 1968.

<sup>114</sup>The term refers primarily to sculpture or three-dimensional work, in which geometry is emphasized and expressive technique avoided. Minimalist works are often indistinguishable from raw materials or found (non-art) objects.

In the theatre, Samuel Beckett's work provides a closer analogue to minimalism. The term ‘minimalist’ is only slightly more precise when applied to works of visual art. However, the minimalist object destabilized both mediums (of painting and sculpture) and opened the way to the invention of new ones - or to the idea that art advances by further displacement, further alienation

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112 Cope, Richard. *Re-reading Samuel Beckett's Three Dialogues with George Duthuit Within The Context of the Continuum it Nourished* (Thesis Ph.D). London South Bank University, 2006.

113 Carl Andre, Dan Falvin, and Robert Morris are some of the most important minimalist artists and Frank Stella's *Black Paintings*, which were shown as early as 1959 in the Museum of Modern Art's Sixteen Americans, inaugurate the period of minimalist practice, while Robert Morris's process orientated work and Michael Heizer's earthworks of the late sixties signal its demise.

114 Minimalist art, according to Strickland: 'is prone to stasis (as expressed in musical drones and silence, immobile or virtually immobile dance, endless freeze-frame in the film, event-free narrative and expressionless lyrics, featureless sculpture, monochromatic canvases) and resistant to development. Gridded or otherwise diagrammatic paintings and sculptures repeated modules and held harmonies in music, simple and reiterated movements in the dance and film, the aborted or circular dialogues of the drama and fiction. It tends towards non-allusiveness and decontextualization from tradition, impersonality in tone and flattening of perspective through emphasis on surfaces, neutralization of depth cues in painting or of the space/substance, image/reflection dichotomies in light environments, the restriction of dynamic and harmonic movement in the music, the human “still lifes” of the films, and the analogously univocal description of persons and objects in the painting and fiction.' In Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993: 7.

from the traditional mediums and even from the idea that mediums can be given coherent definitions.<sup>115</sup>

Pascale Casanova claims that ‘Beckett’s literary corpus is unified by a singular aesthetic purpose, namely, to emulate in literature the abstraction central to modernism in the plastic arts.’<sup>116</sup> Casanova locates the anatomy of a literary revolution in Beckett's abstract writing. The evasion of figuration, the withdrawal from representation and the abeyance of the mimetic, are related facets of Beckett’s technique of abstraction. The concept of abstraction, associated with the visual arts, represented a prominent artistic concern for Beckett. He extensively discussed representational abstraction, three years before the writing of *Breath*, in the *Gruen Letter* (1964), and thought that he had perhaps freed himself from certain formal concepts. As he wrote, ‘perhaps, like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky, I have turned toward an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretize the abstraction not to give it yet another formal context.’<sup>117</sup>

Theorists have experienced difficulty in deciphering Beckett's ambiguous statement about the concretization of abstraction. Beckett’s statement and his discussion about abstract language (in the Gruen and Schneider interview) reveal a tension between expression and abstraction, during composition and a tendency beyond formalism. However, failing to understand the context of the notion of failure, the resistance to representation, the aesthetics of impoverishment and the necessity of both components in a dialectic (abstraction-expression) undermines the inquiry into the content that Beckett aims to express by means of his new formal language. It becomes evident from Beckett’s statements that an “abstract language,” should develop specific technical means of achieving new kinds of expressive force if it is to be artistically effective.

Abstraction, according to Beckett, required new technical means of expression; this is the

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115 See Ratcliff, Carter. *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art, 1965-1975*. New York: Allworth Press, 2000: 21.

116 Casanova, Pascale. *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2007: 21.

117 As Erik Tønning argued ‘Beckett admired at least one instance of Kandinsky’s early lyrical abstract style and was critical of his Bauhaus period; thus it is in all likelihood this former period which acted as a possible analogy with Beckett’s own abstract language in the Gruen interview. By contrast, Beckett’s sharply critical usage of the term “abstraction” reveals a suspicion against the kind of self-sufficient aesthetic purity that approaches mere formal game-playing: his praise is always reserved for artists who continue to struggle painfully with what he later, referred to, in the 1949 “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,” as “the ferocious dilemma of expression.” The reason of this suspicion is ably summarized in Shane Weller’s comments on Beckett’s 1948 essay “Peintres de l’Empêchement”: Rather than freeing the artist to pursue some absolutely non-representational art, recognition of the object’s resistance to representation, it inaugurates an art whose theme or matter will be that resistance itself: “Est peint ce qui empêche de peindre.” Art will therefore be forever in mourning for its object: “deuil de l’objet.” In Tønning, Erik. *Abstraction in Samuel Beckett’s Drama for Stage and Screen 1962-1985*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007: 8, 17.

reason behind the decision to write about the impossibility of writing as a solution to a technical problem, resolutely formalist in nature, with its closest analogue in abstract art. Beckett is against false attempts to reach beyond, rather than sustain the confrontation with the “dilemma of expression” (like some kinds of painterly abstraction). As an alternative, he argues that art should accept failure as its inescapable condition. Hence, Beckett praises the work of Bram Van Velde, who is described as the ‘first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from its desertion.’<sup>118</sup>

Aspects of the formal achievement of *Breath* are considered, as an aesthetic breakthrough that led to an “abstract” formal language. The concern about the new formal language is ultimately related to Beckett’s preoccupation with the nature of the medium and contains prominent philosophical components. Beckett calls into question the nature of the medium he is working with, as Francis Doherty argues, ‘he then follows a path of reduction and diminution, and treads the path of diminution in order to call into question the dominant idea of what constitutes a dramatic script and a theatrical performance.’<sup>119</sup>

Beckett's work, through its highly articulate process of erasure and constant disruption of the processes and the kind of terms that surround representational theatre, reorients our reflections concerning the formation of theatricality, medium, genre, character, place, action, situation and language, turning towards processes and contexts through which the limits of the work are yet to be defined. Gilles Deleuze argued that ‘the exhaustion of possibilities is Beckett's fundamental artistic strategy.’<sup>120</sup> Beckett's art is an art of exhaustion - exhaustion, that is, not of the artist, but of his resources and not with the particular artist, but with art itself, ‘always at the mercy of decomposing and perverse media.’<sup>121</sup> His intention was to illustrate failure, disjunction, dis-function within his given medium.

Parallel to this, his work foregrounds schematization, de-individualization, bodily constriction

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118 Beckett, Samuel, *Bram Van Velde*, New York: Grove Press, 1960: 125.

119 Doherty, Francis. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Hutchinson, 1971: 75.

120 Deleuze, Gilles. ‘The Exhausted.’ *SubStance*, 24.3, (1995): 3-28: 24

121 Ibid.

and reduction, fragmentation and rapid extortion of speech, as well as expressionless (and occasionally unintelligible) delivery. This was Beckett's way with every artistic medium that he worked in, as Albright argued, 'to foreground the medium, to thrust it in the spectator's face, by showing its inadequacy, its refusal to be wrenched to any good artistic purpose.'<sup>122</sup>

Beckett argued, when he compared his work to that of Joyce (concerning his method of composing), that he was merely aiming at the essentials. He thought that he was diametrically opposite to Joyce, because Joyce was a synthesizer, according to Beckett. Joyce 'wanted to put everything, the whole of human culture, into one or two books, and I am an analyser. I take away all the accidentals because I want to come down to the bedrock of the essentials, the archetypal.'<sup>123</sup> In another passage, Beckett compared his aesthetic with that of Joyce, by explaining that his investigation was the area of existence, which was by definition incompatible with art. As he wrote:

the more Joyce knew the more he could. He is tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. There seems to be a kind of aesthetic axiom that expression is achievement—must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable - as something by definition incompatible with art.<sup>124</sup>

Beckett was, also, the inventor of the persona of Jean du Cas,<sup>125</sup> the founder of the movement of Concentrism, a movement that was constantly challenging interpretative strategies. The resistance to exegesis and his deprecating of the role of the author, as authority, was singular. Beckett was constantly challenging the role of hermeneutics, while his statements have been fundamentally against any attempt of interpretation. As he said, 'art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear.'<sup>126</sup> He, also, famously refused to offer his readers any help in interpreting his work, as Beckett argued, 'my work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If

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122 Albright, Daniel. *Beckett and Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 1.

123 Knowlson, James and Knowlson, Elizabeth (eds). *Beckett Remembering Beckett: A Centenary Celebration*. New York: Arcade, 2006: 104.

124 Samuel Beckett is quoted in Shenker, Israel. 'Moody Man of Letters.' *New York Times*, Section 2, (5, May, 1956): 3.

125 As Oppenheim noted, 'any effort to situate and analyze Beckett's work risks the epithet of one who bears a marked resemblance to Beckett himself Jean du Cas the founder of Concentrism. Such a threat, notwithstanding, this book aims to do both for it is undertaken in the very spirit of Concentrist thought—no less fictive than the movement's leader both inventions of Beckett—and the belief that a critical exegesis may be just non reducible enough to respect an art as at once, perfectly intelligible and perfectly unexplicable.' In Oppenheim, Lois. *The Painted Word: Beckett's Dialogue with Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000: 1.

126 Devlin, Devis. 'Intercessions.' *Transition*, 27, (May-April), 1938.

people want to have headaches among the overtones let them and provide their own aspirin.'<sup>127</sup>

Beckett's texts deal with the problem of interpretation itself, as he wrote, 'no symbols where none intended.'<sup>128</sup> Steven Connor argued that criticism mimics the gesture of Beckett's "shrug," in order 'to assert humbly its own limits.' In the very act of making this gesture it (criticism) 'defies those limits affirming the possibility of speech and commentary even when these are denied.'<sup>129</sup> The literal refusal of *Breath* to signify is part of this resistance to exegesis and categorization, despite the fact that, at the same time, Beckett with his writing and directorial vision, maintained the strict construction of his texts and strict control over even the smallest details of the various productions of his plays. Since his death, in 1989, his estate has shown itself committed to the same policy.<sup>130</sup>

The attempt to situate Beckett's work within a single theoretical framework is very difficult, his art, as Abbott suggested, 'reveals the semantic porousness of categories.'<sup>131</sup> His oeuvre absorbs the arts of painting, music and mime; however, we could say that Beckett's work can, by and large, be associated to the artistic movement of minimalism.<sup>132</sup> Minimalist practice presented a range of strategies that redefined the structure, form, material, image, and production of the art object in its relationship to time, space and to the spectator.

These strategies began to imply a different kind of viewer, hence, a different kind of engagement with the artwork, where the boundaries between a timeless visual art object and a temporal theatrical work became indistinct. In the well-known statement about the distinction between the temporal and the spatial arts, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argued that all bodies exist not only in space but also in time and that they continue and at any moment of their continuance,

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127 Harmon, Maurice (ed). *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 1998: 24.

128 Quoted in Alvarez, A. *Samuel Beckett*. New York: Viking, 1973: 86.

129 Connor, Steven. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. New York: Blackwell, 1988: 208.

130 See analysis about Beckett's "closure" in the introduction.

131 Abbott, Porter. *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996: 23.

132 As Blau suggested, 'There is, of course, the minimalist side of Beckett, the parsimonious aesthetic, the "mere-most minimum," of those claustral plays and prose, where "Words are few. Dying too" (Monologue 265). But when it comes to thinking the worst, ill seen ill said, who was saying it better, what where, and who would have thought that in the "accusative [of] inexistence," along with a rush of amnesia, "no notion who it was saying what you were saying," there is also a "grand apnoea" ("Text 8" 134), taking your breath away – what signal from the brain, what particle physics, apnea with a grandeur? "whose skull you were clapped up in" (That Time, 231), where else would you find that but Beckett?' In Blau, Herbert. 'Apnea and True Illusion: Breath(less) in Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49.4, (Winter, 2006): 452-468: 17, 135.



may assume a different appearance and in different relations. As he stated, 'every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present action.'<sup>133</sup>

### 1.3 The Transitional Space between the Plastic Arts and the Theatre

A shift towards a relational understanding of art occurred in twentieth century sculpture that moves it from being a fundamentally spatial, into an increasingly temporal, art. Temporal consequences of a particular arrangement of form are very significant for art criticism and for the history of art. In any spatial organization, there will be folded an implicit statement about the nature of temporal experience. Sculpture is a medium located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing. Minimalist practice stressed the condition and the significance of temporal experience during the viewing of the artwork. Attitudes towards time, in the work of art, vary and art theorists have given many insights into the notion of temporality and its relationship to “presentness.”

The effect of “presence” in the plastic arts has been criticized by modernist theorists. Central to the notion of “presence” and the phenomenological aspirations of minimalist sculpture was the idea of direct experience, that is related to the “here and now” of the temporal, material world, contingent upon the transient situations of encounter. In the critical writings of the late sixties, the notion of “presence,” of lived experience, was differentiated to modernisms' transcendentalism.

Writings on performance, focused on the immediacy of the concept of “presence,” given the structure of co-presence of artwork and viewer. Especially in interactive installations and intermedia practices which involve the viewer's immediate engagement with the work and her/his ultimate involvement in the creation of the artwork. The emphasis of theorists on perceptual and phenomenal states and the insistence on direct, lived experience, generated through representation,

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<sup>133</sup> Lessing, Gotthold-Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962: 91.

undermined aesthetic boundaries and questioned the logic of medium specificity that was prevalent in modernist theories.

The effects of media on perception have been extensively addressed in critical literature, particularly in relation to the notion of literal presence in environmental installations. Adding to that, the implications of the relationship between time and medium have been very crucial for modernism and minimalist sculpture, and minimalism has been characterized as a matter of time by Michael Fried. Fried sees temporality as connected with the theatre and the performing arts. As a result, he criticizes the effect of presence of the new sculpture of the sixties. Fried thought that his invocation of presentness made him the last in a long time of aestheticians, who, from Lessing to Greenberg through Wölfflin, sought in the instantaneous spatiality of painting the specific essence of plastic art.<sup>134</sup>

Fried's linkage of theatricality/objecthood to time and his binarism between mere presence and pure presentness is considered through a close analysis of temporalities<sup>135</sup> and temporal unfolding in the production and reception of *Breath*. The playlet's temporal unfolding and its compositional methodology lies in the dialectics between duration and instantaneousness that is associated to installation aesthetics and to a durational modality of production and reception. *Breath's* temporal unfolding is seen as an equally important component for its composition as its materiality (lighting and stage design). *Breath* does not represent time, it takes place at present time, by composing an "aesthetics of presence" but also an "aesthetics of absence," (missing figure). Beckett reduced *Breath* in time and space to the point where it is frozen temporally and spatially, like a visual art work.

*Breath* takes place "here and now," the time and space of the theatrical event and the time and space of "the breath and cry" on stage, are equal. "Theatrealty"<sup>136</sup> is the term, that describes this process, namely, the time and space of drama is sequentially related to the time and space of the

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134 See Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

135 In his *Laocoön*, Lessing defined separate mediums of art through their differing temporalities, painting and sculpture are "spatial and simultaneous" while prose, poetry and music are "temporal and successive."

136 See Cohn, Ruby in bibliography.

spectators. Beckett explores the aesthetic and conceptual aspects of duration and repetition, through the minimal duration of one of the shortest plays ever written. Audiences have watched *Breath* on stage, yet it has been produced as an installation (of rubbish) or as a soundscape of breaths in a gallery space. It is possible to present *Breath* in situations where the viewers can be walking around it. It is there to be circled, departed from or returned to at one's will, provided that this durational encounter lasts for thirty seconds.

The enigmatic thinness of Beckett's late work, the articulation of a non-text, as well as the articulation of a non-thesis in the "Three Dialogues" are examined in the context of the anti-theatrical and intermedial techniques that Beckett employed. The signifiatory modes that operate in *Breath* are seen in a process of reduction, given that it consists solely of stage directions, no literary text, total absence of plot, action, dialogue, and character, hence visual and acoustic, non-textual processes of signification. Beckett's playlet demonstrates a decisive moment in the history of theatrical experimentation, in part because of the new relationship it developed towards the formal possibilities of the theatrical event. Samuel Beckett has reduced his medium to its most basic form of objecthood; reducing the medium to its basic essentials. Exposition of the components of theatre in skeletal form (no character, no actor, no text).

In *Breath*, Beckett demonstrates a self-reflexive concern with medium, genre, representational subtraction and the creative act and comes perhaps as close as a practicing dramatist can to defining the boundaries between a theatrical performance and a purely visual representation. Beckett's ultimate desire was 'to create a blank or white page,'<sup>137</sup> in *Breath*, it seems that Beckett, almost reached this ultimate desire by constructing a text beyond the theatrical literary text. *Breath* displays the formation of an intermedial text, in a scale of a fragment that almost reaches "the point zero of language," given that it consists, solely, of scenic indications, based on a pattern of an interplay of

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137 Quoted in Bair, Deirdre. *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. London, Picador, 1980: 433.

silence and sound, light and dark, time and space, covering timing for sound and lights, level and intensity of lights. This scenic text is founded on relations established between visual and acoustical elements that structure an acoustical presence on stage, a “soundscape,” that includes and notates silence.

Beckett's ultimate goal, as Essif argued, ‘was not to eliminate either visual image or language, but to discover images as well as utterances, which, instead of telling a story, would convey to the spectator a profound and complex sense of emptiness and silence.’<sup>138</sup> Beckett’s pieces reflect on and explore the modes of theatrical production, beyond the textual frames of representation, the modes of presenting and representing, on one hand, and of perceiving, on the other. Beckett experiments with processes of perception by articulating a visual field<sup>139</sup> that is a perceptual field. In the later plays, as Garner suggested, Beckett explores the activity lodged within stillness and the sound of the depths of visual latency. ‘The result... is to etch the contours of performance even more within the spectator and to replace a theatre of activity, with a theatre of perception, guided by the eye and its efforts to see.’<sup>140</sup>

The closest to a minimal definition<sup>141</sup> we do get from Beckett are his statements that a perfect play is one ‘in which there are no actors, only text’ and that this text must be built up around a “picture.” Hauck, therefore, compares Beckett to a painter, ‘whose distaste for the excesses of style make him end up with an empty canvas, or the musician whose quest for the origins of art lead him back to primitive forms of tonal and rhythmic expression, such as the sound of the heartbeat.’<sup>142</sup> As

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138 Essif, Les. *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and his Generation*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001: 61.

139 The techniques of visual articulation in *Breath* are based on the lighting design. Stage light with the sharp dichotomies of light and dark is a determinant of presence, shape and visual form; the stage becomes visible, in a light that starts faint, becomes less faint then fades to black. With precision and exactitude (e.g. “If 0=dark and 10=bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back” is typical), set dressing, and a description of the sound cues. The only aspect that the stage directions do not comprise is the sound level for the breathing; the note on breath is simply “amplified recording.” The props are a pile of rubbish dispersed on the stage, lit by a light, which begins dim, brightens (but never fully) and then recedes to dimness. In Beckett, Samuel. *Breath and The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.

140 Garner, Stanton. ‘Visual Field in Beckett’s Late Plays.’ *Comparative Drama*, XXI.4, (1987-8): 371.

141 According to Hauck, ‘Beckett moved his drama as close to silence and inaction as a playwright can decently get and still remained a practicing playwright.’ Hauck, Gerhard. *Reductionism in Drama and the Theatre: The Case of Samuel Beckett*. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica 1992: 77. Beckett has not only changed many opinions on what is supposed to happen when we enter the theatre, but has also redefined the minima of valid theatrical performance.

142 Beckett has influenced the development of modern theatre, dramatic literature, by defining the boundaries of drama and genre, closely by questioning them more radically. As Hauck argued 'he researched on form and brought the rhythm, tone, colour and melody of a play to centre stage and that was precisely what was responsible for the crossing of boundaries from drama to something else. His works approximate to the presentational conditions of painting, sculpture and music, while they approach the point where their classification qua drama becomes difficult to maintain.

Gerhard Hauck observed, *Breath's* visual qualities bears a strong similarity to the “environmental sculptures” and paintings of artists like Joseph Beuys and Salvador Dali. However, Hauck suggested that *Breath* would need to be reduced even further, into a single timeless moment, in order to qualify as a purely visual artwork. The implications of this argument can be traced in the examination of practices and shifts in the representation of respiration in two-dimensional art.

In this framework, the chapter integrates the analysis of artworks, so as to highlight the treatment of respiration in other art media, and considers *Breath's* “temporalities” in relation to two-dimensional works inspired by respiration. These paintings are representative of movements like optical-art and abstract expressionism, such as: Bridget Riley's *Breathe* and Gerhard Richter's *Breath*. According to Fried's comparison, between abstract expressionism and minimalism, 'a conflict has gradually emerged between shape as a fundamental property of objects and shape as a medium of painting...Roughly, the success or failure of a given painting has come to depend on its ability to hold or stamp itself out or compel conviction as shape-that, or somehow to stave off or elude the question of whether or not it does so....What is at stake in this conflict is, as Fried noted:

whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects: and what decides their identity as painting is their confronting of the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects. This can be summed up by saying that modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood.<sup>143</sup>

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Approaches to Beckett's representational reductionism may all be considered as homogenous or intra-disciplinary, i.e. located within the framework of drama and the theatre. Further complications arise out of the fact that both intra-scientific and inter-scientific reductions are feasible, whereby the former would describe reductions from drama and theatre to some other art form. There is also, appears to be some evidence of heterogeneous, interdisciplinary reductions taking place. Reductions to other art forms concern the pervasive tendency to reduce drama and theatre to other art forms, notably, sculpture, music and painting.' Ibid: 75.

143 Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998: 151.

#### 1.4 Duration Versus Instantaneoussness : Beckett, Richter, Riley



Figure 1.1: Richter, Gerhard. *Breath*. Catalogue Raisonné: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1989. Source: [http://www.gerhard-richter.com/exhibitions/detail.php?exID=572&paintID=7784&show\\_per\\_page=32&page\\_selected=1](http://www.gerhard-richter.com/exhibitions/detail.php?exID=572&paintID=7784&show_per_page=32&page_selected=1). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Gerhard Richter's *Breath* transcribes the photographic medium to the medium of painting, with a persistent emphasis on the relationship of painting and photography and their contrasting visual effects. Richter's early work was influenced by the expressive abstraction of *Art Informel* ("Informal Art"), the French postwar movement. The postwar period brought the digitalisation of colour in art.<sup>144</sup> Richter's research is focused on the limits of representation of the medium of painting and the particular work is preoccupied with the notion of respiration and its representation in painting. Richter reproduced the photographic medium in painting, through the use of the photographic effect of pixelation and electronic blurring. As he argued, 'I am not trying to imitate a

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<sup>144</sup> See Batchelor.

photograph; I am trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means.’<sup>145</sup>

According to Gertrude Koch, Richter's blur is ‘a mental state in which the relation to the world of objects blurs and the act of blurring causes that world to appear particularly threatening; to appear as an impenetrable presence.’<sup>146</sup> Painting is a synthesizing and constructing medium and makes use of all modes of sensory knowledge besides the visual and the tactile. Like Parrhasius’ curtain, all representation takes place as a staged, mediated event where curtain, paper, canvas are the transport for the idea. This greater, all encompassing truth is only made evident, as Hawker argued, through the rendering of the photographic idiom in painting. It is only possible through the effect of painting's idiom, it is not evident-in fact it is hidden- in photography as medium.’<sup>147</sup>

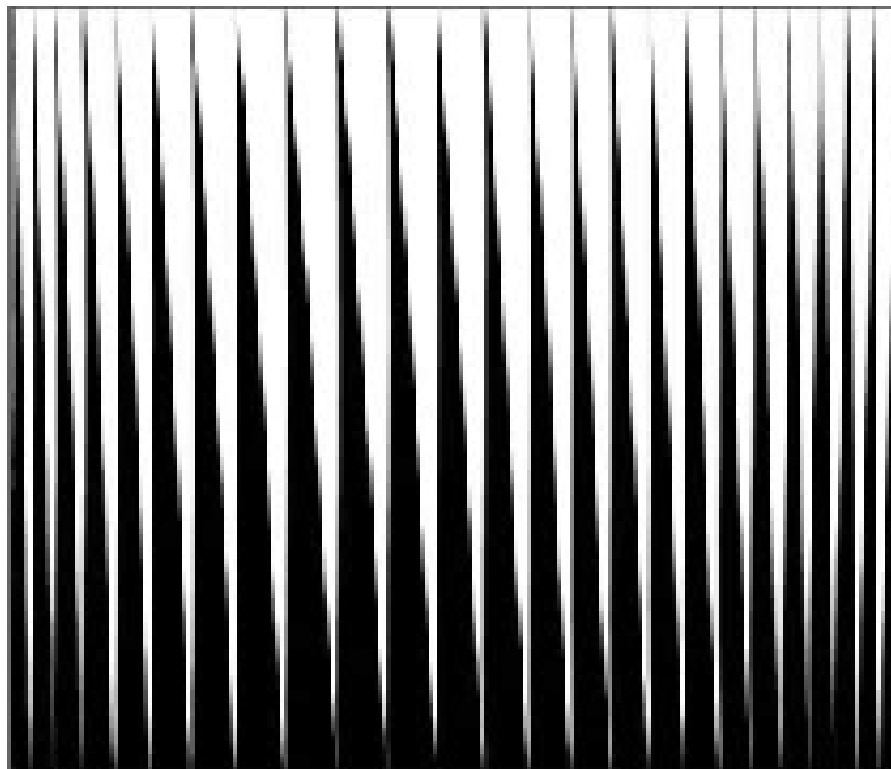


Figure 1.2: Riley, Bridget. *Breathe*<sup>148</sup>. 1966. Source: <http://www.op-art.co.uk/op-art-gallery/bridget-riley/breathe>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

145 Hawker, Rosemary. ‘The Idiom in Photography As the Truth in Painting.’ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.3, (Summer, 2002): 544.

146 Koch, Gertrude. ‘The Richter Scale of Blur.’ *October*, 62, (Fall, 1992): 137.

147 Painting needs the supplement of the photographic idiom in order to set the contours of both media a tremble and to make these “truths” visible.

Hawker, Rosemary. ‘The Idiom in Photography As the Truth in Painting.’ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.3, (Summer 2002): 541-554.

148 Emulsion on canvas 297 x 208 cm.

Bridget Riley's painting *Breathe* constructs an almost cinematic wide-screen canvas of repeated curving diagonals. The notion of respiration becomes the framework for Riley's research on form and optical impression. The visual experience of works of art representative of the Op Art movement triggers bodily responses that demonstrate the interconnectedness of eye and body. The embodied, dizzying vision evident through the viewing of Op Art challenged the claims of the dominance of the optical made by supporters and artists of high-modernism. Op Art's embodied vision is the opposite to the disembodied, optical experience described by modernist theorists like Michael Fried that is proper and exclusive to "advanced" modernist painting of the late 1950s and 1960s. Op Art with its version of "trompe l'oeil," allowed the haptic back into an exclusively optical experience.

Riley's work is described by a verb that expresses a bodily function and enduringness, *Breathe* works at the level of the frame or photogramme and indicates a concern with optical and visual impression. Riley creates a "new" visual language by experimenting with the static medium of painting that results in a confusing dazzle also contrary to the visual ideal of a strong gestalt celebrated by some minimalist artists. This embodied vision questions some of the dominant, contemporary narratives about the viewing experience of visual art as either a pure optical experience or as a strong gestalt. Richter's *Breath* and Riley's *Breathe* are differentiated from Beckett's *Breath*, in terms of their relationship to temporality.

Beckett's *Breath* stages a "tableau," (see introduction) where the viewer's experience of the object occurs through a precise manipulation of time with accuracy. However, the single timeless moment that is produced in painting cannot be produced in time-based art. Beckett's inquiry into respiration poses different challenges to the medium he is working with, and to *Breath*'s temporal "frame." From the moment the curtain rises and falls, the minimal "action," the "story" of two brief cries, the synchronous inhalation, exhalation and the light changes, differentiate *Breath* from these visual art pieces. A painting, a sculpture, or an "environmental" piece are not



framed or staged in the same way. The temporal horizon is an intrinsic factor of responsivity in *Breath*, as it is for Fried's criticism of minimalism. The centrality of time for Fried's argument lies in minimalism's relationship with time that is problematic within the context of the modernist sensibility as an experience that essentially has a beginning and an end. The minimalist artwork has an inherent relationship with repetition, an element contingent on time as it pertains to infinity.

Hauck's poetical interpretation of *Breath* sees the playlet as a work with no beginning and no end, as he argues, *Breath* consists of a single moment stretched out between the point of its completion and the point of its ruination. And while it may tell a story or represent an action, that action, according to Hauck, 'does not move in time and space in the same way it moves even in a minimal play like *Breath*.' Even if *Breath* was shorter than its prescribed 35-second run, the same conditions would still apply. In order to qualify as a purely visual artwork, *Breath* would need to be reduced further still, as Hauck wrote:

it would need to be condensed into a single timeless moment. At that point, however, the cry at the beginning and the cry at the end would be one and the same, just as the inhalation and the exhalation, the increase and the decrease of light would collapse into a single moment. *Breath* would no longer be *Breath*, but an exhibition of rubbish. It would turn from a play into an "environmental" sculpture.<sup>149</sup>

"Environmental" sculpture and installation art are associated with the structuring of various objects and materials to create a complex spatial environment. The fact that *Breath* consists of an installation (as stage design) of rubbish could be "confused" with an exhibition of rubbish or with an installation piece that included rubbish as a main scenic element. The presence of the dispersed rubbish is very significant both for the content and aesthetics of the playlet, signifying "degeneration" of humanity, death, destruction, decrement.

Hauck's statement is legitimate given that the visual image initially appears to be "without time," however, while the visual arts and the theatre share common qualities and lexical terms, terms like temporality, performativity, presence, they have divergent associations in these different

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149 Hauck, Gerhard. *Reductionism in Drama and the Theatre: The Case of Samuel Beckett*. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1992: 77.

contexts. Beckett experiments with the approximation of the aesthetics of time and the disposition of perception between the theatre and the visual arts and with the temporal aspects of the image and the temporal movement in the image that depend on the reception of the viewer. In *Breath*, the represented time is identical to the time of theatrical representation. The piece is about the shaping of time; *Breath* appeals to the temporal sense of the viewer by producing a conceptual imagery and an audio-visual displacement of theatrical perception.

Hans-Thies Lehmann, the theorist who introduced the term “post dramatic” theatre, argued about the relationship of temporality with the theatre and its durational stasis. In the context of visual imagery, the perception of theatre no longer simply prepares for a “barrage” of the sensory apparatus with moving images. But, as Lehmann argued, ‘just as in front of a painting, it activates the dynamic capacity of the gaze to produce processes, combinations and rhythms on the basis of the data provided by the stage.’ According to this view, the visual semiotics seems to want to stop theatre time and to transform the temporal events into images for contemplation. As Lehmann wrote, ‘the spectators’ gaze is invited to “dynamize” the durational stasis offered to them through their own vision. The result is a hovering of perceptual focus between a “temporalizing” viewing and a scenic “going along,” between the activity of seeing and the (more passive) empathy.’<sup>150</sup> *Breath* is seen in the context of installation art and post-dramatic scenography practices, however, the playlet is also interpreted in terms of the subversion of theatrical conventions. Beckett's decision to show the piece in a proscenium stage (with the rise and fall of the curtain) is very important, like his decision to employ the structure of the “well-made play” so as to challenge this structure (see introduction).

### **1.5 Modernist Presentness Versus Minimalism's Real Time (Presence)**

Modernist critical discourses considered that the theatre exists for the spectators in a way that other arts do not. Fried characterized the inclusion of the viewer as “presence,” in view of the

<sup>150</sup> Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006: 157.

fact that the medium of theatre and the effect of theatricality presuppose, as one of their indispensable preconditions, some sort of real, immediate, physical presence. “Presence” suggested the bodily impact of the artwork, an experience akin to encountering another person, according to Greenberg “presence” was the “look of non-art.”

Greenberg and Fried based their argument against minimalism upon this notion, but they radically altered its meaning, attributing presence to a work that lacked aesthetic quality. Presence in Fried’s sense was not, as for Greenberg, the presence of the readymade that shocks us or awaits our use.<sup>151</sup> It was the presence of the human-scaled unitary shape, a shape that seemed to suggest the gestalt of another body. Fried wrote that, ‘the entities or beings encountered in everyday experience in terms that most closely approach the literalist ideals of the...holistic are other persons.’<sup>152</sup> The problem with the literalist work was the phenomenological effect of its wholeness - the disquieting effect that it had on the spectator. This effect of viewing or embodied reception of visual artworks, which is a process that can be engaged as performative, was the core of Fried’s critique.

This performative potential takes as its central theme the proposition that art is a performative rather than merely a representational practice. In contrast to the prevailing understandings of art, as a representational or a signifying practice, through creative practice, a dynamic material exchange can occur between objects, bodies and images. Fried opposes what he calls performative, namely, the way in which the event surrounding the exhibition of the work became as important as the work itself. This process was primarily related with a total control of the *mise en scène*, and of making that situation the primary thing, as distinct from the work itself.

Therefore, it becomes apparent that a particular critique of the actor is motivating this anti-theatrical stance. As Puchner argues, in Fried’s often metaphorical formulations, ‘theatrical paintings or sculptures are described as if they were actors; these sculptures are “aware” of the audience and thus lose their self-sufficient unity and integrity, in the process of which they start to

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151 Nevertheless, by and large, Fried and Greenberg express different accounts of modernism.

152 Fried, Michael. ‘An Introduction to My Art Criticism.’ *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998: 156.

resemble vain human actors pandering to the audience.’<sup>153</sup> In reality, Fried ascribes to such theatrical works an “anthropomorphic” quality leading to a form of personalized “naturalism.” The distrust of the live actor that speaks through Fried’s figurative language becomes evident when he reveals the contrast between theatre and film. As Puchner wrote, ‘the one art form that is safe from such deplorable anthropomorphic effects is film. In contrast to the endlessly personalizing theatre, film not only removes the actors from the presence of the audience but also cuts them into pieces through close-ups and montage.’<sup>154</sup>

Moreover, Fried believed that the experience of these artworks was situational and sensory in the sense that the artist places the beholder in a “situation” of encounter that pushes the object/viewer relationship into sensual realms. In a similar line of reasoning, the literalist works were criticized for being fundamentally naturalistic; Fried thought that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice. He argued that, the problem with literalism is not that it is anthropomorphic, but that the meaning and, equally, the hiddenness of its anthropomorphism are incurably theatrical. The reasons being the 'the size of much literalist work that compares fairly closely with that of the human body and he added that another reason was that 'the literalist predilection for symmetry, and in general for a kind of order that is simply order... is rooted, not, as Judd seems to believe, in new philosophical and scientific principles, whatever he takes these to be, but in nature.’<sup>155</sup>

Similarly, Fried believed that the apparent hollowness of most literalist work- the quality of having inside - is almost blatantly anthropomorphic and that, like actual theatre, the literalist work blurred the distinction between a timeless visual art and a temporal experience. For Fried, 'it is neither the condition of music nor the condition of photography - definitely not theatre - to which art ought to aspire, but to the condition of painting and sculpture - the condition that is of existing in, indeed or secreting or constituting a continuous and perceptual present. He argued that,

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153 Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002: 3.

154 *ibid*

155 Fried, Michael. ‘An Introduction to My Art Criticism.’ *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1998: 156.

modernist art's effect is a higher effect than mere presence; a presentness that transcends temporality (the condition that is of existing in a continuous or perceptual present). As he suggested, 'the viewer's experience of such art is one of continuous and spontaneous apperception it is as though one's experience has no duration, because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.'<sup>156</sup>

Fried favoured the modernist notion of presentness, as opposed to minimalism's "real time" aesthetic, a moment of perpetual immediacy in which one could possibly see the work 'in its entirety...during this moment of presentness, one's conviction and self-knowledge would keep theatre momentarily- and only momentarily, at bay.'<sup>157</sup> This structure delineated a kind of ethics of duration and taking sides inevitably entailed privileging one of the terms of that binary, modernist instantaneity or literalist duration, which became synonymous with the theatre. Not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but as he argued:

because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest... It is this continuous and entire *presentness* [a term I adopted in opposition to literalist "presence"], amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneity as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it.<sup>158</sup>

The effect of presence has been associated with literalism, however, this modernist perception of presence is debatable. According to Sayre, there are two separate poetics of the present, one largely modernist and the other postmodern, the modernist sees in the "present," the immediacy of experience, something like an authentic "wholeness." A sense of unity and completion that is the end of art and another postmodern one which defines the present as perpetually and inevitably in media res, as part of an ongoing process, inevitably fragmentary, incomplete, and multiplicitous.

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<sup>156</sup> Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998: 167.

<sup>157</sup> Fried, Michael. 'Art and Objecthood.' *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968: 45.

<sup>158</sup> Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998: 45.

This would be a straightforward enough situation, however as Sayre wrote, 'for so many the recognition of the latter, in no way mitigates their nostalgia for the former. It as if, having lost formalism, we necessarily long for its return, as if, having lost the present - or, rather, the fullness of presence - we are some how embarrassed to admit it.'<sup>159</sup>

The discussion about presence is related to diverse perspectives of temporality, and like Greenberg, Fried introduces the problematic distinction between real and conceptual temporality. However, Greenberg used it in order to underscore what he described as an effective immediacy or real timelessness at a first glance. In "Art and Objecthood," Fried insists on the instantaneousness of perception on an intellectual level. In other words, the real duration of experience can and has to be annihilated in the "as though timelessness" of an intellectual moment. That moment of instantaneousness he defines in terms of a continuous and entire "presentness" and this perceptual presentness is experienced as a privileged state of grace.<sup>160</sup>

As Vickery argues, Fried apparently meant to convey something more precise than a simple striving after theatrical effect, especially in view of the fact that the term was not one that had any particular currency in art critical circles at the time. Fried's particular understanding of the term derives from Stanley Cavell's anti-Brechtian discussion of the difference between good and bad theatre, between real theatre as it were and the constant threat of theatricality. Theatre works compellingly, when we feel ourselves to be in immediate contact with the scene being enacted before us and at the same time when, according to Cavell:

we are situated physically in a sphere apart, and thus undisturbed by the compulsion to respond to the actors as we would were we to feel we existed in the same space as them. Theatricality intervenes in this experience when we have the sense that the actors might recognize our being present, and so the question arises for us as to whether the scene, taking place is real or illusory.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Sayre, Henry. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989: 175.

<sup>160</sup> Fried, Michael. 'Art and Objecthood.' *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968: 141.

<sup>161</sup>

According to Vickery, 'some of the main observations of Michael Fried's critique in "Art and Objecthood" follows (i) Before 1960 the risk, or even the possibility, of seeing works of art as nothing more than mere objects simply did not exist. Hence modernist art needed to demonstrate explicitly something, which had only previously been manifest implicitly: its unique medium shape. Shape is "the essence of the pictorial" and the means by which it would defeat art's objecthood – the ever more emphatic literal nature of its material support. (ii) Minimal art is a "literalist" art: it refuses to defeat its objecthood and claims its obdurate literal non-differentiated wholeness as the locus of its aesthetic value. (iii) Literalist art has "presence" – as opposed to the presentness of modernist art. Like brute objects, literalist art engenders a powerful physical immediacy, yet because of their human

Situation, duration, temporality, that is to say, theatricality, meant for Fried a breakdown of the intimate relationship between art and its viewer. Theatre's preoccupation with time, the duration of the event, is what modernist sensibility finds intolerable in the theatre. These experiences that persist in time, and more broadly the "presentment" of duration, of time itself, as though, it were some sort of literalist object, was central to the new aesthetic, in contrast to one's experience of the modernist painting and sculpture that had no duration. Conclusively, the "theatrical" effect of these works represented, in this case, a crisis in the definition of the art object.

Fried's argument associates the open-endedness or sense of duration of the minimalist object to its violation of medium as theatrical. Fried describes the artworks of artists like Tony Smith, as presences of a sort and not sculptures<sup>162</sup> and these presences persist in time. As he suggested, he wanted to emphasize that:

the experience in question persists in time, and the presentment of endless or indefinite duration...The literalist preoccupation with time - more precisely, with the duration of the experience - is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical, as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality of time both passing and to come, simultaneously approaching and receding, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective.<sup>163</sup>

According to this reading, minimalist practice blurred the categorical distinction between aesthetic experience, the specular experience of ordinary empirical objects and restricted interpretive practices, because of the notion of "objecthood." Objecthood was primarily interpreted in the criticism of these works, as the subversion of artistic "style." This is not an "art-style," as Mel Bochner declared in 1966: 'It will not "wither" with the passing season and go away. Its objects

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scale and hollowness they simulate the presence of another person, albeit a mute, identity-less person. (iv) The literalist object demands an utmost seriousness, yet the spectator is reduced to a state of unquestioning awareness. The spectator stands in an open-ended, indeterminate and wholly passive relation to the object as a detached subject: interaction, engagement, and response –the characteristics of aesthetic experience- are turned into isolation, passive reception and domination. (v) Literalist art creates "theatricality objecthood:" an over-awareness of the situation in which the object stands, and a heightened sense of the object as an obdurate entity. (vi) The experience of literalist art is one of indefinite duration or endlessness; there is no meaningful dimension to the work, which stimulates a momentary epiphany of understanding within our experience of it. Modernist art, conversely, is characterized by its "instantaneousness": its meaningfulness is made wholly manifest in our momentary experience of it. Fried's concerns were more than just local issues in art criticism; his argument has endured because it involved categorical claims about the nature of art and cognition.' In Vickery, Jonathan. 'Art and the Ethical: Modernism and the Problem of Minimalism.' In Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (eds). *Art and Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002: 100 (Cavell Quote) and Footnote Quote: 188.

162 Tony Smith added that he didn't think of them as sculptures, but as presences of a sort.

163 Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998: 167.

were industrially produced in rigid materials without any trace of the artist's hand. Its forms were those of an idealistically conceived geometry, rather than intuitive self-expression.'<sup>164</sup>

However, since its dominant period (1963-68), it has come to seem a style so much so that critics use "minimalist" to categorize any painting or sculpture that is non-figurative, non-referential, and non-narrative or is remotely geometric. As Bochner added, 'what makes minimal art special, though, is its philosophical underpinnings. It expresses beliefs about the self and the self's perception of the world that are based on material – objecthood - and space as occupied by that material and the artists/viewer body. It is the condition of objecthood that elevates the work of art, theoretically from mere things in the world.'<sup>165</sup>

### **1.6 In-Between Objecthood and Personhood**

In the context of the aesthetic movement of minimalism, the convergence of sculpture with the performing arts is monitored. Consideration of minimalist choreography demonstrates the sculptural elements of dance practice, minimalist dance practice techniques present a range of strategies that redefined the structure, form, material, image, and production of the art object in its relationship to space and to the spectator.

In the theatre, Samuel Beckett's work provides a closer analogue to minimalism, even though literary minimalism is seen as a later development, of the late sixties and seventies. Further analysis of minimalism provides a mode to conceptualize performance and visual art in the minimalist moment, whilst examining the framework of the intersection between minimalist aesthetics and form, in the visual arts and the reductionist techniques in the composition of works of the anti-theatrical movement in the theatre.

The persistent search for irreducible essentials, which many observers find evidenced in the progressive simplifications and reductions, has also been linked to a self-reflexive concern with

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<sup>164</sup> Quoted in Lambert, Carrie. 'More or Less Minimalism: Performance and Visual Art in the 1960s.' *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968*, The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004: 133.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.



genre and the creative act. Adding to that, there are often connotations that the work is approaching the state of non-art. Minimalism has been charged often as being anti-art, however, as Strickland states it may be more accurate to call it anti-artifice.<sup>166</sup>

Minimalist works by Samuel Beckett and by other artists from different disciplines, such as dance, music, sculpture (like Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, John Cage, Agnes Martin, Frank Stella), exemplify a significant shift in compositional methods, towards subtraction of representational registers, emphasis on objecthood (literalness) and on the object of art. These artworks project visuality or literality. As Frank Stella declared, 'it really is an object...If the paintings were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would be able to just look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I want to get out of them, is the fact that you see the whole idea without any confusion... What you see is what you see.'<sup>167</sup>

The minimalist paradigm, in the context of the visual arts, is related to material objecthood and is, often, used for defining the spatial, gestural and durational extensions of artistic innovation.

Jon Erickson argued that, each art form reduced itself to a form of objecthood. As he wrote:

In part, the rationalization of art, its will to self-knowledge and the attempt to eliminate all but its most absolutely essential features, can be seen as the will to autonomy from other, "exterior" forces that would define it for their own purposes. Each particular form of art within modernism has engaged in this process - literature, painting, sculpture, music, dance, theatre - and in each, the relentless pursuit for understanding the essence of its formal properties has resulted in one or another kind of minimalism. Each has reduced itself to its most basic form of objecthood - sound, colour, plastic form, and so on, but each has drawn attention to what gives that form its shape—silence, emptiness, stillness. This movement has even resulted in certain reversals of work that end up encroaching on the territory of other arts or disciplines: conceptual art's reliance on language, minimalism becoming body art then performance art, which slides into theoretical purview of theatre.<sup>168</sup>

The notion of objecthood that was central to minimalism in the visual arts is differentiated from the notion of "personhood" of the live performer. Theatre is mostly defined by the performer's

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166 See Strickland, Edward. *Minimalism: Origins*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.

167 Battcock, Gregory. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. California: University of California Press, 1996: 158.

168 Erickson, Jon. *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995: 13.

presence and personhood is the term used to define this notion. Artists emphasized the object-qualities of the human body by simultaneously de-emphasizing their human qualities. As part of their anti-theatrical methods, theatre practitioners, writers and choreographers have integrated strategies in order to diminish the “personhood” of the performer. The prominent choreographer Yvonne Rainer wrote in 1970 (shortly after the performance of *Continuous Project - Altered Daily at the Whitney*), that she loved the duality of props, or objects: their usefulness and obstructiveness in relation to the human body. Moreover, Rainer focused on the duality of the body:

the body as a moving, thinking, decision-making entity and the body as an inert entity, object-like...oddly, the body can become object-like; the human being can be treated as an object, dealt with as an entity without feeling or desire. The body itself can be handled and manipulated as though lacking in the capacity for self-propulsion.<sup>169</sup>

The ways the body is represented and treated, in minimalist practice, attests the intersection of the plastic with the performing arts. Form is explored through the body's stillness or movement. Minimalist choreographers thought about dance as being in some way sculptural and the sculptural elements of the moving body were emphasized in their choreographies. Minimalist dance practice techniques presented a range of strategies that redefined the structure, form, material, image and production of the art object in its relationship to space and to the spectator.

The body becomes an exceptional medium for the exploration of the interplay between theatricality and “anti-theatrical” techniques, in Beckett’s minimalist theatre practice. The body is present and active, as object and agent, in a very different way than other forms of theatre that employ actors. As Pierre Chabert noted (in his study of Beckett and the body), in Beckett’s theatre the body is considered with minute attention. It is approached as a genuine raw material, like space, objects, light and language, which may be modified, sculpted, shaped and distorted for the stage. The words “raw material” should be taken literally, as he argued:

Whereas the actor’s body is usually a ‘given,’ which does not vary - aside from that part, which contributes to the ‘composition’ of the role (costume and make-up) - in Beckett’s theatre the body undergoes

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169 Rainer, 1974, quoted in Banes, Sally. *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962-1964*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993: 10.

metamorphoses. It is *worked*, violated even, much like the raw materials of the painter or sculptor, in the service of a systematic exploration of all possible relationships between the body and movement, the body and space, the body and light and the body and words.<sup>170</sup>

Oppenheim argued that, art's "end" resides in its consciousness and in its self-consciousness, in the postmodernist explication of modernist self-definition. According to this standpoint, Beckett's minimalism is something more and not something less. The reduction of genre in the conflation of subject and object, the result of the dramatization of the self-awareness at hand, in his work is precisely what defeats the "end." As Oppenheim argued, to the extent that Beckett's is a totalizing art, namely, a synthesis of sight and sound, poetry and drama, literature and choreography, within its very minimalism, art as manifestation of the concrete universal has been revived. Its itinerary from a historical to a post-historical effort accomplished, as she wrote: 'the afterlife of Beckett's painterly writing may thus be said to lie- "beyond minimalism" (to borrow from Brater), beyond the historicity of Hegel-cum-Danto's philosophical analysis - in its re-essentializing, which is to say re-humanizing, of art.'<sup>171</sup>

Critics like Bert States and Jon Erickson endow theory with a more comprehensive and broad account of the context of anti-art, by contrasting art with aesthetics. Art as a vital force, whose force depends upon a free practice, as Erickson argued:

that will posit itself against the standard ethos of its age, attempting to either avoid categorization, and so stand outside of judgment, or create a new category that defies the judgment of its age, as a wilful negation. Art as such can only effectively exist in protean form... the so-called anti-art movements are but a further extension of the desire for an art autonomous from aesthetic, thereby social control. Anti-art movements are not anti-art at all, but anti-aesthetics. We recall that too many scholars still refer to *nouveau theatre* as anti-theatre.<sup>172</sup>

The terms anti-aesthetics and anti-theatre are interpreted in the context of the intersection of

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170 Chabert, Pierre. 'The Body in Beckett's Theater.' *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 8 (Autumn, 1982): 23.

171 Oppenheim, Lois. *The Painted Word: Beckett's Dialogue with Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000: 62. Moreover, Bert States has introduced the opposition of anti-sign (theatrical anti-conventions) to sign (theatrical conventions). He explains that, anti-sign becomes sign through an attempt to break into the circuit of convention, to pester the circuit with nuance, to wound it with the resistance of its presence. As he wrote, 'the sign began, as an image, in which the known world was, in some sense being recreated or revised out of its primal linguistic matter. But what human awareness preceded the primal linguistic matter?' States, Bert O. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*. California: University of California Press: 1985: 12.

172 Erickson, Jon. *The Fate of the Object: from modern object to postmodern sign in performance, art and poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995: 34.

the theatre and visual arts. Theatricality is not bound to the stage, hence, it is not that which the theatre alone is able to produce; it is that which other arts can produce and the visual arts produce a theatricality that they alone are able to produce.

The chapter reconstructed Fried's arguments in conjunction with *Breath's* anti-theatrical and intermedial composition. The thesis provides further analysis regarding Fried's account of the visual arts and the theatre as incompatible (chapter two) and about *Breath's* intermedial aesthetics (chapter three and four). Modernist art historians like Fried have tended to concentrate on the historical contexts of painting and have frequently used general notions of theatricality as a way to explain the frameworks that establishes those contexts. Therefore, Fried's theory has provoked various and intense critical responses, in the field of theatre and art theory, as a distinctly restricted and decidedly negative view of theatricality.

Fried's contemporaries, however, endorsed the performative and durational turn and saw theatricality as an art historical turning point and indeed after the late 1960s art practice shifted towards the open work of art and against medium-specificity. Fried has been intensely criticized by these theorists who argue that he explicitly conflates ontological questions with aesthetic ones. Nonetheless, the focus of this chapter was not the evaluation of Fried's criticism, but the examination of its ramifications on the subject of the intersection of critical discourses in the visual arts and the theatre. The following chapter, focuses on alternative interpretations and exposes the platitudes and assumptions governing Fried's evaluative discourse, as it is exposed in his criticism of theatricality in the visual arts. His notions about "non art," "presentness," "conviction" and "medium-specificity" are set into a critical backdrop.

**SECTION I...**‘The sixties came from an empty room’<sup>173</sup> RESPIRATION, PRESENCE, AND THE QUESTION OF MEDIUM SPECIFICITY  
**CHAPTER II:** ‘...Ever tried. Ever failed...’<sup>174</sup> ...The Durational Turn: Theatricality and its Controversial Opponent.

The move to installation certainly has not resulted in a complete dissolution of the sculptural object, not the distinctive structures of response elicited by a traditional sculpture. Rather it has entailed a progressive abandonment of the assumption prevalent in much nineteenth - and twentieth - century aesthetics that the authentic art object has to be completely self sufficient, its significance unaffected by the circumstances of its display.<sup>175</sup>

The double sensitivity of installation art to context has led neither to an abolition of the traditional work of art nor to fundamentally new conditions of reception. Instead, installation art has quite fundamentally and polemically - that is, also with regard to traditional painting in a frame or sculpture on a pedestal - rejected the idea of context - independent art as ideological.<sup>176</sup>

Fried's theory and its negative reception are further elaborated by providing a critical overview of Fried's controversial theory and its ideological ramifications by questioning Fried's high-modernist narrative about the viewing experience of visual art, as either a pure optical experience or as a strong gestalt. This chapter critically examines Fried's binarism between modernist presentness and minimalism's real time by arguing against Fried's claim that the worst aspect of minimalism is the manifestation of unlimited durationality. “Art and Objecthood” was bound to be controversial but few could anticipate the full extent of the notoriety that was in store for it, this notoriety is describable only in retrospect. Forty five years since the 1960’s the art world

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173 Insley, Will in Droll, Donald, Jane Nicol (ed). *Abstract Painting: 1960-69*. New York: The Institute of Art and Urban Resources, 1983: n.p.

174 Beckett, Samuel. *Worstward Ho*. London: John Calder, 1983: 13.

175 Potts, Alex. “Installation and Sculpture.” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no.2, 2001: 6.

176 Juliane Rebentisch quotes Alex Potts in Rebentisch, Juliane. *Aesthetics of Installation Art*. Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2012: 221.

has clearly taken a performative and durational turn.

Fried defined the contours of late modernism in the visual arts and described the 1960s as “the last great moment in modernist art.” Further analysis is required regarding Fried’s account of the visual arts and the theatre as incompatible. Fried has tended to concentrate on the historical contexts of painting and have frequently used general notions of theatricality as a way to explain the frameworks that establish those contexts. Among the theorists who influenced Fried was principally Greenberg<sup>177</sup>, the philosopher Stanley Cavell, J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein; however, his criticism was marked by philosophical inconsistencies and a reductive approach. In the field of theatre and art theory, Fried’s discourse has provoked various and intense critical responses, as a distinctly restricted and decidedly negative view of theatricality.

This chapter critically engages with these theories that were conditioned by a more fundamental schematism wherein the modernist history of art has itself, in advance, set the limits of its own practice. By imposing its own specific form of discourse on its object, and by implicitly assuming such imperatives, modernist criticism invented artificial boundaries for its object of analysis - an object dispossessed of its own specific deployment or unfolding. This discourse schematizes for itself the limits of its own practice: henceforth, it advances within the closure of its “specificity”- which is to say that it constructs its own criteria of demarcation and its own closed field that includes platitudes and discards the notion of the open<sup>178</sup> work of art. Parallel to this, the refusal of a discourse of specificity to examine critically the real extent of its field is analytically examined. Hence, the study interrogates some paradoxes induced by discourse when it stops questioning its own uncertainties.<sup>179</sup>

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177 Fried is indebted to the writings of the late Clement Greenberg, whom he regarded as the foremost art critic of the twentieth century. Fried knew Greenberg personally and on more than a few occasions visited studios and warehouses to look at recent painting and sculpture with him, and for several years as he said, 'I enjoyed not his friendship but his qualified approval. Then for reasons I only partly understand our relations gradually became impossible. But I would not have been the art critic I was, I would not have become the art historian I am, had it not been for the need to come to terms with his thought.' See Preface and acknowledgements in Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998: xviii.

178 See Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. Hutchinson Radius, Harvard College, 1989. “Closed” versus “open” form have been a defining attributes of modern works of art, critics have become used to employing these terms, with their derivations and extensions, in various contexts literary studies, visual arts and theatre.

179 See Didi-Huberman in the introduction.

## 2.1 The Performative Turn: Installation Art and Avant-Garde Practices

Processes of boundary dissolution internal to the arts, instances of hybridization or “cross-over,” mutual processes of importation between the arts and the extra-artistic sphere and cross-disciplinary approaches are some of the most significant aspects of recent aesthetics and cultural production. Contemporary art contextualizes the radical shift in art's boundaries that began in the last century and the art world has increasingly assimilated artists' experiments with new media and new contexts. Longstanding sites of production, consumption and display of art - such as the theatre, the museum and the gallery - are being challenged by new methods and media.

Crucial to this process has been the redefinition of the relationship between works and their surrounding space, the concept of the work of art and the spectator's mode of reception (diverging receptions) in terms of presence, embodiment, representation. Both the development of visual culture and the proclamations of the performative turn have confirmed the belief that the relationship between spectator and work of art is tangled.

Accordingly, the practice of installation art (that developed into a genre of its own right until the 1960s) incorporates all kinds of media and techniques by combining them in many different ways. Installation art is situated in the threshold between the visual arts and the stage, having both performative and static features. As a genre, installation art is associated with the structuring of various objects and materials to create a complex spatial environment within the exhibition space and does not entail unique formal and technical qualities believed to be intrinsic to this particular type of work. The site of meaning in these works shifts from an inner, formal structure to the shared presence of work and beholder. Installation art is also associated with the creation of an almost “architectural” construction that the viewer must enter in order to experience its spatiality from within.

The viewer is therefore aware that the installation is an artificial construction, not part of a

“life world.” There is a theatrical side to this awareness that is emphasized.<sup>180</sup> The artwork’s “lived physical perspective”<sup>181</sup> describes its spatial orientation to the viewer’s body. As Aristotle stated, the mimetic arts differ from one another in three respects: 'by producing mimesis in different media, of different objects, or in different modes.'<sup>182</sup> However, the physical materiality of the artwork, namely, the “thinghood” of the work of art and the notion of mimesis have been reconsidered by modernist theorists as inevitable and at the same time as that which art must always turn against.

According to critics representative of the high-modernist genealogy, the modernist work aspires to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, whereas the minimalist work (art object) becomes and projects its own objecthood. The notion of “thinghood” has been predominant, in the theory of art, as Adorno argues in his *Aesthetic Theory*,<sup>183</sup> ‘the perennial revolt of art against art has its fundamentum in re.’<sup>184</sup> Adorno suggests that, if it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art. The totally “objectivated” artwork, as he argued 'would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectivation it would regress to an impotently powerless impulse and flounder in the empirical world.'<sup>185</sup> And he added that, what appears in artworks is neither to be separated from their appearance nor to be held simply identical with it - the nonfactual in their facticity - is their spirit.

As he observed:

it makes artworks, things among things, something other than thing. Indeed artworks are only able to become other than thing by becoming a thing, though not through their localization in space and time but only by an immanent process of reification that makes them self-same, self-identical.<sup>186</sup>

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180 As Ilya Kabakov argued “[...] the viewer should not forget that before him is deceit and that everything has been made “intentionally”, specially, in order to create an impression. Everything should remind him of the stage in a theatre, [...] This “social recognisability” by the viewer of the place where he finds himself is extraordinarily important for the total installation because he knows how to behave in it, where and how to move in such an interior. It is this movement, this travel of his in the “social” medium of the installation that is one of the most important artistic means in working with the total installation [...], in Petersen, Anne Ring, 'Between image and stage: The Theatricality and Performativity of Installation Art', in Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev (ed). *Performative Realism*. Museum Tusulanum Press, University Of Copenhagen, 2005: 209.

181 See Rosalind Krauss.

182 *Poetics I*, 1447a, in Aristotle. *Poetics* (ed. and trans). Halliwell. Stephen. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999 : 29.

183 The book was written in the 1960s.

184 Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997: 230.

185 Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997: 230.

186 Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997: 114.



The historical “avant-gardes”<sup>187</sup> of the twentieth century have succeeded in significantly modifying the notion of the artwork and its “thinghood” by opening up new contents and forms against aesthetic formalism. They also challenged the boundary between the artwork and its presentational situation and attempted to change art’s social reality and autonomy, with temporal and body-based practices, by dematerializing the art object or by emphasizing its “thinghood” to the extent of eliminating the boundary between art and “non-art.” The concept of autonomy is also used in an institutional sense, the avant-gardist movements criticise the functioning of autonomous art and attack the institution of Art [die Institution Kunst],<sup>188</sup> while they disclose the interdependence of art and society.

The mimetic economy of these late “avant-garde”<sup>189</sup> art practices often differentiated the “visible” elements of representation (in the “classic” sense of the word) from the “invisible” (elements of abstraction). The western avant-garde art practices aimed to distance themselves both from the static objects of the visual arts and from the dramatic, text based theatre of the stage,<sup>190</sup> through a process of juxtaposition of multiple registers of sensory experience - the spatial and the temporal, the textual and the imagistic - into pieces that were intentionally disjunctive and lacking in unity. Moreover, this art practice questioned the nature and specificity of the artistic medium (and discipline), its place within artistic modernism, the institutions through which their work was presented, and the possible modes of spectatorial engagement, in order to articulate a vision of intermedia assemblage. These late avant-garde practices established an aesthetic and conceptual foundation that was developed further.

Recent developments, in the visual arts and the theatre, have resulted in increasing overlap, mutual infiltration and obliteration of boundaries. Diverse artistic phenomena are referred to as

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187 The avant-gardist movements of the early twentieth century ... and the material and discursive legacies of the avant-gardes, are differentiated to the late avant-garde movement of the sixties.

188 Peter Bürger in his influential analysis of the Avant-Garde in his book *The Decline of Modernism* discusses and questions the formal relationship between art and life, which had dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while he charts the establishment of literary and artistic institutions since the Enlightenment and their apparent autonomy from the prevailing political systems. Peter Bürger addresses the relationship between art and society, from the emergence of bourgeois culture in the eighteenth century to the decline of modernism in the twentieth century. In analysing this relationship, he draws on a wide range of sociological and literary critical sources: Weber, Benjamin, Foucault, Diderot, Sade, Wyndham Lewis, Peter Weiss, and Joseph Beuys, among others. See Bürger, Peter. *The Decline of Modernism*, Polity Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992.

189 See Avant-Garde Practices in Goldberg, Rose Lee. *Performance and Live Art Since the 1960s*. New York: Harry Abrams. 1998.

190 See Goldberg, Rose Lee. *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. New York: Harry Abrams. 1988.

“theatre” and many disciplines of art, such as performance and installation art, are making use of theatrical conventions. Artistic practice involves considerable “theatricalization” and theatrical productions use new media and other artistic activity. Hence, questions are raised concerning the subjugation of one art form by another.

This procedure illustrates the ways in which art practice has undergone a “performative turn.”<sup>191</sup> Both the development of visual culture and the proclamations of the “performative turn” confirm the belief that the relationship between spectator and work of art is tangled. The “performative turn”<sup>192</sup> is linked to a critique of the textual culture and theorists have “called” for a new “performative turn,” as Erika Fischer-Lichte argued, a new “turn”:

that will transform the solid and fixed textual culture of the past into a fluid, ever-changing performative culture of the future that will grant the missing dimensions. Theatre can contribute to the performative turn required when it sets out to treat the text as if it were part of an oral tradition. The fixed text has to be dismembered in order to allow the ever-changing performance to emerge.<sup>193</sup>

A “performative turn” from a textual to a performative culture points to new possibilities for the theatricalization of politics, economics, law, arts and everyday life, establishing theatre and performing arts as a cultural mode (from a perspective of culture as performance). The performative turn of the 1960s, in the contemporary arts, has determined the way art is received and has altered the interaction between spectators and works of art.

Artworks and installations are associated with the theatrical, the spectacular and the scenic,

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191 Erika Fischer-Lichte in *Asthetische Erfahrung*, describes how cultural studies have undergone a so-called “Performative Turn” during the 1990s that can be traced back to the end of the 17th century. The concept of performance received a reconceptualization in the 1970s in what is now known as the “performative turn” in anthropology and sociology, scholars such as the cultural anthropologists Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, theatre director and theorist Richard Schechner, and later, performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood and sociologist Erving Goffman, attempted to wrestle performance away from its purely artistic-bound connotations. As early as 1973, Schechner already called for using the theories and methods of the social sciences to understand the nature of performance, and not only the kind occupying the traditional stage environment or the avant-garde of the art world. Quoted in Salter, Chris. *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance*. Cambridge, MA and London: XXIV.

192 Walker interprets performance as modernism’s “return of the repressed.” It is against the background of the text/performance split that she wishes to understand the past fifty years’ renewed interest in “performance” as a term of critical analysis. As she said, ‘for if, as I’ve argued, the performative dimension of language was repressed by a certain influential strain of literary modernism, then perhaps this postmodern turn to performance is simply a case of modernism’s “return of the repressed.” Think, for example, of Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Absurdism, Artaudian cruelty, Happenings, Body Art, Fluxus, political street theatre, feminist performance art, and the experimental “theatre of images” where performance has often been the avant garde’s favourite mode of resisting the status quo. Whether understood as abstract reason, the law, the law of the father, narrative logic, or conventional forms of representation, that status quo has often been figured as language - the defining limitation that performance strains against and seeks to explode. Consider, for instance, the linguistic referent implicit in the following avant-garde performances : F.T. Marinetti’s “onomatopoeic artillery,” Hugo Ball’s “sound poems,” Andre Breton and Philippe Soupault’s “automatic writing,” Antonin Artaud’s “animated hieroglyphs,” Carolee Schneemann’s “Interior Scroll,” Yvonne Rainer’s “non-verbal theatre,” Ntozake Shange’s “choreopoem,” or Richard Foreman’s “aural tableaux.”’ In Walker, Julia A. ‘Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence.’ *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, (Volume 16, Number 1, Spring), 2003: 149.

193 Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*. London/New York: Routledge, 2005: 224.

and have been ascribed certain performative qualities and the ability to activate the spectator in a phenomenological and bodily manner. The “performative turn” draws on a shift from the paradigm of “representation” to techniques of art/performance and focuses on the exercise of a bodily expounded, “performative approach.”<sup>194</sup> However, while the visual arts and the theatre share performative as a common lexical term, this term often has polar associations in these different contexts.

Midcentury aesthetics was dominated by a rhetoric of isolated and purified opticality,<sup>195</sup> but other forms of aesthetics, that were opposed to it, were also in motion at the time.<sup>196</sup> Rather than cohering into medium-specificity, these art practices sought to “open” the work, to juxtapose multiple media - the spatial and the temporal, the textual and the imagistic - into pieces that were intentionally disjunctive and lacking in autonomy. Within them, we can observe questions regarding the nature and specificity of art, its place within modernism and the possible modes of its spectatorial engagement. Both aesthetically and conceptually, these practices established an early foundation for the whole postwar tradition of expanded art and intermedia practice that would emerge and develop internationally over the quarter century to come.

During the 1970s, evaluative art criticism no longer mattered as it previously had; with the ever growing eclipse of high-modernism in the later 1960s and 1970s (and after) the role of criticism became transformed. Fried's criticism was intimately linked with the values, qualities, and aspirations of the high-modernist art he found so compelling and his evaluative art criticism marked one of the most vexed points of intersection of critical discourses in the theatre and the visual arts.

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194 Contemporary works trace, re-enact and re-appropriate basic postulates of the “performative turn.”

195 According to Fried's claims, nothing in Greenberg's art criticism (or in his) has come in for more sustained assault in recent years than the claim that modernist painting posits or privileges or establishes the illusion of a purely visual or “optical” space, one addressed to eyesight alone. I have no wish to defend that claim here, but it should at least be noted that the idea of opticality (and related notions) plays double role in Greenberg's criticism of the early 1960s.

196 See Thesis Introduction.

## 2.2 The Conflation of Ontological with Aesthetic Issues

Fried's evaluative criticism, the binary structuring of his themes and the evaluative hierarchy he sets up between theatrical and anti-theatrical art has been considered as reductive, anachronistic, conservative, unrepentantly formalist and idealist. The cardinal problem (according to this study) in his theories is that Fried did not acknowledge the heterogeneity of minimalism and excluded the broader contextual considerations, because of the binary structuring of his themes and the evaluative hierarchy he sets up between theatrical and anti-theatrical art practice and by equating anti-theatricality with the “best” art of the past and the present (1960s). Parallel to this, Fried's discourse is based on ideological assumptions and platitudes (art and “non-art” dichotomy) and philosophical inconsistencies.

Fried's aesthetic value judgments had a rigorous critical reception, especially for theorists who supported the “performative turn” in the visual arts. Amelia Jones is one of the critics who exposed what she considered as the hidden assumptions that underlie his criticism of minimalist art. Amelia Jones describes Fried's work as an important object of analysis precisely because it stages so obviously and with such rhetorical style the oppositional logic and lack of self-reflexivity that continues to characterize the practices of art history and art criticism. Fried's essay, excoriates the theatricality of minimalist art, however the irony is, as Amelia Jones argued, that the essay is highly theatrical and thus exposes, while it attempts to veil, Fried's investment in closing down the engagements that these works so aggressively solicit. According to this view, Fried interprets such works as paradigmatic of a debasement of the pure aesthetics of modernism, a debasement that, not incidentally, takes place precisely through the objects' supposed evacuation (again Bourdieu's terms) of both ethical resistance and, as Amelia Jones argues :

aesthetics neutralization...[of] the essentially human power of suspending immediate, animal attachment to the sensible... It is these objects and their kind, then, that Fried, with a startling lack of self-awareness differentiates from modernism, which he positions as both “good art” and “art” tout court

Minimalist works (which he labels “literalist”) are “ideological” (as opposed to the wholly manifest objects of modernism); anthropomorphic (versus the putative self sufficiency of “good,” that is modernist, art); corrupted and perverted by theatre, and, ultimately antithetical to art.<sup>197</sup>

Amelia Jones focuses on certain key moments of Fried’s critique in order to expose the assumptions (that she considers) he cleverly covers over with the veil of authority, provided by a loosely Kantian structure of aesthetic judgment. She argued that, in order to stage this oppositional hierarchy of good and bad, art and non-art and so as to naturalize it as compelling and truthful, Fried explicitly conflated ontological questions with aesthetic ones. As she argued, what modernism has meant is that the problem of what constitutes the art of painting and what constitutes good painting are no longer separable. Therefore, Fried’s discourse strategically conceals his own assumptions about the value of art, by implying that the value is somehow inherent in the ontological structure of the works themselves. This aesthetic “value” (that, again, Fried conflates with the very art status of the work) is assigned to works of art on an extremely tenuous ground. As Amelia Jones argued:

Peeling away the layers of inflated rhetoric and authoritative posing, the reader gleans that the sole criterion of a work’s value is whether or not it is capable of compelling conviction. Needless to say in Fried’s “tendentious” view, “literalist” works fail to compel conviction: while the literalists have largely avoided the issue of value or quality<sup>198</sup>

### **2.3 Tony Smith's Ride: The Controversial binary between Art and Non-Art**

As mentioned, Greenberg was the first art theorist of the modern movement to draw the borderline between art and non-art, while he paved the way with his critique of what he calls the look of non-art. As he wrote: the look of machinery is shunned now because it does not go far enough towards the look of non-art,

which is presumably an inert look that offers the eye a minimum of “interesting” incident - unlike the machine look, which is arty by comparison. Still, no matter how simple the object may be, there remain the

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<sup>197</sup> Jones, Amelia (ed). *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. London: Routledge, 1999: 45.

<sup>198</sup> *ibid*: 50.

relations and interrelations of surface, contour and spatial interval. Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today-including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper... Yet it would seem that a kind of art nearer the condition of non-art could not be envisaged or ideated at this moment.<sup>199</sup>

If the aim of the modernist work is to explore its medium, be it paintings, sculpture or poetry, minimalist art has taken this investigation too far; it blurred the boundaries between art and the every day. Somehow lacking in the aesthetic qualities that art was normally expected to reveal, minimalism undervalues the art object thus lessening the experience of the viewer. Therefore, there is a disparity between the minimalists' claims about their work and the actual experience of the viewer in looking at it. Similarly, by referring only to itself, the minimalist work undermines the distinction between art and non-art. The meaning in this context of the distinction between art and non-art, as explained earlier, is what Fried called objecthood.

Fried suggested that, the literalist projection and hypostization of objecthood amounted to a new genre of theatre. In contract to the modernist imperative that seeked to negate objecthood and expressed a fundamental hostility to theatre in all its manifestations. Moreover, the dematerialization of art into theatricality, even more importantly, because of the emphasis it placed upon reception, was held responsible for what seemed the imminent end of art. Tony Smith's account of his experience on the turnpike provided the ideal evidence for the imminent end of art, thus to what Fried was trying to prove, notably the threat from the imminent end of art.

However, there is an inconsistency in the understanding of the "end of art," given that there is an underlying assumption and a restricted notion of what art "should be." The ambiguity and sterility of such pronouncements soon becomes obvious. As Huberman noted, "the end of art" is a strange expression, with equal aptness:

one can readily imagine it serving as a rallying cry for the heralds (or heroes, I don't know which) of postmodernism and as the frantic shout of those who are, overall, horrified by contemporary art...It is as if the affectation of a value, positive-inflamed in one sense and negative-frightened in the other, were not enough to reduce the irony of one and the same phrase being

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<sup>199</sup> Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998: 152.

brandished by two rival factions: which evokes a dialogue of the deaf (one party yelling: “The end of art!”; to which the other retorts: “Not at all! The end of art!!”) - even of an absurd battle in which two armies would hurl themselves at each other while waving the same flag and sounding the same charge.<sup>200</sup>

According to this reading, the thought of the “end,” belongs to a thought of “ends,” or rather of 'their definition, of their categorical identification starting from an act of birth and an idea of their development. So the “modern” notion of the end of art is actually as old as the history of art itself: not the history of art in the genitive subjective sense, for a practice need not be enlightened about its end to be efficacious and to develop in the historical element in general.'<sup>201</sup>

Fried translated Smith's experience<sup>202</sup> on the Turnpike as being the experience of what he had been calling theatre, 'it is as though the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground reveal the theatrical character of literalist art, only without the object, that is, without the art itself- as though the object is needed only within a room (or, perhaps, in any circumstances less extreme than these).'<sup>203</sup>

Fried considered that Smith's account of his experience on the Turnpike bears witness to theatre's profound hostility to the arts, while it disclosed, precisely in the absence of the object and in what takes its place, what might be called the theatricality of objecthood. By the same token, however, as he wrote, 'the imperative that modernist painting defeat or suspend its objecthood is at bottom the imperative that it defeat or suspend theatre.'<sup>204</sup>

Adding to that, Fried rhetorically asked about Smith's experience on the Turnpike, while he described these artworks “as abandoned and empty situations.” He wondered whether the turnpike, airstrips and drill ground were not works of art, as he asked, 'what are they? What, indeed,

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200 Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. [Devant l'image]. Trans. John Goodman. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005: 37.

201 Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. [Devant l'image]. Trans. John Goodman. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005: 43 and 44.

202 Smith referred to an episode of his life and to the implications it had on his views about art. The episode took place when he was teaching at Cooper Union in the fifties and someone told him how he could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. He took three students and drove from somewhere in the meadows to New Brunswick, the drive was a revealing experience, for Smith, it was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. As he wrote 'on the other hand it did something to me that art had never done.

At first as Smith said 'I did not know what it was but its effect was to liberate me from many of my views I had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not any expression in art. The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself it ought to be clear that that's the end of art. Most art looks quite pictorial after that.' Smith, Tony. 'Interview with Samuel Wagstaff Jr.' *Artforum*, December, New York, 1966.

203 Fried, Michael. 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism.' *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1998:

204 *ibid*: 160.

if not empty, or “abandoned,” situations?”<sup>205</sup> Smith describes a situation where experience becomes the object of art, with his observation, it is as if he foretells the future of art, namely, a long tradition of types of art that are not concerned to produce a singular, tangible artifact (a painting, a sculpture, a print work), but that promote an encounter with “objecthood” during which experience becomes the object.<sup>206</sup>

The idea of the “object” seems to slip from view, as though it has been dematerialized as an experience. Smith’s account became one of the most notorious passages for it provided a dramatic illustration of what Fried identified as the theatricality of objecthood. Precisely since Smith’s experience barely registered as art, it required considerable justification. The view of art, as part of its physical or intellectual surroundings, was in opposition to the self-contained art and medium specificity that Fried envisaged.

Smith’s account, raises philosophical issues concerning the reception of the artwork, it seems that his rejection of medium specificity is based on the perception that conventional forms have limited life spans. However, an appraisal of Smith’s narrative, primarily, as an account of minimalism or as a defence of anti-art, is principally reductive. Fried’s criticism of Smith’s experience, seems to project an anti-theatrical prejudice and to use a singular idea of minimalism as a way to enable this critique.

One of the points of George Didi-Huberman’s deconstructive reading of Fried is that the former has reinscribed within reception aesthetic approaches the psychoanalytic slight against the subject and that the processes of “meaning making” do not fall under the recipient subject’s authority; that they can never be completely controlled; that the objects sometimes look back in an uncanny way.<sup>207</sup> As Rebentisch argues, ‘because what the beholder of Minimalist object sees - what shows or presents itself to him, approaches him - simultaneously distances itself and becomes alien in this approach, perception opens up, according to Huberman, to a process that necessarily includes

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205 Ibid: 159.

206 Ibid: 159.

207 Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Ce Que Nous Voyons, Ce Qui Nous Regarde*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992 : 33. Translated in Rebentisch, Juliane. *Aesthetics of Installation Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012: 63.



the work of meaning, which is also always unconscious. The ostensible closure of the minimalist object relates to the openness of its presentation.<sup>208</sup>

Smith's statement resists interpretation, because it seems to claim that it meant nothing at all; therefore, like the minimal work, he vexed those viewers who demanded more from the work of art, namely, more content, more "complexity," more clues of the artist's presence. In this context, Sayre has demonstrated how Fried's articulation of the problem violates the aesthetic position of the avant-garde and reveals the depth of his misunderstanding. As he argued, when Fried says that minimal art is "incomplete" without the audience, he assumes that it is somehow, when and if the audience is engaged. However, the art of the avant-garde is never complete. As Sayre suggested:

determined, as it is by the local and topical, the events of history itself, and by such things as the forms and operations of mechanical reproduction, from photography to television, that record this history, the art of the avant-garde is always in process always engaged. It is, furthermore, purposefully undecidable. Its meanings are explosive, ricocheting and fragmenting throughout its audience. The work becomes a situation, full of suggestive potentialities, rather than a self contained whole, determined and final.<sup>209</sup>

In line with Fried's critique, minimalism has been charged as being anti-art, because the way in which minimalism operates is one that takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. Therefore, in asserting their objecthood, these art pieces begin to operate not internally, but instead resonate with those things and even those people around them. The process that occurs is one that is akin to theatre, but rather than being the weakening force that Fried sees it as, "theatricality," seems to be stressing the unavoidable object value of art.

In actual fact, Fried's critique represented a last attempt to stem that tide of "three-dimensional work" and "generic art" (by which its authority was finally to be swept away). As he underlines, in a historical retrospect of his earlier criticism, his essay is nowhere near as pessimistic as future events would warrant from his point of view. He didn't imagine the possibility that within

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208 See Rebenitsch in bibliography: 63.

209 Sayre, Henry. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989: 7.

a few years the art he admired 'would be all but submerged under an avalanche of more or less openly theatrical productions and practices as proved to be the case.'<sup>210</sup>

It is true that since the 1960s, visual art practices, from body art to minimalism, have opened themselves to the dimension of theatricality, as analysed by Fried. Within the art world during the 1960s modernist theoreticians were involved in a search for the “essence” of art, a kind of authentic “self” for each art and each work of art and for them the “theatrical” was seen as inimical to this project. This account both supports and is demonstrated by a canon of authentic modernist art, which tends to exclude those Dadaists, Futurists, Constructivists and Surrealists, whose work slips out of the categories of painting and sculpture into the fields of the ready-made, of performance, of poetry or of agit-prop.

In many ways, these fabrications involving the choreography of large and small-scale architectures, artifacts, pseudo-fictional narratives, urban landscapes, and even ineffable “materials,” such as light and mist, move their audiences beyond the third dimension and into the fourth (that of time), in contrast to the conditions modernism sought. Jones is one of the theorists who uncovered the structure of Fried’s ideological thrust. As she argued, whether consciously or not, Fried has signalled to us that his critical authority in debasing minimalism as “non-art” is shored up by a tenuous logic whose truth claims rely ultimately on a blind belief in the speaker’s singular access to transcendent meaning:

I see the world as new; I believe God creates the world as new; therefore, god exists. For Fried this would translate as: [I say] theatricality is bad or non-art because it engages the spectator rather than being wholly manifest; [I say] therefore, minimalism is non-art. Fried's logic which is predicated on the veiling of the ‘I’ of his assertions so as to naturalize them as transcendentally, universally true, is based entirely on his responses - highly invested and specific in relation to New York politics and art world of the 1960s.<sup>211</sup>

These transcendental aspects expose the ideological and philosophical inconsistencies of his arguments and the extent of abstraction in his theory. It is common knowledge that few theories

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210 Fried, Michael. ‘An Introduction to My Art Criticism.’ *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

211 Jones, Amelia (eds). *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. London: Routledge, 1999: 45.

have received such a polemic criticism (especially from theatre theorists), however, theorist Caroline Jones,<sup>212</sup> goes beyond the mainstream criticism of Fried's modernist theories,<sup>213</sup> while focusing on the philosophical context of Fried's theory. Jones focuses on the lesser known ways in which Fried's articulation of Greenberg's modernism was indebted to the matrix of ideas circulating around Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, many of them mediated by the cogent philosophy of Stanley Cavell.

However, Cavell had addressed elliptically the emergent crisis in the definition of modernism and the notion of “successions of art.” According to Caroline Jones, art historians and critics during the late 1960s were using Kuhn's philosophy of science to enforce a particular reading of Modernism, indeed, to protect that reading from the attacks of those who would be celebrated as postmodernists in the decades to come. Jones argues, against the customary reading of Kuhn's theories as instigators of postmodernism. According to this reading, it is during this precise historical span (during the decade from 1960 to 1969) that the concept of modernist art (as distinct from “the modern” or “modern art” or “the avant-garde”) became the subject of particular anxiety and heated debate. Jones attempted to demonstrate the ways in which Kuhn, despite the care he took to describe multiple modes of doing science (while shielding himself from charges of relativism), became associated in the art world with a narrow view of artistic practice that held modernist painting to be not one among many paradigms, but the only viable paradigm governing contemporary art. In part, Jones historicizes the word and the concept of the paradigm, so that its continued deployment today may be informed by some knowledge of the role it has played in Modernist polemics since the 1960s.

According to this reading, Fried's evaluative discourse, was already tightly constrained by the constructed, paradigmatic nature of Modernist painting. Jones argued that, Fried wielded Kuhn in order to fend off the accusation that what he was proposing was in some way a reductionist

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212 See Jones, Caroline A. 'The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn.' *Critical Inquiry* (26, Spring) 2000: 488-528.

213 Fried, Michael. 'Critical Response to Caroline A. Jones.' *Critical Inquiry*, (Vol. 27, No. 4), Summer, 2001: 703-705.

conception of Modernist painting, however, as she noted, 'it was manifestly too late, that reductionist enterprise was one in which Fried was already mired - an interpretation that held modernism to be an inexorable progression toward 'the irreducible essence of all painting.'<sup>214</sup> Jones believed that, Fried is ambivalent in his most recent writings about whether there was, or was not, a “sense of crisis” at the time; reading between the lines here, perhaps one can understand Fried (in 1998) to view the crucial essays (“Shape as Form” and “Art and Objecthood”) as being beset by internal crises in a world that appeared, on the surface, to be otherwise sunnily at peace.<sup>215</sup>

As mentioned, the philosophical inconsistencies of Fried's theories and the ideological ramifications of his discourse are seen in conjunction with the concealed assumptions that underlie his criticism of minimalist art and with Fried's inability to acknowledge the heterogeneity of minimalist art. In this perspective, both art and theatre pose interesting challenges to the legacy and specificity of theatricality. Theatricality is not amenable to the reductions of theorists, in particular to those who use a singular idea of theatre as a way to enable their historical narratives.

Puchner and Weber consider as noteworthy that the anti-theatricalism of Fried, Adorno and Benjamin is based not on an external attack on the theatre, but on the modernist theatre itself. Therefore, Brecht and Beckett keep coming up in these polemics, not as examples of what is wrong with the theatre but as solutions to these theorists' objections to the theatre.

These approaches can serve as an indication of the formative productive role of anti-theatricalism for modern drama and theatre. As Puchner argued, modern drama and theatre did not endure their modernist enemies and avant-garde enthusiasts; as an alternative, they internalized both their critique and their enthusiasm for the purpose of a far-reaching reform of the dramatic form and of theatrical representation. Drama, like Hitchcock's film (*Stage Fright*), has always recorded and

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214 Jones, Caroline A. 'The Modernist Paradigm: The Artworld and Thomas Kuhn.' *Critical Inquiry* (26, Spring) 2000: 495.

215 According to Jones, Fried's anxious efforts in 1966 to extricate himself, via Kuhn, from charges of reductionism came too late. However, Fried replied to Jones criticism by arguing that 'Jones's article operates from first to last on a mistaken and prejudicial premise, namely, that the footnote to my 1966 article "*Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings*" in which I allude to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is an “anxious” attempt to defend myself-which is to say my previous writings against the charge of reductionism. (She uses the adjective “anxious” twice, on pages 488 and 523, and introduces the noun “anxiety” in a related context on page 489). As Jones also puts it, Fried wielded Kuhn in order to fend off the accusation that what he was proposing was in some way “a reductionist conception of Modernist painting.” But it was manifestly too late. That reductionist enterprise was one in which Fried was already mired - an interpretation that held Modernism to be an inexorable progression toward “the irreducible essence of all painting” [a phrase I use in the footnote to encapsulate the view of modernism I claim is wrong]'. In Fried, Michael. 'Critical Response to Caroline A. Jones.' *Critical Inquiry*, (Vol. 27, No. 4), Summer, 2001: 703.

responded to the arguments of its detractors. Modern drama continues to record anti-theatricalism - nowhere more obsessively than in the oeuvre of Luigi Pirandello - but it allows itself to be shaped by anti-theatricalism as well. For example, Euripides' *The Bacchae* personifies the dangerous actor in the Asiatic Dionysus and anti-theatrical stage fright in the moralist Pentheus. As he argued, Brecht mistrusted the theatre,

Yeats' tirades against the actors, Stein's nervousness in the presence of live actors, and Mallarmé's rejection of the theatre are varieties of a resistance to the theatre that are structural and fundamentally formative, shaping these writers' use of the dramatic text, of *dramatis personae* and of actors. No longer interested in bashing actors or closing down theatres, modernist anti-theatricalism does not remain external to the theatre but instead becomes a productive force responsible for the theatre's most glorious achievements.<sup>216</sup>

## 2.4 The Final Irony: The Encroachment of Postmodernism and Theatricality

Fried didn't expect that his theory would facilitate the encroachment of postmodernism and theatricality in the visual arts, given that he established a discourse, that made it possible to theorize postmodern performance, a phenomenon that is virtually the antithesis of the hermetic modernist abstraction Fried sought to protect. Fried's discourse, especially his account of presence and theatricality,<sup>217</sup> became instrumental for the analysis of artworks like *Breath* regardless of the fact that Fried's treatise was not originally intended to examine the aesthetic assumptions of performance.

Auslander refers to two essays that appeared in *Modern Drama* in 1982, one by Josette Feral and another by Chantal Pontbriand, both of whom use Fried as a point of departure for efforts to distinguish performance from theatre. Auslander's work concentrates on the common ground that these essays share with each other and with Fried. Even though Feral and Pontbriand are talking about theatre in a more literal sense than Fried, they use the term theatre in much the same way - one more indicator of how firmly ensconced in the Friedian discursive field their commentary is. Auslander believes that, Fried's use of a theatrical vocabulary has proven to have a decisive effect

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<sup>216</sup> Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002: 12.

<sup>217</sup> See Auslander.

for critical discourses on postmodernism, in both the visual arts and performance, nevertheless, 'even this victory may have proven Pyrrhic for Fried.'<sup>218</sup>

According to Auslander, Fried's theatricality is a term that denotes what we now identify as "postmodernism." Hence, Fried's statements were prophetic. Fried's account of the conflict (his metaphor between modernism and theatricality) is revealing about the polemics between modernism and postmodernism. The list of artists that Fried links with the minimalists as partaking in the theatricalist sensibility could stand as a partial genealogy of the postmodern, particularly in the visual arts. Like the surrealists, John Cage, Kaprow, Cornell, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Flavin, Smithson, Kienholz, Segal, Samaras, Christo and others. To put it differently, whereas colour field abstraction is the modernist response to a certain problematic in the history of painting, minimalism is the postmodernist response to that same problematic. Implicit in Fried's essay is an account of postmodernism, as Auslander wrote: 'that suggests that postmodernism arose within the problematic of late modernism not somehow after modernism or as a result of a rupture with modernism. Fried gave a name to the preference shared by many modernists, for reading over watching and for text over theatre, namely absorption.'<sup>219</sup>

This chapter provided a critical overview of Fried's problematic approach concerning the relation of the theatre with the visual arts, by considering the ironies and limitations of his approach, in the context of an innovative reconsideration of the conceptual and aesthetic fields with which the art and theatre are inextricably linked. The following chapters (especially chapters five and six) apply elements of Fried's discourse on presence and theatricality so as to analyse and comprehend works that share performative qualities.

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218 See Auslander, Philip. 'Presence and theatricality in the Discourse of Performance and the Visual Arts.' *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1997: 55.

219 Auslander, Philip. 'Presence and theatricality in the discourse of performance and the visual arts.' *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1997: 55.

## SECTION II: (RE)PRESENTING BREATH

### CHAPTER III: ... 'Beckett's work is sustained upon an imagination of air' ... Beckett's *Breath* in Context

Beckett's work is sustained upon an imagination of air<sup>220</sup>

Though Beckett's work is less well-ventilated than that of almost any other writer, air and breath are still everywhere in it, as they must be for any kind of life to be sustained. In its enterings into air, Beckett's work seems to define for itself and work within the terms of an extreme materialism. My concern with air forms part of an exercise in understanding what Gaston Bachelard calls the 'material imagination' in Beckett, a phrase which names not only the way in which the material world is imagined, but the materiality of imagining itself, the way in which materiality must continue however obliquely and tenuously it may be to insist, through every effort to imagine what it would be like to be.<sup>221</sup>

I have come to the conclusion it is almost impossible to do *Breath* correctly in the theatre so I must ask you to decline this request and all future ones for the play.<sup>222</sup>

Beckett's oeuvre has infinite references to the corporeal function of breathing and has concentrated on the notion of respiration in diverse ways. Steven Connor's statement that 'Beckett's texts are sustained upon an imagination of air'<sup>223</sup> portrays this process. This chapter examines the artistic treatment of the process of the respiratory system in an interdisciplinary context. Beckett's *Breath* is the focus and the only theatrical text<sup>224</sup> examined, given that it is emblematic of the interdisciplinary exchanges that occur in Beckett later writings, and of the cross-fertilization of the theatre with the visual arts. In order to prove this claim, the ways artists and directors have staged *Breath* is analysed in the context of media cross-fertilization and intermediality. *Breath* is examined in the historical and aesthetic context of its formation and production, so as to comprehend its relation to interdisciplinarity and the ways in which these exchanges are integrated in this theatrical

220 Connor, Steven. 'Beckett's Atmospheres.' In S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (eds). *Beckett After Beckett*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006: 52.

221 *ibid*

222 As Beckett wrote to agent Jenny Sheridan on 27 April 1972. See Gontarski, S. E. *Reinventing Beckett*. *Modern Drama*, 49: 4, (Winter 2006): 428.

223 Connor, Steven. 'Beckett's Atmospheres.' In Gontarski, S.E, Uhlmann, Anthony (eds). *Beckett After Beckett*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006: 52.

224 From Beckett's thirty-three dramatic works, six were written for radio, one for film, and five for television.

text.

The “stagings” or “displays” of the playlet are examined in an attempt to show how artists and directors have responded to *Breath's* intermedial structure. Most of the cases examined fail to understand *Breath's* anti-theatricality as they fail to re-invent its minimal context or understand Beckett's constant desire to expose of the components of the medium in skeletal. The presence of the human body<sup>225</sup> in these works,<sup>226</sup> is in contrast to Beckett's central decision to eradicate the body/subject from the stage. Consequently, these art works disregard (fail to see) the existential and ontological importance of Beckett's decision to eradicate the figure of the performer by presenting the “absence” of the human subject.

The exposition of the components of a medium in skeletal form and the decision to eradicate the subject are pivotal for understanding aspects of *Breath's* anti-theatrical, intermedial structure and visual dramaturgy. *Breath's* “visual dramaturgy”<sup>227</sup> is based on the lack of the figure and is enhanced by the fact that the playlet is not subordinated to the text but structured in an intermedial composition. The chapter is focused on Beckett's art practice and visual dramaturgy, as well as on *Breath's* “stagings” by visual artists (Hirst's, Tynan's, Navridis', Brothers Guimarães') and directors (Gontarski). The interface between staging performance and displaying art can create a new “genre” that can suit to the purposes and approaches of both Beckett *Breath's* and contemporary art. However, some versions of Beckett's playlet fail to understand *Breath's* anti-theatricality as they fail to re-invent its minimal context and Beckett's constant desire to expose the components of the medium, he is using, in skeletal form. The presence of the human body<sup>228</sup> in these works,<sup>229</sup> is in

225 According to Gontarski, the rubbish is seen as a metaphor for the human body, which is finite and disposable, something that reminds us of Hirst's allusion to medicine as a reflection of the human organism.

226 Their image foregrounds the regenerative potential of the embryo. Corollary productions, the *Breathó*, feature an actor (or actors) submerged in water who responds to an authoritarian and apparently arbitrary bell that commands and controls his (or their) submersions and resurfacings; hence it controls his (or their) breath. In one version, actors immerse their heads in buckets of water at the bell's command. In another, a single fully clothed actor is submerged in a massive fish tank, the duration of his submersion regulated by the bell. In a third image, submerged actors, again fully clothed, are grotesquely contorted in a bathtub and viewed from above. In each case, the actor's breathing appears subject to or regulated by an arbitrary, external force, in this case a bell or buzzer.

227 The concept of “visual dramaturgy” is analysed at Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006: 93.

228 According to Gontarski, the rubbish is seen as a metaphor for the human body, which is finite and disposable, something that reminds us of Hirst's allusion to medicine as a reflection of the human organism.

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contrast to Beckett's central decision to eradicate the body/subject from the stage. Consequently, these art works disregard (fail to see) the existential and ontological importance of Beckett's decision to eradicate the figure of the performer by presenting the "absence" of the human subject.

The minimal piece *Breath* depicts/represents the final reduction of Beckett's life-cycle theme and his ultimate venture to define the borders between a theatrical performance and a purely visual representation. As Beckett once commented to his favourite actress, Billie Whitelaw, 'I don't know whether the theatre is the right place for me anymore' and as Whitelaw observed; 'I know what he meant. I thought, well perhaps he should be in an art gallery or something. Perhaps I should be pacing up and down in the Tate Gallery . . .'<sup>230</sup>

### 3.1 *Breath*: History and Formal Analysis

The historical context of the writing and staging of *Breath* is pivotal to the comprehension of its form and content. The playlet was written in 1969, by Samuel Beckett in response to Kenneth Tynan's (a British theatre critic) request for a short piece that he could include in an erotic review he wanted to produce in New York, and it became the opening sequence of *Oh! Calcutta! An Entertainment, with Music*,<sup>231</sup> devised by Kenneth Tynan<sup>232</sup> and directed by Jacques Levy. Its reception was very controversial, since Kenneth Tynan changed the stage directions<sup>233</sup> by adding naked bodies to the rubbish heap as the play's props. It was reported that Beckett was appalled by this version of the play, especially as the revue's programme attributed the work to him.

After thirty-nine previews, it premiered and then moved to Broadway on 26 February 1971, where it continued to be produced, with only one short interruption, until the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1989.

<sup>230</sup> Quoted in Kalb, Jonathan. *Beckett and Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 235.

<sup>231</sup> This collection of short plays by a variety of authors included a prologue, by Samuel Beckett, which he had originally written under the title of *Breath*, after thirty-nine preview performances, on the 16<sup>th</sup> June (17<sup>th</sup> according to Gontarski), 1969 at the Eden Theatre in New York City.

<sup>232</sup> Ruby Cohn remarked that, 'although a fair copy of *Breath* has been widely reproduced, no holograph is extant. In summer 1966 Beckett recited to me in response to my question about what he had written and had sent to Kenneth Tynan for his revue of *Oh! Calcutta* the staging became the most notorious deviation of Beckett's text first published as the prologue of *Oh! Calcutta*, New York Grove, 1969. It was printed correctly in the second impression (1970) and then by Calder in *Gambit* 1970. It is found in CDW and in *Beckett's French in Comedie et Actes Divers* 1972.' Cohn, Ruby. *A Beckett Canon*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001: 298.

<sup>233</sup> Theatre theorists, like Marvin Carlson, have argued on the importance of stage directions and critics like Martin Puchner have also highlighted that few have recognized the central shift (taking place in modern drama); a shift is based on the growing importance of stage directions. Stage directions enfold a universe parallel to, and thus at all times compete with, the drama of speech. Reading the plays of Beckett requires a double reading of direct speech and stage directions, as he argued, 'his plays are therefore split between a theatre of dialogue and a theatre of objects and gestures, the latter captured by the descriptive diegesis of stage directions.' In Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002: 26.

Eighty-five million people saw one thousand three hundred fourteen performances, hence, *Breath* is probably the most viewed Beckett play ever, a record unlikely to be broken.<sup>234</sup> However, according to John Calder, in Kenneth Tynan's production,<sup>235</sup> the philosophical point is lost by the addition of the bodies, and an ambiguity is introduced that can only mislead the audience. For the reason of this unauthorized addition, Beckett did not allow *Breath* to be included in the first London production of Tynan's review *Oh! Calcutta!* at the Roundhouse on the 27<sup>th</sup> July 1970. The unaltered version of the playlet was given its British premiere at the Close Theatre Club in Glasgow in October 1969, produced by Geoffrey Gilham and the unaltered text was originally published in *Gambit*.<sup>236</sup>

*Breath* is one of Beckett's shorter texts, known as "dramaticules" or "residua" (terms that he used in order to describe them, or according to Ruby Cohn "lyrics of fiction."). These texts challenge the meaning of the word "play," thus other terms have been invented, so as to describe them, such as: "fragments of theatre," "ends and odds," "shorts," "playlets" and most commonly "pieces." These miniature pieces, that critics usually refer to as the late or mature plays, register Beckett's later style in the theatre and a new phase of his creative development.<sup>237</sup>

A new kind of critical vocabulary is necessary in order to understand Beckett's later style in the theatre. Lyons suggests that, Beckett's plays are often discussed inter-textually, hence, the late plays are seen as a developing sequence of dramas that are related to each other and not so much to

234 See Gontarski, Stanley. 'Reinventing Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49.4, (Winter 2006): 439.

235 According to Gontarski, 'Breath's most memorable performance was its first, as the opener, called "Prelude," to the Jacques Levy-directed and Kenneth Tynan-conceived sextravaganza, *Oh! Calcutta!*, *Calcutta!*, the image and title adapted from the painting of Camille Clovis Trouille's posterior odalisque, with its pun on the French "O quel cul t'as [O what a lovely ass you have]," said "cul" being prominently displayed. As an opener to an evening of shorts, by Beckett or a variety of artists, as was the case with the Tynan-Levy production and as it is most frequently performed, the play is inevitably lost. Tynan drew attention to the playlet by adding three words to the opening tableau. To Beckett's "Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish," Tynan added, "including naked people" (Calder:6). Leading off with Beckett. According to Bruce Williamson, who introduced the work for a "pictorial essay" in *Playboy* billed as "A Front-Row-Center Look at Oh! Calcutta!" *Calcutta!* (known by some wags [so to speak] as *Jingle Balls*), was "the only show in town that has customers piling into front row-center seats armed, by God, with opera glasses," according to Williamson. But Tynan was called a literary pimp, and his stable of authors, Beckett included, "a pack of whores" (Williamson 167). As the *Playboy* feature suggests, the musical spawned something of an industry, reflecting the era's sexual revolution and its commodification of sex. A book version of the play was issued by Beckett's American publisher, Barney Rosset of Grove Press, who published the play as performed in an illustrated edition in 1969, attributing to Beckett alone the playlet – with Tynan's erotic alterations. While only the earliest playbills identified authors, Rosset's volume listed them under a traditional Table of Contents. The musical was subsequently issued as an LP, was made into a Hollywood film, and is still currently available in CD, VHS, and DVD formats. The enterprise may have been Beckett's sole entry into the Age of Aquarius, certainly his only appearance in *Playboy*. Despite such phenomenal success and unprecedented exposure, drama reduced to its bare necessities, one might say, most respectable critics have generally joined Beckett in the condemnation of at least his contribution to the production.' in Gontarski, Stanley. 'Reinventing Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49.4, (Winter 2006): 428-451: 439.

236 *Gambit*, 4.16, 1970.

237 A chronological scope of the late plays: *Act Without Words I and II* (1959), *Embers* (1959), *Words and Music* (1962), *Cascando* (1963), *Play* (1963), *The Old Tune* (adaptation of *La Minivelle*, by Robert Pinget) (1963), *Come and Go* (1966), *Eh Joe* (1967), *Breath* (1969), *Not I* (1973), *Footfalls* (1976), *Ghost Trio* (1976), *Rough For Radio I and II* (1976), *Rough For Theatre I and II* (1976), *That Time* (1976), *...but the clouds...* (1977), *Ohio Impromptu* (1982), *A Piece of Monologue* (1982), *Rockaby* (1982), *Catastrophe* (1984), *Nacht und Träume* (1984), *Quad* (1984), *What Where* (1984).

other dramatic works. As Lyons suggested, they are marks on a continuum, which are characterized, by a progressive economy, of dramatic images and distillation, of character and plot. The progressive experimentation with dramatic form and the exploration of genre can be seen in the context of Beckett's wider artistic theory. For Beckett, as he remarks in his essay on Proust, 'the artistic tendency is not expansive but a contraction.'<sup>238</sup>

In these stage and "televisual" plays, action, dialogue, language, length of the plays, setting and characters are subject to a process of reduction and contraction. Adding to that, these small-scale dramatic forms are characterized by simplicity of the dramatic situation, concentration, visual, aural and textual fragmentation. The technical exploration in style and content discloses their experimental nature. Condensed as well as contracted, these theatre pieces have the same "savage economy of hieroglyphics,"<sup>239</sup> and this contractive tendency was further elaborated in *Breath*.

*Breath* is one of the shortest stage pieces ever written and staged in the history of theatre, and in view of its form, it is often characterized as a (sound) installation, a sound art piece or a sound tableau. Lyons has called it, "the minimalist absolute of *Breath*" and as Paul Keller says in a review of the play, 'blink and you will miss it!'<sup>240</sup> Samuel Beckett told Alan Schneider that he would make, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, shorter.<sup>241</sup> In view of these features, *Breath* is often examined in the context of minimal art and has been analysed in the context of minimalist aesthetics. Nevertheless, it is difficult to situate *Breath* in a particular art movement and theorists like Brater have argued that the playlet goes beyond minimalism. The late plays create a genre of their own, by moving on from "the old shorter," his own as well as others, the form Beckett chooses for his valedictory becomes a genre of its own, a genre that, as he wrote, 'makes us recognize, finally, a new possibility for drama and poetry in that visionary realm that will always come to rest somewhere beyond minimalism.'<sup>242</sup>

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238 Beckett, Samuel. Proust. London, Chatto and Windus, 1931: 64.

239 "Savage economy of hieroglyphics" was a term Beckett used to characterize Joyce's work.

240 Keller, Paul. 'Feature- Londoners gasp at Beckett's 35-second play.' London: *Reuters*, (11/02): 1999.

241 See Harmon, Maurice (ed). *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 1998.

242 Brater, Enoch. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987: 177.

Therefore, we could argue that Beckett's theatre expresses a new level of minimalism in theatrical language, dramatic form and staging technique that goes beyond length. As Alan Schneider argued, 'all of Mr. Beckett's plays are full length; some of them are longer than others, that's all, but they are all full length.'<sup>243</sup> Brater considers that, the late plays belong to a new kind of drama (in the scale of fragment),<sup>244</sup> that generates a genre of its own despite of its minimum size. By dramatizing moments of radiance rather than transcendence, the spectacle of Beckett's images and sounds, his spectral shapes and his melodic lines, continues its assault against clearly impossible odds.<sup>245</sup> In the process Beckett creates a new kind of drama, as Brater argued:

in the scale of fragment, but a drama which carries beneath its amorphous texture the density and complexity of experience itself. It is Beckett's raid on the inarticulate, but it is also a challenge in the theatre for transformation and renewal in a world of ever-shrinking possibilities.<sup>246</sup>

The late plays are expressive of a transformational theatre and of a "new type of a text" composed primarily on visual and aural frames of representation. According to the Deleuzian taxonomy, *Quad* is space with silence, *Ghost trio* is space with voice and music, *Only the clouds...* is image with voice and poem, and *Nacht und Traume* is image with silence, song and music.<sup>247</sup> Adding to that, as Jeffers observed, Beckett is attempting to move from an alphabetical language to a "language of the image," in *Ping* (1967). It presents a colour-scape, that is dominated by white and *Lessness* (1970), as she wrote:

a text marked by the suffix "- less" maps its coordinates carefully onto a white topography of would-be stillness and silence- both "less" sound and "less" movement. Words function like the still, flat tints of an abstract painting: colour escapes from a chromatic spectrum into a fresh and unique achromatic realm.<sup>248</sup>

Beckett's process of visual "representation" is formed with principles prevalent in the

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243 Harmon, Maurice (ed). *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*: Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 1998: 24.

244 The mimes *Kilcool* and *J.M. Mime* characterized by Beckett as "fragments of theatre" and they were contained in a notebook given by Beckett to the Trinity College Dublin.

245 See Beckett, Samuel. *Ends and odds*. New York: Grove Press, 1976.

246 Brater, Enoch. 'Fragment and Beckett's form in *That Time* and *Footfalls*.' *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Summer 1977: 70.

247 Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Movement-Image*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

248 Jeffers, Jennifer M. 'The Image of Thought: Achromatics in O'Keefe and Beckett.' *Mosaic*, 29.4 (Dec, 1996) 59-78: 74.

visual and plastic arts. As Brater described, condensed and highly elliptical, on first encounter, Beckett's "dramaticules" appear to haunt us with surreal landscapes divested of all recognizable proportions, a nightmare vision that reminds us of the practice of visual artists like: Giacometti, Tanguy, Dali, and De Chirico.<sup>249</sup> As Brater suggested, Beckett's persons, places, and things are transmuted into a bold orchestration of shape, texture, and tonality, a highly imaginative synthesis of the constructivist and surrealist modes. According to this reading, a Beckett "dramaticule," 'confronts the spectator with an embodiment of elusive incongruities, like a Joseph Cornell box. Every attempt to penetrate the mysteries of these "anxious objects" is, in one form or another, the same "raid on the inarticulate" T.S. Eliot saw in poetry.' Yet in Beckett's hands tiny bits and pieces acquire ambiguous meaning and a scale - the scale of miniaturized grandeur – as Brater added:

far removed from their modest physical size. And the actual brevity of these plays - the creation of a compressed and very empty space by means of elaborate but minuscule dimensions - affords these works a 'world' in which they achieve the kind of imaginative harmony associated with the larger canvases of *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>250</sup>

Visual articulation in *Breath* is based on lighting and the primary articulation of the mise en scène is the lighting design. Stage light is a determinant of shape, visuality and visual form; it establishes (through illumination) the spatial presence of the visual object, or its non-presence, given that, no light is indexical of non-location. The visual field is composed with sharp dichotomies of light and dark (darkness represents a "non-space," which is a "non-seen"). The stage becomes visible, in a light that starts faint, becomes less faint and then fades to black. The props are a pile of rubbish dispersed on the stage, lit by a light which begins dim, brightens (but never fully) and then recedes to dimness. *Breath* consists solely of scenic directions based on a pattern: the interplay of silence and sound, light and dark, time and space, covering timing for sound and lights, level and intensity of lights. This composition is based on precision and exactitude (e.g. If 0 = dark

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249As Brater added: 'Whereas in his earlier plays there is more attention lavished on representational detail, details constantly and eloquently subjected to correction, revision, and the shifting ambiguities of audience perception, in Beckett's recent *Fizzles*.' In Brater, Enoch. 'Fragment and Beckett's form in *That Time* and *Footfalls*,' *The Journal of Beckett Studies*, 2, (Summer, 1977): 70-81: 71.

250 Brater, Enoch. 'Fragment and Beckett's form in *That Time* and *Footfalls*.' *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Summer 1977: 70-81. <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num02/Num2EnochBrater.htm>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

and 10 = bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and back” is typical)<sup>251</sup>, set dressing and a description of the sound cues. The only aspect, that the stage directions do not comprise is the sound level of breathing; the note on breath is simply “amplified recording.”

The principal aim in reviewing these hermeneutic perspectives is the comprehension of the formal principles that underlie its structure and pattern. Beckett has called the play “a farce in five acts,” and Ruby Cohn argued that these acts form a symmetrical whole: Act I, is repeated by Act V - the cry; Act II is repeated by Act IV.<sup>252</sup> According to Cohn, the apex Act III is unique and she suggested that *Breath*'s context is metaphoric rather than metonymic. The play etches human life against infinity. As she wrote:

a voice against the void, breath-light against the classico-Christian tradition, against the expanding space of modern science. The brief play contains Beckett's staples-symmetry, repetition, inversion, the wresting of sound from silence, a flicker of light against the dark, dying but not definable death.<sup>253</sup>

In terms of formal analysis, Beckett's archetypal use of cyclic form is to be found in *Breath*. Symmetry, repetition and inversion form a cyclic structure. Moreover, theorists like Rosemary Poutney, in the book *Theatre of Shadows*, have analysed the cyclical structure of *Breath*. As she argued, *Breath* is the ultimate reduction of Beckett's life-cycle theme and analyses the play as structured in circles. As she wrote, it is ‘a sigh lasting thirty seconds. It begins and ends with an identical birth cry, and encompasses between the two the pangs of birth, followed by the death rattle.’<sup>254</sup>

According to the analysis of *Breath* as a “well-made” play, (by William Hutchings, see introduction) the formal aspects of *Breath*, are based on the dramatic technique postulated by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des dramas* in 1863. Hutchings argues that *Breath* constitutes a traditional “well-made play” with a remarkable precision to the pyramidal structure. Firstly, the initial pause and the first cry, representing birth, constitute the introduction and “inciting moment”

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251 Beckett, Samuel. *Breath and The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986.

252 Cohn, Ruby. *Just Play Beckett's Theatre*. Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980: 4.

253 *ibid*

254 Poutney, Rosemary. *Theatre of Shadows: Samuel Beckett's Drama: 1956-76*. Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1988: 42. However, the idea of the “death rattle” is often disputed, see Hutchings.

of life in general and of this play in particular; secondly, the inhalation, a symbol of growth and development, is clearly, as he wrote:

a “rising action” (of the thorax and diaphragm as well as of the play), which is appropriate of the second “act”; The pause while the breath is held is the climax and the third “act,” the culmination of growth and maturation, the apex of the vital capacities of the lungs and hence of life; Finally the exhalation—a metaphor of the entropic decline of the body with advancing age, a declining “vital capacity,” and death (i.e., complete exhalation) - constitutes the “falling action” of the thorax and the fourth act of the play, which is followed immediately by the reiterated cry, the catastrophe or “resolution” of the play, and the final silence before the curtain descends.<sup>255</sup>

Nevertheless, *Breath* subverts this classic structure/form, through its highly articulate process of erasure and constant disruption of the processes and the kind of terms that surround representational theatre, reorients reflections concerning the formation of genre, character, place, action, situation and language, turning towards processes and contexts, through which the limits of the work are yet to be defined. Theorists, like Herbert Blau, have attempted to explain this process by focusing on *Breath*'s reception, and have argued that ‘the theatrical event, hangs perceptually on our breath at the edge of what is possible, at the edge of representation.’ As Blau wrote:

what moves in performance is always thought, which plays upon the body and is never still, even when the body is absent, as it is in the “recorded vagitus” of Beckett’s *Breath*. We might have expected from Beckett the last syllable of recorded time, but what appears in the vagitus is more like the last minimal mediation of the birth cry of ancient drama. With dim light and synchronized breath, there is nothing to this play but the brief repetition of a faint, brief cry, but it is sufficient to remind us that what can never be represented (or can only be represented) is no less moving in thought: that the body in performance is dying in front of our eyes. Unceasing process is out there in the flesh. Or hangs, perceptually, on the audience’s breath. No one sees the motion but the motion, but it is thus that performance remains—through the appearance of the invisible or the ghost of a rigor mortis ontological model of an encounter with the unforeseen.<sup>256</sup>

The playlet evades human and corporeal representation; the body is missing both as an object and as an image. Human agency is made present by its absence.<sup>257</sup>

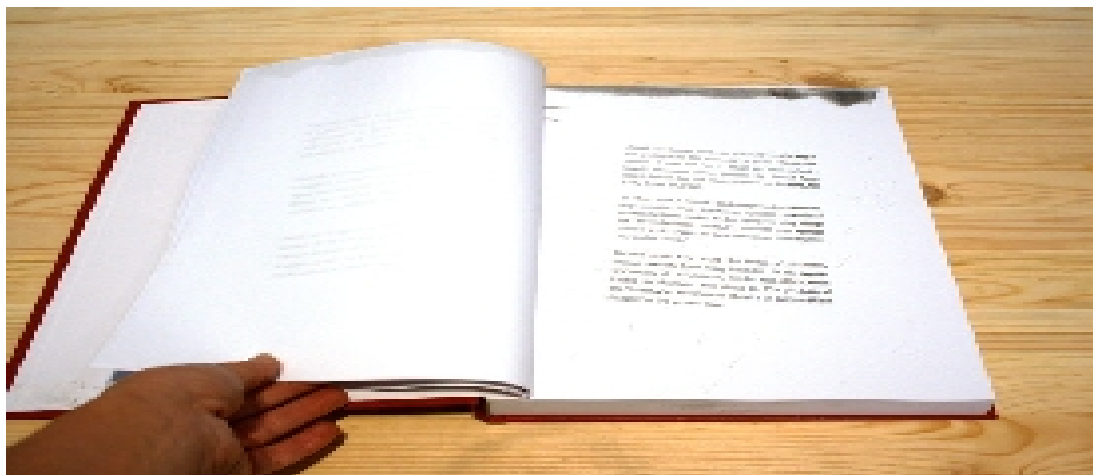
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255 Hutchings, William. ‘Abated Drama: Samuel Beckett’s Unabated Breath.’ *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 17.1 (Calgary, Canada, 1986): 85-94: 88.

256 Blau, Herbert. *The Audience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990: 365 & 366.

257 As Herbert Blau claims that the privilege of the dramatic stage is ‘its very corporeality being the basis of its most powerful illusion, that something is substantially there, the thing itself, even as it vanishes.’ Blau, Herbert. *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982: 132.

It is the subtext of the history of *Breath*'s staging that reveals various controversial attitudes towards the text. Predominantly, Kenneth Tynan's production demonstrates the tension, concerning the interpretation of the playlet.



**Figure 3.1:** Knezevic, Barbara. *Breath: An Exercise In Omission I, Breath And Other Shorts Collection of Plays by Samuel Beckett*, 200 hard-bound photocopies, IKEA Vika Furuskog table, framed theatre programme from 'Oh Calcutta', dimensions variable, 2010. Source: <http://www.barbaraknezevic.com/>.Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]<sup>258</sup>

Theorists have highlighted the necessity of periodic reinvention of Beckett's oeuvre. The theorist and director Stanley Gontarski pointed out the significance of the play's avant-garde potential and its unconventional context and has attempted to present *Breath* in a framework that he considered was more appropriate to Beckett's objectives. Gontarski attempted to negotiate the complexity of the interface between a theatrical performance and a purely visual representation (and despite the final outcome), he attempted to solve the problems involved in the staging of *Breath*, that are essentially related to its anti-theatrical elements.

Gontarski argued that, it was the clamour over Tynan's excesses that kept him thinking about how a director might solve the problems of staging *Breath*. Gontarski's solution was not to

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258 In 1969, Samuel Beckett's short play *Breath* made its debut in Kenneth Tynan's bawdy revue *Oh! Calcutta!*. Infuriated by this staging, which ignored a typically specific set of stage instructions, Beckett withdrew the work and the play became a shadowy chapter in his back catalogue. This incident with Tynan's addition forms the crux of Barbara Knezevic's exhibition at the Joinery, *Breath and Other Shorts*, in which a framed programme of *Oh! Calcutta!* is set beside an old library copy of *Breath* and a red-bound book, entitled *Beckett: An Exercise in Omission!*. This latter piece contains Knezevic's account of *Breath*'s ill-fated debut. Inside, the text is facsimiled hundreds of times, each page a copy of the one before until its image fades and becomes skewed. A metaphor for the changes that occur when a work is re-staged, this piece establishes a thread for the rest of an exhibition which abounds with duplicates.' Source: <http://www.barbaraknezevic.com/>.Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



“stage” *Breath* at all, that is, not to stage it in a theatrical space. He wanted a performance closer to Beckett’s than to Tynan’s *Breath*, thus, his aim was to present it as an independent entity not as part of an evening’s theatrical sequence. He wanted to foreground what he still considered as the play’s avant-garde potential, the play of memory, its power to subvert or defy conventions and expectations and to shock its audience into thinking, at very least, about performance itself. He needed something other than a theatrical venue for the sort of performance he had envisioned.<sup>259</sup>

### 3.2 Displaying or Staging *Breath*: Gontarski's Version

Gontarski “staged” *Breath* (in December 1992) when he was invited to participate in an evening of visual art and performance at Florida State University Gallery and Museum. It was in such a fragile and ephemeral artistic environment that he wanted to present *Breath*. The overall plan for the evening was to use the gallery as a de-centred theatre space. Events would be performed in several venues of the gallery, the audience would wander or drift from one to the other with only the slightest prompting. Instead of adopting the structure of an outdoor fair, where simultaneous performances are offered to a roaming audience, the gallery evening would feature sequential performances without overlap. As he wrote, the evening, would comprise readings and other theatrical performances and environments among the gallery’s various nooks and rooms. My offering was, then, in keeping with the hypertext theme, or rather would present versions of digital or telereality.<sup>260</sup>

Therefore, Gontarski realized that *Breath*, like most of Beckett’s later plays, required a different frame, beyond the traditional proscenium arch that was unavailable in the theatre. Gontarski’s investigation instigated issues concerning the space of its presentation, gallery or theatre, but also of viewing and audience response. Adding to that, his decision was to present the playlet in an ambivalent context, as an artwork emphasizing the hybrid and technological

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259 According to Gontarski, Deborah Warner shared the same intentions as she wanted with the staging of *Footfalls* to provoke the Beckett estate. Gontarski, S.E. ‘Reinventing Beckett.’ *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, University of Toronto Press, (Winter 2006): 441.

260 Gontarski, S.E. ‘Reinventing Beckett.’ *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, University of Toronto Press, (Winter 2006): 441.

implications of Beckett's text. In the printed program, Gontarski called the performance "A Simulated Television Production," and instead of constructing a proscenium, he constructed an oversized prop television, through the absent screen of which *Breath* was performed "live." His version of the text, was simply framed by an almost clownish simulated television screen.

According to Gontarski, this was the continued development of the hybrid art that he considered to be Beckett's late theatre. As he described it, it was 'an art of icons, images and afterimages, ghosts of memories – as closely related to sculpture as to what we have traditionally called theatre.'<sup>261</sup> The pile of "miscellaneous rubbish" was physically present in the gallery. The heap of "rubbish" was of a piece with the other installations in the gallery. Gontarski's intention was that Beckett's "play" would be indistinguishable from the other art objects on display (or from the gallery's refuse outside the service entrance).

Nevertheless, Gontarski attempted to endorse and promote the different qualities of *Breath* its "hybridity" and theatricality, in contrast to the other exhibits. The ways he achieved this effect are very significant for this study, given that they demonstrate Beckett's own intentions and his specific choices concerning the mise en scène. As pointed out earlier, the visual articulation in *Breath* is based on lighting and the primary articulation of the mise en scène is the lighting design. Gontarski's production focused on these notions and on the presence of the rubbish so as to differentiate the subtext of *Breath*, in relation to the other artworks.

The performance of *Breath*, as opposed to the gallery's other sculptures, was "announced" by the light's fading up on the set, that is, on the heap of rubbish some ten feet behind the television screen, as the gallery lights simultaneously (but only slightly) dimmed. The brief cry (vagus) and amplified inspiration would sound for some ten seconds and after the prescribed five-second pause, the expiration and identical cry for some ten seconds. Fade down the stage; fade up the gallery. *Breath* was repeated several times during the evening, interspersed amid other performances.

Gontarski hoped that such repetition might suggest the regenerative element he saw as

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261 Ibid

implicit in the play. However, he couldn't foresee the audience's response. The context of the gallery and the fact that the viewers were not manipulated into seeing *Breath* as an ordinary theatrical piece, with the rise and fall of the curtain, lead to an open response, that blurred the distinction among artistic forms.

This response pleased Gontarski who felt that the production was like an invisible theatre that took place in a gallery. He stated that he had deliberately chosen to associate Beckett's "play" with sculpture and that was the reason that he placed the performance in an art gallery, he was not surprised that the audience never seemed to understand that it was watching what he considered live theatre, since the performance lacked what had heretofore been deemed an essential ingredient of theatre, namely, actors. The audience, deprived of its standard ambience and cultural cues, failed to applaud at the fade down, but neither did they applaud the viewing of other sculptures as they departed, even when the gallery lights dimmed as they did to announce another *Breath*.

The production included no curtain (as included in Beckett's stage directions) and there was no curtain call. Gontarski considered that the lack of audience response was a measure of the success of this production, the project, had blurred the distinction among artistic forms and became, almost, invisible theatre, but as he stated, 'while I may have saved the play from being lost amid a sequence of other plays as planned, I may also have lost it to a neo-Dadaist revival of found sculpture.'<sup>262</sup>

Gontarski's comment reveals that he wanted to experiment with *Breath*, only in one extent, by focusing on the theatrical context; he was not willing to negotiate more profoundly with the piece's complex relationship between a visual art piece (found sculpture, readymade piece) and the theatre. It is important to highlight that *Breath's* interface between staging performance and displaying art can create a new intermedia condition of presenting *Breath* that can suit to the purposes and approaches of both Beckett and contemporary art.

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262 Gontarski, S.E. 'Reinventing Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, University of Toronto Press, (Winter 2006): 442.

### 3.3 Fernando & Adriano Guimarães' Expanded Staging of *Breath*



**Figure 3.2:** Guimarães, Fernando & Adriano. *Breath + (Respiração +)*, 2002-2007. Source: <http://interartive.org/index.php/2008/11/samuel-beckett/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figure 3.3:** Guimarães, Fernando & Adriano. *Breath + (Respiração +)*, 2002-2009. Source: <http://interartive.org/index.php/2008/11/samuel-beckett/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figure 3.4:** Guimarães, Fernando & Adriano. *Breath + (Respiração +)*, 2002-2009. Source: <http://interartive.org/index.php/2008/11/samuel-beckett/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Theatrical representation in Beckett's work is formed with principles prevalent in the visual and plastic arts, hence artists have focused on the visual aspects of Beckett's *Breath*, and on the presence of the rubbish (as an art object - readymade). Fernando & Adriano Guimarães' staging of *Respiração +* (2002-2007) involves the staging of Beckett's playlet *Breath* and was presented in conjunction with an installation called *Breathó*. The artworks of the Guimarães brothers have often focused on the subject of respiration, as well as on the works of Beckett. The artists consider that Beckett's play is a "visual work" and they have treated his works as readymade art objects. Their aesthetic references concentrate on the interface between the theatre and the visual arts, by surpassing theatrical and visual boundaries. They challenge both the gallery space and the theatre, by integrating the one to the other and by creating installed art environments. Adriano Guimarães sees in *Breath* a 'life in 35 seconds, and what you have is rubbish, organic material, what the human being is made of.'<sup>263</sup>

The artists are in an ongoing dialogue with Beckett's work, however; in contrast to Beckett's

<sup>263</sup> Gontarski, S.E. 'Reinventing Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, University of Toronto Press, (Winter 2006): 441.

stage directions, the Guimarães brothers considered as vital the presence of the human figure in this work (like Tynan's and Hirst's versions of the playlet). *Breath* took on the role of a central work at the exhibition, one version of which featured a live, naked actor in an embryonic sack. The performance took place in two transparent tanks filled with water, where the performers dive with their clothes, as they try to hold their breath. The exhibited artwork consisted of living people, their bodies were pushed inside and forced to stay under the water where they are unable to breathe. In the work of Adriano and Fernando Guimarães, the transition between the visual and the theatrical constitutes a hybrid space, a territory of complexities ruled by experimentation. Their work focuses on the human body. According to the art critic, Vitoria Daniela Bousso, they engage directly the cultural games of regulation and control that are played upon it. For the Guimarães brothers, as Bousso argued, 'the body is less ancillary, than it might generally be in Beckett and instead becomes the seat of the struggle of power relationships - if not overtly expressed, certainly a subtext of Beckett's work as well.'<sup>264</sup>

The Guimarães' brothers reinvented the context in which *Breath* is presented by creating a new poetic interpretation of the Beckettian oeuvre. The Guimarães brothers, as Gontarski argued, 'create something like their own Beckett archive, Beckett in or as a cabinet of curiosities, a Beckett made up of cultural shards. Their antiphonal use of Beckett's works and words is a case in point.'<sup>265</sup> According to Gontarski, the Guimarães brothers' performances are less critiques of Beckett's work, than reinventions of it, as he calls it, these works are Beckett's afterimages and hence in no need of serious revision or renovation, since they are already preceded and followed, as they are, by images of the Guimarães brothers' re-imagining of Beckett afterimages of Beckett's texts.<sup>266</sup>

However, the Guimarães' version of Beckett's playlet fails to understand *Breath's* anti-theatricality as it fails to re-invent its minimal context and Beckett's constant desire to expose of the

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264 Bousso, Vitoria Daniela, 2004, 'Interstice Zone in Adriano and Fernando Guimarães', 2004, *Todos Os Que Caem / All That Fall Catalogue* published by Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (April 2004): 97-99.

265 Gontarski, S.E. 'Reinventing Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, University of Toronto Press, (Winter 2006): 451.

266 *ibid.*

components of the medium in skeletal. The presence of the human body<sup>267</sup> in these works,<sup>268</sup> is in contrast to Beckett's central decision to eradicate the body/subject from the stage. Consequently, these art works disregard (fail to see) the existential and ontological importance of Beckett's decision to eradicate the figure of the performer by presenting the “absence” of the human subject.



**Figure 3.5:** Guimarães, Fernando & Adriano. *Breath + (Respiração +)*, 2002-2009. Source: <http://interartive.org/index.php/2008/11/samuel-beckett/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

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267 According to Gontarski, the rubbish is seen as a metaphor for the human body, which is finite and disposable, something that reminds us of Hirst's allusion to medicine as a reflection of the human organism.

268 Their image foregrounds the regenerative potential of the embryo. Corollary productions, the *Breathó*, feature an actor (or actors) submerged in water who responds to an authoritarian and apparently arbitrary bell that commands and controls his (or their) submersions and resurfacings; hence it controls his (or their) breath. In one version, actors immerse their heads in buckets of water at the bell's command. In another, a single fully clothed actor is submerged in a massive fish tank, the duration of his submersion regulated by the bell. In a third image, submerged actors, again fully clothed, are grotesquely contorted in a bathtub and viewed from above. In each case, the actor's breathing appears subject to or regulated by an arbitrary, external force, in this case a bell or buzzer.



**Figure 3.6:** Hirst, Damien. *Beckett's Breath*. Beckett on Film Project (RTÉ, Channel 4 and the Irish Film Board). Source: Channel 4 Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

### 3.4 Damien Hirst's Version of *Breath*

Damien Hirst, the director of *Breath* for the *Beckett on Film Project*, stated that when he was asked to direct this film, he read the text and thought it was incredibly precise and strict. While preparing to shoot, he kept reading the text over and over and what really focused him was Beckett's direction "Hold for about five seconds." That was when he realized that Beckett had this massive sense of humour.<sup>269</sup> Therefore, we deduce that Hirst directed his version of the playlet based on this "massive" sense of humour, in conjunction with Beckett's precise and strict context and Hirst's own saturated aesthetics.

In his attempt to negotiate the complex interface between the theatre and the visual arts, Damien Hirst <sup>270</sup>constructs a scenery for the playlet that is problematic. The addition of the human subject does not necessary contribute to a critical conceptual framework and does not acknowledge the fundamental emptiness that is evoked by the absence of the body/subject/actor. On the contrary,

<sup>269</sup> Source: <http://www.beckettonfilm.com/plays/breath/synopsis.html> [Date of Access: 20/11/2012]

<sup>270</sup> Hirst is a representative artist of the new British art of the 1990s, 'Young British art' YBA: Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Marcus Harvey, Sarah Lucas, among others. The young British artists obsessed with commerce, mass media and the cult of personality a movement that proved to have "avant-garde pretensions." Stallabrass analyses all aspects of this young generation of British artists and their environment from a critical perspective, and places it in the broader context of contemporary art.



Hirst goes beyond Beckett's precision and strict framework, by adding an element that Beckett decided to eradicate (the human subject). This poetic license does not seem to “contribute” to the playlet's meaning or humour. Hirst's version seems to be a facile version of the playlet seen as a “Vanitas,”<sup>271</sup> that doesn't discover new aspects nor places the playlet in a new context - one that relates to the original and to the current context. On the contrary, Hirst reproduces his own preoccupations with the saturation of culture with commercial imagery.<sup>272</sup>

Respiration has been a focal theme for the *Young British Artists*, a movement interested in the performative aspects of the work of art and in shaking up the notion of a unified and “disembodied” visual field. Their interest in breath lies in their involvement with the themes of life and death, “Vanitas” and the brevity of life (Emin, Quinn, Collishaw).<sup>273</sup> When seen in comparison to Beckett's work, the avant-garde and ideological/critical guise of the YBA's is exposed. The chapter sees these works as immersed in the culture they criticised. Beckett's work has resisted recuperation and can be seen as a critique of the conditions of art making, display, marketing and interpretation, in contrast to the YBA movement, which became dependent on these processes.

In the case of the reconsideration of the “staging” of *Breath*, the intersection of the visual arts and the theatre orientates notions concerning the artistic work in new directions. Damien

Hirst's, Guimarães Brothers' and Amanda Coogan's version of *Breath* show the impact of Beckett's

271 Claire Lozier argues that, there is in Beckett, a desire to write a *Vanitas* and she sets out to explore Beckett's debt to the genre of painting known as the “Vanitas,” and more specifically to its reworking in the 1969 play *Breath*. Beckett's indebtedness to a baroque genre debt (the seventeenth-century Dutch genre of painting known as the Vanitas). Lozier argues that 'the pictorial tradition of the “Vanitas” informs the play's aesthetic, to the point where *Breath* can be described as a transcription of the older genre. The play inflicts a postmodern ironical twist upon the moral of the contemptus mundi and memento mori expressed by the Vanitas tradition, and Lozier analyses this contradictory use of the Vanitas in the stylistic features of the writing. Lozier based her argument on a comment made by Beckett in a 1973 interview with Charles Juliet that 'he would like to be able to say death and life in an extremely reduced space. Juliet reports that Beckett “évoque ces tableaux hollandais du XVIIe siècle faisant fonction de memento mori” (mentions those seventeenth-century Dutch paintings which serve as memento mori; 41; my translation) and that, like those painters, “il aimerait pouvoir dire la vie et la mort en un espace extrêmement réduit”.' In 'Breath as Vanitas: Beckett's Debt to a Baroque Genre', in *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*. Tønning, Erik, Matthew Feldman, Matthijs Engelberts and Dirk Van Hulle (Eds.) Amsterdam/New York, NY, 2010.

272 See Derval Turbity's extended criticism of Hirst's version of the playlet (bibliography).

273 Emin's *You Take My Breath Away* (1992) is a thin skin bearing the imprint of his body. It is exhibited hanging like a discarded condom. More recently Quinn has made sculptures of exploding bodies. Tracy Emin's *You Left Me Breathing*. ( The exhibition took place in 2007, at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles, Emin's wide-ranging and provocative oeuvre includes drawing, sculpture, video, photography, painting, and needlework. Emin has worked with Neon wall sculptures, a group of fragile wood and jesmonite sculptures, that expand on the spirals, rollercoasters, and bridges of recent years. Others incorporate cast bronze figures - seagulls, songbirds, and frogs - or objects combining cement and glass, that are placed on tables or bundled bases made from found timbers. )

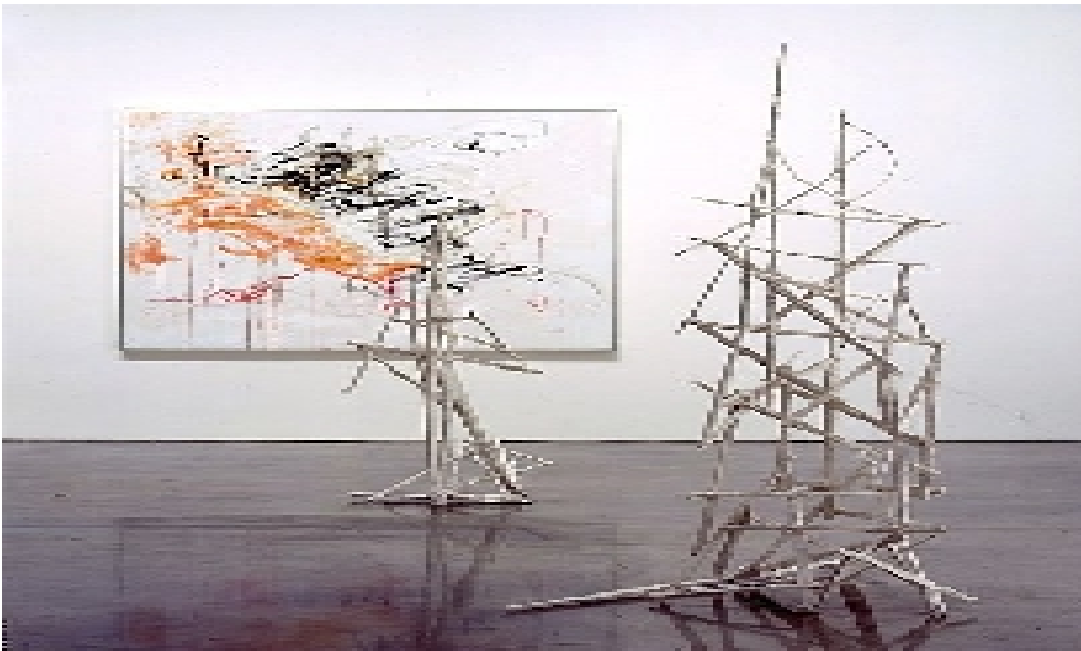
exhibition includes a series of early drawings, monoprints, from diminutive stitched texts to monumental, hand-embroidered textile assemblages. According to Emin, *You Left Me Breathing* has diverse connotations, as she wrote: 'the obvious is half-dead, but also, when someone leaves you standing - crying - as you sob and inhale the air you realise how important breath is. The same as when making love with uncontrollable passion, when there are no thoughts but just breath and the sound of a beating heart.' And she continued that 'targets are for shooting at. Once you know where you are going you can work towards it. I want to make a series of crazy sex paintings - half Tony Hancock and The Rebel, a quarter Tracey Emin and a good 25 per cent alcohol-induced. I want to push myself to the limit. I want to get to that point where I'm afraid to go to the studio the next day for fear of what I may have done. I want to scare and excite myself all at the same time. I want to fall off the trapeze wire, but bounce back higher from the safety net.' in Emin, Tracy. 'My Life In A Column.' *The Independent*, Friday, 3 August, 2007.

work on contemporary art practice. The artists decided to transform and re-invent the context that *Breath* was written by opening the work in a spatially expanded situation. Chapter five examines, in particular, Navridis' display of *Breath* as one of the most pertinent productions of the playlet. The artist/architect added an experiential and intermedial aspect to the playlet by projecting the image of the rubbish on the floor, so that spectators could walk on them. By transforming the solid and fixed context and by dismembering breath these artists ascribed certain performative qualities to the work and activated the spectator in a bodily manner. However, most of these artworks failed to see the potential of showing the fundamental ontological emptiness of *Breath's* disembodied stage by acknowledging Beckett's decision to eradicate the subject. The following chapter examines in detail the existential as well as the artistic ramifications of Beckett's ultimate decision to present an empty figure on *Breath's* shattered scenery.

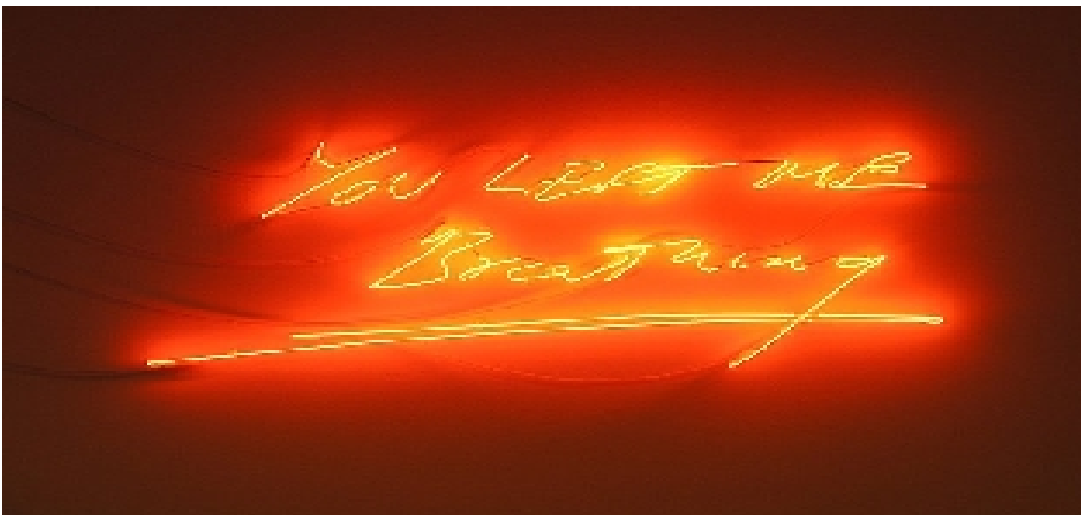
**3.6 Young British Artists: Visions of Respiration (Marc Quinn *You Take My Breath Away*, Tracy Emin *You Left Me Breathing*, Mat Collishaw *Innercity Inhalers* )**



**Figure 3.7:** Quinn, Marc. *You Take My Breath Away*. Latex rubber, 1992.  
Source: [http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/aipe/marc\\_quinn.htm](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/aipe/marc_quinn.htm). Website  
[Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figure 3.8:** Emin, Tracey. *You Left Me Breathing*. 2007. <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/november-02-2007--tracey-emin/exhibition-images>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figures 3.9:** Emin, Tracey. *You Left Me Breathing*. 2007. <http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/november-02-2007--tracey-emin/exhibition-images>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



Figure 3.10: Collishaw, Mat. *Innecity Inhalers*.<sup>274</sup> Murano glass and silver leaf, *Other Criteria*, 2012.

274 Mat Collishaw's glass sculptures, the 'Innecity Inhalers', are replicas of plastic smoking bongs. According to the site that sells the art works, they are: 'debased interpretations of Marcel Duchamp's 'Air de Paris', these works address the polluting, but also mind expanding effects of inner city air. One does not have to light the bong in order to get the desired effect - the visual distortion taking place when looking through the translucently coloured and partially melted bongs is a sensation not dissimilar to the perceptual disorientation of the drug smoker.' In [https://www.othercriteria.com/browse/all/new/innecity\\_inhaler\\_9721/](https://www.othercriteria.com/browse/all/new/innecity_inhaler_9721/). Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]



**Figure 3.11** : Collishaw, Mat. *Innecity Inhalers*. Murano glass and silver leaf, *Other Criteria*, 2012.

## SECTION II: (RE)PRESENTING BREATH

### CHAPTER IV: ‘...the empty page defended by its own whiteness...’<sup>275</sup> *Breath* and the Empty Figure

If there ever was a kenotic writer, the writer of the utter self-emptying of subjectivity, of its reduction to a minimal difference, it is Beckett.<sup>276</sup>

While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence.<sup>277</sup>

Art can only be reconciled with its existence by exposing its internal emptiness.<sup>278</sup>

The history of the theatre is the history of the transfiguration of the human form.<sup>279</sup>

The ethical subject is the subject who bears witness to desubjectification.<sup>280</sup>

The human figure is represented, both verbally and visually (in the theatre), by means of the physical presence of the performer. The actor enters the empty stage and becomes the performative agent who introduces theatricality in the realm of space and time. Temporality and space come together as theatrical presence. Nevertheless, Beckett’s anti-theatrical project integrated strategies in order to diminish the presence of the character. The variety of means that Beckett applies so as to generate that lack of the subject are examined here. The evasion of figuration, the withdrawal from representation and the abeyance of the mimetic are related facets of Beckett’s method of representational reduction.

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275 Mallarmé, Stéphane. ‘Brise Marine’ (1887) in Hartley, Anthony. (ed.) Mallarmé. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965: 29.

276 Žižek, Slavoj. ‘Beckett with Lacan,’ online at <http://www.lacan.com>. Website [ Date of Access 20/11/2012]

277 Leder, Drew. *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990: 1.

278 Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997: 230.

279 Gropius, Walter (ed). Oscar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy, Farkas Molnar, *The Theatre of the Bauhaus*, Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1996 :17.

280 Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Zone Books: New York, 1999: 151.

This chapter examines the de-centred field of subjectivity and its polysemous modes of absence and presence and argues that *Breath* is intrinsically intermedial given that it operates in-between presence and absence/emptiness, in-between embodiment and ambiguity of corporeal experience. Intermediality is traced in the context of the quasi-generic and inter-generic features of Beckett's late style in the theatre, the de-centred field of subjectivity and its polysemous modes of absence and presence. These topics are approached in the context of "bodied spatiality," a term that illustrates the aesthetic union between stage and the human figure.<sup>281</sup>

Emphasis is given on the reflective emptiness of the dramatic character and not only on its physical presence. Beckett's decision to eradicate the stage of the figure might be received as inconsistent with the prominence of the body in his theatre. The body of the actor has a privileged status in theatrical representation; it introduces presence and actuality on stage. The body constitutes the subject, as the experiencing agent of the dramatic phenomenon. The human body becomes the primary architectural space of the theatre, it is the centre point from which the other elements, setting, lighting and sound are oriented. The performer incarnates the character. The body in its physiology and materiality constitutes the form of the subject, the site and sign of the subjectivity of the character. It contributes to the composition of the character and it orients at once theatrical empty space and the subjective, corporeal awareness of the spectator.

#### **4. 1 Disembodied Space**

Attitudes towards the staged body - its corporeality, subjectivity and "bodied spatiality," (as the agent of the dramatic structure, in relation to the construction of the character) - determine the context of dramatic writing and practice and define the work of dramatists and theatre practitioners. Peter Brook's (often cited) statement about the empty space<sup>282</sup> discloses this process, by demonstrating the importance of the presence of the performer for the realization of the theatrical event, when s/he enters the empty theatrical space. Empty space becomes an essential part

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281 A term introduced by Garner who applied a phenomenological method of analysis to performance.

282 See Brook, Peter. *Empty Space*. New York: Atheneum, 1984.



of the performance.

Theatre and performance are associated with diverse modes of presence. Presence is often seen as that which often lies outside representation, the “live” immediacy of the performer, the unmediated unfolding of dramatic action and the “liveliness” generated through an actor-audience relationship are among the notions frequently used to explain theatrical experience, and all are underpinned by some understanding of “presence.”<sup>283</sup> Following the dominance of realism, the “present-ness” of theatre and literalness became important concerns of the 1950s and 1960s. The aesthetic concerns shifted to a theatre interested in staging the real by focusing on presence.

Theatrical experience is often founded on an interplay of affirmation or negation of presence, an interplay of absence and presence. However, as Jon Erickson asked, 'what happens to the specific pleasure that theatre affords if presence is to be evaded, eliminated or deconstructed...'.<sup>284</sup> This chapter addresses the above issues by analysing attitudes towards the absence of the character (of the subject and the body), the formation process of absence and presence in their complex and elusive modes of disclosure, along with the theatrical implications of emptiness in the later dramatic works of Samuel Beckett, having as a focal point *Breath's* incorporeality, as a component of essential emptiness on stage. Incorporeality, emptiness and immateriality are intimately related in art practice. According to Foucault, theatricality is the expanding domain of intangible objects that must be integrated into our thought. We must articulate a philosophy of the phantasm that cannot, as he argued 'be reduced to primordial fact, through the intermediary of perception or an image, but that arises between surfaces...in the temporal oscillation that always makes it precede and follow itself - in short, in what Deleuze would perhaps not allow us to call its “incorporeal materiality.”'<sup>285</sup>

Beckett experiments with perception, subjectivity and embodiment, notions that are also identified with the phenomenology of drama and performance. The phenomenological body is

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283 See Power, Cormac. *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008.

284 Erickson, Jon. *The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995: 216.

285 This review essay originally appeared in *Critique* 282 (1970): 885-908. The translation, by Donald F. Brouchard and Sherry Simon, has been slightly amended. Murray, Timothy (ed). *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

characterized by a de-centred field of subjectivity and polysemous modes of absence and presence. The phenomenology of drama is mainly concerned with the subject and its trace. As Garner suggests, the Husserlian tradition relinquishes its hold on the stable subject, which is bound on an ideal self-giveness. As he wrote, 'it opens its domain to experience as we are learning to see it in its dislocations and ambiguities, its variable modes of embodiment, its traces.'<sup>286</sup>

Beckett seems to respond to these questions by foregrounding on stage a trace of presence, the disembodiment and not the dismembering (fragmentation) of the body. This effect is seen in conjunction with the concept of "incorporeal spatiality," given that the body is removed from the theatrical space. Therefore, the aesthetic union and dialectic between theatrical space and human body on stage is simultaneously ruptured and established. "Bodied spatiality" is the term used to describe this union. According to Garner, "bodied space" is designed to evoke this "twinness" of performance, when subjected to specifically phenomenological attention. Theatrical space is "bodied" in the sense of "bodied forth," oriented in terms of a body that exists, not just as the object of perception, but as its originating site, its zero-point. As Garner suggested, 'to stage this point in space before the witness of other bodies is to engage with the complex positionality of theatrical watching.'<sup>287</sup>

The corporeal, as a signifying medium, is essential for the analysis of Beckett's late plays that express "a writing of the body itself."<sup>288</sup> In the late plays, the naturalistic body has been replaced by the intermedial body that is in-between live and mediated performance, in-between liveness and technology. The enduring binary between live and mediated performance, as well as the binary between the theatre and the visual arts is mainly founded on different representational attitudes towards the live body, the human figure, corporeal presence, subjectivity/subjecthood and agency. The human body is either physically present or technically represented/mediated in video, film, television and the digital. Intermedial exchange (between the theatre and the visual arts) has

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<sup>286</sup> Garner, Stanton. *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1994: 230.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> See Derrida and Chabert.

managed to reconcile this binary by integrating a variety of technical media into a large medial framework.

Notwithstanding the significant presence and materiality of the miscellaneous rubbish as the protagonistic element of the stage design (their literal use/objecthood) and the interplay of light and darkness, the stage is empty of subjectivity in *Breath*. There is an essential absence and lack of the subject, of theatrical character and subjecthood. The play starts with a recorded cry that Beckett calls: an “instant of recorded vagitus.” The cry is an organic sound intentionally amplified, it is not produced by a present body on stage. The spectator listens to the sound that the body produces, without the presence of an actual body. The auditory frames of representation are extra-linguistic, sound alone represents/produces presence. Respiration is not visible, there is almost nothing to see, no mirror image.

*Breath* concentrates on the act of listening, sound plays a protagonistic role, as Enoch Brater suggested “sound literally makes sense.”<sup>289</sup> The playlet's intermediality is traced in its inquiry into the range of processes revealing the in-between of theatrical languages that, as Dorothee Ostmeier suggests, could be called in acoustic terms silence and in visual terms invisibility.<sup>290</sup> Beckett's intention is ‘to force the fundamental invisibility of exterior things till the very invisibility becomes itself a thing, not just awareness of limits, but a thing that can be seen and made seen.’<sup>291</sup> Beckett looks into the visual image in order to uncover its perceptual invisibility and creates perceptual fields based on theatre's dual status as a visible and invisible space. From a theatre of activity Beckett shifts to a theatre of perception by exploring 'the activity lodged within stillness and to sound the depths of visual latency. The result...is to etch the contours of performance even more within the spectator and to replace a theatre of activity, with a theatre of perception, guided by the eye and its efforts to see.’<sup>292</sup> The “visual field” becomes a “perceptual field” and like language that

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289 Enoch Brater quoted in Buning, Marius (ed). *Historicising Beckett: Issues of Performance*. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005: 212.

290 See Ostmeier, Dorothee. *Dramatizing Silence: Beckett's Shorter Plays* in Oppenheim, Lois and Marius Buning (eds). Beckett On and On...Madison and London: Associated University Presses, 1996: 187.

291 Essif, Les. *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and his Generation*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001: 58.

292 Garner, Stanton. ‘Visual Field in Beckett's Late Plays.’ *Comparative Drama*, (XXI.4), 1987-8: 371.

has the potentiality of pointing beyond itself to the unsayable, the visual becomes a screen for the unseeable. Beckett's ultimate objective was not to eliminate either visual image or language, but as Essif argued, 'to discover images, as well as utterances, that, instead of telling a story, would convey to the spectator a profound and complex sense of emptiness and silence.'<sup>293</sup>

From the emptiness of the stage - whether ostentatious (empty space) or discreet (realistic or even naturalistic set) - the actor's body began to emerge along with every component of theatre - the costumes, scenic elements, lighting, music, etc. Beckett's theatre is a theatre of corporeality, however, in *Breath* Beckett designs a space emptied of the presence of the subject and of the body. However, as Essif argues, 'emptiness is a primary presence; only its absence, one found in realist forms of theatre, could set the stage for a perception of a presence.'<sup>294</sup>

The human icon and body is emptied, the body is placed beyond the visual spectrum, however, respiration is produced by the body and entails presence. According to the critic Antony Kubiak, by postulating a theatre that is at the edge of appearance and disappearance, Beckett produces *Breath*: a "Post Apocalypse with Out Figures."<sup>295</sup> Moreover, Kubiak argues that, Beckett brings us to the most fundamental moment of theatrical perception, the moment in which one asks what it is that makes "it" theatre, the moment in which the mind's eye perceives itself seeing, and thinks itself thinking the *mise en scène*. As he added:

lacking any quality that consensus might declare "real" performance - devoid of actors, speech and plot. Seemingly devoid of the very theatre that gives it birth. *Breath* invokes an imaginary theatrical apocalypse, the final movement of the performative erased of everything but its own scene.<sup>296</sup>

In the late plays, Beckett simultaneously establishes bodied and disembodied spaces, while he designs two spatial fields; the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. In *Breath*, presence is generated, despite the fact that the referent is materially absent, as Jacques Derrida describes that absence 'in which all presence is announced.'<sup>297</sup> Theorists have been preoccupied with the notion of

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293 Ibid: 61.

294 Ibid: 27.

295 Kubiak, Anthony. 'Post Apocalypse with Out Figures: The Trauma of Theatre in Samuel Beckett' in Smith, Joseph H. (Ed). *The World of Samuel Beckett*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Psychiatry and the Humanities, 12, 1991: 107.

296 Ibid.

297 Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Oxon: Routledge, 2008: 7.

absence in art, however, to posit the concept of an absent signifier is not to reverse the semiotic model, as Fuery notes, in his book *The Theory of Absence*, : 'nor is it to abide by some binarism of the sign itself. Rather, the absent signifier represents a typology - a logical type located in the larger class of signifiers (absent or present).'<sup>298</sup>

Beckett aimed to purge his texts of mimesis and symbolism alike, which left him with the task of refining the ways in which 'a text can reflect its lack of content, the central absence.'<sup>299</sup> The body asserts itself, as a primary field for the play of presence and absence, existence and death, through the respiratory system. Respiration belongs to the body and is produced by it. The body in *Breath* is an absent signifier and the sound of respiration is a present signifier and paradoxically the one generates the other. However, this paradox can be understood, given that the only way to represent absence, as Bergson suggested, is 'through some kind of presence, in the sense that one does not so much represent it as point toward its ineluctable presence.'<sup>300</sup>

The conveyance of a sense of absence is one process, whereas the recognition of emptiness is another. The notion of absence implies referentiality and representability in a way that the notion of emptiness does not. In *Breath*, the absence of the body "coexists" with the "emptiness of space," the body (an absent signifier) produces emptiness on stage. Beckett's decision to detract the figure from the stage evokes the reception of the empty. *Breath* is integral to the space it creates. The impression of emptiness is not an impression that is related to the scenic materiality of the stage (in this case the miscellaneous rubbish), but to the essential emptiness created by the lack of the body/subject. The theorist Les Essif, formulates a dramaturgical view toward the fusion of the "empty" body of the actor with the material emptiness of the theatrical space, based on the juncture between theatrical space and the body of the actor (which he considers as a meta-dramatic fusion). Essif's approach to drama and performance is based on a new poetics of space for the text based on emptiness.

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298 Derrida in Fuery, Patrick. *Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification, and Desire*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996: 25.

299 Albright, Daniel. *Beckett and Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 13.

300 Quoted in Essif, Les. *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and his Generation*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001: 27.

In the book *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage*, Essif examines the theatrical implications of emptiness, with reference to actual performances of dramatic works. He considers, the ways playwrights draw meaning from emptiness, by focusing on the ways dramatists create an impression of emptiness not only on the stage, but also in the body and mind of the central character. Essif presents an overview of the evolution of “empty” characters and “empty” space in Western drama, as well as the dramatist’s use of empty space in the theatre and the spectator’s perception of it. His primary referent is the meta-physical and “sur-real” essence of emptiness and its effect on the spectator.

Essif examines dramatic forms that are associated with non-realistic movements, principally with the term “Nouveau Théâtre,”<sup>301</sup> a term used to describe the avant-garde theatre movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in France, which includes movements such as the “Theatre of Cruelty” inspired by the writings of Artaud. The “Nouveau Théâtre” artists presented more emptiness on their stages and imaginative uses of it. Therefore, the representative writers of “Nouveau Théâtre” were not filling emptiness, they designed empty space, by valorising it as fundamental, non-representational and non-referential.

In this context, Beckett’s dramatic works are characterized by Essif as the quintessential paradigm of “Hypersubjective Nouveau Théâtre,” given that Beckett is more interested in the ways the stage is essentially emptiable instead of essentially fillable. He approaches empty space qua empty space and the ways in which it impacts theories of the dramatic subject, the concept of the marionette-like dramatic character and the concept of death for this theatre. Essif examines the “unrealistic” empty space with the aim of re-evaluating theatrical concepts, such as the subjective status of the dramatic character.

In the late plays, Beckett explores and refines the material meaningfulness of the human figure set in emptiness. As Langbaum argued, dramatists and directors, like Beckett, ‘work from the complete emptiness of the stage toward a visual image, that points to the idea of emptiness, as the

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301 See Serreau, Geneviève. *Histoire du Nouveau Théâtre*. Paris: Galimard, 1966.

common denominator between the inside and the outside. The visual image that provides the link between empty stage and empty mind is the human body on stage.’<sup>302</sup>

Nevertheless, Essif believes that Langbaum, like many other theorists, has not acknowledged the essentialist perspective that operates this image on stage. Essif examines the hypothesis that “metatheatrically,” as well as existentially the void that surrounds the mind is duplicated within the mind, producing a double referent that invokes metatheatricity in a profound way. According to this view, Beckett brings the concepts of stage and mind closer together and makes the connection between outside and inside, as he argued ‘the head of the dramatic character becomes the central self-referential icon or *mise en abyme* of theatrical empty space.’<sup>303</sup>

Essif deals with the aesthetic and self-referential nature of Beckett’s concentrated (empty) image. This Artaudian metaphysical approach to Beckett’s theatre (an approach that reveals rather than obstructs our awareness of the void of the hypercorporeal, of the extralinguistic) fundamentally prioritizes visual image over narrative story and concentration over fragmentation, as well as emptiness over fullness. Theorists, like Essif, differentiate signs and signals; signs are replaced and signals are introduced, given that, signals are considered to be broader than the semiotic message. Phenomenological signals are essentially signifiers that signify extra-referentially and by so doing they point to non-referentiality, thus, they are more applicable for the analysis of emptiness in the theatre, in conjunction with Essif’s extra-physical, hyper-corporeal, meta-physical and phenomenological approach to the empty theatrical space and character.<sup>304</sup>

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302 Langbaum, Robert. *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982: 137.

303 Essif, Les. 'Introducing the "Hyper" Theatrical Subject: The *Mise en Abyme* of Empty Space,' *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 9(1), University of Kansas, 1994: 69.

304 Phenomenology in performance is seen as a term of fundamental complementarity. As Garner states, ‘phenomenology complements the always already of signification with the always also of the subject’s corporeal fields.’ Parallel to this, what the text loses in significative power in the theatre, as he argued, ‘it gains in corporeal presence, in which there is an extraordinary perceptual satisfaction. Hence, the need for rounding out, a semiotics of the theatre with a phenomenology of its imagery or if you will, a phenomenology of its semiology.’ Garner, Stanton. *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1994: 230.

## 4.2 The Missing Theatrical Character

The emptiness of the space can have a greater effect on our perception of the human figure. It is awkward for the spectators to imagine a stage without actors, laid out to an empty auditorium. Moreover, it is difficult to perceive the material emptiness of the theatrical space, to perceive empty space qua empty space. The term “empty” is interpreted as a potentially fillable space, both visually and acoustically. The stage is filled with the actor’s presence, even without a setting; the isolated human form, the solitary human figure on the empty stage, represents the figural image of the character. The separation of the image of the theatrical space from the image of the character seems unrealistic; the two are directly aligned and the spectator perceives the dramatic character within space. As Charles Lyons argued, we need to confront the fact that ‘the image of character in space and time constitutes an irreducible aesthetic unit. No critical system can erase the presence of the human image that occupies the space of the stage.’<sup>305</sup>

Character and its spatial surrounding are conjoined; adding to that the perceptual nature of the theatre is dependent on the stage presence of the human figure, on its phenomenal existence. Scenic and textual levels of representation shape the form of the character as a corporeal presence and visual image on the stage. At the same time, the dramatic text emerges from the performer, as Bruce Wilshire suggests, in a theatrical event ‘an actor must stand in for a character; his image is one that links text and stage space.’<sup>306</sup>

The status of presence becomes problematic in relation to the dramatic text, when we think about the written text, as something separate and distinct from its staging. Corporeal presence and liveness are often differentiated from the text’s verbal language. Two attitudes are observed in relation to this differentiation. On the one hand, even though non-textual elements generate meaning on the stage, dramatists have attempted to preserve the primacy of the word in the theatre.

On the other hand, textual representation has been subsumed in scenic representation and the

305 Lyons, Charles. ‘Character and Theatrical Space.’ Redmond, James (Ed). *The Theatrical Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987: 28.

306 Wilshire, Bruce. *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*. Bloomington University Press, 1982: 42 and 43.



dramatic text has been treated as the opponent of theatrical presence. This differentiation is expressed as the dichotomy of mimetic space and diegetic space (as proposed by Michael Issacharoff's semiotic analysis of textual space), the mimetic space is that which is made visible to an audience, represented on stage and not conveyed by verbal language.

Issacharoff suggests that in contemporary drama, the dramatic tension stems from this antinomy between visible space represented and invisible space described. The diegetic space is 'described...referred to by the characters ... mediated through the discourse of the characters, and thus communicated verbally and not visually.'<sup>307</sup> The visible space is the visual image presented on stage, it constitutes the theatrical and the scenic frame of representation. It is considered as multilayered in comparison to narrative space (the invisible space, which is the verbal image, created by the spoken text, the textual frame of representation).

The articulation of the body concentrates on the performative and on a strong auditory dimension of theatricality and representation that foregrounds sound as stage presence. The body becomes an image produced, signifying and perceived. The notion of the double nature of the body, as both living and formal,<sup>308</sup> can be examined both in the context of the experiencing body and of the body as it is given to external observation. The body can be treated as an individual, a human subject and a character or it can be dissociated from its usual function of indicating an individual identity or a character, it can become an object, a mannequin. The body inserts a more fundamental and intrusive actuality into the field of dramatic representation, an actuality that charges even verbal reflections (and evocations) of bodily presence that Garner sees as a point of independent sentience; according to this view, 'the body represents a rootedness in the biological present that always, to some extent, escapes transformation into the virtual realm.'<sup>309</sup>

Different accounts of the relationship between actuality and theatrical representation, the

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307 Issacharoff, Michael. 'Space and Reference in Drama.' *Poetics Today*, (2, 3) 1981: 210.

308 A comparative analysis of the chapters on "The grain of the voice" and "Baudelaire's theatre" displays the significance Barthes attributes to corporeal presence. As he wrote, 'authentic theatricality, in Baudelaire's plays 'is the sentiment, indeed one might say the torment, of the actor's disturbing corporeality.' According to Barthes, 'Baudelaire's theatre: had an acute sense of the most secret and also the most disturbing theatricality, the kind which puts the actor in the centre of the theatrical prodigy and constitutes the theatre as the site of an ultra incarnation, in which the body is double, at once a living body deriving from a trivial nature, and an emphatic, formal body, frozen by its function as an artificial object. Barthes acknowledges a disturbing theatricality with the actor as its centre and with various implications for the representation of the body in the theatre.'

309 Garner, Stanton. *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1994: 44.

concept of mimesis and theatrical practice, textuality and theatricality (speech, voice, language and non-linguistic processes of signification), become the background, of dramatic writing and practice and indicate the interface between literary drama and non-textual performance. Hauvel makes an analogy from the world of physics, arguing that two cultures or technologies can, like astronomical galaxies, pass through one another without collision; but, as he wrote, 'not without a change in configuration. In modern physics there is similarly the concept of interface or the meeting and metamorphosis of two structures.'<sup>310</sup>

This formative process generates an inter-generic treatment of text and performance. The interactive dynamic between text and performance and theatricality is seen as the interplay of auditory and scenic frames of representation, (rather than a term which merely indicates a clash between the visual image presented onstage and the verbal image created by the spoken word). In the later<sup>311</sup> theatrical works of Samuel Beckett and in particular *Breath*, this dynamic interface generates "new type of text," that is intrinsically intermedial given that it operates in-between auditory and scenic frames of representational practices.

Beckett, being both the writer and the director of his work identifies the literary text to its performative realization (focus on stage directions), he expands the literary genre and defies literary and dramatic conventions. "Text," as Beckett has been redefining it (since *Not I*), disintegrates the conventional way of thinking about drama as something separate and distinct from performance. The absence of any acceptable boundaries distinguishing play from performance reality signals the breakdown of other generic distinctions.

The Beckettian text structures a genre of a unified dramatic form, a signficatory practice that includes but also goes beyond the centrality of language (as a system of meaning). This unified dramatic form becomes the centre of action in these plays, Beckett's attempt to relyricize the genre, as Brater wrote, 'is the only way the voice of the would-be poet can open the constraints of a

310 Heuvel, Vanden. Michael. *Performing Drama/dramatizing Performance: Alternative Theatre and the Dramatic Text*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.

311 In particular in the late plays Beckett reaches for something far more concrete : 'what remains in the theatre, live and palpable and real, after so much has been taken away, how much doesn't have to happen onstage for a lyrical dramatic moment to expand and to unfold.' Brater, Enoch. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987: 17.

performing arts medium.<sup>312</sup> The inter-generic nature of Beckett's "fabricated" language expands the limits of language by providing an alternative that also unsettles views about the nature of language. Beckett's ultimate aim is to express being without words, beyond our linguistic set up. Faced with the paradoxical nature of his artistic endeavour, Beckett pursues his "assault" on language in the hope of finally achieving a "literature of the unword."<sup>313</sup>

According to Brater, Beckett's drama is not a drama in the shape of poetry but poetry in the shape of drama. The experience for the audience in the theatre is like the experience of reading a poem, except that in this instance the poem has been staged. Language art and theatre art draw together, as he suggested, progressively validating through stage time and our own time the purity of the writer's voice, as he builds a sustained dramatic metaphor. In his late plays, Beckett pursues the limits and possibilities of such unified dramatic form even further by challenging his audience to analyse and as Brater argued to encounter with him the special effects of a stage situation, when one genre breaks into another.<sup>314</sup>

Brater's and Esslin's perspectives concerning language and visual imagery are juxtaposed. Esslin points beyond language, since he considers that the visual frames of representation are primordial to the textual, according to this view, the late plays represent a wholly new genre: they are poems without words, visual poetry. According to this view, Beckett has reached the "point zero of language."<sup>315</sup> Esslin highlights the visual and aural disposition of Beckett's art and its relationship to some types of contemporary performance art. The metaphor and the poetic has been freed from the word altogether. As he argued:

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312 Brater, Enoch. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987: 17.

313 "The Literature of the Unword" (is a term that Beckett used to describe his work), the same process was identified as "indeterminacy" ( by Marjorie Perloff), "decreation" (by Ruby Cohn) and "the syntax of weakness", "the point zero of language," "arts of impoverishment" "literature of silence" (other commentators). The rejection of any attempts at writing is analysed thoroughly in "The German Letter" (1937). "The German Letter," is part of a correspondence between Beckett and Alex Kaun (a friend, whom he met in Germany). It was becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for Beckett to write in an official English. Progressively his own language appeared to him like a veil that, as he argued in the notable statement: 'must be torn apart in order to get at things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank god that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it- be it something or nothing- begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. In Cohn, Ruby (ed.). Beckett, Samuel. *German Letter: Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. London: Calder: 172.

314 Brater, Enoch. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987: 17.

315 See Esslin, Martin. 'A Poetry of Moving Images.' In Friedman, Alan-Warren Rossman, Charles and Sherzer, Dina (eds). *Beckett Translating/ Translating Beckett*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987: 74.

It is not drama any more, it is poetry, wordless poetry. Nor is it strictly speaking cinema: it lacks the epic quality, the storytelling element of cinema; it is most akin to some types of contemporary performance art, where also, often, two distinct phases are distinguishable: firstly the ritual of building the image, secondly the display of the image. In some sense this is a kind of painting, the creation of an “emblem” to be deciphered by the viewer, except that the image moves and has sound.<sup>316</sup>

The interchange between non-textual frames of representation in performance and text oriented drama lead to a redefinition of the concept of the character in contemporary performance and a gradual revision of character representation (based on complex models of representation beyond narrative and language).<sup>317</sup> The dramatic character holds a problematic status on the contemporary stage, a process of destabilization is noticed and the fragmentation of the textual and visual frames that are used to figure the subject and the displacement of the figure within the narrative. Character has dissolved into the flux of performance elements. As Gruber argued, in his book *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama*, ‘the idea of character haunts us in the theatre like the absence of some pictorial metabolism in a colour field. Playwrights have abandoned many elements long thought essential to drama, including plot, action and character.’<sup>318</sup>

It is essential to contextualize this process in terms of art theory and discourse on aesthetics where there is also a tendency to move away from the human subject ( “dehumanization of art.”).<sup>319</sup> The move away from the human subject in cubism, futurism, and other art movements was foreshadowed by other advanced theatre artists at the end of the nineteenth century. It is often believed that because of the live actor, dramatic character survived what we think of as the particular modern dis-assembly of the concept of the character.

The theorist Elinor Fuchs relates the ontological issue of “the character’s desubstanciation” in the theatre and the crisis of representation to discourses and ideas that derive from French critical

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316 Ibid: 47.

317 Modern playwrights and theatre practitioners are critical towards realistic forms of representation and reconsider conventional structures of identity, the official presence of the character on stage, and stable constructions of plot and language.

318 See Gruber, William. *Missing Persons: Character and Characterization in Modern Drama*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994: 5.

319 As José Ortega y Gasset argued, in his study about the “dehumanization of art.” José Ortega y Gasset. *The dehumanization of art, and other writings on art and culture*. The University of Michigan: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956.

postmodern discourses. In critical theory the subject is put in question, as she wrote: 'from Lacan's insight into the symbolic construction of subjectivity, Foucault's announcement of the "end of man," Derrida's attack on the "metaphysics of Presence," Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author," Baudrillard's shattering 'precession of the simulacra,' Deleuze and Guatari's "schizoanalysis," Lyotard's collapse of the "grands récits" of modernism.'<sup>320</sup>

Nevertheless, as a rule, we discuss about strategies that are employed in order to diminish the presence of the character, but not about a total abstraction that left behind the human form. *Breath* pursues this course even further, by illustrating Beckett's project to create a text devoid of character and actors.

The body in performance is not a representation of something spoken, but rather speaks itself. Adding to that, the body introduces a radical actuality on stage that transcends linguistic signification. The human body as a working material goes beyond the representational role-playing of theatre and generates "the dramaturgy of the organic." The body in performance can either displace or be a supplement for the character. According to Pierre Chabert,<sup>321</sup> the body is always present in those forms of theatre which use actors, however, it may be present and active in many different ways. In theatre based on characters (the majority of existing plays), the actor's body is subjugated to psychological factors: the actor must incarnate different character types and express different psychological states. In this context the body is a means, entirely subordinated to the plot and to psychological description. It is not approached for and in itself; as Chabert suggested, 'it supports the action and acts as a relay for bringing the character to life.'<sup>322</sup>

The later plays reveal an increasing dispossession within bodied subjectivity and the gradual abandonment of the naturalistic body. Beckett employs strategies in order to diminish the presence of his character and evolves techniques of concentration on the body, on aspects of the physical and the corporeal. With regard to, Beckett's character formation, the body becomes

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320 Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996: 1.

321 The actor and Beckett's close friend who wrote about *Beckett and the Body* see bibliography.

322 Chabert, Pierre. 'The Body in Beckett's Theatre.' *Journal of Beckett Studies*. 8 (Autumn, 1982): 24.

fragmented, dehumanized, spatially restricted, it is drawn toward invisibility and immobility. In the course of Beckett's dramatic work a gradual reduction of the visual frames used for the representation of the body is observed in *Waiting for Godot* the bodies of the performers are normal, in *Eh Joe*, the protagonist is reduced to sitting on the edge of his bed, in *Happy Days*, Winnie's movements are restricted to her upper body, the bodily function is even further reduced in *Play*, where only the heads remain, the same with *Not I* that focuses on the mouth and the voice. Finally, the complete reduction of the body culminates in *Breath*.

Moreover, in the later plays, Beckett's process of reduction removes the context of the narrative. The recited discourses overpower the dramatized action and they call for a re-examination of the conventional relationship between narration and enactment in drama. Whereas *Waiting for Godot* (1953/55) consists of two acts, five characters and the length of a "well-made" play, Beckett's *Endgame* (1957/58), consists of two pairs of actors, one pair confined to waste bins, and one act, *Act Without Words I and II* (1957/59) are mime plays for one or two characters, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) is a play for one actor, *Happy Days* (1961) features two actors. This process of reduction reaches its climax in *Breath*, since, narrative, text and figure are removed from the stage, the triptych of character, body and actor has vanished.

In the context of the increasing dispossession within bodied subjectivity and of the abandonment of the body in *Breath*, it is paradoxical to see productions (versions) of the playlet that don't pay attention to Beckett's central premise, namely, the absence of the subject. These artists or directors haven't realised the focus Beckett gives on the significance of the lack of the human subject. Instead of underlining this essential emptiness, they have chosen to focus on the "fullness" by adding the human figure in various forms, thus, relating *Breath* to the human body, despite Beckett's manifest desire to distinguish the two.

### 4.3 Amanda Coogan's Version of *Breath*



**Figure 4.1:** Coogan, Amanda. *Breath*. Design and direction for the Samuel Beckett play. Bedrock Production for the Beckett festival at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin. 2007. Source: <http://www.amandacoogan.com/selected-works---2007.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Amanda Coogan's production is a case study in terms of this artistic endeavour to “present” a human body on *Breath*'s set (without taking into consideration Beckett's stage directions), and despite the connotations (the plastic human bodies that are placed like the miscellaneous rubbish, the body as waste), this version seems to reduce the piece into a “cliche” installation.<sup>323</sup> Rather than, focusing on the empty figure on stage and on the dialectics of presence (liveness) and absence, the artist substitutes the miscellaneous rubbish with plastic human figures. Therefore, the body instead of missing, multiplies, and becomes a simplistic prop.

Amanda Coogan and her directorial decisions seem to have fallen into the trap of the limitless enlargements of Beckett's oeuvre. Beckett has been made the centrepiece of what might be called a

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323 The Beckett Centenary production of *Breath* by Bedrock Productions in Dublin brought together elements of theatre and installation. Directed by performance artist Amanda Coogan, the mise en scène comprised a pile of rubbish illuminated by ‘faint light’ as directed by Beckett. However according to Turbity, ‘Coogan, in what might be considered an ironic gesture to Kenneth Tynan's production, includes a scattering of mannequin limbs amongst the detritus barely visible under the dim light, evoking also the prosthetic element of Beckett's work within the context of a very characteristic aesthetic of debilitation, dismemberment and decay’. Coogan, Amanda. ‘Performance Art.’ *IGNITE*. Science Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin. 14 April 2010. Quoted in Turbity, Derval. “Beckett's Spectral Silence: *Breath* and the Sublime” *Limit(e) Beckett 1*(2010): 102-122. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12].

contemporary aesthetics of the inexhaustible that, as Connor argued:

assumes the sovereign value of endless propagation and maintains a horror of any kind of limit. Having perhaps helped in some of my previous work to recruit Beckett to this aesthetic, I would like now, in this talk, to argue that Beckett is in fact a writer who is governed by the principles of limit and finitude, principles that are in fact both philosophically more provocative and politically more responsible than the cult of endless exceeding that has attached itself to Beckett.<sup>324</sup>

Several scholars have discussed the importance of the body within the stage, however, they have approached these topics from a “physical” point of view. This process can be seen as reductive and ignores the reflective emptiness of the dramatic character. A concept that might facilitate, as Essif suggests, to explain, both the process of concentration and the self-referential, meta-theatrical nature, of the work. *Breath*, however, is placed in another context; it is differentiated from the sense of emptiness as it is incorporated in the dramatic subject, in view of the fact that the dramatic subject is absent. The stage is empty of the presence of the human figure.

The treatment of the “empty space” is seen in relation to *Breath*'s emphasis on the actual, its modes of presence and its resistance to be transformed into the virtual realm. As Timothy Wiles illuminates, the value of empty space, a value that he believes is implied by Peter Brook's notion of the empty space. He argues that, Brook points to a phenomenon of theatre architecture which has broader implications for our understanding of the poetics of space in dramaturgy and in aesthetics. For Wiles, the concern with empty space suggests the disavowal of an autonomous site of theatrical activity – a rejection of both the stage setting and of the auditorium (if the setting is understood as an assembly hall that is set apart from the world and has no other function than that). Instead of this separation, Wiles argued that:

the empty space asks for continuity between theatre event and life event - that is, it claims that the theatre event is a kind of a life event, not a copy of one. And it's more general aesthetic implication is to require us to pay as close attention to the empty space surrounding and shaped by the art object, as we pay to the object itself.<sup>325</sup>

324 Connor, Steven. Lecture: 'On Such and Such a Day...In Such a World: Beckett's Radical Finitude.' *Borderless Beckett. International Samuel Beckett Symposium in Tokyo*, 29 September, 2006. In <http://www.stevenconnor.com/finitude/>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

325 Wiles, Timothy. *The Theatre Event: Modern Theories of Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980: 114.



This hermeneutic approach attempts to cancel out the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic dichotomy, while it provides a certain integration of the aesthetic with everyday life. Respiration on stage originates directly from everyday life, from the individual's concrete life experience. Wiles' approach acknowledges the tension between the representational and the non-representational aspects of theatrical reality and the challenge Beckett poses to the limits of the art object, while it focuses on the spatial, gestural and durational extensions of artistic innovation. Space and time are primary materials, while the viewer is aware of her/his presence during the theatrical process. This process is affected by the "contextual" elements whose expanded engagement eventually unhinges medium purity.

Emphasis on the "contextual" elements of art has political and ideological underpinnings. The concept of aesthetic autonomy as the very condition of the possibility of "art" itself is re-evaluated or abandoned. The idea of context-independent art is impossible even in Beckett's abstracted imagery. The chapter examined the fundamental ontological emptiness of *Breath's* disembodied stage by acknowledging that Beckett's decision to eradicate the subject is not only a formal decision, nor is it only an allegorical statement about the human condition, it is a clear response to a post-Holocaust reality. Adorno's "negative" and "positive" representation is unfolding in the dialectic of presence and absence of the figure and its ideological context turns out to be central. *Breath's* Empty Figure is the inhabitant of a stagnant landscape filled with nihilism uncertainty, disorientation, exile, hunger and, thus, rubbish.

## **SECTION III: BREATH IN THE EXPANDED FIELD**

### **CHAPTER V: Intermedial Breath**

Intermediality should not be misunderstood as evidence either of ignorance regarding the specificities of various aesthetic media or, on the other hand, of mere ignorance regarding conventions of formal creation within the traditional genres. Instead, the specificities of each medium become the object of an artistic production that confronts these conventions freely – but not from a position of simple ignorance.<sup>326</sup>

[I]ntermedia is not performance, but performative action.<sup>327</sup>

Intermediality is examined as a combinatory structure of syntactical elements that come from more than one medium, but are combined into one and are thereby transformed into a new entity.<sup>328</sup> Contemporary discourses on intermedia are often describing the phenomena of crossing the borders between traditional media (such as painting and photography), contemporary media (such as cinema, television, video, computer and other hypermedia), live and animated stage production. The theorist and artist Dick Higgins<sup>329</sup> was one of the first theorists who formulated a framework for understanding and categorizing intermedia work. This process investigated the methodological challenges of converging different mediums, live performance, animation, film, music and design.

In order to demonstrate this process, this chapter focuses on Beckett's media environments and his experimentation with technology in relation to the complex contemporary media culture. Beckett explored some cardinal aspects of technology and wrote texts that deployed media so as to

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326 Krauss, Rosalind. *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000: 122.

327 Klaus-Peter Busse, 'Intermedia: The Aesthetic Experience of Cultural Interspaces,' in Breder, Hans, and Klaus-Peter Busse, eds. *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal*. Dortmunder Schriften zur Kunst, 2005: 264.

328 See Spielmann, Yvonne. 'Synesthesia and Intersenses: Intermedia in the Electronic Arts.' *Leonardo*, 34.1 (2001): 55-61.

329 Vostell, Wolf (ed). *Dé-coll/age (décollage)* \*6, Typos Verlag, Frankfurt - Something Else Press, New York, July, 1967. In <http://artpool.hu/Fluxus/Higgins/intermedia2.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

create dramatic effects and simultaneously challenged the limitations of the artistic medium. As mentioned, *Breath* is intrinsically intermedial given that it operates in-between realities, in-between the boundaries of artistic media, the verbal and the visual, the audible and the scenic, in-between visibility and invisibility, absence and emptiness, embodiment and ambiguity of corporeal experience.

Artistic experimentation includes movements into non-artistic fields, as well as, exploration of technological and scientific innovations. Respiration presupposes a relation to found biological phenomena that doesn't operate in the domain of cultural and art production. However, artists have formulated various means of presenting breath in art. Breathing is considered as an intermedium, in a twofold sense. The first, suggests the breach, between art and life and the interest in non-art and the other, the breach between different artistic media.

The term intermediality is directly related to the concept of the medium (and its essential components), from a perspective that takes into consideration the far-reaching transformations of aesthetic experience (and of the arts) that have been effected through recent and contemporary developments. Both of the constituent parts of the term “intermediality,” “inter-” and “media,” designate “between-ness.” The many interrelated aspects of the multifaceted concept of the medium generally include several types or levels of mediality that have to be correlated with each other. This condition can also be described as “inter-medial,” the “multi-modal” or even “post-medial.”<sup>330</sup> Intermedia appears in the form of conceptual art, performance art, video art, new dance, graphically-notated music and music involving theatrical activity, a “new” theatre based on extra-theatrical sources, visual poetry, phonetic poetry.<sup>331</sup>

Oleg Gelikman places the concept of intermediality in the context of the unresolved conflict between philosophical aesthetics and aesthetic theory. The conflict originated in the response of an

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330 A distinction is made between media understood as a means of transmitting signals bearing a written, aural or visual message and mediums as designating the very fabric or substance of which signals and messages are made. Different media borders and multimodalities are analysed as Medium/intermediality mode/multimodality material, sensorial, spatiotemporal modality, semiotic modality, tangible, perceptual, conceptual, basic, qualified, technical media. See Elleström, Lars. *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*. Palgrave, Macmillan, 2010.

331 See Barton, Bruce. 'Paradox as Process: Intermedial Anxiety and the Betrayals of Intimacy'. *Theatre Journal*, (Volume 61, Number 4, December): 2009.

influential generation of thinkers to the crisis of the neo-Kantian schools and the emergence of modernism in the 1910s. As Gelikman supports, despite the relatively new usage of the term it presses into service an old, indeed archaic argument for the centrality of the medium to representation. It can be found, as he stated, in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Lessing's *Laocoön*, and the newer *Laocoöns* that proliferated in the twentieth century (beginning with Irving Babbitt's *The New Laocoön: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*, 1910). Gelikman sketches a transition other than the one from the mono-medial to inter-medial production, namely, from “aesthetics” to “aesthetic theory.” However, when he proposes to relate “intermediality” to the transition from aesthetics to aesthetic theory, he does not mean to suggest that we are free to go back to the historical context in which the distinction between the two appeared.<sup>332</sup>

Intermediality, as a conceptual framework, was further developed by the “Theatre and Intermediality Working Group.” The Group’s focus on the concept of intermediality was not only in the context of the interaction of technology and the convergence of live and mediatized performance, rather they interpreted intermediality, as the interaction of media, while they argued that intermediality is not reliant on technology, but on the interaction between performance and perception. Chapple and Kattenbelt, as mentioned, define intermediality as ‘a powerful and potentially radical force, that operates in-between performer and audience; in-between theatre, performance and other media; and in-between realities - with theatre providing a stage space for the performance of intermediality.’<sup>333</sup>

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332 Gelikman, Oleg. 'Intermediality and Aesthetic Theory in Shklovsky's and Adorno's Thought,' *Comparative Literature and Culture*, (13.3, 2011): 2-10. In *Thematic issue New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*. (Ed) López, Asunción. Saussy, Haun. Mieszkowski, Jan Azcárate, Varela.Tötösy, Steven de Zepetnek.

333 Chapple, Freda and Kattenbelt, Chiel (eds). *Intermediality In Theatre and Performance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006: 12.

## 5.1 Beckett's Technicule

By contextualizing Beckett's experimentation with media and technology in the multifaceted contemporary media culture, we could say that Beckett explored some cardinal aspects of technology and wrote texts that both deployed media to generate dramatic effects and simultaneously comment on each medium's limitations. His innovative use of medium, technology and the apparently simple staging of his plays is one of the reasons that artists continue to produce his works in new media<sup>334</sup> and formats. In particular *Breath*, as Ruby Cohn suggested might be called a *technicule*, dependent as it is on technology. As Cohn wrote, 'the scenic directions stipulate that the two recorded cries be identical and that the light and amplified breath be strictly synchronized. The elemental symmetries of life on earth rely upon sophisticated theatre electronics.'<sup>335</sup>

Beckett's late stage plays foreground the notion of changing media environments and technology, so as to draw attention to the artifice of the dramatic form itself. Adding to that, the continuity with his writing for the stage, radio and television, as well as, the theatrical language often used in these works, suggests a certain variability or doubling of medium, as though the texts included within themselves the possibility of their staging in some other form.<sup>336</sup> Beckett's dramatic works assert the specificity of their media; they are placed at the representative edges of those media rather than at their centres. It is these boundaries, as Steve Connor suggested, 'which constitute the specificity of their medium, even as they mark the dubious place where they touch and perhaps cross into different media.'<sup>337</sup>

Beckett's relationship to technology and television, in particular, has received the attention

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334 *The Beckett on Film project* (2002), British visual artist Damien Hirst directed *Breath* using the voice of comedian Keith Allen. In this project funded by the Irish Film Institute, the Irish broadcasting network RTE, and Britain's Channel 4, virtually all of Beckett's stage plays were committed to film by a wide range of artists. Some of the project's artists worked regularly with Beckett texts, such as director Harold Pinter and actors Alan Stanford and Barry McGovern. Other artists involved in the project have not work regularly with Beckett (Anthony Minghella and Neil Jordan, for example) or, for that matter, in the film medium at all: The series of films was broadcast on television in both Britain and Ireland before being sold on DVD. Accompanying the launch of the DVD, people could browse the official Beckett on Film Web site, which contains essays on Beckett, interviews with the artists involved in the production, and a page of links to other Beckett Web sites.

335 Cohn, Ruby. *A Beckett Canon*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001: 298.

336 See Connor, Steven. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, theory and text*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1988: 167.

337 Connor, Steven. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, theory and text*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1988: 167.

of writers such as: Linda Ben-Zvi, Eckhart Voights-Virchow, Gilles Deleuze, Graley Herren, and Daniel Albright's study *Beckett and Aesthetics*. Albright argues that, while Beckett (like surrealist artists) is “doting on technique”, he does so not to show technology's potential and power but, rather, its “muteness, incompetence, non-feasance of transmission,” the medium allowed “to dwindle before the stress that Beckett places on it.”<sup>338</sup> Beckett uses technology to indict itself, as Linda Ben-Zvi, argued, ‘I agree that - just as he uses language to reveal its own paucity- creating a technology of the unworkable just as he committed himself at the beginning of his career to write “a literature of the unword.”’<sup>339</sup>

Beckett's texts change in different technological environments, while they demonstrate the convergence of old and new technology formats. Beckett embraced the challenges of new media. Technology provided Beckett with more possibilities, as Albright wrote, 'for unfiguring things than words ever could.'<sup>340</sup> His work for film, radio and television is not merely plays written for different media, but rather explorations of the potential and limits of each medium to express Beckett's aesthetics. Media are stripped down as far as possible to let the technology show. Linda Ben-Zvi argues (about Beckett's television and film work) that although the technique probably derives from Beckett's tendency toward simplicity, as she wrote, ‘its effect is to reveal the nature of the medium to show what it doesn't do: provide clarity and wholeness to “the mess” of life or the world itself.’<sup>341</sup>

Theorists like Saltz<sup>342</sup> explain the ways in which Beckett developed multimedia stagings of *Ohio Impromptu*, *Eh Joe*, *Not I*, *Play*, *Come and Go*, *Breath* and *Quad*. Sean McCarthy argued these plays allow the audience to engage more closely with the texts, and highlight the texts' cyclical quality, as he wrote, 'to explore the interaction between live performance and technology inherent in them; and, most important, to test [his own] contention that Beckett's short plays redefine in a very

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338 Moorjani, A., Ben-Zvi, Linda (eds). *Beckett, McLuhan and television: The Medium, the Message and the Mess in Beckett at 100 Revolving it all*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 2 & 3.

339 Ben-Zvi, Linda. ‘Beckett and Television: In a Different Context.’ *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, (Winter, 2006): 469.

340 See Albright in Bibliography: 137

341 Ibid: 104

342 See Saltz, David. ‘Live Media: Interactive Technology and Theatre.’ *Theatre Topics*, 11. 2, (September, 2001): 107-130.

specific and radical way, the nature of the dramatic text itself.'<sup>343</sup>

The intermedial approach emphasizes the dialectic between the media. The term intermedia differs from multimedia (a term that correlates different media that are presented together synchronously yet remain distinct). The term intermedia goes beyond mixed media, which incorporates elements of one medium in another (e.g. photography in film, painting in photography.) Adding to that, intermediality denotes that the reference frame of the entire system of art forms (that mediates the intermedial correlation) is itself included in the processes of transformation. As Yvonne Spielmann argued, the definition of intermedia (in relation to visual media), inherently implies that the processes of transformation are reflected in the form of the images. It is through the modes of self-reflection that the structural shifts characteristic of new media images are mediated and made visible. As she wrote, 'the point is that the transformation of elements of at least two (historically) different media creates a new form of image that reveals these differences in a mixed form and mostly reveals the self-reflexivity of the medium in a paradoxical structure.'<sup>344</sup>

The same process is valid in relation to all media. Intermediality is applied throughout the arts; an intermedium can be traced between music and sculpture, between poetry and sculpture etc. However, this chapter examines the structure of the intermedium, in conjunction with the medium of theatricality, while the mediums are analysed in the context of the intersection of theatre and the visual arts. Several factors must be considered in attempting to formulate distinctions between these two disciplines. The effects in relation to the theatrical in contemporary art are vast and the comparison of works of several media suggests the convergence of the visual arts and the theatre. However, consequential disciplinary boundaries are still detectable in the instances in which one art form conjures another.

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343 McCarthy, Sean. 'Giving Sam a Second Life: Beckett's Plays in the Age of Convergent Media.' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 51.1, (Spring, 2009): 102-117.

344 Spielmann, Yvonne. 'Synesthesia and Intersenses, Intermedia in Electronic Images.' *Leonardo*, 34.1 (2001): 55.

The intermedium investigates the ways in which the mapping of one structure, originally composed in one medium, is mapped onto another structure in another medium. In the context of the interface between the theatre and the visual arts, we observe that visual artists are investigating the nature of the medium of theatricality<sup>345</sup> by experimenting with the fundamental registers of the theatre like: embodiment, spectacle, ensemble, text, sound, gesture, situated space, reenactment.

The theatre is related to situatedness, spectatorial encounter, referentiality, literality and extended spatiality that unsettles the circumscribed spatiality of the “autonomous” art form. Theatre is, also, about duration, an engagement with temporality that violates the juxtapositive immediacy of visual art forms. These artworks which investigate the notion of theatricality, the construction of space, the stage and the duration of the experience, the significance of text and the need for a new attitude on the part of the audience, are principally, interested in the act of perceiving.

In addition to, these formal conceptual characteristics and effects of intermedia, however, intermediality may be understood as a cultural and ideological positioning and basis for strategy.<sup>346</sup> Beckett's *Breath* is situated in the context of these contemporary investigations of theatrical intermediality seen in relation to the exploration of a wide range of forms, territories, strategies and artistic motivations. Beckett's use of technology has led to a remediation of the interface between the theatre and the visual arts and of a revision of the boundaries of mediums<sup>347</sup> and of the effects of intermediality that involve innovative modes of representation; dramaturgical strategies; new ways of positioning bodies in time and space and new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations.

Beckett attempts to reconceptualize theatre as a “hyper-medium,”<sup>348</sup> that integrates a variety of technical media into its performance. Theatre, thus, becomes a large medial framework, which

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345 Weber, Samuel. *Theatricality as Medium*. Ashland Ohio: Fordham University Press, 2004: 30.

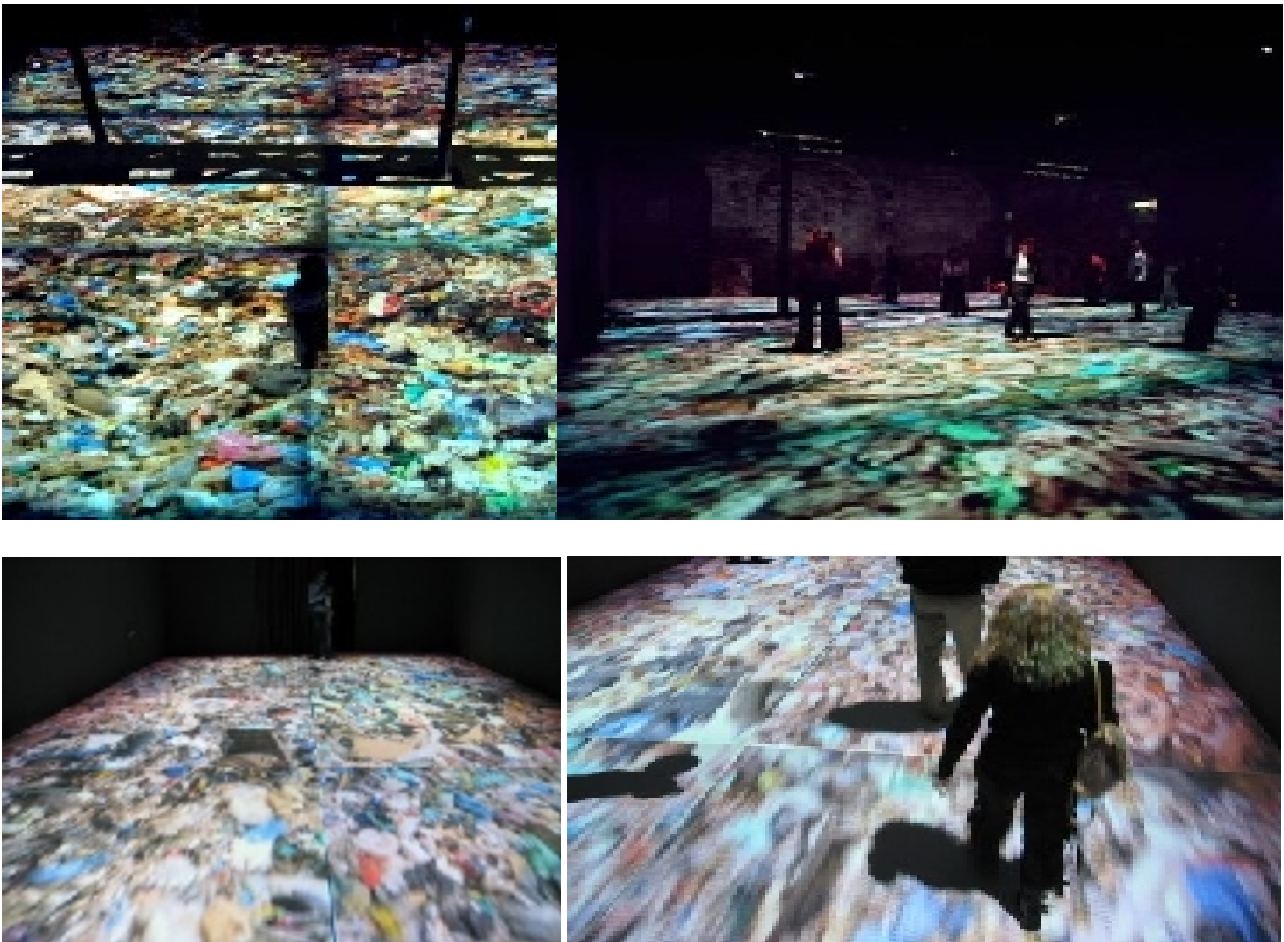
346 See Busse, Klaus-Peter and Breder, Hans (eds). ‘Intermedia is not performance, but performative action.’ *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal*, Dortmund, Germany: Dortmunder Schriften zur Kunst, 2005: 264.

347 Remediations: explorations of the ways recent media remediate earlier media (i.e. filmic remediation of theatre; televisual remediation of radio, theatre, and film; digital remediation of print, photograph, television etc.) *Intermedial dramaturg(ies), intermedial bodies in performance mixed media, multimedia, crossover and hybrid performances, “live” performance in virtual space and virtual performance in “live” space.*

348 (Kattenbelt 2006, 32)



incorporates different media without negotiating the assumed live quality of the theatrical body. Visual and theatrical practice are seen as constituting and constructing each other, operating as an “axis” that allows media relationships to be established. It is significant to note that Beckett's theatre is able not only to represent but also to stage other media. Media therefore become visible as media, as means of communication, each with their own materialities, medialities and conventions of perception. The medium specificity of theatre becomes with Beckett's manipulations a field that contains within its phenomena a heterogeneous collection of interdependent media.



**Figures 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4:** Nikos, Navridis. *Breath*. 2005: based on Samuel Beckett's playlet *Breath*. Video Installation, video projections synchronized in loop, sound. Duration: 35 seconds. Dimensions variable. 51st Venice Biennial, *Always a Little Further*; Arsenale, Venice, June 12-Nov 6, 2005, curator Rosa Martinez. Courtesy: Bernier/Eliades Gallery and the artist.<sup>349</sup>

<sup>349</sup> Based on Samuel Beckett's play *Breath*, video Installation, video projections synchronized in loop, sound, Duration: 35 seconds. Dimensions variable. (First installed: 51st Venice Biennial, "Always a Little Further," Arsenale, Venice, June 12-Nov 6, 2005, curator Rosa Martinez) Courtesy: Bernier/Eliades Gallery and the artist.

## 5.2 Navridis' Intermedial version of *Breath*

Navridis “staging” reframes *Breath*'s reception through the use of current developments in intermediality. In this video projection, the viewer becomes involved in this process while moving through the rubbish projected on the floor. Navridis has interpreted *Breath* as a video installation, inviting the audience to experience the work. Viewers walk into a dark room where eight overhead projectors compose a disorienting, mobile landscape of garbage, making it difficult for them to find their way out. Navridis' work extends Beckett's concerns with metaphysics, performance and particularly the human body. Navridis' display of *Breath* is one of the most pertinent versions of the playlet; the artist/architect added an experiential and intermedial aspect to the playlet by projecting the image of the rubbish on the floor, so that spectators could walk on them. By transforming the solid and fixed context and by dismembering breath Navridis ascribed certain performative qualities to the work and activated the spectator in a bodily manner. Navridis did not consider that he has to add the human body so as to highlight presence (like other versions of *Breath*), hence, in this piece the spectators themselves become the leading figures on this “stage.”

Samuel Beckett's creative and personal life was marked by a series of transformations and reinventions. In the process of remaking himself, over and again, as Gontarski argued, 'from donnish academic to avant-garde poet, from Joycean acolyte to post-Joycean minimalist, from humanist to post-humanist, perhaps, most certainly from poet to novelist to playwright to theatre director, Beckett was simultaneously reinventing every literary genre he turned his attention to.'<sup>350</sup> These reinventions and transformational qualities of Beckett's artworks arise from the productive tension generated by the struggle between expression and abstraction, in the context of artistic composition.

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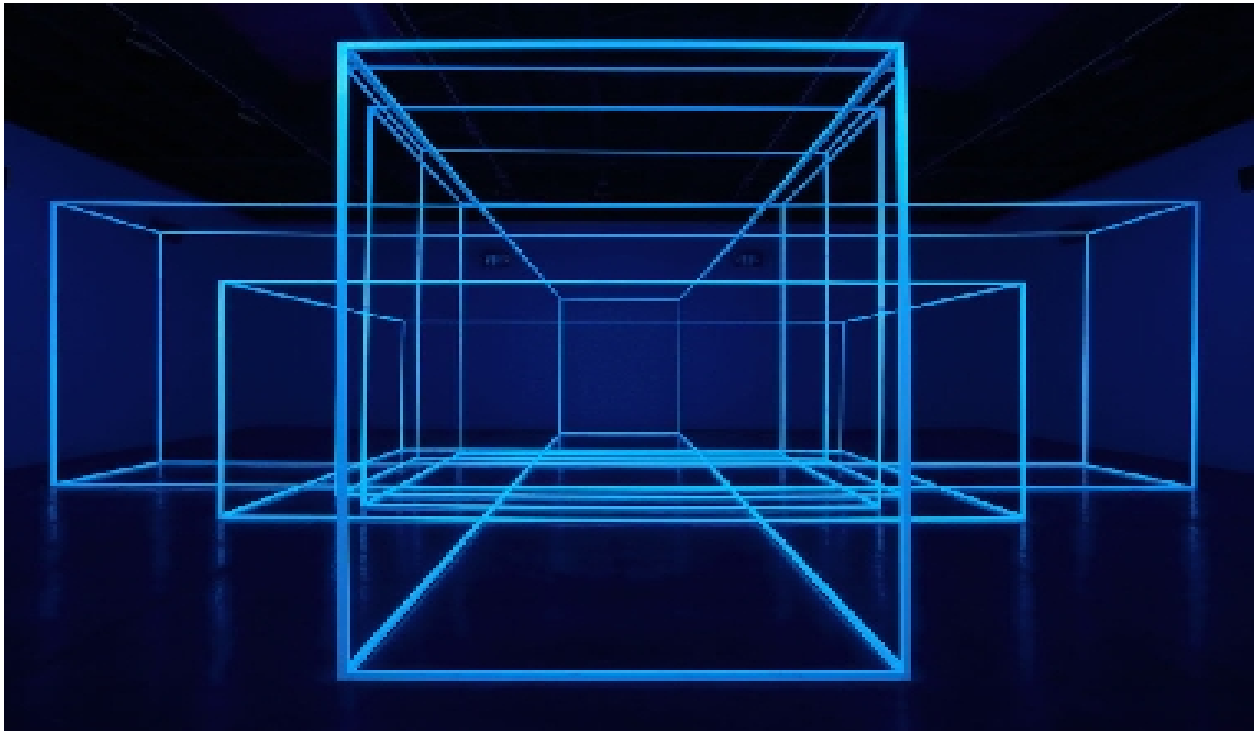
350 Gontarski, S.E. 'Reinventing Beckett.' *Modern Drama*, 49. 4, University of Toronto Press, (Winter 2006): 428-451.

### 5.3 Antony Gormley's *Breathing Room II*

The intermedial relationship between the sensuous and the technological and the culture of the technologized body have also an effect on the biological phenomenon of breathing. The sculptor Antony Gormley has revitalized the human image in sculpture, through the investigation of the body, as a place of memory and transformation, using his own body as subject, tool and material. Since 1990, the artist has expanded his concern with the human condition, his installation *Breathing Room*, was an attempt to make a three-dimensional drawing in space, that was both a diagram and an object, it was an instrument that allowed the viewers to become the viewed by creating an interpenetrating nest of seven space frames that occupy a central position in the room.



**Figure 5.5:** Gormley, Antony. *Breathing Room II*. Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France. 2006. Source: <http://www.antonygormley.com/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figure 5.6:** Gormley, Antony. *Breathing Room II*. Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France. 2006. Source: <http://www.antonygormley.com/> Website [Date of Access 10/01/2012]

The volume outlined by the frame remains constant whilst being extended in each case on a different axis.<sup>351</sup> A mandala-like drawing on the floor forms the ground plan from which the seven rooms grow, as Gormley wrote:

The object hovers between being architecture and being an image of architecture. It is a contained object in a defined internal space. All electrical lights were removed and the frames were painted with two layers of phosphorescent paint that absorbed light during the day and emitted it at night. In its night state the work assumes an unstable position between the virtual and the real. If perspective and orthogonal architecture in the West are the way in which space is described and contained, this is an attempt to open up those limiting characteristics.<sup>352</sup>

In this environment Gormley's *Breathing Room II*, like Beckett's *Breath*, the figure is absent, however, the spectator embodies the human subject, by being immersed in this mediated installation. The same spectatorial engagement is applied to McCall's *Breath*.

<sup>351</sup> The structure is made from 25mm x 25 mm square aluminium tube

<sup>352</sup> See <<http://www.antonygormley.com/>> , Website [ Date of Access 20/12/2012].



**Figure 5.7** : Gormley, Antony. *Breathing Room II*. Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France. 2006.

Source: <http://www.antonygormley.com/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

#### 5.4 Anthony McCall's *Breath*



**Figures 5.8- 5.9** : McCall, Anthony. *Breath [the vertical works]*, 2009. Source: <http://www.anthonymccall.com/> [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Anthony McCall's<sup>353</sup> sculptures, *Breath I* (2004), *Breath II* (2004), *Breath III* (2005) are a series of artworks based on projected light. This series applies a combinatory structure of syntactical elements that come from more than one medium, (installation art, film, sculpture and performance) so as to transformed them into a new artistic entity. The artist has been developing

<sup>353</sup> Anthony McCall is considered to be one of the prominent representatives of London's "avant-garde" cinema of the 1970s. He started to work with performance and film, at the beginning of the 1970s, initially with a series of open-air performances, in which fire was used as sculptural element. McCall has focused on the mechanical basis of film projections and treats light beam as a three-dimensional presence, before it is discharged on the two-dimensional screen where the images are formed.

architectural installations that explore height and verticality and the way the viewers relate to horizontal and vertical projections. In the horizontal forms one moves, within and around every part of the projected object and the source of light is close to eye level. The vertical projections rise to five times the height of the viewer and the viewer can only occupy the lower part of the sculpture while observing the tunnel of light above them meaning, as McCall stated, 'the defining membranes of light, together with the chambers they enclose, are made visible by the movement of the mist, with its sometimes, spiralling movements, which carry the eye to the vanishing point around the lens of the projector.'<sup>354</sup>

These works have a sculptural quality of the luminous, volumetric, beam, using digital production techniques rather than film. These installations intersect between cinema and sculpture, the forms and the spaces are projected, and gradually change through the passage of time. The projections produce three-dimensional enclosures (darkened spaces filled with mist), based on abstract figures, ellipses and waves that gradually expand and contract in the space like ephemeral architectonic walls. The viewers can be walking around and within the translucent walls and enclosed spaces.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Walley, Jonathan. 'An Interview with Anthony McCall.' *The Velvet Light Trap*. (54, Fall, 2004): 65-75. In [http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/the\\_velvet\\_light\\_trap/v054/54.1walley.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/the_velvet_light_trap/v054/54.1walley.html). Website Accessed [20/11/12]

<sup>355</sup> See Branden, Joseph. *Anthony McCall: The Solid Light Films and Related Works*. Artist interview by Jonathan Walley (Ed.) Christopher Eamon. United States: New Art Trust, Northwestern University Press.

## 5.5 Curatorial Intermediality: Koan Jeff Baysa *OXYGEN*



**Figures 5.9, 5.10, 5.11** : Baysa, Koan Jeff. (curated) *OXYGEN*, White Box, New York, 2002. Source: [http://www.whiteboxny.org/prog\\_list/prog\\_list20.html](http://www.whiteboxny.org/prog_list/prog_list20.html). Website [Date Of Access 10/1/2012]



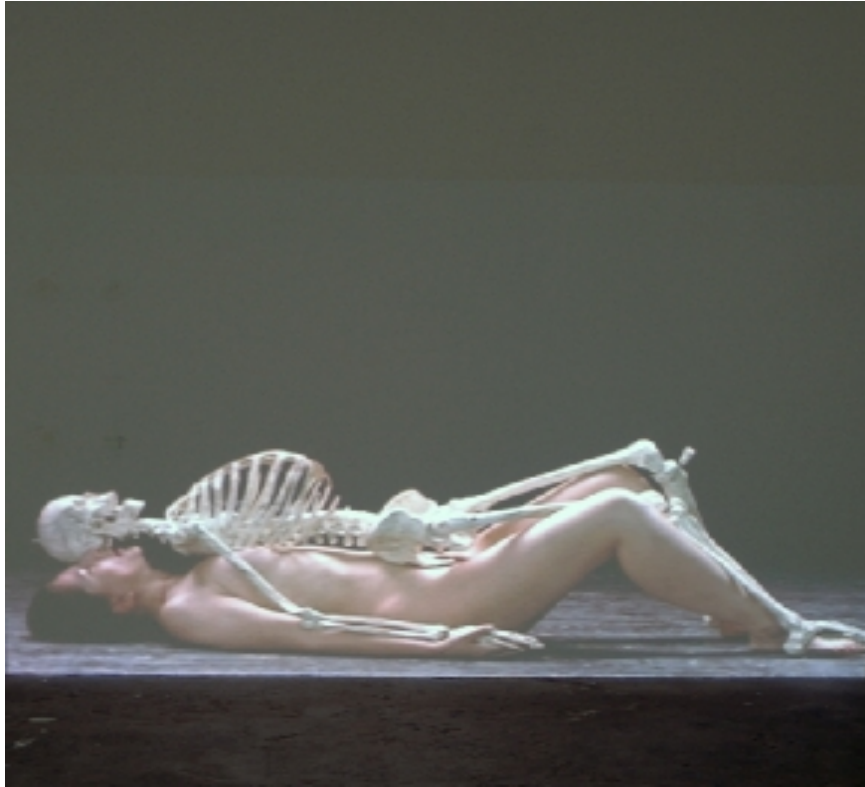
**Figure 5.11** : Baysa, Koan Jeff. (curated) *OXYGEN*, White Box, New York, 2002. Source: [http://www.whiteboxny.org/prog\\_list/prog\\_list20.html](http://www.whiteboxny.org/prog_list/prog_list20.html). Website [Date Of Access 10/1/2012]

The conceptual framework of the intermedial curatorial collaborative project *Oxygen* is the ways in which eleven artists relate to breathing, after the terroristic attacks of September Eleven. The medical doctor Koan Jeff Baysa experiments with a combinatory structure of syntactical elements that come from the field of science, sociology and art but are combined into one and are thereby transformed into a new entity in the form of an environmental project that addressed among other things the heightened awareness of matters pertaining to life and death after the “Terror.”<sup>356</sup> Each of these works 'hinges on the nature of breathing as an ever - present, memento, mori.'<sup>357</sup> The project included Gordon Matta-Clark’s breathing station made out of oxygen bottles with attached masks on a wheeled cart, also, Gordon Matta-Clark’s portable breathing station is a commentary on the endangered atmosphere of the urban environment and calls for audience participation. Marina Abramovic coexists with a skeleton in synchronous breathing, Abramovic’s video shows herself painfully breathing under the weight of a human skeleton.

356 Gene, Ray. 'Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11.' *Studies in European Culture and History*. New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2005.

357 See Honigman, Ana Finel. 'Oxygen'. *Time Out*, New York, 2002 and *White Box* New York.





**Figure 5.12:** Abramovic, Marina. *Nude with Skeleton*, 2002-2005, Courtesy Kappatos Gallery, Athens.

The exhibition *Oxygen* was described as a selected visual inventory of (dys)function and topology of the breath, (that crucial element that comprises 21% of our atmosphere extracted by the lungs to sustain aerobic life). As Anne Filen Honigman wrote:

a paired active inspiration and passive expiration, initiated at birth and terminated at death. This threatened resource and disorders of breathing have become emblematic of the endangered atmosphere and the tenuous balance between the environment and its human habitation. The aftermath of September 11 brought attention to the ecology of terrorism, its ravages on the earth, and a new medical diagnosis, “Ground Zero cough” which now afflicts some rescue and recovery team members. The etiology of this condition has been attributed to the inhalation of vaporized glass, benzene, asbestos, mercury, and other materials from the site of the lower Manhattan tragedy; the ultimate sequelae resulting from exposure to these toxins remain unknown. The exhibition’s original title, *Ondine’s Curse*, a caveat against taking things for granted, referred to the spell that required conscious thought about each breath. Death would result from falling asleep. The metaphors and images presented in *Oxygen* are valuations of life framed within the acknowledgment of loss, disease and mortality.<sup>358</sup>

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358 *ibid*



**Figure 13:** Muñoz, Oscar. *Breath (Aliento)*. 1996-2002. Source: [http://www.iniva.org/events/2008/mirror\\_image\\_in\\_conversation](http://www.iniva.org/events/2008/mirror_image_in_conversation). Website [Date of Access].

Oscar Muñoz's *Breath (Aliento)* represents the politically disappeared in South and Central America, the victims' images appear for the duration of viewer's exhalation. The surfaces seem like daguerreotypes, since, the images become clear only when viewers breathe on them. Young Colombian men proclaimed "disappeared" by their government appear on the surface. As Amanda Graham noted, 'the condensation fades on the mirror-like metal, so do the images. Here the aesthetic disappearance parallels the corporeal-political one. For a moment, viewers recognize the "Other" in their own reflections and in so doing begin to comprehend how Muñoz's piece forces the repetition of the moment of encounter and in the process uncovers hidden truths.'<sup>359</sup>

These artworks - inspired by respiration - are seen in relation to *Breath*, and to installation practices that engage the beholder in an embodied intermedial experience; that is ultimately

<sup>359</sup> Graham, Amanda Jane. 'Assisted Breathing: Developing Embodied Exposure in Oscar Muñoz's Aliento.' *Latin American Perspectives*, December 15, 2011. Source: <http://0-lap.sagepub.com.opac.sfsu.edu/content/early/2011/12/15/0094582X11431807.abstract?rss=1>. Website [Date of Access 10/1/2012]

ideological and political, since spectatorship in itself becomes a self-reflective act. Developments in technology and curatorial practices transform the audience into the key site of intermedia art. The embodied intermedial experience entails a politics of spectating in contrast to a modernist purified opticality. The spectator becomes a participant in these intermedia works that not only demand her/his active perceptual engagement, but often also generate explicit awareness of this activity. Thus, the spectators are not reduced to a state of unquestioning awareness or a wholly passive relation to the object. They are not detached, interaction, engagement, and response are required for the aesthetic experience of intermedial art. Certain of these artworks return us to the body of the spectator as a space that is both sentient and active, this process has ideological ramifications. The following chapter explores this process even further in relation to the biology of the body and its breathing apparatus.

### **SECTION III: (RE)PRESENTING BREATH**

#### **CHAPTER VI: ‘...The breath was not perceptible...’ Breathing in Different Media**

...The breath was not perceptible...<sup>360</sup>

Is air thinkable?<sup>361</sup>

Breathing is a foundational experience. As long as the child is in the womb of the mother the experience of a distinct outside and of an inside is no doubt mediated through a sonorous and primary tactility; the birth of the skin which submits to and provokes movements and the confused sensibility of the edges and limits of the body. Agitations cannot be temporalised in that internal space. Going out into the air suddenly projects the body into a new rhythm, that of breath.<sup>362</sup>

Within the art (as, one suspects, within the artist) form and formless are linked in constant combat.<sup>363</sup>

This chapter treats the notion of respiration as a conceptual guide to investigate points of intersection (connections, linkages, overlaps) between different artistic media (intermediality) and aims to put on view breath's intrusive actuality and immediacy into the field of representation, by means of an inquiry into the ways that these different aesthetic practices depict the human respiratory system, as the zone of evaporation that separates formlessness from form and life from inertness. The minimal and conceptual setting of breathing is displayed in these artworks as an exercise in enquiry, on embodied temporal experience; hence breath becomes a bioscope (view of life). That is to say, it becomes a medium of recording life as such, from our concrete perceptive

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360 Beckett, Samuel. *Murphy*. London: Calder, 1993: 5.

361 Irigaray, Luce. *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. London: Athlone Press, 1999: 12. Also quoted in Mazzio, Carla. 'The History of Air: Hamlet and the Trouble with Instruments', *South Central Review*, (Volume 26, Numbers 1 & 2, Winter & Spring): 2009: 153.

362 Mondzain, Marie-José. *Homo Spectator*. Paris: Bayard: 2007. In <http://dominiquevivant.blogspot.gr/2012/01/homo-spectator.html> . Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

363 See Lippard, Lucy. (ed.) *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. London: Studio Vista, 1973: 5.

experience and from the ontological “concreteness” of the body.

Artists view respiration as a source of inspiration and contemporary artists in particular are engaging with breath, and the corresponding aesthetic and biomedical concepts where respiration is investigated, are engendering innovative and challenging artworks that stimulate new relationships between art and science. This chapter examines this creative cross-fertilization that provokes intermedial art practice and the discourse between the perceptions of respiration, and the contemporary reality of biomedical practice. This dialogue is ultimately rewarding for both art and science and for how breath can be represented and expressed in a contemporary art context.

Science has recourse to technical apparatuses and to graphic devices to make visible to the eye phenomena that are beyond human vision. Breath as a measured volume of air that is manifested in the respiratory cycle is one of these biological phenomena. Breath’s formless and immaterial spectrum mediates between the inner and outer space of the material body. The respiratory system is interior and integral to the invisible components of the body and exterior to the body. In the realm of the arts the visualization of this corporeal process takes a parallel course. Artists have evolved techniques of concentration on aspects of the physical and have looked at the different manifestations of breathing and the ways in which it becomes perceptible, through the use of diverse artistic media.<sup>364</sup>

The invisible context of respiration provides artists with the potential of experimentation with the formal possibilities of the artwork. This chapter puts on view breath’s intrusive actuality and immediacy into the field of representation and treats the notion of respiration as a conceptual guide to investigate points of intersection of visual art and performance practices, by means of an inquiry into the ways that these different media depict the human respiratory system. In order to demonstrate the above claims, the chapter addresses issues of visual and aural representation, spectatorial engagement, theatricality, minimalism, corporeality, presence and immateriality by

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<sup>364</sup> Such as: theatre, painting, sculpture, dance, video art, film, photography, installations, sound art, performance art, land art, body art, kinetic art, conceptual art, environmental art, music and projective prose.

examining the creative processes undertaken by artists (from different art movements) in presenting their aesthetic ideas through the use of diverse artistic media, staged in the scene of respiration.

Beckett's work is juxtaposed with works by other artists, with pieces that in some sense echo Beckett's world and aesthetics and offer an alternative to a particular history of modernism, related to the idealization of forms. Representative of a diverse assortment of historical moments, and theoretical voices, these art practices continue to challenge the ideological effects of specific narratives of high modernism that focus on the separation and hierarchization of artistic media and map out an area beyond form and thematic content to interpret the visual arts. The selected artists explore and revise the condition of the modernist art object and its historical trajectory into contemporary art by shaking up the notion of a unified and "disembodied" visual field.

### **6.1 *Pneumatic Readymades: Duchamp, Beuys, Manzoni, Weseler***

Moreover, the selected artworks propose a contemplative act between the beholder and the art object as an extension of the physical senses, in contrast to a modernist focus on visual form and to a notion of the eye as a purely abstract organ, cut off from the bodily senses to which it is connected. By challenging the viewer's expectations of the experience of coherent, bounded, and unified form that can be organized as distinct media or in terms of a stylistic scheme, the artworks explore the act of the viewer on the art object.<sup>365</sup> This chapter acknowledges the conflict between different versions of modernism, in relation to the dialectics between form and formless, "form" has been identified as modernist and "formless" as a process beyond the postmodern divide.<sup>366</sup> As Caroline Jones argued, 'few oppositions have organized post-1960s art as completely as form versus formless<sup>367</sup> (or, more pretentiously, informe)'. Both terms are accompanied by discourses that

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365 This perspective on a wide range of artworks about respiration engages with alternative contributions to the question and provocative intervention in contemporary and modernist debates on the relationship between the visual arts and the theatre, both within the context of respiration and of Beckett. The majority of the artworks examined involve intermediality, whilst they belong to a transitional space between the plastic arts and the theatre. The endeavour to represent silence, absence and emptiness (notions not associated with representational art), the methodical act of formalization in the medium and the progressive aesthetic abstraction in Beckett's *Breath* are comparable to these artworks which highlight not the efficacy, but rather the limits of the medium, in the face of attempts to understand, represent or emulate the properties of breath.

366 Jones, Caroline A. 'Form and Formless,' *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, Jones, Amelia (ed.), Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006: 126.

367 According to Jones: 'If the revival of "formless" in the 1990s was accompanied by a method, it was deconstructive in nature, committed to process and naturalized in contemporary art discourse at least since the postmodern turn against art writer Clement Greenberg in the 1980s.' Ibid: 126.

continue to influence the contemporary art world. The brief hegemony of the method called “formalism” came in the 1950s and early 1960s, and according to Jones:

its reign is the crucial backdrop for contemporary antagonisms between form and formless...Form and informe have been particularly crucial discourses in Anglo-American art worlds, but the antinomy has its sources in Continental philosophies as old as modernism itself. Formalism was a compelling but always embattled component of aesthetic theory in a disjunctively modernizing Europe, and theories attending to the “formless” were, in several interesting respects, less a rejection than an extension of formalism’s earliest motivations, yet theorists of the informe have not moved beyond form as much as they have returned to a lost future rescued from formalism’s complex past.<sup>368</sup>

The antinomy between form and formless has defined the ways art treated “appearance” and “conception.” A shift has occurred when emphasis was placed on the concept rather than the appearance (shape in Fried's terms). The critique of modernist aesthetics fed an increased emphasis on concept over visual production. The depiction of formless visual shapes (respiration) that become metaphors for conceptual forms is a very interesting challenge for the visual arts; the challenge of finding a form for formlessness, of showing a form that has no form.

Joseph Kosuth signaled the emergence of conceptualism as minimalism’s avant-garde successor. He also argued that, 'all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.<sup>369</sup> Art movements, that were more or less indebted to Duchamp<sup>370</sup> were considered as varieties of “Novelty” Art<sup>371</sup> (minimalism). Greenberg suggests that the “aesthetic surprise” a viewer experiences on looking at “true” works of art,<sup>372</sup> is long lasting and important, while the “novelty” item provokes no more than a momentary surprise that is “superfluous.” Greenberg attacked the tendency to produce art, without the guidance of aesthetic judgment.

According to this theory, the ready-mades in their three-dimensionality were a spatial coordinate that art has to share with “non-art.” Minimalist artist’s use of repeated standardized units,

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368 Ibid:126.

369 Kosuth, Joseph. 'Art After Philosophy, part 1.' *Studio International* (October), 1969.

370 Assemblage, Pop, Environment, Op, Kinetic, Erotic.

371 In his essay “Recentness of Sculpture” (1967), critic Clement Greenberg, champion of the Modernist art of the previous decades, dismisses Minimalism as a “Novelty” art.

372 For example paintings by Raphael or Jackson Pollock.

in the context of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades were elements of standardization and repetition. Conceptual artist and inventor of the "Readymade,"<sup>373</sup>

Jonathan Kalb makes a comparison between Samuel Beckett and Marcel Duchamp by arguing that Beckett's relationship to language has always been quasi-Duchampian, as he wrote, 'if one accepts the idea that Duchamp's greatness lies not so much in the fact that he stopped painting as in his managing to have that act recognized as significant. You have to be quite a writer before your refusal to write can be received as a statement in itself.'<sup>374</sup> Marcel Duchamp, has once said that '...I just like - just breathing. I like breathing better than working...'<sup>375</sup> However, his approach to respiration was further developed with the artwork *Belle Haleine: Eau de Voilette or Beautiful Breath*, a readymade that was altered in several ways by Duchamp and his close friend and fellow artist Man Ray.

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373 Marcel Duchamp's concept of the "readymade" was established in 1917 by titling the famous "Urinal *Fountain*, 1917" ( was remade in 1964).

374 Kalb, Jonathan. *Beckett in Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 160.

Barter also noted that Marcel Duchamp wrote 'Reduce, reduce, reduce!' wrote proclaiming a new credo for artistic composition. Beckett has taken the manifesto as its word, for in his short prose pieces to construct means quite literally to reduce. Definitely incomplete, Beckett's formal condensation undermines the elusive and sometimes suspicious relations between his minimalist prose and all other things: Objects give us everything. Duchamp continued but their representation no longer gives us anything. Disengaged from representational imagery and therefore not emblematic, Beckett's work makes us discover in residual prose the literary potential of compressed and frequently abstract patterns, their human overtones, their flash colours, and, above all, their pervasive texture of mucous membrane. In Brater, Enoch. 'Why Beckett's "Enough" Is More or Less Enough,' *Contemporary Literature*, 21.2 (Spring, 1980): 266

375 See Cabanne, Pierre. *Dialogues With Marcel Duchamp*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1971.





**Figure 6.1:** Duchamp, Marcel. *Belle Haleine: Eau de Voilette or Beautiful Breath: Veil Water*. New York, 1921. Private Collection, Paris. Source: [http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=5157362](http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5157362) .Website [ Date of Access 20/11/2012]

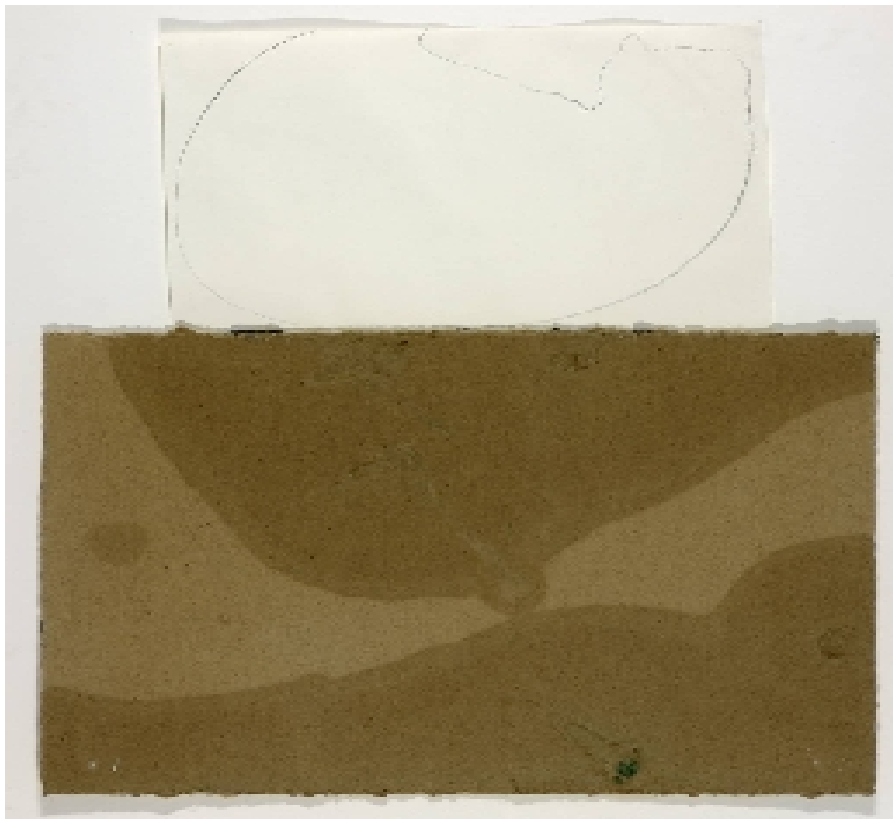
Duchamp removed the original label Rigaud brand perfume bottle and replaced it with a new one created by him and Man Ray. *Belle Haleine*<sup>376</sup> stands as one of the significant readymades in Duchamp's oeuvre. Man Ray took the photograph of Duchamp dressed as his female alter ego *Rose Selavy*,<sup>377</sup> which stands at the top of the new label. This was the first visual appearance of *Rose Selavy*. Duchamp's constant questioning of the nature of the work of art and his emphasis on the work of art's "completion" by the spectator highlights conceptual art's openness.

The dialogue of conceptual art with respiration and the ready-made has continued with artist Joseph Beuys, who belongs in a long tradition of artists who have responded to Marcel Duchamp's legacy, Beuys was inspired by the Duchampian ready-made, however, he focused less on the

376 Perfume bottle with collage label inside oval violet cardboard box, assisted ready-made, bottle: 15.2 cm tall, box: 16.3 x 11.2 cm.

377 See Cooke, Lynne. 'Reviewing Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Rose Sélavy, Marchand Du Sel.' *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art*. Sydney: Eighth Biennale of Sydney, 1990 and Daniels, Dieter. 'Marcel Duchamp: The Most Influential Artist of the Twentieth Century.' *Marcel Duchamp*. Basel: Museum Jean Tinguely and Hatje Cantz, 2002.

aesthetic (like Duchamp) and more on the social ramifications of the readymade.



**Figure 6.2:** Beuys, Joseph. *Der Atem (Breath)*. 1966. Fat, copper oxide and pencil on paper, Courtesy National Galleries of Scotland and Tate.

Organic curves prevail, in Beuys' work *Der Atem (Breath)*, the artist uses liquid fat to create shapes which have been echoed in the curved lines of the pencil drawing. The materials Beuys uses are always selected for their particular significance to the artist. As Christa- Maria Lerm Hayes remarks, Gene Ray's interpretation about fat and felt in Beuys' work 'is related to the Nazis' extermination camps and how, after liberation, sacks of human hair and piles of other materials revealed the gruesome business with human remains that the Nazis had sustained there.'<sup>378</sup> According to Lerm Hayes, 'Beuys' approach to Ireland and the holocaust is indicative of the possibilities for art to deal with social trauma and situations where difference is not generating harmonious and prosperous relations. Beuys shared an expanded conception of art as a form of

<sup>378</sup> Lerm Hayes, Maria-Christa. 'Unity in Diversity Through Art? Joseph Beuys' Models of Cultural Dialogue.' *KTHC - Knowledge, Technology, Human Capital, Eurodiv Paper*, 2006: 3. In <http://www.feem.it/userfiles/attach/Publication/NDL2006/NDL2006-060.pdf>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

‘social sculpture,’ that could contribute to political and ideological change. His “Energy Plan”<sup>379</sup> was conceived as a vehicle of social change, Beuys’s weltanschauung (world view) was conceived in terms of energies and alchemical polarities - cold and warm, soft and hard, life and death, past and present, east and west, north and south - and the ways in which energies are transferred through natural materials, plants and animals. Fat represents fuel and nurturing, but is also associated with producing warmth and energy, copper, as a conductor of electricity and heat, can transmit this energy. Beuys' art practice is conceived in terms of healing energies and respiration and its rhythm is one of the energies that have healing properties.<sup>380</sup>



**Figure 6.3:** Günter Weseler’s *Atem Objekt (Breathing Object)*, mixed media, 1972.

Joseph Beuys’s multi-disciplinary interests in medicine, science, art, myth and history and the ways he explored the qualities of natural materials were an influence to the artist Günter Weseler,<sup>381</sup> who created a work with Beuysian overtones in its unusual conjunction of materials: bread, fur, wood and an electrical motor.

379 See [http://sydney.edu.au/museums/pdfs/Art\\_Gallery/666%20Beuys\\_catalogue\\_finalextra.pdf](http://sydney.edu.au/museums/pdfs/Art_Gallery/666%20Beuys_catalogue_finalextra.pdf). Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

380 See Beuys's lecture tour to the United States in 1974, entitled *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, organised by Ronald Feldman Gallery and the ways his work was influenced by Rudolf Steiner's writings and theories.

381 In the 1960th and 1970 Günter Weseler was - besides Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polke - international best known as one of the best German artists.



**Figure 6.4:** Günter Weseler's *Atem Objekt (Breathing Object)*, mixed media, 1972.



**Figure 6.5:** Manzoni, Piero. *Artist's Breath*. 1959. <http://www.thewhitereview.org/art/gabriel-orozco-cosmic-matter-and-other-leftovers/piero-manzoni-artists-breath-1960/>.Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

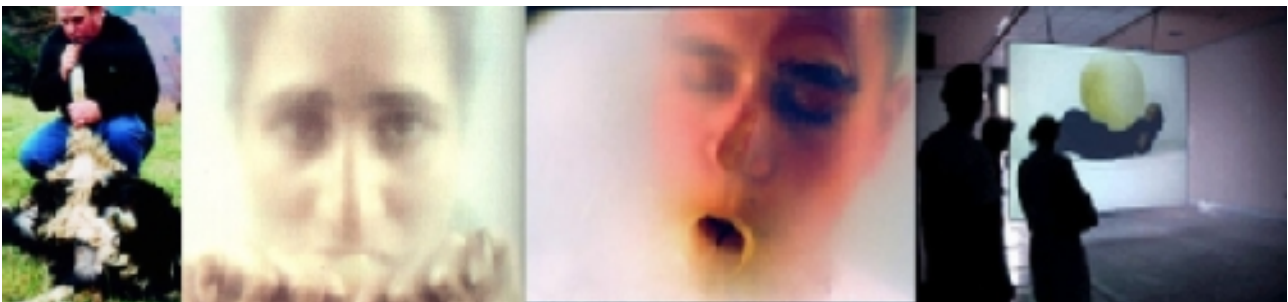
Piero Manzoni's pneumatic sculptures testify the influence of Duchampian readymades, as well as Duchamp's use of physical substances or residues, parallel to conceptual art's fascination with the visualisation of energy. Manzoni offers his own body as an artwork, and the vestiges of the transfigured body become valuable relics. His practice parodies the traditional sculptural emphasis on permanence by using modern materials to suggest a modern aesthetic whilst creating a poetic metaphor for the ephemerality of life itself. Manzoni used his bodily resources as a “material” within certain of his works. His *Artist's Breath* works of 1960, involved the artist blowing up balloons, in an allusion to the classical notion of the “divine pneuma” whereby the artist “breathes life” into the work of art. The brief lives of Manzoni's balloons were subsequently memorialized with their wrinkled remains being affixed to plaques. There is a direct Duchampian allusion here, namely to his ampoule of *Paris Air* of 1919, but it is clear that Manzoni has expanded the idea to encompass the “life” of the art work, which is keyed to his physical expenditure.



**Figure 6.6** : Manzoni, Piero. *Artist's Breath*. 1959. <http://www.thewhitereview.org/art/gabriel-oro-zco-cosmic-matter-and-other-leftovers/piero-manzoni-artists-breath-1960/Website> [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Manzoni fabricated forty-five *Corpi d'Aria*, “Pneumatic Sculptures,” of up to thirty-two inches in diameter which, when filled by the artist himself, were labeled *Artist's Breath* (*Fiato d'Artista* 1959). *Artist's Breath* was Manzoni's first use of a body substance-product, presented without alteration, certified as authentic, and traded by the volume. A series of red, white or blue balloons (medium-sized balloon, that contained seventy-five imperial gallons of air), inflated and attached to a wooden base inscribed *Piero Manzoni - Artist's Breath*, that the artist would sell, if the purchaser wished.<sup>382</sup>

## 6.2 Navridis' *Difficult Breaths*



**Figure 6.7:** Navridis, Nikos. *Difficult Breaths*. La Caixa Foundation's Madrid Exhibition Hall. 2004. [http://www.fundacio1.lacaixa.es/webflc/wac0acti.nsf/WURL/ACT20040014\\_cat%5EOpenDocument/](http://www.fundacio1.lacaixa.es/webflc/wac0acti.nsf/WURL/ACT20040014_cat%5EOpenDocument/). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Navridis' *Difficult Breaths* (2004),<sup>383</sup> also belong to the series of pneumatic sculptures that this chapter examines, Navridis, employs elements that are lightweight such as latex, or ethereal like breath, in order to articulate the main theme of his work, namely, air. These “Breathing Sculptures” focus on visualising the processes of human breathing as a basic ability of all living beings.

The selected artworks, like Beckett's *Breath*, appeal to the temporal sense of the viewer by

382 Manzoni prepared a series of 45 *Bodies of Air* (pneumatic sculptures) of maximum diameter 80cm (height including base 120cm). If the purchasers wished, they could, in addition to the membrane and the base (closed in the small pencil box provided), buy Manzoni's breath too, in order to conserve it in the membrane. At the same period he planned a group of spherical bodies of air of approximate diameter 2.50 meters to go in a park. By means of an air compressor these were to pulsate with a slow unsynchronized rhythm of breathing (experimental example with a membrane of small dimensions, 1959). On the same principle he constructed an architectural proposal of a pneumatically pulsating ceiling and wall. As he remarked, in 1959, 'as another scheme for a park I had thought of a cluster of pneumatic cylinders, elongated in shape, like steel, which would vibrate in the blowing of the wind. (As part of the same project there would have been other very high steel, which would have produced sounds in the wind).' Manzoni, Piero. *Paintings, Reliefs and Objects*. The Tate Gallery, March 20 - May 15, 1974. In 1961, Manzoni composed two Aphonies, the *Aphonia Herning for orchestra and public*, and the *Aphonia Milan for Heart and Breath* (1962).

383 The exhibition was curated by Rosa Martínez, organized and produced by *la Caixa Foundation*, in *la Caixa Foundation's* Exhibition Hall in Madrid, from January 30th to March 14th, 2004.

producing intermedia artworks that experiment with the use of temporality, representational subtraction, visualization of the process of respiration. Practitioners, writers and theorists arrive at the notion of respiration from different ends, both the formal and thematic spectrum. Common to both, however, is the artwork's temporal extensiveness. Respiration, as a temporal and repetitive process, gives way to the incalculable cycles of duration. As Levinas remarked, 'our time is already the breath of the human being in respect of another human being. Our time is the breath of the spirit.'<sup>384</sup>

### 6.3 Gary Hill *Circular Breathing*



**Figure 6.8:** Hill, Gary. *Circular Breathing*. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1994. Source: <http://www.sfweekly.com/photoGallery/index/318905/2/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]<sup>385</sup>

Artists have attempted to represent the circular temporality of respiration with the persistent aspiration to visualize the phenomenon of breathing. Gary Hill's video installation *Circular Breathing* (1994) functions as a personal breath recorder; by breathing and blowing into the mouthpiece, the viewer can record a breath pattern.

*Circular Breathing* consists of five projected large-scale side-by-side moving images of

<sup>384</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, in conversation with Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, translated by Joseph Simas and Carolyn Ducker, Oxford: MOMA, 1993: 93.

<sup>385</sup> A large-scale black and white, five channel projection video installation measuring 10 feet high by 35 feet in length.

elderly hands playing the piano, the camera-eye view of someone walking up stairs, a man chopping wood, a freighter on the ocean with the on-screen stereo sound of circular breathing. As the five screens become activated, they are slowed to an almost photographic state of suspension. The cycle continues in the opposite direction, ending with all screens again blank. Jacques Derrida has paid tribute to Gary Hill's original works in his discussion about the use of language in the medium of video.

Derrida considers that, Hill is one of the few (and maybe the only) "video artists" who is working with many different discourses, in an attempt to depart from the rather conventional ways in which video artworks are usually presented. According to Derrida, Hill is working with a "new" visual art form that appears to be one of the most discursive, as he wrote, 'and not only with discourses but also with textual forms that are heterogeneous among themselves, whether literary or not that seem to be altogether at odds with such a working, with what one thought video art had to be, especially if, as seems to be the case, they are anything but the simple pretext assumed by the videogram. And yet, if this "new art" arises, it is because within the vague terrain of the implicit, something is already enveloped - and developing.'<sup>386</sup>

The representation of time in art is often brought to a condition that breaks down into "abstract-objects," and the respiratory system, as an abstract mechanism, develops into an "abstract-object" of meditation on the nature of time, the brevity of existence and the human condition. The human subject is a sum of breaths, representing past and future time. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, as Beckett wrote, in his study of Proust, 'decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours.'<sup>387</sup>

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386 Derrida suggests that we should take into account what "happens to language" (partitioned or distributed, cut strung or tucked together, delinearized, palindromanagrammatized in more than one language and passing like a serpent across seven monitors at the same time) with regard to the "video event." As he wrote: ...anything but a mutism, a certain being silent of this writing –new but very impure and all the newer for that –which stages discourses or texts that are thought to be of the most 'interior' sort. It is just by chance that Gary Hill solicits, among others, gnostic texts or the writings of Blanchot? One never sees a new art, one thinks one sees it; but a "new art," as people say a little loosely, may be recognized by the fact that it is not recognized, one would say that it cannot be seen because one lacks not only a ready discourse, with which to talk about it, but, also that implicit discourse which organizes the experience of this art itself and is working even on our optical apparatus, our most elementary vision. Derrida, Jacques. 'Videor.' *Passage de l' Images*, Paris: Musee National d' Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990.

387 Beckett, Samuel. *Proust*. New York: Grove Press, 1957: 4-5.



#### 6.4 Kanarinka *It takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston*



**Figure 6.9:** *Kanarinka AT ikatun DOT. It takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston.* 2007.  
Source:[http://www.ikatun.com/ Website](http://www.ikatun.com/Website) [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figure 6.10 :** *Kanarinka AT ikatun DOT. It takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston.* 2007.  
Source:[http://www.ikatun.com/ Website](http://www.ikatun.com/Website) [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

In the context (of temporal displays and intermediality), the multimedia artist Kanarinka conceived and created a project that consisted of a series of running performances in the public sphere (2007), a web podcast of breaths (2007) and a gallery installation of the archive of breaths (2008). Kanarinka runs through the “evacuation routes,” that were created in American cities, after September Eleven (11/9/2001), so that the civilians could escape the city in case of a terrorist attack. During her runs, she was wearing complex technological equipment that counted, recorded and augmented her breaths through speakers. The project is an attempt to measure our “post - 9/11 collective fear” in the individual breaths that it takes to traverse these new geographies of insecurity.<sup>388</sup>



**Figure 6.11** : Kanarinka AT ikatun DOT. *It takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston*. 2007. Source:<http://www.ikatun.com/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

At present, interdisciplinary interest in the social, cultural and scientific ramifications of breathing is monitored often as an alternative to received artistic practice. The revival of interest in respiration, in the new millennium, is suggestive and is partly the interest in the re-emergence of the

388 The artist asked, ‘how do you measure fear in a society obsessed with security and preparedness?’ According to the artist, ‘it is essential to attempt to measure our collective fear – the tiny ways that we are being changed by the ritualized introduction of emergency, disaster and terrorism into the everyday landscape. Here I measure fear with my body and my breath.’ The threat of disaster has been caused by the measures implemented in Boston since the terrorist attack. Subsequently, she broadcasted her breaths, through the internet and installed them in a gallery exhibition. As she reported ‘the \$827,500 Boston emergency evacuation system was installed in 2006 to demonstrate the city’s preparedness for evacuating people in snowstorms, hurricanes, infrastructure failures, fires and/or terrorist attacks. “Experimental geography” is an invented term by geographer Trevor Paglen (2002). The term denotes an amalgam of science and art in a manner that deploys aesthetics, ambiguity, poetry and empiricism. This alternative practice explores the distinctions between geographical study and artistic experience of the earth, as well as the juncture where the two realms collide, and possibly make a new field altogether. This new practice employs a wide range of mediums including sound and video installations, photography, sculpture, and experimental cartography. The project *It takes 154,000 breaths to evacuate Boston*, by the artist Kanarinka, involves the study of experimental geography. site

rhetoric of the body, upon the field of theory. Scientific discoveries and theories about corporeality in the 20th century have problematised the notion of representation and have invited a reconsideration of the body both in “real” and aesthetic forms.

Respiration seen as a medium is commonly understood as the physical basis of the organism and of the body's manifold sensory apparatus. However, a fundamental reading of the term emphasizes its formative value as a communicative agent between the individual, the outside world and time. The act of mediation is a process; in this sense the medium of breath always internalizes a singular engagement with time. Any medium has the effect of reshaping the way in which we, collectively and individually, perceive and understand our environment. In the context of this study, the interest lies in the special significance that mediation acquires by means of an artistic system. According to Stanley Cavell, medium is not a given, it is not an a priori; Cavell focused on the communicative and therefore temporal contingency of the word medium, as he wrote, ‘I characterized the task of the modern artist as one of creating not a new instance of his art but a new medium in it.’<sup>389</sup>

In our highly mediated world, technology becomes an important model for this process. Contemporary artists and writers explore the implications of the techno-human interface by investigating embodied technology and the technologized body. The impact of new technology has rearranged the established hierarchy of the senses. Moreover, the modernist segmentation of the senses is now giving way to dramatic multi-sensory mixes or transpositions. The auditory, the olfactory and the tactile are similar to the visual; crucial sites of embodied knowledge. Presently, we notice the ever-closer relationship between the sensuous and the technological. The resulting set of experiences can be called a sensorium, namely, the subject's way of coordinating all of the body's perpetual and proprioceptive signals, as well as the changing sensory envelope of the self. The sensorial intersects with the intermedial in the ways they construct sentient and experiential aspects of artistic creation and audience reception. (See Kanarinka and Lygia Clark)

<sup>389</sup> Cavell, Stanley. ‘Knowing and Acknowledging.’ *Must We Mean That We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976: 238.

## 6.5 Lygia Clark's *Respire Comigo (Breathe with Me)*



**Figure 6.12:** Clark, Lygia. *Respire Comigo (Breathe with Me)*. Source: <http://www.lygiac Clark.org.br/defaultpt.asp>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

*Respire Comigo (Breathe with Me)* is an interactive sensorial creation, where the two ends of a rubber tube (of the kind used for sub-aqua fishing) are placed together by the artist to form a circle, that she stretches and contracts rhythmically beside the viewer's ear. The Brazilian artists Lygia Clark (1920-1988) and Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980) centred their work on the body and on the experiential aspects of viewer's participation, by exploring haptic space through tactile, auditory, olfactory and kinetic propositions. Their emphasis on meaning encompasses both a sensory experience and an aesthetic potential. Clark's artworks are not limited to the aesthetic field, but rather attempt to integrate art and life, by displacing art's boundaries and by going against institutionalized art. In a similar perspective, Clark presented at the MAM-RJ, *A Casa é o Corpo (The House is the Body)*, 1968), an eight-meter installation, which allowed the passage of people through it so as to experience sensations of penetration, ovulation, germination and expulsion.

A subsequent and new stage of her work was based on bodily sensory experience, with therapeutical objectives. Clark dealt with the viewer's "memory files," fears and weaknesses. Her methods were articulated with the *Objetos Sensoriais*, (*Sensorial Objects*, 1966-68), that were simple everyday objects (water, shells, rubber, seeds) and the *Objetos Relacionais* (*Relational*

*Objects*), that were based on the “dual nature/duality” of the objects (light/heavy, soft/hard, full/empty). Clark's artistic attitude incorporates intermedia principles.

Intermedia and sensorial artistic practice addresses the influence of technology on the senses and is often involved in a mediated form of communication (where the viewer is imposed by the work of art), produced or transmitted not through a direct sensory contact, but by means of an electronic system for the processing of information. The effect of media on our senses (namely the sensorium) is a creation of the physical, biological, social and cultural environments of the individual organism and its relationships, while being in the world. Multiple sensory structures, as well as other modes of perception, the sum of their relations and the ratio of mixture and importance comprise a sensorium.

Philosophies of sensory embodiment and neuroscientists have revealed that the human sensorium has always been mediated and that our sensing bodies are themselves mediating apparatuses without which there can be no knowledge of the world. Knowledge originates in experience and is mediated through the senses and scientists have argued that breathing is part of the body's sensorial spheres. Without the “medium” of air or water, the anthropoid ear finds it impossible to hear. However, over the past few decades that condition has greatly intensified and artists have focused on the mediated sensorium, as Caroline Jones wrote:

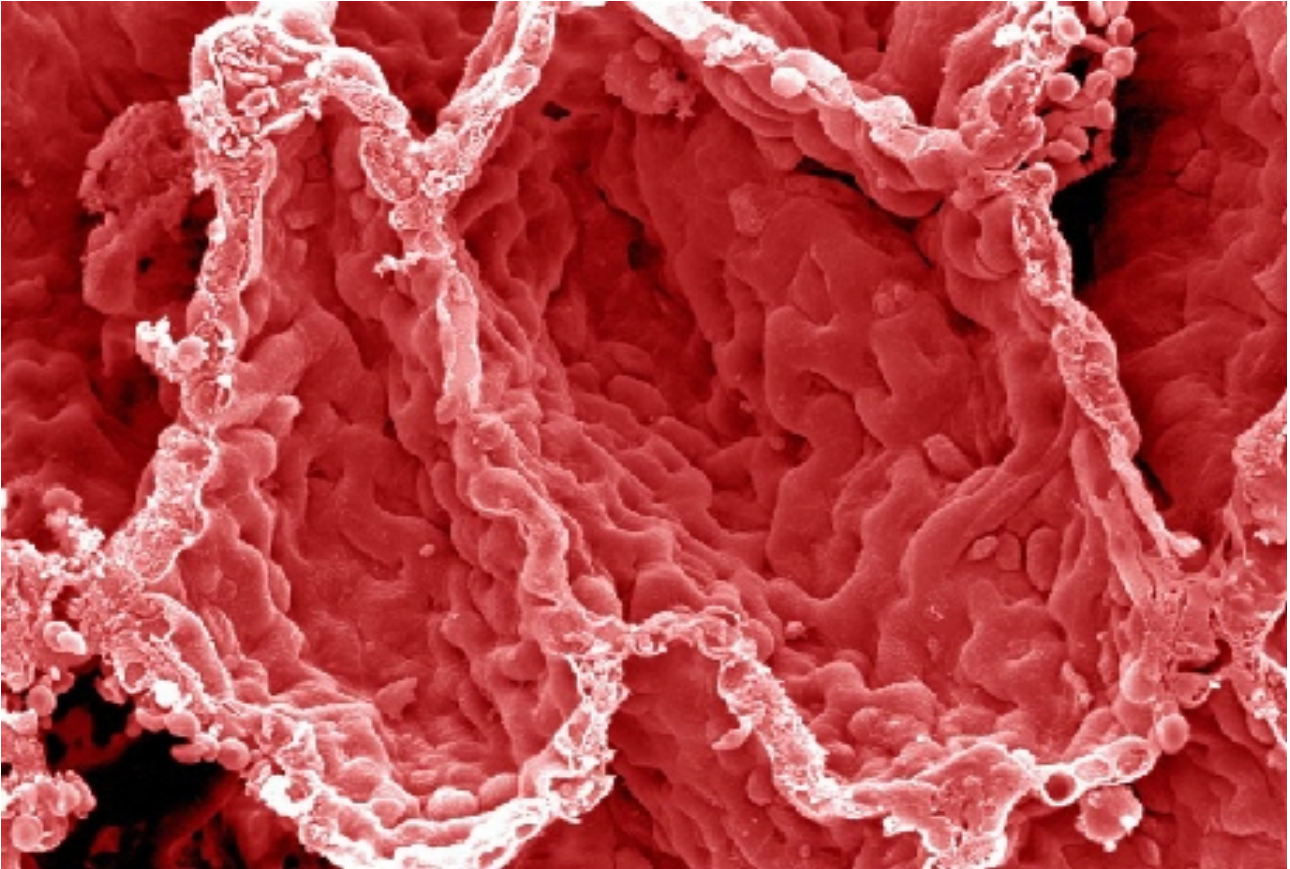
Amplified, shielded, channeled, prosthetized, simulated, stimulated, irritated - our sensorium is more mediated today than ever before. Yet it bothers us less. The cyborg model of the 1980s and the virtual dreams of the 1990s have evolved into a twenty-first-century comfort zone: in which the prosthetic and supplemental are habitual. The microspeaker in the ear, the drug in the blood, the nanosurgical implant, the simulated taste in the mouth- these enhancements no longer provoke the apocalyptic excitement they did even a few years ago. The relative calm this situation provides gives us time for reflection: a propitious moment for artists and other culture workers to interpret, think and reckon with the sense of our mediated sensorium.<sup>390</sup>

Empirical science has developed theories on the subject of respiration and scholars like

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<sup>390</sup> Jones, Caroline, Bill, Arning (eds). *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, The MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2006: 5.

Volkmar Glaser (1980), Udo Derbowsky (1987) Horst Coblenzer (1976) have treated the respiratory system as an autonomous discipline and have published original works of its practices for dealing both with the nervous and visceral systems of the body.



**Figure 6.13:** Gregory, David & Marshall, Debbie. *Photography of Alveoli in the Lung*. Wellcome Trust Images. Source: <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Website> [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Neuroarthistorians like Heinrich Wölfflin have argued about the involvement of the respiratory system in the interaction of our visual and motor systems. Wölfflin suggested that lines relate to the tempo of respiration and that the idea that our reaction to lines is determined by our eye movement carries little weight. In his view, the observation that the varying height of the waves in a line suggests variations of speed of respiration can be widely applied not just to individual people, but to whole cultures, in relation to the significance of tempos of breathing for the expression of moods. This point is significant for historical characterization. He discusses about architecture as a paradigm for human behaviour. One can observe that the older a person is, the faster it begins to

breathe in its architecture, the more excited it becomes. As he argued:

How quiet and restfully run the lines of an early Doric temple... Then in the Ionic there is a quicker mobility ... and as ancient culture comes to its end, the more it pursues a febrile, hasty movement. Peoples that from the very beginning are quick of blood go the furthest. One thinks of the suffocating pace of the lines in Arabic decorations. Unfortunately, I must here content myself with hints, a historical psychology, much more a psychological history, would have to be able to follow the growing speed of lines in all exactitude and would certainly find that the development comes always first in decoration.<sup>391</sup>

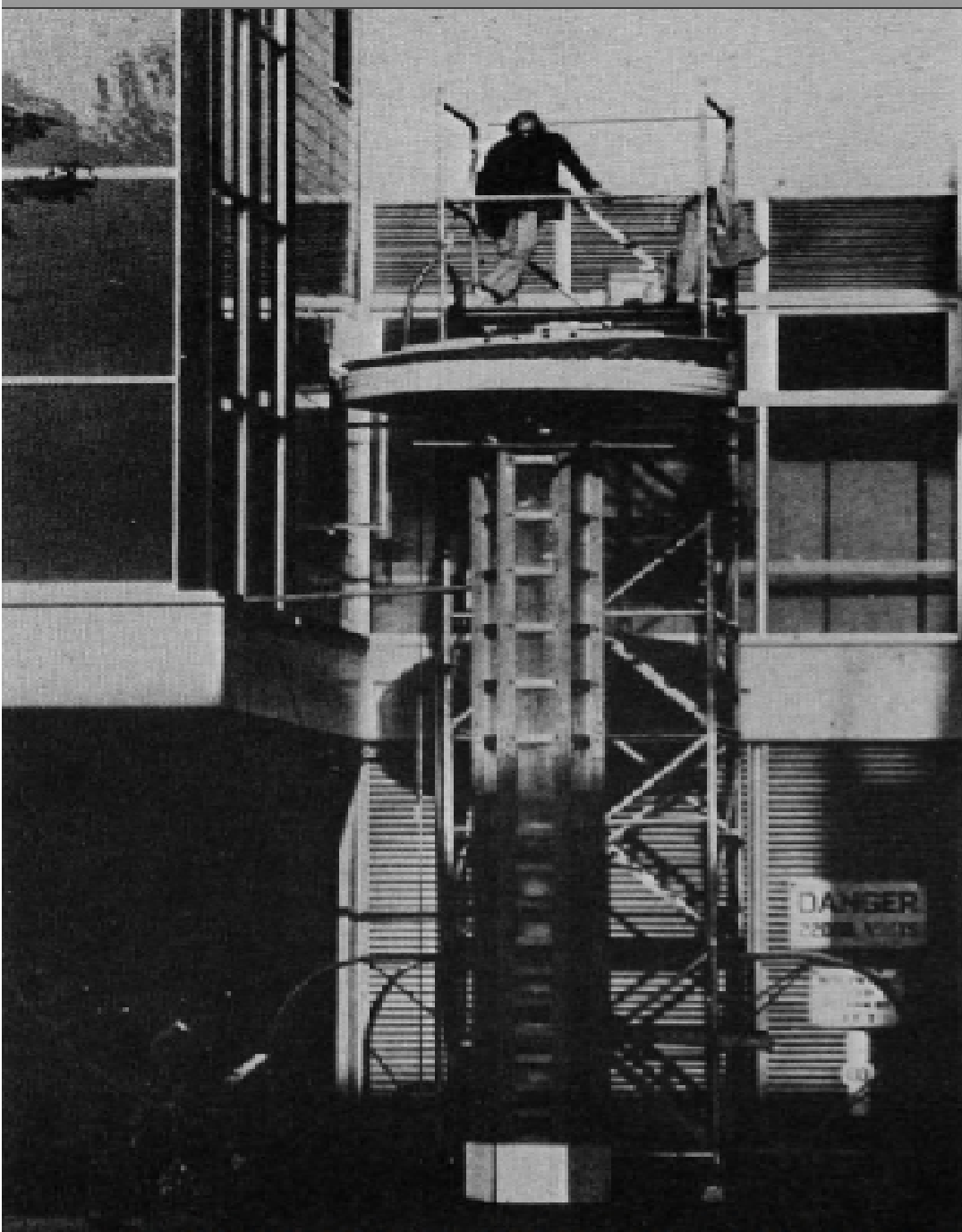
Scientific research has, principally, focused on the nature of the respiratory system, from the standpoint of anatomical studies, kinaesthetic consciousness, somatic learning, voice study, practical exercises, bodywork, physical and spiritual awareness, medical prognosis and physiological psychology, control of posture and movement. However, the influence of respiration in the work of artists and theorists and its manifestations in art and culture has not been extensively theorized.

The integration of a philosophical perspective into artistic inquiry allows us both to imagine and to construct a connection between a scientific and an aesthetic paradigm. Inquiry into the complexities of respiration, as an area of intense cross-disciplinary focus, can offer an insight into a possible new reading of breathing, one that intertwines the aesthetic with the biologic. Biological metaphors are often manifested in discourses of the relations of human nature to art and various biologically based theories of aesthetics see biological phenomena and aesthetic practices in a shifting and reciprocal relationship to each other. According to Guy Brett, there is an ongoing parallel between the “visualization of energy” in the scientific and in the artistic domains.

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391 Wölfflin, Heinrich, in Onians, John. *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007: 117.

6. 6 John Latham *The Big Breather Project*



**Figure 6.14:** Latham, John. *The Big Breather Project*. 1973. <http://www.flattimeho.org.uk/> Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

The conceptual artist John Latham (1921-2006) invented a machine called *The Big Breather Project* (1973), so as to extract energy from the sea (the thirty two feet high “lung” was to be filled



and emptied by the six-hour cycle of tide levels in river-estuaries). The *Big Breather*<sup>392</sup> would be erected in estuary waters, where it would use six-hour cycles of tidal levels to make energy available for a number of purposes, such as fog lamps, sound-warnings etc. Latham considers that, the verbal language is inadequate to describe the dimensionality of the universe, given that it is constituted by the common-sense view of the relation of objects in space. As a conceptual artist, he experimented with the intersection of art and science. The source and inspiration for his artworks are his visionary theories and the notion of “flat-time,” based on the theoretical physics of “Event Structure.”

According to this theory, everything that exists can be explained, not as atomic particles and waves, but as recurring time-based “events” of finite duration. A “least event” - the shortest departure from a state of nothingness - is, in the theory, the fundamental unit of existence. The recurrence of such events establishes a “habit” that forms the basis for structures in reality. Recurring events of longer duration result in more complex phenomena such as objects, mental images and, ultimately, the cosmos.

Latham's machine certifies that the experience of the “forces of nature” is in so many instances today a graphic one, mediated through seismographs, remote sensors, bubble-chamber photographs, encephalograms and so forth. Artists have in the past sometimes responded, as Brett suggested:

by offering up their canvas as a straightforward blank surface to receive the imprint of natural energies, such as Yves Klein *Cosmogonies*, one of which was an attempt to capture wind patterns by strapping a still wet canvas to the roof of his car on a journey from Paris to Nice (a somewhat quixotic gesture), or his fire paintings. The relationship between a literal trace and a sign – a configuration with pre-thought and more complex meanings—therefore becomes multivalent and ambivalent, with traces acting as signs and signs acting as traces. In the transcription of energies drawing often approaches script, or writing.<sup>393</sup>

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392 Latham was working in a variety of media, including painting, assemblage, performance, book art, conceptual art. The sculptural piece installed in the stairwell, filling that space from the ground floor to the top floor was the seminal idea of the *Breather Projects*, which he developed.

393 Brett, Guy. *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*. Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Actar, 2000: 40.

The relationship between a literal trace and a sign can operate as an analogy to the abstract and the representational in art; these two compositional systems activate other areas of the visual brain. Abstract compositions activate a less extensive part than representational or figurative compositions, namely, abstract works activate more restricted parts of the visual brain than narrative or representational art.<sup>394</sup>

The artistic preoccupation with the visualization of the process of breathing can be associated with techniques of “abstraction,” that can capture this visually restricted organic function. Breath as an immaterial and invisible medium exceeds the sphere of representation and textual signification, thus reinforces the role of the concept within the art object to the point of projecting “dematerialization,” in the sense of a de-emphasis on material aspects.<sup>395</sup>

Art practices often differentiate the “visible” (elements of representation, in the classic sense of the word) from the “invisible” (elements of abstraction). While encompassing multilayered strategies to understand or cross the threshold between the chiasmus of the visible and invisible the works about respiration draw attention to temporality and to the state between presence and absence by revealing what is beneath the surface, in addition to rendering the invisible visible. In “The Visible and the Invisible” and the chapter on the “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,”<sup>396</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty traces a constitutive “invisibility” at the heart of the visible, something that cannot be seen, that is beyond “appearance.” Merleau-Ponty conceives of our bodies as a part of the tangible world but also as part of the world through which we perceive the tangible things that lay beyond our bodies.

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394 See Zeki, Semir. *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art, Vision and the Brain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 207.

395 In 1968 Lucy Lippard's influential essay, *The Dematerialization of Art*, announced the outset of conceptual art.

396 Maurice Merleau-Ponty's “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” the last and incomplete chapter from *The Visible and the Invisible* written before his death. Merleau-Ponty whose thoughts on perception eventually culminated in his concept of “Chiasm” or flesh, which is the crossing over between subjective experience and objective existence.

## 6. 7 Gabriel Orozco *Breath On Piano*



**Figure 6.15** : Orozco, Gabriel. *Breath on Piano*. Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery.1993. Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/gabrielorozco/room16.shtm> [Date of Access 20/11/2012] <sup>397</sup>

The interplay of the visible and the invisible and the ways breath can leave a trace has also preoccupied Gabriel Orozco's work, *Breath on Piano*, is a piece that records a trace of his breath in the brief seconds before it evaporates, a captured moment of the pattern of a hot breath created on a shiny piano. The ephemerality and fleeting nature of the physical world is marked in this formless structure, suggesting an unseen presence of a body that produces this breath. Merleau Ponty's conception of the body as a “chiasm”<sup>398</sup> or crossing-over juxtaposes subjective experience and objective existence. The artistic exploration of the idea of a body as a system rather than mere biological organism implies - as in Merleau Ponty's chiasmus - a questioning of the body as a subject. Ponty's chiasmus implies the interweaving of scientific and aesthetic aspects, as well as of the individual with the world. The chiasmus refers, also, to the phenomenological body, that seems to exist as a metaphor, a disembodied fragment or a trace. Breath is in essence beyond appearance;

<sup>397</sup> And New York; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City Chromogenic colour print image: 12½ x 18½in. (31.5 x 47½cm.) sheet: 16 x 20in. (40.6 x 50.8cm.) Executed in 1993, this work is number four from an edition of five.

<sup>398</sup> The term comes from the Greek letter X: Chi.

in close contact with and “inside” of the body, it is distanced by sight. Therefore, breath becomes crucial in working out the relationship between abstraction, visibility and corporeality in the realm of the arts. If, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty stated in the *Phenomenology of Perception*,<sup>399</sup> the “theory of the body is already a theory of perception,” then it goes to stand that audiovisual perception is located not just in the brain, in the purely cognitive realm of nerve endings, cortical regions, and neurotransmitters, but also in the body and its embedment in its surroundings.

It is important to indicate that cultural practices and materials emerge not solely in the visible world, but also in the artistic, social, temporal and theoretical relations that define the invisible. The artworks presented in this chapter are informed by the complex interplay between visibility and invisibility. Contemporary art has focused on a critique of the hegemony of vision and of the modernist segmentation of the senses, by exploring the auditory, the olfactory, and the tactile as similarly crucial sites of embodied knowledge. The correlation between the visible and the invisible has been problematised.

### 6.8 Giuseppe Penone *Breath Leaves*



**Figure 6.16:** Penone, Giuseppe. *Breath Leaves*. 1979-1991. Source: [http://blogontour.blogspot.com/2009\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://blogontour.blogspot.com/2009_08_01_archive.html). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

399 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. trans. by Colin Smith, New York: Humanities Press, 1962.

Giuseppe Penone's installation *To Breathe The Shadow (Respirare l' Ombra)*<sup>400</sup> leaves the trace of his absent body on a space lined by laurel leaves held by chicken wire, darkly lit, and ambient sound was muted by the leaves, which gave off a subtle perfume. Penone laid down on heaps of leaves, breathing into them and leaving, once more, the outline of his body. Penone has spoken of the influence of mythological explanations of the creation of man, by adding, a more mystical element to the subject of respiration. The focus of his art is the relation of man to nature, the ephemerality of breath and the passage of time. Penone considered that 'the clarity of the well-marked path as sterile. For him to find the path, to follow it, to examine it, and to clear away the tangled undergrowth: that is sculpture.'<sup>401</sup>

Therefore, the visible and the invisible aspects of the body, often mark a lack of correspondence, as Michel Foucault articulated in his essay "The Utopian Body,"<sup>402</sup> the body can be visible is in one sense, and yet as Foucault argued this same body, which is so visible, is also withdrawn, captured by a kind of invisibility from which I can never really detach it. Accordingly, the skull and the back of the skull can be experienced and felt with the finger, but cannot be seen. As he wrote:

But see it? Never. This back, which I can feel leaning, against the pressures of the matters, against the couch when I am lying down, and which I might catch but only by the ruse of the mirror. And what is this shoulder, whose movements and positions I know nothing with precision, but that I will never be able to see without dreadfully contorting myself? The body-phantom that only appears in the mirage of the mirror, and then only in fragmentary fashion- do I really need genies and fairies, and death and the soul, in order to be, at the same time both visible and invisible?<sup>403</sup>

Respiration and issues of spectatorial engagement are ultimately interrelated. Our breathing can be affected by being aware of someone else's breathing and scientists have argued about the

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400 The Installation at the Centre Pompidou in 1999, consisted of bronze, metal cages, and laurel leaves.

401 Source: <http://fauxberliner.blogspot.com/2010/01/hamburger-bahnhof-and-other-delicacies.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

402 'Le Corps Utopique' translated by Lucia Allais in consultation with Caroline A. Jones and Arnold Davidson from Foucault, Michel. *Utopies et Heterotopies*, a CD release of two 1966 radio broadcasts published in 2004 by the Institut National de l' Audiovisuel, Paris.

403 Ibid.

involvement of breathing in the interaction of our visual and motor systems. Mondrian was pleased when a viewer compared his painting with the rhythm of breathing. Looking at a picture this person had said simply, 'Je respire,' and Mondrian wrote, 'that's exactly what it should be in my view, namely, that one breathes, feels free through seeing the canvas.'<sup>404</sup>

### 6.9 Bill Viola *Fire, Water, Breath*



**Figure 6.17:** Viola, Bill. *Fire, Water, Breath*. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997. Source: <http://craig.purplestateofmind.com/?p=36>[Date of Access 20/11/2012]

The video artworks of the artist Bill Viola are intermedial since they mark a space of transition between the medium of painting and the medium of the video. The multiple layers of his artistic approach transform the medium of video, into painting. Viola's works can be characterized as a meditation on the themes of human existence. *The Messenger*, one part of the trilogy *Fire, Water, Breath*, is an image sequence projected onto a screen. The image sequence begins with a small, central, luminous, abstract form shimmering and undulating against a deep blue-black void. Gradually the luminous shape begins to get larger and less distorted, and it soon becomes apparent that we are seeing a human form, as Viola described:

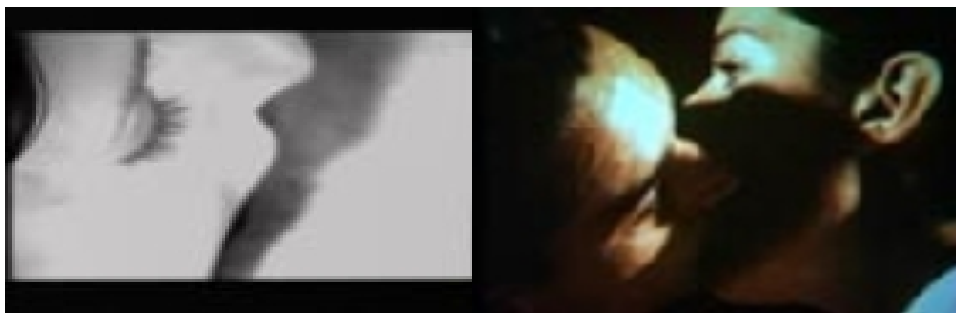
illuminated, rising towards us from under the surface of a body of water...  
After some time, the figure breaks the surface, an act at once startling,

<sup>404</sup> Piet Mondrian quoted in Matthes, Hendrik. 'Aphorisms and Reflections by Piet Mondrian,' *Kunst & Museumjournal*, 6.1. (1995): 57.

relieving and desperate. His pale form emerges into the warm hues of a bright light, the water glistening on his body. His eyes immediately open and he releases a long held breath from the depths, shattering the silence of the image as this forceful primal sound of life resonates momentarily in the space. After a few moments, he inhales deeply, and, with his eyes shut and his mouth closed, he sinks into the depths of the blue-black void to become a shimmering moving point of light once more. The image then returns to its original state and the cycle begins anew.<sup>405</sup>

Some of these artists like Gormley, McCall, prefer the abstract composition without the representation or mediation and interaction with the human figure. Other artists highlight the presence of the human figure and particular the body, in contrast to Beckett's *Breath*.

### 6.10 Marina Abramović (With Ulay) *Breathing In Breathing Out*



**Figures 6.18- 6.19 :** Abramović, Marina (With Ulay). *Breathing In Breathing Out*. Performance, 15 min., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.1978.<http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/picture-galleries/2010/march/22/documenting-the-performance-art-of-marina-abramovi-in-pictures/?idx=7>[Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Marina Abramovic and Ulay worked together on performances (from 1976 to 1988), exploring the psychological and physical limits of personal identity and the tense relation they established with the audience. Their first performances were governed by a three-fold principle, they were to have no predetermined purpose, no repetition, and no possible reproduction. Subsequently, their work developed and became intermedial with the use of various media, including photography, film and video. The body has been both the subject and medium for these works, while Abramovic pioneered with the use of performance as a visual art form. Exploring the physical and mental limits of her being, she has withstood pain, exhaustion and danger. During the performance of *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, with their mouths

<sup>405</sup> Viola, Bill. *The Messenger*. Durham Cathedral, September, 1996 in Sparrow, Felicity (ed.). Viola, Bill. *The Messenger*. Durham, The Chaplaincy to the arts and Recreation in North East England, 1996, revised by the artist, February 1997: 18.

clamped tightly together and microphones taped to their throats, breathed in turn the air from each other's lungs, until - almost to the point of suffocation- by exchanging only carbon dioxide.

Abramovic's work is based on the idea that what is important is less what you do, than, the state of mind, you do it in. This state of mind is interconnected with the immaterial and the emptying of the body. As she stated, 'oat emptying, stream entering: 'this means that you have to empty the body/boat to the point where you can really be connected with the fields of energy around you. I think that men and women in our Western culture are completely disconnected from that energy, and in my new work I want to make this connection possible.'<sup>406</sup>

Abramovic, believes that art will become intangible and will surpass the art object in the future and that the art of the future will be an art without objects, because in the communication of pure energy, the object appears as an obstacle. The only way for her to transmit her experience from the Chinese Wall was to build these "transient objects," that were not sculptures but tools that help her to make a work. As she wrote: 'during my walk I realized that my state of mind was different according to the metals in the ground. This relates to legends, that describe the Chinese Wall as a dragon of energy. We all know that quartz is used to convey energy: this is not culturally limited.'<sup>407</sup>

Abramovic' work involves the participation of the viewer, she focuses on the creativity of the recipient of the work. She has been influenced by a sentence by Duchamp that says that the artist is not the only one who should be creative, the public should be creative too. According to Abramovic, art has changed a lot, but the spectators haven't changed that much, the viewers should constantly transform themselves like the artists who are preparing, by the way they live and transform themselves, an art, that could be completely mentally developed.

Through the use of auditory, olfactory, kinetic and tactile propositions, artists have explored ways of making respiration perceptible, often through the viewer's participation. Lygia Clark's

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<sup>406</sup> Abramovic, Marina. Interview. *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Paris: June, 1990. In <http://www.jca-online.com/abramovic.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.



*Respire Comigo* (Breathe with Me) is an intermedial sensorial artwork, where the two ends of a rubber tube were placed together by the artist to form a circle that she stretched and contracted rhythmically beside the viewer's ear. Marina Abramovic and Ulay during the performance of *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, with their mouths clamped tightly together and microphones taped to their throats, breathed in turn the air from each other's lungs.

### 6.11 VALIE EXPORT *Breath Text: Love Poem*.



**Figure 6.20:** EXPORT, VALIE. *Breath Text: Love Poem*. 1970-1973. Source: <http://www.eai.org/title.htm?id=6491>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

VALIE EXPORT's art practices are socially critical and creative, her productions are formatively influenced by reactions to a restrictive political and cultural climate and include digital technologies, cinematic and video work, photography, text and performance; she creates an "expanded cinema," with her as the protagonist. The pictorial surface is no longer suitable for her, thus she directly works with real bodies, objects and substances. She employs detailed linguistic analysis of image policies as one of her distinctive techniques. Initially expanding the Viennese

Actionist project to confront a complex feminist critique of the social and political body, her works achieve an interesting synthesis of the visceral and the conceptual. *Breath Text: Love Poem* is a video poem showing VALIE EXPORT from the front behind a glass plate, on which she breathes “I love you.” The plate in the video and the plate of the monitor suggest a corresponding surface, so that there is an impression that the breath is in “direct” contact with the set. Being the performer herself, she experiments with the limits of cinema, her cinematic actions she breaks the passive reception characteristic of the medium. As a Viennese Actionist, she approached the issue of the relationship between a constructed body language and the surrounding urban space and experimented with audience reception. De Certeau refers, to 'the different productions which move within the visual field of the enemy as tactics. The tactics enable EXPORT to participate in certain political discourses, to appropriate them for herself and at the same time to subvert them, to make herself understood through language and its grammar (...).'<sup>408</sup>

This chapter integrated the analysis of artworks, performative actions and installation practices that engage the beholder in an embodied intermedial experience. The embodied intermedial experience entails a politics of spectating in contrast to a modernist purified opticality. By shaking up the notion of a unified and “disembodied” visual field, the spectator is able to make connections between the different elements comprising the work (intermedia/installation practices).

The spectator becomes a participant in these intermedia works that not only demand her/his active perceptual engagement, but often also generate explicit awareness of this activity. Most of these artworks challenge the ideological effects of specific narratives of high modernism that focus on the separation and hierarchization of artistic media. Thus, the spectators are not reduced to a state of unquestioning awareness or a wholly passive relation to the object as a detached subject: interaction, engagement, and response are required for the aesthetic experience of intermedial art. The political is traced in the revision of the condition of the modernist art object and its historical trajectory into selected art practices (representative artists of movements like conceptual art,

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408 <http://www.valieexport.org/> . Website Accessed on 01/01/2012

performance art, land art: such as Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, Marina Abramovic, Lygia Clark, VALIE EXPORT etc). Certain of these artworks return us to the body of the spectator as a space that is both sentient and active, this process has ideological ramifications.

The invisible context of breathing and the ways it challenges artists to experiment with the formal possibilities of the artwork was examined in this chapter. The selected artworks about breathing were created as a response to some of the theoretical issues underpinning the viewing experience and the subjectivity of the viewer's own gaze, both in relation to modernist discourse and to contemporary discourses about visibility. The focus was placed on the spectator's body, as a sentient and active “agent” in a reciprocal relation with the work of art. This approach is ultimately ideological and intermedial, since spectatorship in itself becomes a self-reflective act. Artists through the use of visual, auditory, olfactory and tactile artistic mediums, explored and expanded the ways of making breath perceptible, often through the viewer's participation. The respiratory system, therefore, becomes both the locus of representation and of experience through diverse models of audience participation.

**CONCLUSION** ‘...it will never have been given to me to finish anything, except perhaps breathing...’<sup>409</sup>

You write in order to be able to breathe<sup>410</sup>

Grace to breathe that void<sup>411</sup>

You are living in your breathing. Stop. Think. You are dying in your breathing. Stop. Think. You are living in your breathing. You are dying in your breathing. You are living in your dying, dying in your living. (Take time, breathing.) Stop. Show. The doing without the showing is merely experience. The showing is critical, what makes it theatre. What makes it show (by nothing but breathing) is the radiance of inner conviction.<sup>412</sup>

This study attempted to show that Beckett's *Breath* is intrinsically intermedial given that it operates in-between realities (art and body/biology/life/non-art), in-between the boundaries of artistic media (theatre/theatricality and visual arts/installation art), the verbal and the visual, the audible and the scenic (sound as stage presence), in-between visibility and invisibility (light and darkness), presence and absence/emptiness, embodiment and ambiguity of corporeal experience, in-between life and death (movement and stasis) and in-between inhalation and exhalation (silence and sound). *Breath* operates (or oscillates) between a sound tableau (installation art) and the pictorial, two-dimensional (static image).

Each chapter focused on these different aspects of intermediality, and the term (intermediality) was treated in the context of the quasi-generic and inter-generic features of

409 Beckett, Samuel. *Malone Dies*, in *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Press, 1995: 242.

410 Charles, Juliet. *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*. French Literature Series, 2009: 157.

411 Samuel, Beckett. *Ill Seen Ill Said*. In *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*. Grove Press, 1981: 59.

412 Herbert. Blau, *Take Up The Bodies*. 86. See bibliography.

Beckett's late style in the theatre, the de-centred field of subjectivity and its polysemous modes of absence and presence. The first chapter focused on *Breath's* intermediality in relation to the theatricality - (anti) - theatricality nexus, the third in relation to the visible and the invisible, as with the visual and the theatrical and the fourth in relation to presence and absence. These features and attributes are treated as chiasmatic rather than binary.

In order to demonstrate these claims (chapter one and two) provided an analysis of the anti-theatrical associations between the theoretical systems of Samuel Beckett and Michael Fried, and illustrated that both the theatre and the visual arts appropriate similar conceptual systems and share a common theoretical ground about issues of representation. In this context Fried is perceived as a modernist art critic, who has written about the theatre and has criticized theatricality and Samuel Beckett as a playwright who attempted to formulate an art theory. Beckett's challenge to the theatre was to create an intermedial playlet that resists character representation, textual production and theatricality, while Fried imagined a visual art context that would be liberated from the notion of theatricality. A number of affinities and differences were traced between the two writers. It was in fact Fried who mentioned that the need to defeat theatricality is nowhere more evident than in the theatre,<sup>413</sup> however, Fried was critical of intermediality and installation aesthetics.

Intermediality was examined in its contextual and ideological milieu as a force that perforates modern and contemporary art practice. (chapter five selected intermedia artworks: Navridis' *Breath*, Gormley etc). The different associations and the interdisciplinary mobility of the concepts of theatricality, presence and minimalism and their differently inflected meanings across discipline boundaries was the particular research interest. The task was not to resolve all questions concerning the relation of theatre with the visual arts, but rather to rethink these relations and, through the transformation and displacement of the visual and the theatrical, to recast the conceptual and

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413 As he argued, 'the need to defeat what I have been calling theatre has chiefly made itself felt as the need to establish drastically different relation to its audience.' Beckett's theatre is emblematic of this endeavour to eradicate theatricality. The success, even the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat the theatre. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than within theatre itself, where the need to defeat what I have been calling theatre has chiefly made itself felt as the need to establish drastically different relation to its audience. The relevant texts are of course, Brecht and Artaud). In Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood Essays and Reviews*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998: 163.

aesthetic fields with which art and theatre are inextricably linked.

Beckett's work was juxtaposed with selected works by other artists, (chapter five and six) with pieces that in some sense echo Beckett's world and aesthetics and offer an alternative to a particular history of modernism, related to the idealization of forms. Representative of diverse assortment of historical moments, and theoretical voices, these art practices continue to challenge the ideological effects of specific narratives of high modernism and revise the condition of the modernist art object and its historical trajectory into their art practice.

Moreover, the selected intermedia artworks propose a contemplative act between the beholder and the art object as an extension of the physical senses, in contrast to a modernist focus on visual form and to a notion of the eye as a purely abstract organ, cut off from the bodily senses to which it is connected. The depiction of formless visual shapes (respiration) that become metaphors for conceptual forms is a challenge for the visual arts; the challenge of finding a form for formlessness, of showing a form that has no form (chapter six focused on the analysis of pneumatic sculptures influenced by Duchamp and conceptual practices like Beuys and Manzoni). Georges Bataille described the formless as subversive of the traditional duality of form and content and as Krauss states, the formless has its own legacy to fulfil, its own destiny - which is partly that of liberating our thinking.<sup>414</sup> The strategies these artists employ in their projects significantly strengthen the case for a re-articulation of the aesthetic, through a transition in various contexts: art, science, technology, new media and everyday reality (chapter five and six).

## **I. Intermedial Practice: A Total Work of Art or A System of Relays**

In view of the heterogeneity of artistic practices that greeted the beginning of the twenty-first century, the chapters considered how the transient and limitless formal possibilities of the artwork and the methods associated with movements that originated in the 1960s and 1970s have

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414 See Bois, Yves-Alain & Krauss, Rosalind E. *Formless. A User's Guide*. Cambridge : MIT Press, 1997.

subsequently determined art practice and theory.<sup>415</sup> Art practice focused on notions of intermediality that share a lot of common elements with the synaesthetic unity of the Wagnerian “total work of art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*)<sup>416</sup> that was engaged in interrelating or even unifying theatre.<sup>417</sup> Wagner's “total work of art” expresses his attempt to reconceptualize the theatre as a hyper-medium, that integrates a variety of technical media into its performance. Theatre, thus, becomes a large medial framework that incorporates different media without negotiating the assumed live quality of the theatrical body.<sup>418</sup>

Intermediality characterizes the roles the disciplines play in an integrative and interactive process. The encounter between two disciplines doesn't take place when one begins to reflect on the other, but when one discipline realizes that it has to resolve, for itself and by its own means, a problem similar to one confronted by the other. Analogous problems confront the sciences, painting, music, philosophy, literature, and cinema, on different occasions, and under different circumstances. As Gilles Deleuze argued:

The same tremors occur on totally different terrains. The only true criticism is comparative... because any work in a field is itself imbricated within other fields... There is no work that doesn't have its beginnings or end in other art forms... All work is inserted in a system of relays.<sup>419</sup>

This study examined a system of relays, by means of a specialized paradigm of intersection of critical discourses on aesthetics, in the theatre and the visual arts, in the context of respiration. According to this paradigm, the physical act of respiration is the starting point for a new understanding of the body's intermedial relationship to the world. The medium of breath and the

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415 In the fields of the arts and the humanities educational systems have focused on issues of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. The concept of interdisciplinary curricula emerged in the 1970s. Prior to this, the study of the arts was delimited by discipline and to a lesser extent by medium; however, in recent years we notice an integrating curriculum across the disciplines; art disciplines have become inter-methodological. Interdisciplinary approach has expanded the possibilities for scholarly practice and the formation of emergent and critical pedagogical models is founded on synthetic art-educational notions that invite the linking of various art disciplines across the curriculum.

416 The modernist (principally Michael Fried's) understanding of the theatre as a compound art form, a type of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the romantic Wagnerian tradition, is significant to Fried's negative view of the theatre and theatricality. (The theatre lies *between* art forms, as Fried argued).

417 Theatre is interdisciplinary par excellence, since different disciplines are integrated in the theatrical process as Yurii Anenkov has argued, ‘The theatre is not an independent, self-sufficient, pure form of art, but merely a treaty drawn up by a bunch of different arts, a treaty according to which they promise to reproduce, supplement, explain, and reveal by visual and acoustic media - the fortuitous, miraculous elements of the theatre...’ Anenkov, Yury. *Teatr Chistogo Metoda (The Theatre of Pure Method)*. 1921, in Gronberg, Tag. ‘Performing Modernism.’ In Wilk, Christopher. *Modernism: Designing a New World* (ed.). V & A Publications, 2006: 201.

418 See Barton, Bruce. ‘Paradox as Process: Intermedial Anxiety and the Betrayals of Intimacy.’ *Theatre Journal*, (Volume 61, Number 4, December): 2009.

419 Deleuze, Gilles. ‘The Brain is the Screen: an interview with Gilles Deleuze.’ in Flaxman, Gregory (ed.). *The Brain in the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000: 367. Translated by Marie Therese Guirgis.

body's intermedial relationship to the world was treated as a conceptual guide, so as to investigate points of intersection (connections, linkages, overlaps) of the theatre and the visual arts, in the expanded field of art practice and the mobility of practices like minimalism and conceptual art in these different contexts.

The expanded field is generated by problematizing a set of concepts concerning issues of genre, medium and discipline in relation to different artworks about breathing (analysed, in different sections, throughout this study). These artistic fields are based on an expanded notion of art and theatre that involves other disciplines such as architecture, sound art, etc. As a result, the field of contemporary art presupposes an expanded theoretical model of aesthetics.

The contextual analysis of issues of genre and discipline engages with a discourse about the relationship between performance and literary studies ; namely, about the relationship between the textual and the visual and a criticism of the misconception that dramatic performance is a reiteration of texts, a citation that imports literary or textual authority into performance. The relation of staging and performance to the written text is multifaceted, given that a text is a connection and an interweaving of signifying elements. The written and/or verbal text is transferred onto theatre and becomes the "text" of the staging. The linguistic text, the text of the staging (*mise en scène*) and the "performance text," shape three different kinds of texts.<sup>420</sup> The intermedial text can include all these together and it can, also, be technologically mediated.

Performance analysis often exceeds the sphere of textual meaning, hence, the mode of relationship of the performance to the spectators, the temporal and spatial situation, and the place and function of the theatrical process are decisive, in terms of questions of meaning and signification. Malgorzata Sugiera argued that, nowadays the basic structural principle of texts written for the theatre, increasingly often, turns out to be their immanent theatricality, and she

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420 In the "German Letter" (1937), which is part of the correspondence between Beckett and his friend publisher Axel Kaun, whom he met in Germany, written three months after Beckett's return to Dublin from his trip to Germany. Beckett asked Axel Kaun 'is there something paralyzingly holy in the vicious nature of the word that is not found in the elements of the other arts?' *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume I: 1929–1940, Cambridge University Press, 2009: 512–520.



considered that theatricality can no longer be understood as a reflection upon theatre as a domain of artistic activity or as an extensive metaphor of human life, but rather as a 'means of inducing the audience to watch themselves as subjects which perceive, acquire knowledge and partly create the objects of their cognition.'<sup>421</sup>

A range of meanings has been attributed to the concept of theatricality, hence a single definition or an understanding of the term cannot be given. According to Tracy Davis, theatricality can be defined exclusively as a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation.<sup>422</sup> Davis and Postlewait,<sup>423</sup> also, challenge some of the expansive applications of the concept and the ahistorical and “laissez faire” uses of the term in critical usage today. Consequently, a diverse set of interconnected explanations of theatricality, but not a composite interpretation, emerges from their assessments of the term.

## II. Beckett's and Fried's Anti-Theatrical Prejudice

The view of a duality between concepts ( theatricality - (anti)theatricality) is based on the premise that there is an unbridgeable division between them and it therefore necessarily excludes the perspective that reconciles in practice what seems paradoxical in theory. The anti-theatrical prejudice is shared both in Beckett's works and Fried's theory. Jonas Barish draws from the Beckettian world in order to illuminate what he considers as drama's anti-theatrical prejudice. In Beckett's later plays, the scraping away process continues unrelentingly, attacking the characters in their vitals, leaving them not only without memory, or with only the merest shred of memory, but - according to the case - without locomotion, without speech or even without visibility. As Barish wrote:

they come imprisoned in urns or ashcans or pyramids of earth, reduced to trunkless heads or legless torsos, or else deprived of language so that they can only gesticulate frantically in pantomime, or reduced to a single disembodied mouth hysterically jabbering away in shrill monologue, or -

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421 Sugiera, Malgorzata. 'Theatricality and Cognitive Science: The Audience's Perception and Reception.' *SubStance*, (98/99, 31.2 & 31.3), 2002: 225.

422 Davis, Tracy and Postlewait, Thomas (eds). *Theatricality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 3.

423 See Davis, Tracy and Postlewait, Thomas (eds). *Theatricality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

extremest of all - reduced to total absence except for two faint cries and an intake of breath heard on a bare stage with nothing on it but a pile of rubbish.<sup>424</sup>

According to Barish, it is hard to imagine a theatre more negative, more calculatedly eviscerated of everything the world has always thought of as theatre. Adding to that, it is hard to imagine human substance coming so close to absolute nullity and yet retaining, in some strange and stunted fashion, a meaningful semblance of humanity. As he wrote, 'in all these cases the playwright assaults the theatre, undermines it with high explosives, in order to delve to bedrock of consciousness.'<sup>425</sup> Barish formulates a correlation between anti-theatricality and anti-humanism, when he discusses Beckett's wish to blast the theatre loose from its specious theatricality, as well as from its complacent reliance on mimicry, on spectacle, and its facile trust in the rational, the social, and the objective.<sup>426</sup>

Various forms of anti-theatricalism seem to be symptoms of a prejudice, that as discussed, can play a productive role in the theatre. The anti-theatrical associations, between the theoretical systems of Michael Fried and Samuel Beckett, illustrate that both the theatre and the visual arts share similar prejudices concerning theatricality, while they appropriate similar conceptual systems and share a common theoretical ground about issues of representation. The second chapter provided a critical overview of Fried's problematic approach concerning the relation of the theatre with the visual arts, by considering the limitations of his approach, in the context of an innovative reconsideration of the conceptual and aesthetic fields with which the art and theatre are inextricably linked.

The thesis underlined the anti-theatrical associations between the theoretical systems of these prominent writers (Samuel Beckett and Michael Fried), so as to illustrate that both the theatre and the visual arts appropriate similar conceptual systems and share a common theoretical ground

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424 Barish, Jonas. *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*. London: California University Press, 1981: 458.

425 Ibid.

426 However, as Barish wrote: 'in so doing he topples one by one the stones that held the edifice together. With personality challenged as a value and even as a reality with impersonation less and less honoured as an art, the actor undergoes a transformation into a ritual vessel, an impersonal symbol of existence, a depersonalized building-block with which the architect of the theatre tinkers his constructions together. Anti-theatricalism links itself with anti-humanism as it does with Artaud it aims to offend rather than please.' *ibid*: 458.

about issues of representation. In this context Michael Fried is perceived as a modernist art critic, who has written about the theatre and has criticized theatricality and Samuel Beckett as a playwright who attempted to formulate an art theory. The intention was to explore these different treatments of theatricality and to examine their implications for rethinking visual and theatrical representation.

Re-readings and reconsiderations of these art discourses, in critical relation to broadly contemporaneous writings on art demonstrate their relevance to art criticism, art historical questions and interdisciplinary concerns. Chapter one investigated the ways in which the “Three Dialogues” illuminate Beckett’s *Breath* and the ways that Beckettian aesthetics translates into practice in the framework of this playlet, given that *Breath* is the culmination of Beckett’s experimental vision and artistic self-reflection...as an artwork that ventures to go beyond “the field of the possible,” even if that attempt results in an “art of failure.”<sup>427</sup> Beckett confessed in the “Three Dialogues” that he knew that all that was required, in order to bring even this “horrible” matter to an acceptable conclusion was to make {...of...} this fidelity to failure, a new occasion a new term of relation.<sup>428</sup>

As he wrote, 'I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists. For what is this coloured plane, that was not there before. It seems to have nothing to do with art, in any case, if my memories are correct.'<sup>429</sup> Art is often considered by the artist as something to be overthrown for it denies the artist the realization, the transcendence s/he desires.<sup>430</sup>

There is no “escape” for the artist from this cyclical process of composition, as there is no “diversion” for the human, from the cycle of respiration. Beckett’s concentrated drama, in *Breath*, articulates and distills this process of the human condition in an existential crossing, which is determined by representation in the rise and fall of the curtain. As an integral part of the

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427 The “field of the possible,” and the “art of failure are extensively discussed at “Beckett, Samuel. 'Three Dialogues.' Cohn, Ruby (ed). *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. New York: Grove Press, 1984: 138.

428 *ibid*

429 Quoted in Levy, Eric. *Trapped in Thought; a study of the Beckettian mentality*. Syracuse University Press, 2007: 21.

430 Sontag described the process, in which art itself becomes the enemy of the artist. Therefore a new element enters the individual artwork and becomes constitutive of it. As she argued: 'the appeal (tacit or overt) for its own abolition—and, ultimately for the abolition of art itself...Committed to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to negate, the ultimate weapon in the artist's inconsistent war with the audience is to verge closer and closer to silence.' Sontag, Susan. 'The Aesthetics of Silence,' *Styles of Radical Will*, Vintage, London: 1994.

“performance,” the classic raising and lowering of the curtain establishes the temporal boundaries of the drama. Beckett telescopes an entire life within a period of time roughly equivalent to that of a few breaths.

When the curtain rises, we see that a large rubbish heap occupies the stage and that there is no cast. Yet every one of the thirty seconds during which the play lasts is filled with dramatic tension. One virtually holds one’s breath from the moment the curtain rises until it mercifully falls once more for what Beckett dramatizes so incisively in these brief moments is the ceaseless perpetuation of mankind’s futile existence, as Herbert Blau suggested:

Four poignant utterances span the seconds, taking man from the silence of nonexistence to the shock of birth, through maturity, and finally to a slow and agonized death; but at this moment (which might seem to signal a conclusion) a second natal cry reveals that the process is a cycle from which there is no escape. Here, then, is the distilled essence of the human condition captured in the essence of theatre itself. For what is theatre but the experience framed by the rise and fall of the curtain?<sup>431</sup>

The human condition and theatrical representation intersect in Beckett’s artistic inquiry, Beckett’s decision to fill the stage with rubbish is not just an allegorical statement about the human condition as it is often stated, it is an ideological<sup>432</sup> statement that encapsulates Beckett’s ultimate aspiration to go beyond representation, (also, beyond the representation of reality). *Breath’s* representation is unfolding in the dialectic of birth and death and its ideological context turns out to be central. To fail for Beckett, means to fail to represent and his fidelity to the “art of failure,” namely, the inevitability of the artist’s failure, becomes an expressive recourse, intimately related to the representation of the human being.

In this sense the absence of the human<sup>433</sup> reveals what has been human. As Derrida announced, ‘the trace I leave signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me.’<sup>434</sup> In our respiratory system lies the essence of human

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431 Blau, Herbert. 'Apnea and True Illusion: Breath(less) in Beckett.' In Ben-Zvi, Linda and Moorjani, Angela (ed) *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*, Oxford University Press, 2008: 53.

432 Beckett was one of the few modernist artists to become a militant of the left rather than the right. See Eagleton.

433 As Boulter argued 'for Beckett the total elimination of the human is a total impossibility' in Boulter, Jonathan. *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2008: 14.

434 Derrida, Jacques, Birmbaum, Jean (ed). *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville, 2007. In <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue20/burt/index.html>. Website[Date of Access 20/11/12]

experience, nonetheless, in Beckett's late theatre the absence of the human body discloses a subjectivity that is beyond embodiment. Beckett's theatre is essentially related to issues of presence and mediation, as it is related to the dialectic between the notion of humanism and the absence of the human.

The fourth chapter examined the decision of some artists to stage *Breath* without taking into consideration Beckett's determination to eradicate the human subject ( Hirst, Coogman, Guimaraes, Tynan). The reasons might lie in the fact that contemporary visual art practice often evokes the human figure. A wide acceptance of anthropomorphism is monitored that could be interpreted as a manifestation of the increasingly intention for art to have agency. The use and omnipresence of the mannequin<sup>435</sup> in current installations and the revival of a minimalist vocabulary, which embraces anthropomorphism are signs of tendencies to reconcile minimalism with suggestions of the human figure.<sup>436</sup> This new artistic convention becomes rather questionable when discussed in the light of theorists like Fried who wanted to eliminate anthropomorphism. Didi-Huberman recognized minimalism's anthropomorphism, after Fried, however, in contrast to Fried, Didi-Huberman did not support the presence of objects, but supported their subject-like power and the belief that artworks have agency (objects as quasi-subjects).

According to Isabelle Graw, linking art to subjecthood is not exactly a new move, there is an aesthetic tradition - from Hegel to Adorno - that treats artworks like "rhetorical figures of the subject." Hegel considered painting to be the art form that the "principle of subjectivity" had broken into. Moreover, Adorno considered the artwork to be a stand-in for the universal subject ("Statthalter des Gesamtsubjekts"). According to Graw, in the late 1980s there was an anthropomorphization of Minimal art that had been set in motion by artists like Janine Antoni, John Miller, or Mike Kelley. As she argued 'while the insistence on the dark or repressed side of

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435 Artists like John Miller, Thomas Hirschhorn, Heimo Zobernig or David Lieske, Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison have focused their work on replicas of the human subject. See Birnbaum, Daniel, Graw, Isabelle, Hirsch, Nikolaus (Eds). *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*. Sternberg Press, 2012.

436 Birnbaum, Daniel, Graw, Isabelle, Hirsch, Nikolaus (Eds). *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*. Sternberg Press, 2012. The book is part of the conference proceedings *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*, part of the project "Art and Life," made possible by Kulturfonds Frankfurt Rhein Main. Organized by The Institut für Kunstkritik (Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, Nikolaus Hirsch).

Minimalism was motivated by the insights of identity politics and cultural studies and amounted to a necessary strategic provocation, the animation of Minimalist forms has since turned into what can be described as an aesthetic convention.<sup>437</sup>

#### IV. Sublime Emptiness

Beckett's concern with the limits of the human<sup>438</sup> discloses his preoccupation with history and humanity, yet in an inverted manner (via negativa); in negative representation. Herbert Blau associates, the ideological context of *Breath* with topics encountered in critical theory, most specifically with Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. According to Blau, the phrase "Know minimum," that Beckett wrote in *Worstward Ho* and the merest minimum of pitiful rubbish in *Breath* was proleptic and reminiscent of Benjamin's view of history, for it suggests the wreckage of time accumulating before the "Angelus Novus." Described by Benjamin in the painting by Paul Klee as wings outspread, caught up in a violent storm from Paradise, the Angel, is being blown backward into the future, as Blau argued:

facing the catastrophe of the past, the debris growing skyward before him, from which Beckett might have gathered the litter, as a kind of bricolage, scraps and tatters from those ruins of time, "no verticals, all scattered and lying," not flat out, but at minima, if not Benjamin's "chips of Messianic time," an ideographic suggestion of the Beckettian view of history.<sup>439</sup>

Blau suggests that, the rubbish onstage might also be a corrective to what Theodor Adorno wrote, in his essay on *Endgame*, with profounds of mind<sup>440</sup> about the play not meaning anything becoming the only meaning, and with that certain certitudes about Beckett's indifference to history. However, what seems to be, at first reading Beckett's indifference is on the contrary, full of

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437 Birnbaum, Daniel, Graw, Isabelle, Hirsch, Nikolaus (Eds). *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semiocapitalism*. Sternberg Press, 2012: 15.

438 According to Boulter, for Beckett we are always already post-human insofar as we are controlled by discourses (history-ideology-language). As he wrote "human always remains human but only as phantom, as trace, as specter. The figure of the posthuman is always a figure of the boundary or limit: she exists just at the threshold of the recognizable at the limit if what we except to be the human (the figure of the ghost, the specter - the literal post-human). Beckett, for all his interest in the limits of the human, in what Boulter have been calling the posthuman, thus really does remain fundamentally a humanist. Indeed, the trajectory of his career demonstrates that posthumanism, defined in a limited sense as the elimination of the human- its body; it claims to a transparent consciousness- is a patent impossibility: traces of the human, of the (spectral) body, of (spectral) desires, insistently reanimate what seems to have vanished.' As Boulter argued, 'Posthumanism can be defined as that of philosophy which radically critiques the idea that the individual subject is the centre of all things, the beginning and end of all knowledge and experience: this is therefore a radical critique of Humanist philosophy which would posit the human's reason and rationality as being transparently available to the thinking subject. Posthumanism begins by countering humanism's belief that the human is self-producing, self-coincidental, that it is somehow responsible for the production of its world and its experience of the world.' in Boulter, Jonathan. *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2008: 12.

439 Blau Herbert, *Apnea and True Illusion: Breath(less) in Beckett* :458

440 The two writers disagreed on the philosophical context of Adorno's text.

ideological connotations and meaning.

Beckett was ideologically<sup>441</sup> committed to the sufferings of the post-war devastated humanity. Through negative representation and criticism of any philosophical certainty, Beckett points beyond the scope of representation, to a view of history and humanity which is yet to be uncovered. Beckett “stages” an environment, in *Breath*, of a shattered reality that draws attention to the failings and omissions of modern notions of the political itself.

Emptiness on stage is further illuminated with the presence of the pile of miscellaneous scattered and lying rubbish. This still image, that resembles a temporized<sup>442</sup> installation (tableau) shows a moribund humanity and death. The dialectics between positive and negative representation intersect with the rubbish and the respiration (the ontological medium). Beckett is interrogating the dialectics of presence (liveness) and absence, the presence of miscellaneous rubbish in juxtaposition with the absence of the human figure. The “terror” of the decay of humanity and death is juxtaposed with the presence of the rubbish heap (waste) that coexists with the “sublime,” the life giving force of respiration on *Breath*'s set. As Burke puts it, 'terror is, in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.'<sup>443</sup> *Breath* oscillates between the sublime expression of life, that is respiration's basic characteristic and the presence of rubbish that alludes to a sense of “negative representation.”<sup>444</sup>

Fried would probably endorse Beckett's “negative representation” and anti-theatrical strategies in *Breath*, however, without accepting its intermedial ramifications. Beckett's opposition to the “traditional unity” of the work and to medium specificity is against Fried's fixation with art's autonomy and medium specificity. Beckett deconstructs medium-specificity in the theatre by

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441 See Terry Eagleton in the introduction of the thesis.

442 According to Stimson, 'instead of the usual modernist alternatives of instrumental beauty or universal sublimity, here the beholder would submit him/herself to the flux of a polytemporal aesthetic experience neither outside of time nor subject to its singular iron rule. In so doing, the great companion myths of time and timelessness, history and transcendence, would be sundered and the many component parts, the many and sundry bits of local time generated by that break-up would be disseminated to various (often-conflicting) narratives of temporal eddies and flows'. In Stimson, Blake, 'Rhizome ... Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste', *Discourse*, Spring: 2002  
.In <http://arthistory.ucdavis.edu/people/faculty/publications/stimson.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

443 Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761. <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/burke2.html> . Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012].

444 About the history of negative presentation in the visual arts after 1945, see 'Mourning and Cosmopolitics: With and Beyond Beuys,' forthcoming in Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, ed., *Beuysian Legacies: Art, Culture and Politics in Ireland, Europe and the U.S.* (Berlin: LIT). Ray, Gene *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. In Ray, Gene. *Ray. History, The Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear*.

approaching the visual arts, moreover, the specificity of both the visual arts and the theatre has become difficult to define in Beckett's intermedia aesthetics.

Adding to this, representation seems no longer possible for Beckett, because of the absence of relation between subject and object. Michael Fried was also anxious about how the subject perceives the object and the collapsing distinction between subject and object, however, from a different standpoint. The performance of objecthood, the new relation to objecthood and the engagement of the subject obscured (according to Fried) the artwork's autonomy and medium specificity. The emergence of time based art, the endurance of a piece and the encounter with objecthood produced discomfort to Fried.

In this context, the two writers are seen in contradistinction with each other. Fried is an exponent of medium purity and against artworks that reduce their medium to its most basic form of objecthood and Beckett is an exponent of the exhaustion of media. Thus, the two writers provide different accounts of modernity, Fried was fascinated by high-modernity and medium specificity, in contrast to Beckett's late works, which stem from a desire to "exhaust" the art object, pointing to an exhausted project of modernity<sup>445</sup> and to an exhausted artistic endeavour. Beckett's final piece of discursive writing considers the exhaustion of possibilities, as a fundamental artistic strategy,<sup>446</sup> as well as the tension between abstraction and expression, the dilemma of artistic expression and the impossibility of expression in painting.

Beckett's impact on contemporary artistic practice lies in the dilemma between expression and abstraction as well as in the desire to "exhaust the possible."<sup>447</sup> His insistence on an acoustically constructed presence mediated in *Breath*, a corporeal, amplified sound of an absent body mediated by technology; and the focus on the spatial, gestural and durational extensions of artistic innovation can be seen as forms of exhaustion of representation, however, in Beckett's writing, exhaustion becomes as generating for art, as breathing is for life.

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445 The "Three Dialogues" have, also, been related to some well-known writings, on modernist painting and abstraction, from the post war period and in critical relation to broadly contemporaneous writings on modernist painting.

446 See Deleuze, Gilles. 'The Exhausted.' *SubStance*, 24.3, (1995): 24.

447 See Deleuze.



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## APPENDIX

### I. Art & Language *There were Sighs Trapped by Liars*



**Figure I:** Art & Language. *There were Sighs Trapped by Liars*. 1997-2001. Source: <http://timeoutchicago.com/arts-culture/art-design/75693/art-language>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

The art collective *Art & Language*<sup>448</sup> reconsidered medium-specificity by advancing a new three-dimensional work and by experimenting with various forms of neo-conceptual art objects. As Donald Judd announced in 1956, ‘half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture.’ Painting and Sculpture have become set forms, as he wrote:

a fair amount of their meaning isn’t credible...because the nature of three dimensions isn’t set, given beforehand, something credible can be made, almost nothing. Of course something can be done within a given form, such as painting, but with some narrowness and less strength and variation. Since sculpture isn’t so general a form, it can probably be only what it is now-which means that if it changes a great deal it will be something else; so it is finished.<sup>449</sup>

Their work *Sighs Trapped by Liars* was presented at Documenta X in Kassel in 1997 and

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448 *Art & Language* was adopted in 1968, as the name of both an artistic practice and a group collaboration. Though the numbers within the group fluctuated, and were at one stage around thirty, since 1976 *Art & Language* has consisted of artists Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, with the art historian Charles Harrison collaborating on theoretical projects.

449 Judd, Donald. ‘Specific Objects.’ *Art Yearbook VIII: Contemporary Sculpture* (New York, 1965), in Harrison and Wood (eds). *Art in Theory 1900-1990*. Oxford: Blackwell: 809.

consisted of life-size structures and installations that reproduced inhabited spaces. This installation is focused on the analysis of the linguistic and the pictorial. The visual elements are made of everyday materials that reanimate the dialectic between looking and reading, pictures and words. The text can only be read and understood with strong efforts. The tables are constructed of canvasses pinned together and photocopied sheets of texts, are printed on the canvasses, that have then been painted over and almost obliterated by brightly coloured paint.

The group has concentrated on the importance of medium specificity, as they wrote, about their work:

they bespeak that form of resolution without which art cannot persist: trust in the potential of a medium. Art must embody some form of resistance to the dominant regimes of the culture - some form of incompetence. It cannot be good unless it does. This is a basic tenet of modernism. Does it follow that it is an outdated notion? Does it no longer hold true in the post-modern world? Or is the idea of the post-modern, like the idea of the global, no more than a return to the earlier, discredited version of modernism, in which all differences were overcome in the eyes of the global aesthete-cum-consumer?<sup>450</sup>

Their works highlight the difficulty of “reading” - by reproducing the text as a visual object the viewer is left unsure whether they are meant to be reading or recovering an image. The artists employ a variety of practice and a tendency to provide open and reflexive enquiry, hence, they invite the viewer to question the correlation between “reading” and “looking” and to reconsider the relationship of the artwork and the institution.

## II. Gérard Fromanger's *Souffles*

The process of the respiratory system has, also, preoccupied artists who are working with figurative techniques. The artist Gérard Fromanger, one of the foremost proponents of the “Nouvelle Figuration” movement in France, originally presented large, colourful and translucent

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450 Harrison, Charles. *Essays on Art & Language*, London, Massachusetts: The MIT press: 2001.



“half-balloon” street sculptures entitled *Souffles*, one month after May 1968, in Place Blanche, Altuglas and Place d'Alésia in Paris, while his friend Jean Luc Godard was filming the reactions of the people. *Souffles* were designed, as interventions in the urban environment, as a result, they were destroyed by the police the same night. In 2005, thirty-seven years after that event, Fromanger exhibited the *Souffles* once again, this time in *Jardin du Luxembourg* for the exhibition *Art in the City*.



**Figure IIa:** Fromanger, Gérard. *Souffles*, Jardin du Luxembourg, 2005. <http://www.creativtv.net/artistes/fromanger.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]



**Figures IIb,IIc:** Fromanger, Gérard. *Souffles*, Place Blanche, Septembre and June, 1968. <http://www.creativtv.net/artistes/fromanger.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]



**Figures II d, II e :** Fromanger, Gérard. *Souffles*, Place d'Alésia, Octobre and September, 1968 and Fromanger, Gérard. *Souffles*, Place Blanche, Septembre, 1968. <http://www.creativtv.net/artistes/fromanger.html>.Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

### III. Salvador Dali *Breathing Pneumatic Armchair*



**Figure I** : Dali, Salvador. *Breathing Pneumatic Armchair*. Drypoint, lithograph and collage on white wove paper, 1975–76. <http://www.salvador daliexperts.com/breathingpneumaticdali.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

As Gerhard Hauck observed, *Breath's* visual qualities bears a strong similarity to the “environmental sculptures” and paintings of artists like Joseph Beuys and Salvador Dali. Salvador Dali's *Breathing Pneumatic Armchair* is part of a well known series of works called: *Imaginations of Objects of the Future*, this is a mixed media work that includes lithography and hand etching.

#### IV. William Kentridge *Breathe*



Figure IIIa: Kentridge. William. *Breathe*, Film Still, 2010



Figure IIIb: Kentridge. William. *Breathe*, Kentridge in his laboratory, 2010

William Kentridge's *Breathe*<sup>451</sup> is composed of small pieces of torn black tissue paper that successively swirl and fall making either random patterns or defined images. A singer's breathing conducts the movement of the paper; the fragments are dispersed and in turn gather and fall to the rhythm of her breathing. The complete installation consisted of three films, *Breathe*, *Dissolve*, and *Return*, the triptych was produced in 2008 for the Teatro La Fenice in Venice and was projected on the fire curtain whilst the orchestra was tuning before the performance.

## V. Eric Fischl *Ten Breaths: Congress of Wits*

In the work of Eric Fischl, the notion of respiration is framed in a research of presence and theatricality, nevertheless from the perspective of visual representation. The painter and sculptor created a series of thirteen life-sized, three-dimensional sculptures and corresponding large-format gouache works, cast in polyester and resin, which he called the *Ten Breaths*.



**Figure V:** Fischl, Eric. *Ten Breaths: Congress of Wits*. 2007-2008. Source: <http://www.maryboonegallery.com/exhibitions/2008-2009/Eric-Fischl/detail1.html>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

The viewer is invited to move around these staged figures, explore their interrelations and discover, the three sculptures that are unable to exhale or inhale. The dramatic effect and

<sup>451</sup> *Breathe* is a component of the larger project *REPEAT* from the beginning" that debuted at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice and at the nearby Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in San Barnaba, Italy. Producer: Wesley Miller & Nick Ravich. Camera: Bob Elfstrom. Sound: Ray Day. Editor: Paulo Padilha & Mark Sutton. Artwork Courtesy: William Kentridge.

theatricality is prevalent in these visual scenes.

## VI. Giuseppe Penone's *Breath Series*



**Figures VIa, VIb:** Penone. Giuseppe. *Study for Breath Of Clay*. 1978. Source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=20834>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Giuseppe Penone's works display sensory phenomena, associated with the aesthetic movement of Arte Povera and its commitment and focus on the body and nature. Penone produced *Soffio (Breath, 1978)*, a series of terracotta vessels representing the volume of air drawn from a single breath into the artist's body and was presented as six similar rust-coloured and womb-like forms in one space. The clay was modelled on the imagined shape of a breath of air, exhaled from the artist's mouth. The impression along the side of the clay was of the artist's leg or the artist's body pressed into each form like an inverted spine another form is a mould of the interior of Penone's mouth.



**Figure VIc:** Penone. Giuseppe. *Breath 5*. 1978.  
Source [http://www.terminartors.com/artworkprofile/Penone\\_Giuseppe-Breath\\_5\\_Soffio\\_5.Website](http://www.terminartors.com/artworkprofile/Penone_Giuseppe-Breath_5_Soffio_5.Website) [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

## VII. D.A.ST. ARTEAM. *Desert Breath*



**Figure VII:** D.A.ST. ARTEAM. *Desert Breath*. El Gouna, Egypt. 1997. Source: <http://www.danaestratou.com/desertbreath.swf>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

D.A.ST. ARTEAM<sup>452</sup> created an interactive land installation in the desert, in El Gouna, Egypt, the site-specific work *Desert Breath*, an artwork about respiration of such a scale that would be experienced through walking. The site that was chosen is a flat expanse of sand that lies between the Red Sea and a body of mountains. The work covered an area of one hundred thousand square meters and involved the displacement of eight thousand cubic meters of sand. One hundred and seventy eight conical volumes form two interlocking logarithmic spirals that move out from a

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<sup>452</sup> The group was formed in May 1995, as an interdisciplinary collaboration between three artists: Danae Stratou, Sculptor, Alexandra Stratou, Industrial Designer, and Stella Constantinides, architect.

common centre with a phase difference of one hundred and eighty degrees in the same direction of rotation. One spiral consists of incised cones, while the other of protruding ones; the incised cones are the result of the displacement of sand to create the protruding cones. The centre, a one thousand two hundred cubic meters earth en vessel with a W section is the union of the positive and negative cone. It is filled with water to its rim so that the protruding cone in the centre forms a tiny island at the level of the horizon.<sup>453</sup>

## VII. Christopher Wilmarth's *Breath*

The American sculptor Christopher Wilmarth's designed the series *Breath* (1979-81), a series of drawings, as a response to Mallarmé's poetry. The project involved collaboration between Morgan and Wilmarth, in the early 1980s, on a book of seven Mallarmé translations and included sculptures, drawings, pastels, etchings, paintings, and poems by Wilmarth. Wilmarth employed minimalistic techniques and used similar materials, however, he criticized the work of artists like Judd or Stella. He was a proponent of the spiritual in art and thought that minimalistic practice was often flat and "soulless." Wilmarth wrote that, 'understanding Mallarmé was a realization, an epiphany in that I found myself in them (his poems),' while he added that art has to be spiritual otherwise it becomes dependent on the conditions of marketing, as he wrote, 'when art is Art (and not all art is) it is of the spiritual...it is a disease, this materialistic what you see is what you see denial of the spirit (but a perfect vehicle for trade).' <sup>454</sup>

In the early 1980s, this process led him to create a series of objects out of blown glass (non-formal and structural use of glass in comparison to his other sculptures), based on the same poems. Wilmarth's work paralleled Mallarmé's, in the emphasis on immateriality and spirituality, as in the series *Breath*. As he described, 'I have tried to make sculptures that evoke a spiritual disembodied state close to that of reverie; the kind of perfection I have found during my revelations

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453 Land Art Installation, *Dessert Breath*, El Gouna, Egypt, created by Danae Stratou, Alexandra Stratou and Stella Constantinides (D.A.ST. ARTEAM), June 1995 - March 1997, Egypt. 1996: Exhibition, Artist's Studio, Installations, April 1996, Athens, Greece. Source: Press Release, *The Associated Press*, 1997.

454 Panero, James. 'On Christopher Wilmarth at the Betty Cuninghame Gallery,' *The New Criterion*, Volume 26, New York, (January, 2008): 47.



or epiphanies.<sup>455</sup> This statement is similar to Mallarmé's desire to produce the ultimate poetic tone, which would satisfy the spiritual needs of society and that occupied him from 1866. As he wrote, 'poetry is the expression of the mysterious meaning of the aspects of existence through human language brought back to its essential rhythm: in this way it endows our sojourn with authenticity and constitutes the only spiritual task.'<sup>456</sup>

## VIII. Charles Olson's Breath inspired Projective Verse

The American modernist poet Charles Olson (1910-1970) published the influential essay "Projective Verse"<sup>457</sup> in 1950, the essay argued that poetry, should embody the rhythms of natural breath and thought. Olson claimed that a poem, if it is to be of essential use, has to put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the respiration of the man who writes as well as of his listening. The question Olson is raising is how to make verse come alive, as he said, if it isn't breathing, it's dead.<sup>458</sup> According to his theory, 'a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader...', hence, from the moment the projective purpose of the act of verse is recognized, the content does - it will - change. If the beginning and the end is breath, as Olson stated:

voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts. It has to. It starts with the composer. The dimension of his line itself changes, not to speak of the change in his conceiving, of the matter he will turn to, of the scale in which he imagines that matter's use. And the line comes from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending-where its breathing, shall come to, termination.<sup>459</sup>

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455 Ibid

456 Ibid.

457 Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse" in *Human Universe*, New York: Grove Press, 1951.

458 According to Olson, ' "Is" comes from the Aryan root, as, to breathe. The English "not" equals the Sanskrit na, which may come from the root na, to be lost, to perish. "Be" is from bhu, to grow. I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous, this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed...it is close, another way: the mind is brother to the sister and is, because it is so close, is the drying force, the incest, the sharpener... it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born. But the syllable is only the first child of the incest of verse (always, that Egyptian thing, it produces twins!). The other child is the LINE. And together, these two, the syllable and the line, they make a poem, they make that thing, the—what shall we call it, the Boss of all, the "Single Intelligence."

459 Olson, Charles. *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*. New York: New Directions, 1966: 19.

Olson's manifesto about *Projective Verse* was very idiosyncratic and radical, he thought that the problem with contemporary poetry was that most work, since the breaking away from traditional lines and stanzas, and from such wholes as, say, Chaucer's *Troilus* or *Shakespeare's Lear*, was that poets were lazy. As he wrote 'RIGHT HERE WHERE THE LINE IS BORN. Let me put it baldly. The two halves are: the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE.'<sup>460</sup> According to Olson:

if a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line (this was most Cummings' addition) he means that time to pass that it takes the eye - that hair of time suspended - to pick up the next line. If he wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma - which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line.<sup>461</sup>

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460 Glover, Albert (ed). Olson, Charles. *Letters for Origin 1950-1956*. London: Gape Goliard, 1969.

461 Olson, Charles. *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*. New York: New Directions, 1966: 19.

## VIII. Michael Craig-Martin's *Inhale/Exhale*



**Figure VIIIa:** Craig-Martin, Michael. *Inhale* (White). Acrylic on canvas, 2002. <http://www.artfund.org/artwork/9057/inhale-yellow>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figures VIIIb VIIIc:** Craig-Martin, Michael. *Inhale/Exhale*. Manchester Art Gallery, Installation, 2002. Source: <http://www.artfund.org/artwork/9057/inhale-yellow>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Craig-Martin's site-specific installation *Inhale/exhale* consists of a large canvas depicting magnified everyday objects in vibrant colours. His sculptures and installations focus on ordinary, mass-produced functional objects altered or assembled in ways, that draw attention to relationships

between form and purpose. Craig-Martin's conceptual and minimal art is characterised by stylized drawing, often depicting everyday household objects and sometimes incorporating art references, like the uses of readymade techniques, inspired by Marcel Duchamp. He has shown everyday objects as models for works of art, as he noted, 'I try to get rid of as much meaning as I can. People's need to find meanings, to create associations, renders this impossible. Meaning is both persistent and unstable.'<sup>462</sup>

During the 1970s he began to develop a unique style of drawing from life. He was using mechanical lines, without inflection or any other sense of the artist's own hand, he built up a vocabulary of several hundred images, which he used in repetition, as a way of trying to construct situations. As he noted, he wanted 'to construct images and pictures, places to use very simple things to describe very complex ideas...Because they are so familiar, they are like a universal language, anybody can see them.'<sup>463</sup> Craig-Martin established a language of drawn objects and planes of colour relating to intellectual processes and physical experience. In *Inhale/Exhale*, brightly coloured walls form the background for a range of magnified painted objects, *Inhale/Exhale* is an experiment on perspective that intends to overcome the three-dimensional and the object itself. The installation is a single painting around the space, from floor to ceiling, a panorama of objects, painted directly on to all four walls. The objects are easily identifiable, reduced to coloured-in outlines, fan out across one long wall, of such varying scales and focus on perspective.

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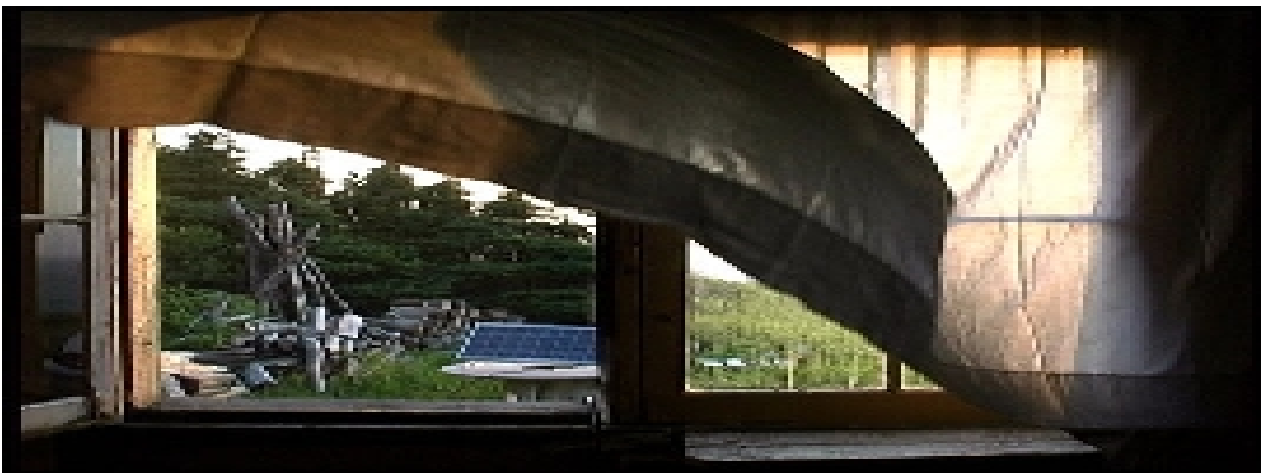
462 In Craig-Martin, Michael. *A Retrospective 1968-1989*: 73. Craig-Martin, Michael. *Landscapes*. exhibition catalogue, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin 2001:19-20. Craig-Martin, Michael. *A Retrospective 1968-1989*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1989. Craig-Martin, Michael. *Selected Works 1966-1975*. Turnpike Gallery, Leigh, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, 1976: 18 and 27-31.

463 In Craig-Martin, Michael. *Eye of the Storm*. Exhibition CD-ROM, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2003.

## X. Michael Snow's *Solar Breath*



**Figure Xa:** Snow, Michael. *Solar Breath*, (*Northern Cariatyds*). 2002. Source: [http://www.muhka.be/press.php?la=fr&date=&id=&subbase=archief&jaartal=2006&jaargang=&letter=&person\\_id=&work\\_id=&project\\_id=1740&zoe\\_kstring=](http://www.muhka.be/press.php?la=fr&date=&id=&subbase=archief&jaartal=2006&jaargang=&letter=&person_id=&work_id=&project_id=1740&zoe_kstring=). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]



**Figure Xb :** Snow, Michael. *Solar Breath*, (*Northern Cariatyds*). 2002. Source: [http://www.muhka.be/press.php?la=fr&date=&id=&subbase=archief&jaartal=2006&jaargang=&letter=&person\\_id=&work\\_id=&project\\_id=1740&zoe\\_kstring=](http://www.muhka.be/press.php?la=fr&date=&id=&subbase=archief&jaartal=2006&jaargang=&letter=&person_id=&work_id=&project_id=1740&zoe_kstring=). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Michael Snow is a visual artist, filmmaker and musician, among Canada's most important living avant-garde artists, renowned as a pioneering, award-winning filmmaker, influencing artists and filmmakers such as Bill Viola, Dan Graham, Wim Wenders and Paul McCarthy. *Solar Breath...* is a 62 loop of fluttering curtains, that reveal and conceal an idyllic landscape in rural Newfoundland. The work is a result of artist's observations of a window of his summer cabin in

Canada. According to Snow, a mysterious wind performance took place in one of the windows, about an hour before sunset. Snow has experimented with the use of video and expanded film and continues to experiment with the limits of filmmaking and with interdisciplinarity; his artwork has included music, sound installations, sculpture, photo-works, holography and painting, as well as, filmmaking.

*Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids, 2002)* is an unaltered video recording of a natural phenomenon - the subject is a window, with invisible wind making the curtains billow forward and sucking back, an event described by Snow as “pure solar magic.” The thin curtain in this rural retreat billows in the wind, creating unpredictable compositions of folds, revealing and concealing a window to the idyllic surrounding landscape and the small solar panel being used to power the camera equipment, as he said, ‘while on one level, *Solar Breath* is merely a fixed-camera documentary recording, it is also the result of years of attention.’<sup>464</sup>

Snow was against using any post-shooting manipulation, he captured in the film the various movements and folds that the window’s curtain created against the window’s screen, with the interaction of the wind. As he stated *Solar Breath*, belongs to a group of film and photographic works that were not intended to be artworks, but rather were “taken-by-surprise”. Snow saw in these sun-and-wind events, their potential as art. As he wrote:

I did not record these “events” to share this modest phenomenon from my daily life with others. No, the rich play of light, surfaces and durations said to me: this real, un-staged event contains the elements which are essential for a contemplative time-light-motion work of art, a “motion picture” with “plastic” values and reverberant associations which will reward many viewings. While on one level, *Solar Breath* is merely a fixed-camera documentary recording, it is also the result of years of attention... *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* is 62 minutes of the most beautiful, eloquent movements and pliages that the sun, wind, windows and curtain have yet composed. Chance and choice co-exist.<sup>465</sup>

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464 See [http://www.jackshainman.com/dynamic/exhibit\\_artist.asp?ExhibitID=56](http://www.jackshainman.com/dynamic/exhibit_artist.asp?ExhibitID=56). Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

465 [http://www.jackshainman.com/dynamic/exhibit\\_artist.asp?ExhibitID=56](http://www.jackshainman.com/dynamic/exhibit_artist.asp?ExhibitID=56). Website [Accessed 10/01/2012]

## XI. Shirazeh Houshiary's *Breath*



**Figure XI** : Houshiary, Shirazeh . *Breath*.  
Source:[http://www.lissongallery.com/#/exhibitions/2004-11-10\\_shirazeh-houshiary/](http://www.lissongallery.com/#/exhibitions/2004-11-10_shirazeh-houshiary/) 2003. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

Houshiary's *Breath* comprises four animations on screens placed on the walls of a room. Each screen is a visualization of the imprint of the breath of vocalists expanding and contracting as they hum songs from four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Sufism. The delicate organic forms that register the vocalists' breath and the audible succession of chants envelop viewers, immersing them in diverse cultures. On the recurring motif of breath in her work, Houshiary states: 'I set out to capture my breath, to find the essence of my own experience, transcending name, nationality, cultures.'

## XII. Sophie Calle's *The Last Breath, Impossible to Capture (Pas Pu Saisir la Mort)*



**Figure XII:** Calle, Sophie. *The Last Breath, Impossible to Capture, (Pas Pu Saisir la Mort)*. Venice Biennale, 2007. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/eglantine/1492143590/>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/2012]

The day the artist Sophie Calle learned that she was invited to be in the Venice Biennale, she also learned that her mother had one month left to live and when she told her about Venice her mother said, ‘and to think that I won't be there.’ Calle’s mother wanted to see the sea one last time. On Tuesday, January 31, they went to Cabourg. This was their last journey. As Calle wrote:

The next day, “so my feet look nice when I go” : the last pedicure. She read *Ravel* by Jean Echenoz. The last book. A man she long admired but never met came to her bedside. Making a friend for the last time. She organized the funeral ceremony: her last party. Final preparations: she chose her funeral dress, (navy blue with a white pattern), a photograph showing her making a face for the tombstone, and her epitaph, “I'm getting bored already!” She wrote a last poem, for her burial. She chose Montparnasse cemetery as her final address. She didn't want to die. She said this was the first time in her life she didn't mind waiting. She shed her last tears. The days before her death, she kept repeating: “It's odd. It's stupid.” She listened to the *Clarinet Concerto in A major; K 666*. For the last time. Her last wish: to leave with the music of Mozart in her ears. Her last request: for us not to worry. “Ne vous faites pas de souci.” Souci was her last word. On March 15, 2006 at 3 P.M., the last smile.



The last breath, somewhere between 3:02 and 3:13. Impossible to capture.<sup>466</sup>

The artist wanted to film her mother's last hours, so as to replace her absence. The video shows even the last minute of her life when Calle didn't know if she was alive or dead. That moment that she had caught, where she didn't know, she could put her finger, like on the last book, the last mile, the last phrase, the last words, but the last second, the last breath was impossible to catch.

### XIII. Franz Wassermann *Atem (Breath)*

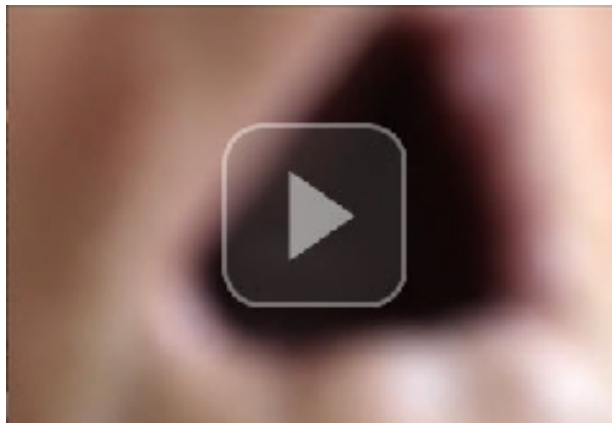


Figure XIII: Franz Wassermann *Atem (Breath)*, Video Still, Documenta XII

Similar to Sophie Calle's Franz Wassermann's video piece entitled *Atem (Breath)*, that was exhibited at the international exhibition Documenta XII, is a documentation of death that records the final moments of the life of Wassermann's father. The video captures the death of his own father, who disappears as an entity through it, in real time. The central questions that Franz Wassermann poses with his work are, according to Hannah Stegmayer, : 'when does the father's absence actually begin and how much is he responsible for it himself? The connection to Freud and the Oedipus complex or God as a projection screen for human inadequacy appear automatically to the viewer.'<sup>467</sup>

The screen on the one side displays, first sharply and then increasingly blurred, the greatly enlarged

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466 Calle describes her mother's last months, her fears and her choice of epitaph: "I'm getting bored already!" Across from the text is an old portrait of her mother and in the next room a video of her mother resting on her deathbed during the last minutes of her life. Medical attendants check her pulse and breath several times. Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A Major, one of her favourite pieces, plays in the background and the screen fades to dark. (February 15, 2006). When anything shocking or profound happens to Calle, or anything that catches her attention, she has a little idea in the back of her head that she may use sometime. From the viewers she doesn't want anything. They are free to do what they want. She cannot give the rules of the game of the project or give the rules of the game for the visitors of how to take it. Kennedy, Randy. *Venice Biennale: Intimations of Mortality*, June, 2007.

467 Stegmayer, Hannah. 'Franz Wassermann Documenta XII – God has Committed Suicide.'  
In <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/001/004/articles/fwassermann/index.php>. Website [Date of Access 20/11/12]

detail of an open mouth that is gasping. As the sharpness disappears and the contours become obscured, so does the vitality to a certain extent. On the opposite side of the same screen, one can see the same person, although here he is dead.





