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Jean-Thomas Tremblay: *Breathing Aesthetics*

Durham and London (Duke University Press), 2022, xii + 232 S., 17 Abb., gebundene Ausgabe/Paperback \$ 99,95/\$ 25,95

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As titles go, *Breathing Aesthetics* proves rather ephemeral, and not just in relation to its object – breathing. One might read it equally as describing an aesthetic that breathes as the aesthetic qualities of breathing or an aesthetic that works with breath. The perspective of the book is much more tangible than it appears, however. By way of exploring the reliance on breathing in a range of artworks and artistic practices and its presence in socio-ecological constellations since roughly the 1960s, *Breathing Aesthetics* makes a scholarly ambitious case for breathing as »a resource for living under precarity« and as potential socio-political, environmental resistance.

Two observations motivate this perspective for Tremblay. The first is a diagnosis that an »intensified pollution, weaponization and monetization of air and breath since the 1970s« has made it increasingly difficult to maintain one's breath, which amounts for Tremblay to a crisis in the reproduction of life. That the author frames this as a crisis *in* breathing, rather than *of* breathing, is pivotal, as the author seeks to draw our attention away from a binary between breathing and not breathing to the different degrees of difficulties we might have in breathing and their causes. Secondly, Tremblay records how different groups of humans, but also other ecological organisms, are unevenly affected by this crisis.

Both the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by asphyxiation (and the deaths of

numerous other black persons in the US since and before Floyd's case) that led the Black Lives Matter movement to global recognition and the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the respiratory coronavirus illustrate Tremblay's diagnosis of breath as a marker of crisis vibrantly. But the author is careful not to lean too heavily on them and make the crisis too contemporaneous, and breath therefore a potentially fleeting issue. Instead, the introduction follows breathing from a central activity of negotiation of struggles to the levelling of an aesthetics of breathing as a site of ecocritique via what the author calls »respiratory subjectivity«. In this trajectory, difficulties to breathe make visible, palpable, and contestable injustices and differing struggles of survival in times of crisis, while conscious engagement with breath becomes the place for a different kind of (environmental) politics and negotiation of subjectivity.

The sources for this weighty and far-reaching charging of breath by Tremblay are readings of minoritarian, often overlooked, and sometimes forgotten artistic positions – poetry, novels, performances (dance), video and film – that engage and work with breathing as a method and technique of production. Through such readings, the first of the five chapters invokes breathing as a site of social and political individual struggle. By way of works by Ana Mendieta and Amy Greenfield, Tremblay argues that breathing represents a practice of mimetically af-

factive spectatorship that can reveal to the viewer individuality as a space in-between demarcation from and transition into an environment, a space maintained and negotiated by breathing. Breathing is thus argued to be an inescapable practice to (re)negotiate subjectivity and the individual's being in the world.

The second chapter continues tracing breathing as site of constituting subjectivity via positions that understand breathing as a form of »aesthetic self-medication«, where artists turn to breathing as a therapeutic practice in their art. In other words, the artistic positions engaged in this chapter stage a self-encounter through their breathing that proves, or tries to be, therapeutic. Such self-medicating proves aesthetic in making breathing a repertoire of artistic production, where the making of art through breathing becomes therapeutic. What emerges from these first two chapters is a vision of a subjectivity that is and can be shaped through respiration and its mediation in art.

Chapter three zooms out from the focus on the self to a wider political communal context, turning to examples of breath as a form of feminist politics, struggle, and emancipation. It moves from and connects the self to the collective, to spheres that become intersected through respiratory rituals based in Native American and Black feminism of the 1960s and 70s. Tremblay argues here that »breath is reparative – and it is a call for reparations: theirs [artists Linda Hogan and Toni Cade Bambara, A.K.] is a feminist breathing that articulates survival while tallying the cost of doing so within hostile environments.«

Continuing the change in scale outwards from the subject, chapter four traces different positions people have in relation to smog and the city, and how, according to Tremblay, they potentially

become detectors and indexers of pollution and injustices. Effectively, however, Tremblay draws from this chapter a simultaneity of universality and particularity in breathing: the need to breathe is universal and connects us to others while our own breathing, and especially our struggles to breathe, inevitably makes us aware of our particularity and differences. Breathing thus becomes for Tremblay an experiential marker for building alliances and coalitions for justice in awareness of our inaccessibility of other experiences, and thus a politics that respectfully navigates injustices affecting other populations than our own in solidarity, rather than by proxy.

The final chapter moves further away from a focus on our breath to the breathing of others, or the absence of such breathing. It takes us through representations and engagements with the final breath as mark of life's end. The negotiation of the nonviolent last breaths in hospital settings represent for Tremblay a desire of the living to manage and process their own finitude, something that the author evinces at the heart of our current socio-ecological situation and political challenge. Breath, then, becomes finally a phenomenon through which we can come to manage our own finitude in the face of current ecological crisis.

A short coda draws »a queer theory of benign respiratory variations« from these studies according to which the author argues to make attention to and the negotiation of respiratory differences and struggles to breathe the foundation for collective politics. Tremblay is careful not to make any prescriptive claims what such politics might look like. At the core, one might expect that »benign respiratory variations« are any deviation in respiration from the dichotomy of unimpeded and therefore unconsciously happening

breathing and the terminal absence of breathing in death. The political mobilization of breathing to counter today's crisis of respiration, then, would be the active introduction of benign respiratory variations by way of aesthetic mediations of breathing, which can be anything from making the act of breathing conscious to consciously changing it, including its interruption, individually or communally.

The book straddles a diverse field of disciplines, from literary studies and medical humanities over queer and feminist theory and Black and disability studies to the environmental humanities. First and foremost, though, *Breathing Aesthetics* amounts to a proposition, rather than to pursue a systematic analysis of an »aesthetics of breathing«: to turn to aesthetically mediated breathing as a practice for instigating socio-ecological change, or maybe to make the possibility of such change in the face of the challenges even imaginable again in the first place; the book remains unclear about its political implications here. In a time when any possibility for a better future seems difficult to imagine and when a mood of resignation and perplexity is palpable in many socio-ecological struggles, this hits an important note. Furthermore, I learned much humbleness in how to engage with the work of others through reading Tremblay's, and maybe that is a feat as much owed to Tremblay's sensitivities as a writer as it is to the communal power of breathing.

However, there are some gaps in the study. First, the study lacks historical contextualization. When Tremblay declares a crisis in reproduction that has intensified since the 1970s, historical precursors such as the plague, the fumes-ejecting industrial revolution and the sulfur mustard of the First World War come to mind, where breathing is similarly polluted and

weaponized. Tremblay is aware of these and references them, but there is no engagement with what they might mean for the author's central diagnosis of a crisis in breathing, on which hinges much of the argument for why breathing is the central marker of our current time.

Second, there is no substantial discussion or reflection of aesthetics and aesthetic mediation by Tremblay, which is surprising given the weight that they make the aesthetical to carry and how notoriously ambiguous it is. As a consequence, it remains unclear, how, »while breathing isn't itself a resource for living under precarity, aesthetic mediation turns it into one.« This is all the more unfortunate given the substantial discourse on environmental aesthetics that could (and should in my perspective) have been discussed to elaborate on this issue and at the same time outline further the aesthetic qualities of breathing. Both issues will require clarification to make Tremblay's concept of a politics of »benign respiratory variations« stick.

André Krebber (Kassel)