

IMMA

GALLERY 2

14 June 2024 – 17 March 2025

Take a Breath



The nature of breath and its vital role in our very existence is one of the starting points of *Take a Breath*. The exhibition reflects on the social, political, environmental, and spiritual aspects of breathing, tracking this vital act from the impact of colonisation and environmental racism to post-industrial air pollution, modern-day wars, and their effects on our environment, health, and way of life. It addresses the suppression of protests and the voices from different communities, where breath becomes a symbol of community and resistance, and examines the use of breath as a means of personal exploration.

Breath has been at the forefront of our collective consciousness, particularly in recent years. The global upheavals of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, with its resounding slogan of “I can’t breathe,” have made us acutely aware of the precarity of our existence, global inequalities, and the destabilisation of our common ground. Historian Achille Mbembe, in his essay “The Universal Right to Breathe,” writes, “From a universal perspective, not only is it the right of every member of humankind, but all of life. It must therefore be understood as a universal right to existence.” This insight lies at the heart of the exhibition, as it navigates different perspectives, shifting from a human-centric view to a holistic understanding of ecological interconnectivity.

Air pollution is a global issue. The World Health Organisation calls air pollution the “single biggest environmental threat to human health” and estimates that 99 percent of the world’s population live in locations that are above WHO thresholds designed to protect human health. Ambient (or outdoor) air pollution is primarily caused by the burning of fossil fuels, forest fires, waste burning, other industrial activities and natural factors. An estimated seven million people die every year from indoor and outdoor air pollution. These statistics don’t cover the impact that it is having on our environment.

The exhibition begins in the corridor with Alex Cecchetti’s work *The Journey of One Breath*, this immersive installation explores the ecology of the ocean and plants. The videos have been taken in the Philippines in two different dives. The first one is a freediving at Luluyuan Lake, one of the holy lakes of the indigenous Tagbanwa people. The second one is a scuba dive in Aapo Reef, a coral sites of the Philippines at the Tubbataha Reef. The hammocks are naturally dyed with plants and the silk curtains by indigo. The acidification and pollution of our oceans is part of the climatic crisis, the loss of diversity of plankton and life in our oceans is negatively impacting our planet as a habitual space for ocean life.

Chapter 1

From the corridor we move to the first chapter which addresses Feminism, Race and Ecology, with the works Ana Mendieta’s *Burial Pyramid*, Marina Abramović’s *Freeing the Memory*, and Mercedes Azpilicueta’s *Potatoes, Riots and Other Imaginaries* are shown together, invoking a profound dialogue on feminism, ecology, and our fundamental right to breathe. Mendieta’s earth-body sculpture incorporates the artist’s own female form, symbolising the symbiosis of breath with struggle and endurance. Abramović’s pursuit

of mental purification through linguistic and physical exhaustion delves into the depths of consciousness, echoing the necessity of cleansing amidst ecological turmoil. Azpillicueta's tapestry interweaves narratives of food economies, feminist solidarity, and historical resistance, resonating with the embodied struggles of women across time. Maud Cotter's *One Way of Containing Air* explores the interdependence of breath and space. Together, these artworks embody the meditative and philosophical significance of breath, offering a profound exploration of existence, interconnectedness, and the continuum between the physical and the metaphysical. *Take a Breath* invites viewers to reflect on the essential act of breathing, its implications on our world, and its role in the journey of human and ecological existence.

Khadija Saye's photographic series *In This Space We Breathe* magnifies the spiritual significance of breath within the Black experience, entwining ancestral rituals with contemporary realities. The artist tragically died in the Grenfell Tower fire, highlighting the continuation of the inequity amongst minority communities. Today racial capitalism perpetuates a division between who has access to clean air, water, parks, safe housing and how the state compounds these divisions. Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's *Respire (Liverpool)* amplifies the urgency of Black liberation, harnessing breath as a conduit for individual and collective empowerment. Through these bodies of work, the exhibition reflects on the interconnectedness of feminism, ecology, and the elemental act of breathing. It addresses systemic injustices and honours ancestral wisdom and ritual.

Chapter 2

In the second chapter we explore the impact war and the tools of war have on our environment. Brian Dixon in his publication, 'Slow violence and the Environmentalism of the poor' discusses the idea of 'slow violence' – which is the violence that occurs out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that will play out over long periods of time. The impact of war on the environment plays out for years; if you think of Agent Orange, a herbicide mixture used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. Production of Agent Orange ended in the 1970s and is no longer in use. The dioxin contaminant however continues to have harmful impact today so when we look at current wars we have yet to see the detrimental effect they will have on the environment and the people who live there. The artworks of Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Ammar Bourras, and Forensic Architecture converge to illuminate the insidious impact of war on air quality. Bourras's *24°3'55"N 5°3'23"E* delves into the aftermath of the 1962 Béryl nuclear test explosion in Algeria, revealing the enduring environmental degradation resulting from human-induced cataclysms. Similarly, Abu Hamdan's *Air Conditioning* visually maps the Israeli army's sonic occupation of Lebanese airspace, exposing the invisible violence inflicted through prolonged auditory warfare the piece tracks the time from 2007 to 2022. Forensic Architecture's *Tear Gas Tuesday* further underscores the slow violence of militarised suppression, documenting the toxic fallout of tear gas deployment in Portland and its detrimental effects on urban air quality. The widespread impact of tear gas on respiratory health during public protests is emphasised, highlighting a global issue.

Chapter 3

In the third chapter we examine the relationship between language and colonialism which is multifaceted, encompassing themes of cultural memory, identity, resistance, erasure, and continuity. Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie* is an evocative audio collage of extinct and endangered languages, creating a sensory experience that connects viewers to lost cultures. This highlights language as a reservoir of collective memory and cultural heritage, countering the cultural erasure imposed by colonialism. Niamh McCann's *shhh.... I fuar anocht beanna boirche* uses neon to combine Ogham, an ancient Irish script, with pictorial elements, reflecting on the persistence and adaptation of marginalised languages. This interplay symbolises the contested yet cherished landscapes of a postcolonial identity.

Chapter 4

Hajra Waheed's sound studies, involving mark making through vocal resonance, underscore the personal and spiritual dimensions of linguistic expression. Her work reclaims voice and identity, resisting the silencing effects of colonialism and emphasising language's role in personal and collective emancipation. Joseph Kosuth's *Three Titled Meanings (A.A.I.A.D)* critiques traditional art forms and challenges artistic and linguistic standards. His conceptual approach, grounded in philosophical theories, challenges the boundaries of art and language. In a postcolonial frame, Kosuth's work can be interpreted as a challenge to the colonial imposition of linguistic standards. Sheroanawe Hakihiiwe's acrylic works preserve Yanomami cultural symbols, translating ancestral knowledge into contemporary forms. His art resists colonial erasure, celebrating environmental and cultural continuity. These artists highlight how language serves as a repository of cultural memory, a tool of resistance, and a medium for preserving and celebrating identity in postcolonial societies.

In parallel, Hajra Waheed's *A Letter From My Sister, November 16, 2015* offers a poignant reflection on the cyclical nature of colonial violence and state-sanctioned oppression. By transposing human struggle onto the sky, Waheed's film underscores resilience and resistance against systemic injustices. Together, these artworks confront viewers with the cumulative and pervasive nature of violence, urging a critical examination of the long-term environmental and social consequences of warfare.

Chapter 5

The fifth chapter is on De-nature, which looks at the degradation of the environment and the loss of biodiversity. Ours is the era of turbo-capitalism, an economy of extraction, we have an upsurge of indigenous rebellions like the Chipko movement that protest against the destructions of their vernacular landscape. John Gerrard's *Dust Storm (Manter, Kansas)* presents a hyperreal landscape, utilising simulation and video-game technologies to confront viewers with the disquieting beauty of an environment in turmoil. Gerrard's meticulous recreation of a dust storm in a dry desert environment, inspired by the historic Black Sunday Dust Bowl event of 1935, mirrors today's ongoing denaturing of our environment. Mark Ruwedel's photographic series

Four Ecologies documents Los Angeles' evolving natural landscapes, emphasising humanity's impact on the environment. Through haunting imagery of fire-scarred terrains and discarded remnants, Ruwedel evokes both the resilience and fragility of urban ecosystems, prompting reflection on our role in their transformation.

In juxtaposition, Pamela Singh's photographs depict the Chipko movement's eco-feminist activism, symbolising grassroots resistance against deforestation. The movement's success in advocating for forest conservation reflects a poignant response to environmental degradation, echoing the urgent need for preservation amidst widespread ecological upheaval. Yuri Pattison's *Sun[set] provisioning* employs digital art to visualise the consequences of pollution on atmospheric phenomena, drawing attention to the paradoxical allure of polluted sunsets. By monitoring pollution levels and translating data into virtual sunsets, Pattison confronts viewers with the consequences of environmental degradation, urging collective action to mitigate its effects.

J.M.W. Turner's iconic sunset paintings offer historical context, linking natural phenomena like volcanic eruptions to artistic interpretation. Turner's depictions of dramatic sunsets serve as a reminder of nature's interconnectedness and resilience in the face of cataclysmic events, echoing the imperative for environmental stewardship in an era of accelerating denaturation.

Chapter 6

In that last chapter of the exhibition we look at the connection of breath to meditation, philosophy, poetry and cosmology. Waqas Khan's 2023 works eloquently intertwine breath with art, meditation, and philosophy. These expansive minimalist drawings, composed of tiny dashes and dots, evoke the interconnectedness of particles and the cosmos. This repetitive mark-making invites viewers to reflect on the micro and macro levels of existence, creating a visual dialogue akin to meditation. Similarly, Patrick Scott's *Meditation Paintings* employ gold leaf and acrylic to create geometric abstractions that bridge the physical and metaphysical. His work, influenced by Eastern aesthetics, encourages contemplative exploration akin to the meditative focus on breath.

William McKeown's *Hope Painting (Going Through the Looking Glass)* and *Tomorrow* series evoke luminous, emotionally charged spaces that resonate with the liminal spaces between breaths. Isabel Nolan's *Deep Time Day* tapestry delves into the complexity of existence, exploring philosophical and cosmological questions through rich layers of representation, reflecting on the beauty and meaning inherent in chaos. Maria Hassabi's *White Out* installation and performance delve into the essence of time and human experience, with breath serving as the ultimate movement. Through dance and reflection, Hassabi's work embodies the quest for rest and transcendence, encapsulating the human journey of becoming and being in the cosmos.

Isabel Nolan's tapestry evokes the architecture of religious artworks, the layering of the complexity of existence, often exploring philosophical and cosmological questions through representations. Driven by "the calamity, the weirdness, horror, brevity and wonder of existing alongside billions of other preoccupied humans", her works give generous form to fundamental questions about the ways the chaos of the world is made beautiful or given meaning through human activity.

The exhibition is an exploration of breath emphasising its multifaceted role in human and ecological existence. It encourages the viewer to reflect on the essential act of breathing its broader implications and the need for collective action to address environmental and social injustice.

Exhibition curated by Mary Cremin

IMMA is grateful to all the artists in this exhibition for their generous contribution.

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THE DEAN

Front cover:

Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński 'Respire (Liverpool)' (2023)

Image courtesy of the artist

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