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On Processing the Texts in The Air Journey

Leena Rouhiainen

Introduction

The Air Journey is an internet-based audio-visual artwork by three Finnish artists: videographer Riikka Theresa Innanen, sound designer Antti Nykyri and myself, choreographer artist-researcher Leena Rouhiainen. The work approaches the element of the air especially through its indirect exposure. For us as humans, air is often most tangible through the manner in which other materials and conditions impact its experienced quality. The starting point of the work comprises short experimental and evocative texts written by me and titled The Underwater, The Soil, The Trees, The Fire, The Exhaust, The Storm, The Ice, The Vibrations and The Stardust. The read texts form the basis of a soundscape and visual design that is meant to prompt audience members, who explore the work via mobile devices, to become sensitive to their embodied relatedness with different aspects of the air and their environment. The work is described by us as a sensuous journey into inter-corporeality afforded by the element of the air. It is publicly available at <https://theairjourney.com>. This article introduces some of the textual material of the work and the motifs for the artistic process from my perspective, focusing on the process of writing and the kind of script I generated for the project.

On setting up the stage

On my part, The Air Journey is indebted to my lengthy involvement with different approaches to somatic breathwork and continues my exploration into embodied relatedness, breathing, experimental forms of writing and phenomenological inquiry into artistic research (e.g. Rouhiainen 2015, 2017). In contrast to my previous projects, in The Air Journey my interest was to acknowledge the impact situation-specific moments of

breathing and being in contact with air have on our immediate embodiment. Instead of working with face-to-face contact with live audience participants, Antti and Riikka and I set up an audio-visual internet-based environment that is meant to be explored by individual audience members through their mobile devices. This is in turn derived from our previous collaboration on the project Renderings of the Heart of Matter (Nykyri and Rouhiainen 2013), in which we addressed the heart and knowing from the heart. This project was done on the basis of visual material derived from an ultrasound of a heart, an evocative script interweaving accounts of my own experiences as well as philosophical excerpts on notions of the body and the heart, mainly by Jean-Luc Nancy. The sound design of the consequent audio-visual work was based on the spoken version of the script, and the videography on the footage from the ultrasound. In The Air Journey, too, we wanted to interlink bodily informed creative writing, sound and visual imagery in our work. Antti described the motif of our collaboration in the following manner in a 2019 conference presentation:

The core of the work will consist of short written essays and tasks or instructions, which the user can follow in order to experience the work. Several tasks will guide the user to listen, read and have a look at the materials of our work in certain public and private spaces. The tasks will utilize several media such as text, recorded speech, sound compositions, video and images. These materials, as well as the whole website, can be accessed with mobile devices and the sounds can be listened to with earphones. The materials we provide will serve as tools and guidelines for performing the tasks. In this respect it will not be a piece of art which is mediated to the audience through the website, but rather a guide and a collection of materials, which helps the user to perform and experience the work. (Unpublished conference presentation at the 10th International Conference on Artistic Research, 2019)

On probing into breath and air

My own exploration into the central themes of the work began through palpating the felt-sense of breathing and air in different ways. I started with some more conventional somatic exercises, in which one pays attention to one's own breathing both as it is and by intentionally deepening the phase of exhalation and pause in the cycle of breathing. More

importantly, I began to observe how I related to air in different everyday situations. I was specifically interested in the kinds of affective and sensory experiences that emerged in being in contact with my surroundings when attending to the air. While I knew and was peripherally aware that I bathed in and was at the mercy of air, what here struck me most was the near absence of air in experience, its sensory non-existence. I was faced with the fact that air is both uncannily familiar and alien at the same time. In its most concrete form, it is experienced indirectly through what it transmits -- odour, temperature, wind, light, sound and the like. I also realized that it brought to the fore experiences of expansion and contraction, belonging and alienation, comfort and distress among others. Luce Irigaray, whose work has been an important reference for my previous writing on breathing, similarly notes that:

Always there, air is neither absent nor present. (Irigaray 1999 [1983]: 167)

She further writes:

No other element carries with it -- or lets itself be passed through by -- light and shadow, voice or silence. No other element is to this extent opening itself -- to one who would not have forgotten its nature there is no need for it to open or re-open. No other element is as light, as free, and as much in the 'fundamental' mode of a permanent, available, 'there is'. (8)

To gain further insight into and evoke the indirect or nearly absent condition of experiencing air, I conducted a mini workshop with a group of artists and researchers engaged with The Body and the Other (2018--20) research project that pivoted around how they experienced their relation to air. In the workshop, I asked them to observe this relation in an indoor and outdoor environment on the basis of the following questions:

Explore your experience and relatedness to your surroundings by considering that the air in this location is the sum of the respiration of all the human and non-human beings influencing it.

1. How do you breathe or how are you breathed?
2. What is your relationship with air?
3. How do your surroundings unfold?

The exercise generated an insightful discussion around place-related memories, the threat of not being able to breathe and an awareness of climate change and the flow of global toxins and pollution that we are connected to through the air. For me, this outcome gave assurance that breathing and air were evocative themes with rich connotations. In attending to breathing and air, the air acted as a receptacle that triggered experiences of contact, connection or relationality, as well as alienation and adversity in others than myself too.

These experiences made me want to engage in our artistic collaboration with the indirect experience of air as an elemental entity subtending life and other material processes. I also became dedicated to the idea that to evoke attention to our embodied relationship with air, I needed to address other materials and conditions impacting its experienced quality. Contemplating Hegel's notion that the four elements offer insight into how the sensuous permeates thought, David Macauley writes that:

The collective notion of the elements as earth, fire, and water is both quite ordinary -- perennial, pervasive, and common place to most cultures -- and at the same time very extraordinary -- belonging to the realm of dream, mythology, and imagination. (2010: 9)

His comment informed the kind of creative writing I engaged with as I envisaged diverse experiential opportunities for relating to breathing and air. The writing I produced became partly based on a concrete contact and experience with different conditions, environments, materials and entities that permeate air, and partly on an affective and imaginary dialogue with related theoretical and scientific conceptions. The manner in which the participants in the workshop also emplaced their experiences of breathing and air in specific locations likewise came to guide my writing and offered it a more tangible structure.

On writing

While the overall content of The Air Journey was meant to be based on the script that I wrote, from early on the design of the work included other parameters that Antti, Riikka and I concurred on. The writing process was therefore influenced by our desire to prompt participants to attend to different materials or places -- at least provisionally -- when first

engaging with our work. We also concluded that the website would contain an introductory text as a nudge to open a perspective on different material, as well as place-related audio-visual contents of The Air Journey. Aside from the fact that air is perceived indirectly, these two aims made me write several different yet interrelated short texts. As I wrote, a thematic structure of air-related entities, materials, environments and conditions emerged. We began relating to the different sections of the script as 'the sites' as they involved site- and material-specific contents meant to provoke the experience of the audience-participants. As previously mentioned, the sites are: The Underwater, The Soil, The Trees, The Fire, The Exhaust, The Storm, The Ice, The Vibrations and The Stardust.

To foreground the all-pervasive yet perplexing sense of air, the actual writing of these texts was informed by an affective orientation in which I related to my own bodily experiences and descriptions of the concreteness of the chosen sites. However, I also felt a need to learn about how the sites involve air more concretely, to both allow the information to impact my imagination and to generate texts that address the sites in meaningful ways. I therefore also drew upon both theoretical and philosophical insights as well as popularized scientific knowledge published in internet-based news entries. My sources included such authors as Gaston Bachelard (2011 [1943]), Don Ihde (2001), David Macauley (2010), Timothy Morton (2013), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and Peter Wohlleben (2016) as well as the British daily newspaper the Guardian, and news reports by Finland's national broadcasting company, YLE. The affective orientation I engaged with helped me to tie these materials together, while writing the script. I found support in Sara Ahmed, who notes that 'the practices of thinking are not separated from the realm of the body but are implicated in the passions, emotions and materiality that are associated with lived embodiment' (Ahmed and Stacey 2001: 3 as reported by Koivunen 2010: 13).

In her book Queer Phenomenology (2006), Sara Ahmed theorizes how we are oriented towards things, other people and the world through our bodies. Being oriented in a certain way explains how things come to be significant for us. It shapes how we inhabit space and apprehend the shared world as well as whom and what we direct our energy and attention to: orientation entails, for example, feeling at home, knowing where one stands or having certain objects within one's reach. While analysing how orientations influence the manner in which subjects and objects come to materialize in the way that they do, Ahmed indicates that they involve the affects, emotions and judgements that form part of our bodily habits and actions. Our orientations thus also direct what is in our reach,

and, in relation to writing, the tools and practices that allow the body itself to be extended (Ahmed 2006: 27, 51, 56).

My intention of appreciating an affective and bodily orientation established a form of motional writing. Here the generative interplay between my embodied being, previous experiences and referenced materials involved movement and a thinking ingrained in the making, in the act of writing. While the writing was based in my bodily experience, the contents of the referenced materials too had agency, sparking my imagination and extending my bodily experience and thus impacting the form the writing took. This happened to the extent that it became difficult for me to discern exactly who or what produced the final script. Additionally, in the completed work The Air Journey the texts are further contextualized and complicated in the manner in which they are performed as part of the images, soundscape, video materials and the set-up of the internet site, and, as a significant extension, the experiences of the audience.

Texts from three sites of The Air Journey

This article offers me the opportunity to present some of the texts written for The Air Journey. The following excerpts are published partially in written and partially spoken form on at www.theairjourney.com. Below you can read the orientation and the materials of the three first sites in the work. In them you are first asked to orient yourself somatically and that you are in the dark, in contact with soil or among some trees. This is done to spark both a bodily and imaginatively perceptive approach to reading -- to induce an affective orientation, if you like.



Image 1: The Soil

Image capture from The Air Journey. Riikka Theresa Innanen ©

Orientation

Palpate how the skies engulf you.

Consider that the air in this situation is the sum of the respiration of all the human and more than human beings influencing it.

Observe how you are breathed.

How do your surroundings unfold now?

- - -

Enclose yourself in a dark room

The Underwater

Innumerable oxygen molecules ride the undulating tides.

Sea water is aerated by winds that cause waves.

A bit like carbonated water is impregnated by gas,
sea water is aerated by the photosynthesis of aquatic plants.

Have you ever swum in sparkling water?

Then again too high or too low dissolved oxygen levels harm aquatic life.

Sea water species should avoid club soda and the dead zones of the globe:
the Gulf of Mexico, the North Sea, the Baltic Sea and the East China Sea.

There are no reddish hues here.

The grey substance is illuminated by green, blue and violet sparks.

Vision is different in this semi-dark liquid.

Ultraviolet rays do not burn but lend the surroundings perceptible.

And you focus by moving your eyes forward and backward.

Hearing is different too, more like touch.

You hear by sensing currents, vibrations and motion.

The sound of your breathing is a soft repetitious gush.

Bathing the resonating life, at times you are stirred by the push and pull of strong
water streaming and might take a ride in a sudden burst of air bubbles.

To outsiders it seems a languid life, but predators are around, and you best keep in
your flock to survive.

Avoiding suffocating is more difficult.

Without decisive measures we cannot choose what we breathe.

- - -

Bury yourself or a part of your body in a pile of soil

The Soil

You are a worm inching through cool and wet granules.

Your effort leaves criss-crossing tunnels in its aftermath.

Moist vapours spawn slithery pathways and your undulation pushes air through them.

Leaking a rich and musty odour, the soil is ventilated and mineralized

Can you see beneath the surface?

It might make a difference -- indeed 'to treat soil like dirt is a fatal mistake' (Monbiot 2015 as reported by Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 169).

The largest portion of life on earth exists underground in the subterrestrial.

Overflowing with animation, the planet's crust forms a biosphere the volume of which is nearly two times as large as that of all the oceans together.

Bacteria, archaea, fungi, worms and insects thrive in the buried covering composed of different types of rock and sediment.

In the dark deep-set terrain, bacteria draw energy from rock minerals through chemosynthesis involving oxidation.

Hidden in component parts in the in-between, there is oxygen, even if here air barely exists.

All the same, borne in the environmental interactions of living and non-living things, borne through 'conspiring -- literally, breathing together' (Macauley 2010: 26) air owes in consistency to the gases the earth's crust emits.

- - -

Roam in the midst of some trees

The Trees

Trees have existed for 370 million years.

Trees suck in and leak out gaseous components and particles.

They are attractants and repellents.

They signal to and support each other not the least when warding off perilous wildlife.

Us these sophisticated transmitters repeatedly lure into their nearness.

Lean on a tree and become one of its intimate extensions.

Can you witness the way in which the tree imparts information, through a gradual streaming?

Each according to their grace, short and tall, straight and twisted, narrow and wide, trees linger sideways and tower upwards to the skies with an uncanny familiarity for most of us.

Not counting exceptional territories, they still remain more than not in our vicinity.

Listen to their leaves rustling in the wind, and you might feel their roots crackling under your feet.

Tree roots interlink across species and couple with fungi friends.

Sparking vital communication and kindling root growth, the subterranean interlocking extends the contours of trees into surprising measurements.

A spread and steady persistence, trees subtend rich ecologies of dependable scaffolding.

Trees care and share, they react to their environs and pass on acoustic, electric and chemical messages, filter and store harmful particles, feed many, form diverse microclimates, taper noise, offer shade and shelter, make for building materials...

They are no taciturn materiality.

A 'vital organ of the planet', they are 'like lungs on the animal body' (Macauley 2010: 100).

More than one, their networks form a 'Wood-Wide-Web' (Wohlleben 2016: 29) with a different temporality to that of ours.

(see: www.theairjourney.com)



Image 2: The Trees

Image capture from The Air Journey. Riikka Theresa Innanen ©

The Air Journey was one of the artistic projects in The Body and Other (2018--21) project that was supported by the Kone Foundation, Finland.

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