

Research Report

Title: Exploring Breath as a material in contemporary art.

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This report explores how contemporary artists use breath as both a material and a concept in contemporary art. Breath in its most direct sense is air and life. It is the basis of how we exist and a reminder that the body is always active even in stillness. Because of this breath carries presence time connection and emotion. My interest lies in how artists take something invisible and turn it into an experience that can be felt or sensed creating work from a material we cannot see but constantly depend on.

Thinking about breath in relation to making brings glassblowing immediately to mind where breath becomes the force that forms molten glass. In this practice, the artists body shapes the material itself through steady pressure, turning air to structure. What starts as nothing becomes form capturing a moment frozen in a physical form, leaving behind a trace of human presence.

In art more broadly, breath can act as a bridge between body and the materials It works with. It creates a sense of rhythm that can be mirrored within a piece as it expands and changes over time through inhaling and exhaling. This movement can influence the shape or feel of a work introducing a subtle but constant reminder of the body that produced it allowing it to dictate performances and objects.

Breath also brings ideas of time and process to mind. Theorists like Tim Ingold in *Thinking Through Making* emphasises that materials are active participants in creative processes, encouraging engagement through doing rather than just observation, as materials are always moving and changing (Ingold,2013). When thinking about breath this way, it becomes more of an act of creation through doing, a gesture that shapes or directs the work and binds the maker to the material.

Similarly, Seetal Solanki's in *Why Materials Matter* expands the idea of what counts as a material. She argues that materials carry meaning and emotion, she includes elements like air, sound and time within this understanding (Solanki,2018). Her perspective allows

breath to be read as something with its own story, something that holds traces of lived experience and moves between people places and objects themselves. Breath becomes a form of exchange that everyone carries with them making it an accessible shared resource as well as a deeply personal one.

Gaston Bachelard's in *The Poetics of Space* explores how air and atmosphere as forces that influence how we emotionally interpret space (Bachelard, 1994). For him air is not a passive background but something that shapes how space feels. This thinking can be applied to breath as well. in performance, breath can fill a room with tension or ease, depending on how it is used. In installation, breath can become perceptible through the way it moves, sound, light, or subtle shifts in the environment this view gives breath a presence that extends beyond biology allowing it to function as a material, mood and also as a structure.

In a wider sense, the theme of breath is about presence, transformation, and connection. It is something that occupies the pace between people and the places they move through. it can be both metaphorical and physical, linked to the artist's body but also to the viewers experience. The three artists I will focus on are Marina Abramovic, Annie Cattrell, and Janet Cardiff who each approach breath differently that reveal different possibilities.

Abramovic uses her own breath and body as a central material within her practice. Her performances focus on endurance, performance, and the immediacy of being present with another person. Breath becomes a way of exposing emotion and testing limits turning something unnoticed into an intense encounter this explores vulnerability and human connection, turning the invisible into the physical and emotional.

Annie Cattrell works with breath by capturing its traces in material form. Her sculptures hold the residue of internal bodily processes making something fleeting feel solid and lasting. Through this approach she translates invisible activity into structures that encourage attention.

Finally, Janet Cardiff uses breath and voice to create auditory spaces that surround the listener. Her installations rely on sound to shift spatial awareness creating a sense of being in a place not shaped by walls but by tone and movement. Breath becomes a guide through constructed environments shaping how audiences listen.

Together, their work shows how breath can connect performance, presence, and craft, drawing attention to the connection between maker and material and the viewer reminding us that even the most fleeting aspects of the body can influence how art is made and experienced. In this report, I will examine how each artist uses breath within their practice

and connect their work with the ideas of Ingold, Bachelard and Solanki. Through this I aim to show how breath functions as a significant material in contemporary art.

Mariana Abramovic is widely known for her performance practice, which focuses on endurance, presence, and the physical limits of the body. Rather than creating objects, she uses her own body as her material pushing to explore ideas around connection, time, and human consciousness. Her work consistently emphasises full presence, which naturally brings breath into focus. Breath becomes her tool and a source of tension and in many cases a material that shapes the performance itself. While many artists who use approach breath symbolically or metaphorically, Abramovic uses it to directly physical way, turning something essential for survival into an emotional and artistic gesture (Biesenbach, 2010).

A clear example of this is “*Breathing In/Breathing Out*” (1977), created with her collaborator Ulay. In this performance, the two artists press their mouths together and exchange each other's breath until they run out of oxygen, and they are forced to stop. The performance continues to the point where they nearly lose consciousness. Breath is not only subject of the work but also the material that drives the performance forward. By sharing and depleting the same air, Abramovic and Ulay highlight the vulnerability and risk involved in relying entirely on another person to breathe. What is normally invisible becomes visible through their struggle, the gasping, the increasing difficulty of drawing air. Breath here becomes a way to explore trust human connection, reliance, and dependency through the limits of the body (Westcott, 2010).



Figure 1: *Video clip*

Breath also plays a powerful role in *Freeing the Voice* (1975), a performance where Abramovic screams repeatedly for extended periods of time until her voice collapses. Although not directly about inhaling and exhaling, it depends on how long her breath can sustain sound. The screams reveal the physical labour of breathing, turning the breath into sound and pushing it to exhaustion. Breath becomes an emotional material here, not just something performer needs to continually do but something that shapes the entire duration and emotional intensity of the work. As her voice breaks down, it exposes the fragility of the body and shows how breath can be extended, forced, or emptied through endurance encouraging it as a resource and an artistic material (Bjork, 2010).



Figure 2: *Exhausted scream*

Abramovic's later work, including *The Artist is Present* (2010), breath has a more subtle but equally important role. In this long duration performance, she sits silently at a table for hours every day, making eye contact with visitors. Even though nothing appears to be happening physically, breath becomes a quiet anchor for the piece. Without speech or movement, the audience begins to notice their own breathing as well as hers. Breath becomes the atmosphere of the room, and the connection between artist and visitor. A specific moment that really showed was when Ulay, an artist she had a significant emotional connection to, unexpectedly appeared; you can see how her breath shifts, revealing a strong display of emotion, showing how breath communicates what words cannot. This heightened attention to breath without voice or action reinforces Abramovic's focus on presence and the transformation that occurs in prolonged work (Iles, 2010).



Figure 3: *Setup space*

Theoretically, Abramovic's work aligns closely to Tim Ingold's idea of *Thinking Through Making*. Although she is not “making” objects, her performances are still a form of making with her performances that construct emotional and experimental spaces through action. Breath becomes a material she works with in real time, responding to it and allowing it to guide the performance. For Ingold, materials exist in movement rather than stasis, and breath perfectly fits this idea as something active, unstable and, constantly shifting (Ingold, 2013). Abramovic treats breath as a live, unstable material that participates actively in the work.

Her practice also relates to Gaston Bachelard's ideas in *The Poetics of Space*, where he discusses air and atmosphere as sources of emotional experience shaping how a space feels. Abramovic creates performances where breath becomes part of the environment whether its shared breath (*Breathing In/ Breathing Out*), strained breath (*Freeing the Voice*) or breath as silent presence (*The Artist is Present*) all of which reveal the atmosphere around the body. Breath shapes the emotional tone of the performance, and it affects how viewers experience the performance (Bachelard, 1994).

In addition, Seetal Solanki's view that materials carry emotional and cultural meaning supports the idea that breath functions as a material in Abramovic's work. Solanki

suggests that materials are not only physical substances but carriers of relationships and memories (Solanki, 2018). Abramovic demonstrates this through performances where breath becomes a material that holds intimacy, tension, endurance, and connection. By foregrounding something everyone relies on, she turns breath into a shared emotional experience.

When considering breath as a material, Abramovic's work highlights three important points. First, breath can shape performance physically it determines duration, intensity, and the audiences sensory experience. Second, breath acts as a bridge between people, shared breath becomes a metaphor for the human connection. And third, breath reveals vulnerability it exposes the limits of the body and the fragility of being alive. Through her approach breath becomes visible and tangible, pushing the audience to confront something normally hidden inside the body.

Within the context of his research, Abramovics work shows that breath is not just a biological function but a powerful artistic tool. It can create pressure or stillness, intimacy or discomfort. by working with breath so directly, she reveals its ability to shape emotional space and influence how art is experienced. Her work forms a solid foundation for understanding how other artists approach breath in different ways.

Annie Cattrell is an artist whose practice sits in the intersection between art and science, particularly the atmospheric the intangible and the bodily. She is known for working with materials such as glass, resin, and gases to explore processes that are usually hidden from view and shape the human experience. Rather than focusing on solid or traditional sculptural forms, Cattrell often focuses on what is unseen in the background of human experience- air currents, breath, brain activity, weather, and memory. Her work moves between sculpture and scientific visualisation, making her especially relevant when considering breath as a material. Like Abramovic and Cardiff, she is concerned with presence and the human body, but her approach carries a quieter, more materialised and almost analytical way transforming it from an invisible action into something suspended and tactile (Cattrell, 2016).

A core aspect of Cattrell practice is her interest in the threshold between the inside and outside of the body, specifically the moment when what is internal becomes part of the atmosphere. Breath is a natural bridge between these two spaces, and even when she does not work with literal exhalation, the forms she creates echo the movement and behaviour of air. Breath becomes an implied presence throughout her work, captured

through the fragility of the glass, the softness of light, and the structures that suspended or contain visible motion.

Her sculpture *Capacity* (1999) is one of the most direct examples of this. In this work, she created a cast of the internal space of her own lungs in glass., creating an object that feels both fragile and bodily. Instead of presenting breath as air, she presents the space breath occupies. The result is a physical materialisation of something normally inaccessible, shaping the absence. The sculpture effectively turns the lungs into a container for memory of movement, functioning as an archive of breath (Stafford, 2010). This work strongly supports the idea that breath can be used as an artistic material, not only by using air directly but by shaping the spaces breath occupies.

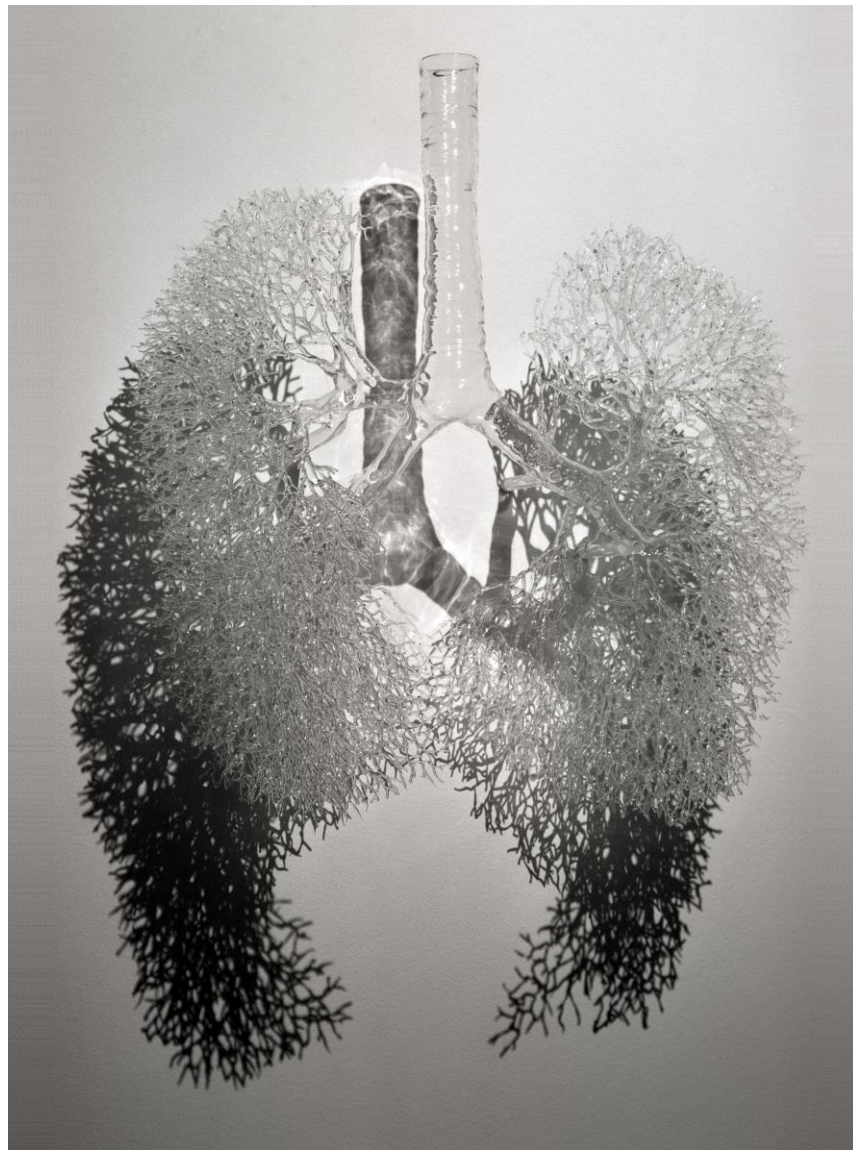


Figure 4: *Capacity sculpture*

A second relevant work, which replaces the earlier fictional reference, is *From Within* (2001–2002). In this project, Cattrell collaborated with neuroscientists to transform MRI and fMRI scans into sculptural forms. While not directly about breath, these works map internal bodily atmospheres such as blood flow, neural activity, and physiological movement. What links this to breath is the way Cattrell visualises fluctuating internal environments — systems that operate continuously and invisibly, similar to the constant rhythm of breathing. These works extend the idea that internal processes can be visualised and materialised, reinforcing breath as part of a broader investigation into hidden bodily spaces.



Figure 5: *skull form*

Another relevant work is *Holding Breath* (2000), in which Cattrell collaborated with medical imaging specialists to investigate what happens inside the body when a breath is momentarily suspended. Using MRI scans, she recorded the subtle expansion and contraction of the lungs between an inhaled and exhaled state, then transformed this data into two cast resin sculptures. These forms appear almost identical, yet one is fractionally

swollen while the other pulls inward—the literal physical difference created by a single held breath (Cattrell, 2000). Instead of representing breath symbolically, Cattrell reveals the internal pressure and volume shift that air produces when it is contained inside the body. By freezing this moment of inhalation and suspension, she turns breath into a sculptural force: something that shapes space from within. Her approach strongly resonates with Tim Ingold’s belief that materials exist in a constant state of movement and transformation (Ingold, 2013). In *Holding Breath*, she interrupts that movement just long enough to give it form, translating a fleeting bodily process into a material structure.



Figure 6: *Holding breath*

Cattrell's frequent use of glass further reinforces the connection to breath. Glassblowing itself depends on the body's breath — even if she does not blow the glass herself, the medium is inherently shaped by air pressure, heat, and expansion. Glass holds breath-like qualities: fragility, transparency, vulnerability to pressure, and the ability to expand and contract. Seetal Solanki writes that materials carry emotional and symbolic meaning (Solanki, 2018), and in Cattrell's work, glass becomes a metaphor for the delicacy and instability of breath. It captures the momentary and atmospheric qualities that define breath.

Her practice also resonates with Gaston Bachelard's theories in *The Poetics of Space*, particularly his interest in atmosphere, airiness, and the emotional qualities of spatial experience (Bachelard, 1994). Many of Cattrell's sculptures feel like moments frozen in time. By using scientific imaging to trace how internal and atmospheric processes behave, she reveals the emotional weight carried by something usually unnoticed.

Unlike Abramović, who uses breath through physical endurance, or Cardiff, who uses it as part of immersive sound, Cattrell works more distantly, allowing breath to be present without participation. Breath becomes something she studies rather than performs. Her work remains deeply connected to the body, yet it exists in a space where breath is both present and absent — solid and immaterial at the same time.

What makes Cattrell particularly important to this research is the way she moves between art and science without prioritising one over the other. Her use of breath-related imagery demonstrates how an artwork can capture invisible processes, suggesting new ways to understand and materialise forms that usually vanish the moment they occur.

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Janet Cardiff's practice centres on the voice not just as a sound producing tool but as a sculptural spatial and embodied material. Where Marina Abramovic uses breath through the physical presence of the body, and Annie Cattrell uses materials like glass to map invisible processes, Cardiff turns to sound particularly the voice to create immersive spaces that the audience travels through. What makes Cardiff particularly relevant to this research is the way she treats the voice as something that is not simply heard but felt almost as if it becomes an atmosphere that the viewer steps inside. In her recordings, the small intakes of air, the shaky exhale before a whispered phrase or the soft release at the end of a sentence becomes a key element that shapes the entire experience of her work.

One of the clearest examples of this is her series of audio walks, such as *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) and *The Missing Voice (case study B)* (1999). In these works, Cardiff records herself speaking directly into a binaural microphone, capturing every texture of her breathing, the closeness of her mouth to the mic, the softness of inhale, and the slight tremor of her exhale. When a listener wears headphones, these breaths create an uncanny nearness, as if she were standing just beside them. Breath becomes something spatial, directing the viewer's movement and shaping their relationship to the environment. The work relies on breath not as a metaphor but as part of the material quality of the recording. It guides the audience through a city creating a doubled reality the real world and Cardiff's breathed world layered on top of each other.



Figure 7: Audio walk image

In Cardiff's more sculptural installations, like *The Forty Part Motet* (2001), breath becomes present in a different way. The work consists of forty speakers arranged in an oval each emitting the voice of a single singer performing Thomas Tallis's *Spem in alium*. What makes the piece powerful is not just the harmony but the way you can hear the singer's breath before and after each phrase the inhale that prepares the sound the release at the end of a line. These breaths reveal the labour of the voice turning the choir into forty living bodies occupying the space. Moving among the speakers you become aware of the physicality of each voice, its vulnerabilities, and strengths. Breath becomes the connecting element between the singers and the audience, collapsing the distance between live presence and recorded performance. Here, breath functions as a connective tissue between the individual voices and the audience, reminding us that sound is inseparable from lungs, mouths, and physicality.



Figure 8: *Audio space*

What makes Cardiff so effective for a case study centred on breath is her ability to transform voice into a spatial material. The voice is not merely a narrative its atmospheric. it shapes how the audience feels inside the work. Abramovic uses breath to expose the limits of the body and Cattrell uses material processes to reveal hidden systems, Cardiff uses breath to construct emotional and architectural environments. Her work encourages a form of listening that engulfs the viewer making them aware of their own breath in response to hers. The intimacy of the whisperer and closeness of the inhale creates a sense of shared space even though Cardiff is not physically present.

Theoretically, Cardiff aligns with Tim Ingold's ideas about movement and atmosphere. Ingold proposes that materials including sounds exist as processes rather than objects. In Cardiff's practice the voice itself becomes a kind of line drawn through space. The breath embedded in her recordings functions as a material process rather than a stagnant object emphasising the relational nature of sound. The work fully exists through the audience's movement and their responsiveness to her voice. Breath becomes a participant in the process of making not something fixed or final.

Her work also resonates with Seetal Solanki's idea that materials carry emotional and cultural meaning. Cardiff uses the human voice arguably one of the most intimate materials to evoke memory, intimacy, and presence. Breath is particularly present here and it marks the sound of closeness and life force. Cardiff's manipulation of this breath

within the voice makes her installations emotionally driven. She is not simply documenting sound she is crafting an experience where breath guides the viewer and comforts them, unsettles them, or pulls them into a connection.

There is also a clear link to Gaston Bachelard's writing in *The Poetics of Space* that supports Cardiff's practice. He describes how certain atmospheres generate interior experiences, turning space into something psychological. Cardiff's whispered guidance during an audio walk creates exactly this effect. A busy city becomes an interiorised landscape shaped by her breathing voice. Her installations build “rooms” made of sound, where breath is the element that softens and shapes the walls of those rooms.

Within the context of this research on breath as material, Cardiff demonstrates how breath can be used not only physically and visually (as with Abramovic or Cattrell) but sonically. She shows that breath carries emotional weight and spatial power. Her practice highlights how breath can anchor a viewer in the present moment providing intimacy or entirely transforming a space. More importantly Cardiff uses breath to foster connection between artist and audience, sound, and space and as well as inner and external environments.

Her work expands the understanding of breath beyond biology, and it becomes an immersive medium that envelops the viewer shaping how they listen, feel, and react.

Through this research, it has become clear that breath operates in contemporary art as both literal substance and a conceptual one, something that moves between body, environment, and audience with a fluidity that few other materials possess. The practices of Marina Abramovic, Annie Cattrell, and Janet Cardiff reveal just how differently artists can work with the same phenomenon. Abramovic uses breath through the body's endurance and emotional exposure, allowing the audience to witness tension between fragility and resilience. Cattrell translates internal atmospheres in physical form, turning the hidden spaces of the body into sculptural environments. Cardiff shifts the focus toward listening, using breath within the voice to create sonic spaces that alter how the audience experiences their surroundings.

Across these examples, breath emerges as a material that moves easily between physical presence and conceptual depth. It can be felt, heard, imagined, or embodied. It shapes duration in performance, determines the form of sculptural works, and transforms the listeners sense of space. What becomes evident is that breath carries meaning beyond its biological function; it communicates vulnerability, intimacy, and atmosphere. It unsettles the boundaries between artist, material, and viewer, foregrounding relationships rather than static objects, these in which all align closely with Ingold's, Solanki's, and Bachelard's ideas.

Examining breath through different media also shows how sensory experience becomes central to meaning and making. Whether encountered through a performer's trembling exhale, a glass sculpture of the lungs, or a whisper that feels close enough to touch, breath invites a heightened awareness of presence. It encourages the audience to become conscious of their own bodily rhythms in response to the work, creating a form of shared experience that is subtle but deeply felt.

Reflecting on this investigation, it becomes clear that breath challenges conventional ideas of what constitutes material in art. It resists containment, shifts constantly, and is inseparable from the body that produces it. Despite this it can be shaped, captured, amplified, or transformed, making it unexpectedly versatile. The theories of Ingold, Solanki, and Bachelard helped frame this complexity, offering ways to understand breath as relational, atmospheric, and emotionally charged.

Ultimately, this research shows that breath is far more than an invisible necessity. It is an active and expressive material capable of generating form, shaping encounters, and prompting reflection. Through Abramovic, Cattrell, and Cardiff, we see how breath can hold presence, carry emotion, and create connections across space. Their work demonstrates that even the most intangible elements can produce powerful artistic experiences, expanding our understanding of what contemporary art can be and how deeply it can engage the senses.

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