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Visceral Resistance and The Vulnerability of Breathing

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic invites us to re-examine the relations between aesthetics and social, environmental, and bodily issues. This essay highlights these interconnections by focusing on the vulnerability of breathing from a visceral point of view. Merging theoretical accounts with investigations of selected artworks by Latvian artists Dace Džeriņa and Rasa Jansone, the aesthetic apprehension of breathing allows for the advancement of feminist politics for a liveable and breathable life and bodily flourishing.

Keywords

Visceral Feminism, Vulnerability, Corporeality, Breathing Aesthetics, Contemporary Art

...with every breath we take,
we expose our lungs to the outside world.

Michael Marder, 2016, 130

There is no outside.

Karim Sariahmed, 2020, 15.10

Breathing is a universal experience that is shared by both human and non-human beings. It is the essential precondition of life. So, the capacity to breathe can be viewed as vital and crucial. Recently, this simple truth has been foregrounded in an unprecedented and alarming way by the health crisis evoked by the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic that has reached

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so many people worldwide has posed new challenges and questions in such a short period. By taking the perspective of corporeal feminist aesthetics, this essay will examine the vulnerability of breathing as an issue of social injustice enacted by multiple cultural, economic, and political forces, gender, and the normative notion of fit femininity among them. For advancing feminist politics of a liveable and breathable life, this essay will tentatively foreground the notion of visceral feminism and breathing aesthetics that emerge from the notion of bodily flourishing and well-being.

This essay derives from the accounts of feminist social theory, notably, works of Judith Butler and Magdalena Górska, as well as the respiratory philosophy of Luce Irigaray, in order to apply the theoretical findings to the analysis of artworks by Latvian artists, Dace Džeriņa (Fig. 1) and Rasa Janšone (Fig. 2). The analysis will implement the principle of aesthetic apprehension, instead of a more commonly used “aesthetic appreciation”—feminist theorist Carolyn Korsmeyer has elaborated this methodological distinction to underline that art provides not only pleasure but also affords a “powerful means to convey difficult truths” (2011, 8). The two artworks to be examined in this essay allow us to articulate the inherent ambivalence of breathing and the entangled nature of its political and visceral dimensions; thus, it provides an example of the engagement of aesthetics with urgent social issues. Combining theoretical and artistic perspectives will detect vulnerability’s bearing on our bodily life on a visceral level. It reaches out to our respiratory tract and lungs and affects the oxygen supply crucial for survival. Thus, vulnerability should be understood as embodied, material and affective. However, the body should not be viewed as a passive surface of political imprints nor a mere victim of social injustice. Instead, the body exhibits its capacity to revive by using the state of vulnerability to foreground visceral resistance. This capacity is foremost exemplified in the ability to breathe and, as the analysis of the artworks will demonstrate, can provide a resource for an embodied political agency.

A Breathable Life

While the issue of air quality and pollution had been extensively addressed by a variety of scholars from different disciplines, ecofeminism and new materialism among them, the disparities of breathing disclosed by the current pandemic have provided a new challenge for aesthetics to account for urgent environmental, bodily, and political issues. By aggravating the dynamics of “cruel inequalities” (Kindig 2020, 5.18), seclusion, separatism, and

discrimination, the health crisis of COVID-19 has also triggered a political crisis of care (Winant 2020, 8.7), especially of the care work that is usually performed by women and has reinforced traditional gender roles and stereotypical behavior. For months already, as a part of the strategy to fight the pandemic, the capacity to breathe effortlessly has been restricted in various ways, for example, by introducing the norm of wearing protective face masks and going into lockdowns. This restriction has compelled people to cope with the stationary aerial atmospheres of their living spaces and the diminished liveability of their immobile bodies. Also, it is estimated that the pandemic has increased domestic violence worldwide, thus exposing the vulnerability of those for whom the home is not a safe place. The safety of the workplace outside the home has likewise been called into question: many workers continue to face the risk that breathing might endanger their health or the health of their family members, and many of them lack the advantage of having health insurance or paid sick-leaves. The physical weight of breathlessness has also been felt by the healthcare professionals who endure a twelve-hour shift while wearing impermeable protective clothes when taking care of the sick in overcrowded hospitals. Finally, many COVID-19 patients were struggling with the most devastating feeling of suffocation when their lungs could not resist the destructive operations of the virus.

Breathing inequalities have resulted from the outbreak of the virus and the public policies carried out during the pandemic. They have affected different people in different ways and, by exposing their embodied and visceral vulnerabilities, have revealed the ambiguity of breath that, while being fundamental and inalienable, has become a matter of social stratification, advantages, or lack of them. Consequently, in a pandemic, if with every breath we take, we expose our lungs to the outside world, following philosopher Michael Marder (2016, 130), we do not do so only to embrace the multiple possibilities of life-affirming encounters the world can offer. A more careful reading of the statement detects a life-threatening perspective as well: with every breath, we enact our susceptibility to pain, discrimination and even defer our means for survival.

The air that flows and circulates in the lungs may demonstrate the continual material exchange between the body's interiority and the exteriority of the world. The intensity of these interactions cast doubts on the possibility of the separation of both. Material feminism scholars have already addressed such doubts; for example, Stacy Alaimo developed the term *trans-corporeality*. This term allows us to "travel through the entangled territories of

material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual,” and “acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” (2010, 2-3). Governments, workplaces, and living arrangements that sustain bodily vulnerability should be considered among those “other actors.” Breathing, therefore, is an eloquent example of trans-corporeality that allows for a visceral analysis of breathing as a political engagement. In this sense, there is no “outside.” Namely, no political, social, or ideological organization is irrelevant to an embodiment, its affective corporeal patterns, and prospects for survival.

The theoretical significance of breathing has often been overlooked in Western philosophy, allegedly since Plato (Škof and Berndtson 2018, ix-xviii). Even when breathing did capture philosophers’ attention, its importance has typically been articulated within frameworks of spirit, gods, and the soul; or by aligning breathing with will and imagination, thinking and consciousness, logos, mindfulness, and poetry (Škof and Berndtson 2018). One of the few philosophical accounts of breath in the Western tradition has been elaborated by Luce Irigaray, where she cautions against “the forgetting of air” (1999) and asks for the “cultivation of breath” (2002). In positioning breath within maternal ethics, as well as interrogating its relation to voice and speech (1996, 121-128), Irigaray renders breathing as a way of spiritual and cultural ascent. While exploring her views, I will instead attend to a materialist understanding of breath from the perspective of feminist politics that will present a visceral interpretation of Irigaray.

In unfolding the political dimension of breathing, this essay is also aligned with classic postcolonial and feminist perspectives that refuse to embrace the mind-body dualism of the earlier views and strive to understand breathing in corporeal terms. These authors exhibit a vivid interest in the political agency of breathing, while their accounts often oscillate between the metaphorical and literal (i.e., embodied and immediate) understanding of breathing, as, for example, in the movement “Black Lives Matter” that has responded to the last words uttered by the victims of police violence: “I can’t breathe...”¹ Thus, racist bodily oppression is manifested as a lack of breath in a rather physiological sense. Likewise, the lived experience of breathing, as well as its robust, transgressive, and critical power for social change, has been captured in the notions of “combat breathing”, a strategy to resist the violence of the colonial state, by Franz Fanon (1994

¹ The slogan originated in 2014 when Eric Garner died in a police chokehold. It is estimated that the phrase has been used by over 70 people (Baker *et al.* 2020).

[1965]); and “airless space,” a term used to describe the conditions of poverty and isolation fostered by a neoliberal capitalist state, by Shulamith Firestone (1998). The relations of bodily vulnerability and its environments along with social and economic forces that affect air quality have been captured in Alaimo’s term “the proletarian lung.” Her inquiry proves that the human body is never “rigidly enclosed” and can be harmed and transformed by social systems and material substances (2010, 28-58). An intersectional feminist interrogation of breath in its corporeal contexts that allow us to consider oppressive social structures in a new materialist way has been carried out by a feminist scholar, Magdalena Górska (2016, 2018). She proposes that the question of the breathability of life ultimately leads to “re-searching the dynamics of geopolitical economic and (neo)colonialist power relations [...] that materialize [...] in matters such as whose lives are breathable and whose loss of breath is grievable” (Górska 2018, 251-254). To elucidate her argument, Górska had selected rather visceral examples of breathing: the “black lung disease” of coal miners, phone sex breath play performed by a young female student, and breathing in anxieties and panic attacks (2016, 24).

In Górska’s work, the notion of a breathable life has been introduced via the writings of philosopher Sara Ahmed, who has suggested that the political struggle for a bearable life of marginalized groups (for example, queer) foremost is as a struggle to “have space to breathe” (Ahmed 2010, 120). Likewise, accounts of feminist politics of breathing are greatly indebted to Judith Butler (2004, 2009), who has examined the notions of liveability in response to recent outbreaks of violence, racism, and warfare. Butler proposes to apprehend life, its liveability, and entitlement to persistence and flourishing, from a perspective of a new bodily ontology that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, and bodily persistence, as well as desire, work, and the claims of language and social belonging. She underlines that the body is “always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others” (Butler 2009, 2-3). Femininity and motherhood can be regarded as such organizations whose impact on breathing will be analyzed shortly.



Fig. 1. Dace Džeriņa, *Liberation*, 2002 (video still). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Rasa Jansone, *Mother*, 2017 (performance). Courtesy of the artist.

**Visceral Affects:
Breath, Perspiration, and Flourishing**

Feminist theoreticians have often evoked the notion of the visceral in a figurative sense. They have linked the visceral with the body's and affect's materiality. For example, the visceral is viewed in a study on the material geographies of food as "the realm of internally-felt sensations, mood and states of being, which are born from the sensory engagement with the material world" (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008, 462). This essay proposes an outline of visceral feminism, derived from its literal meaning, namely, the viscera (lungs being among them). Accordingly, since the inner organs and their proper functions are crucial for one's health and well-being, the visceral is the ultimate target of any political action. Social and political organizations do not exist "outside" one's body, nor do they touch it on the "surface." They permeate and affect the lived experience of every political subject. While this understanding transcends the scope of "internally-felt sensations" and "sensory engagement," it also questions the outside-inside binary, the private, and the political. However, an opposing view—unstratified exchange's messy entanglement and flux—may not be beneficial either. Therefore, the notion of viscosity allows us to preserve the view of the body as partially contained (its organs do not flow freely), partially inaccessible (we cannot see nor identify them), and partially autonomous (the organs in most cases function independently, despite our will, and even without our awareness). Such a view allows for critical investigations on how the body is given, shaped, and enacted by social, cultural, and political forces.

These forces can be both benevolent (nurturing and supportive) and malignant (aggravating one's corporeal vulnerability and intruding on the body's visceral commitment to survive). Although it might sound uncommon to think about a body's commitment (since we are used to attributing will only to rationality and consciousness), I argue, along with other material feminists,² that the body strives to ensure its persistence and flourishing. Thus, the body demonstrates agentic potential. Moreover, visceral feminism emphasizes that the body, especially its viscosity, is the first locus of one's political engagement. While we may discuss abstract political ideas and wonder what their slogans mean, it is impossible to be mistaken about, for example, one's hunger or, to get closer to this essay's topic, feeling of breath-

² See, for example, Alaimo and Hekman 2008 among others.

lessness. Thus, the affective dimension is viewed as a medium that exposes the subtle interconnections of social power structures and the body's (re)actions that might, for example, take the shape of surrender, outrage, or resistance.

To make my point clearer, let me now turn to the artistic findings of two contemporary artists from Latvia, Rasa Jansone and Dace Džeriņa. By recognizing and exposing corporeal vulnerability, which is both gendered and situated, these artworks acquire the power "to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself" (Butler 2004, 43) and can guide us to the visceral resistance of a breathing body. It should be noted that this kind of resistance does not ensure anything immediately, nor does it provide a solution to the inequalities of breathing to overcome injurability and interdependency completely. Instead, vulnerability and resistance are mutually constitutive. One presupposes the other and vice versa, enabling the body to become a "potentially effective mobilizing force" (Butler 2016, 14), enhancing its political agency.

Consequently, the framework of visceral feminism emerges from the interconnectedness of the body's viscosity and politics, corporeal vulnerability, and the prospect for survival. When used for interpreting art, it allows us to foreground a perspective of breathing aesthetics, in which breathing merges its physiological and social functions to attest to corporeal flourishing. This position is anchored in the interest that feminist aesthetics commonly takes in gender and everyday life and assumes that art is crucial for social change.

Dace Džeriņa (born in 1971) engages with video, installations, and scenography, while Rasa Jansone (born in 1973) is known chiefly as a painter, although she frequently employs installations and strategies of textual interventions. Two artworks will be examined for this essay: a video work by Džeriņa, "Liberation" (2002), and a performance by Rasa Jansone, "Mother" (2017). None of these works (as the years of production indicate) had been intended to be a commentary on the COVID-19 pandemic, though they exhibit a vivid interest in breathing. I consider this lack of intention a strength, not a shortcoming: the specific context and purposes of creating these works will ensure a non-reductive perspective and highlight unexpected encounters that will rethink the current health crisis, care, and breath.

Džeriņa's work "Liberation" consists of six video pieces, each approximately 2 minutes long, showing a woman's face in affective states like pain or fear, and during activities like dancing, having sex, sweating in a sauna, and doing physical exercise. The woman is presented on a neutral back-

ground that does not provide any situational context. The only sources of information are her facial expression as well as the physiological changes in her body: the tightening and relaxation of muscles, a slight movement of the pupils of the eyes, pulse patterns visible in her blood-vessels, and foremost, the changing rhythms of breathing and intensities of perspiration. While the simple function of perspiration is to cool the body and reduce blood pressure (Waite 2014, 667), the word's etymology acknowledges its proximity to breathing since *perspirātiōn* in Neo-Latin means "a breathing through."³ Therefore, the process of sweating may be referred to as a type of respiration, perhaps a somewhat "vegetal" one, where "our whole bodies breathe through the pores in our skin" (Marder 2016, 131) resembling the breathing surface of a plant. Respiration, along with changes in heart rate and metabolism, is an agent of visceral affect that (re)acts upon its environment (the outside world) and discloses its inequalities and inherent structures of violence.

It seems accurate to point out the botanical roots of the word "flourishing" that parallels human and vegetal lives. The need to develop a new ecological economy that acknowledges the respect for life and the hospitality of the vegetal world has also been expanded by Luce Irigaray in the work co-authored with Michael Marder (2016). The vegetal metaphors used to talk about our well-being (both individual and communal) are neither contingent nor arbitrary. Instead, they highlight the mutual interdependence and material vulnerability of both human and nonhuman beings and reminds us that the oxygen human beings need for their survival is ensured by the "aerial placenta" (Irigaray 2016, 21), namely, the plants. Likewise, this metaphor can be compared with Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality that might suggest that some of our inner organs are outside of us from a visceral point of view.

The female body in Džeriņa's work also transcends its corporeal borders through cathartic discharge, the unwinding or liberation of tension, as the work's title suggests. At this usage, the term liberation departs from its historical roots to acquire a more affective dimension. While in the case of dance, sex, and physical exertion, the awareness of liberation might be relatively immediate, the affective dynamics of fear and pain, and to a certain extent: being in a sauna, instead envisage a slow increase of intensity that becomes unbearable at some point. It is important to note that the videos do not have any sound, apart from an almost indiscernible humming back-

³ WordReference.com English Dictionary, 'Perspiration', [online], <https://www.wordreference.com/definition/perspiration> [accessed: 10.12.2020].

ground. It somewhat resembles a monotonous noise produced by a machine, not a human body in an affective state. Possibly, the artist had decided to avoid the expressiveness of the female voice to prevent the viewers from developing a strong emotional response to it, encouraging them instead to focus on the subtle details of the corporeal transformations that otherwise would risk remaining unnoticed. It seems the artist would suggest that we are prone to overlook our bodily needs, capacities, and vulnerabilities. Therefore, attending to breathing patterns and perspiration would be a way to enhance one's bodily awareness. Close attention to the body's visceral responses will not only help overcome self-alienation but also allow us to view Džeriņa's work as a political enactment of a liveable and flourishing life, the strive to find a space to fulfill one's everyday bodily functions: to breathe and to sweat freely. This focus highlights social and cultural restrictions imposed on bodies, among them—fit and proper femininity's normative standard.

The woman's body in Džeriņa's work is marked with distinctly feminine features (the make-up, haircut, and clothing). The six circumstances she experiences, being in pain and fear, dancing, having sex, playing sports, and sweating in a sauna, can all be typically gender-charged. Due to sexual differences and the peculiarity of their cultural situatedness, women experience a particular kind of pain and fear that is intrinsic to the vulnerabilities of their gendered bodies. Likewise, the experience of sexual pleasure, physical exercise, and dance have a distinct gendered perspective,⁴ and the very practice of attending a sauna is often based on the segregation of sexes, not to mention the historical association of the sauna and birth-giving rituals that existed in traditional Latvian culture, as well as elsewhere. Thus, Džeriņa's work locates the female body against social expectations: conventional hygienic codes, patterns of decency, and proper behavior that ought to constitute respectable femininity.

Women's bodily fluids are often considered less acceptable than those of men. They have become associated with disgust, pollution, contamination and have become considered abject.⁵ It is not surprising to discover that women are pressured to maintain a sweat-free body with a matte skin surface that smells good (Waitt 2014, 671-673). Perspiration undermines the Western idea of tightly managed femininity, exemplified by a clean, smooth,

⁴ Feminist theories and antropologies offer comprehensive research on these topics. See, among many others, Irigaray (1985), Martin (1987) and Young (2005).

⁵ For feminist studies on bodily fluids, including analysis of views of Julia Kristeva and Mary Douglas, see Elizabeth Grosz (1994).

slim, contained, and soft body. This standard also presupposes a normative feminine character: one whose hunger, sexuality, desire, emotions, and affects are controlled, repressed, and denied to appear docile, modest, gentle, pleasing, well-mannered, and submissive. Similar regulations apply to female breathing. While it is encouraged in some cases (for example, in labor, choir singing, or phone sex for arousing the client [Górska 2016, 160-164]), frequently loud and expressive breathing is not considered feminine. It is peculiar to note that one of the typical female maladies, hysteria, was believed to be a form of breathing difficulty that led to fainting and *tussis nervosa*, a condition of the sudden expiration of air from the lungs (Grosz 1994, 40). Perhaps the history of wearing corsets has left its imprint on the body's memory as well. The scientific findings of sex differences in breathing suggest that respiratory function is influenced by the different phases of the menstrual cycle and common hormonal and metabolic conditions that might correlate with developing diseases like asthma, cystic fibrosis, lung cancer, *et cetera*. Due to anatomical differences, women are more prone to develop hypoxemia, an abnormally low amount of oxygen in the blood, during physical exercise (LoMauro and Aliverti, 2018). However, the diaphragmatic breathing that is considered the most efficient way to breathe is more common among men, while women most typically tend to perform a shallower version, the so-called chest breathing. The different breathing patterns are regulated not only anatomically and physiologically, but also socially since women in Western culture are expected to have a slim figure with a flat stomach.

In contrast, the rising and falling of breasts in "feminine breath" has often been made into an object of heterosexual fascination. These considerations allow us to conclude that breathing is a gendered practice. It aims to control and tame female bodies, keeping them in a disabled and dependent condition. Such control might be exerted not only by social structures, but also through self-surveillance and self-denial (Meagher 2003, 36; Waitt 2014, 674). As a result, in breathing, a woman fails to summon the full possibilities of her body, which is simultaneously experienced as a capacity and a burden, and the breathing itself seems to develop a pattern of "feminine hesitancy," to borrow the term from Iris Merion Young. Her accounts on socially constructed habits of feminine body comportment are classic in feminist philosophy (2005, 37). Therefore, the body and its visceral manifestations are regarded as the ultimate target and trophy of gender-based oppression and social organization. In Džeriņa's "Liberation," on the contrary, the woman is allowed to breathe, sweat, and discharge her emotional tension, and in doing

so, she successfully transgresses the limits of the docile, fit and controlled, femininity. Her body is not only subject to control but also reworks the norm and “expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (Butler 2004, 217). By transgressing the gendered scripts of physical performance, the artist exposes and enhances the bodily vulnerability of her protagonist, who is provided with a resistance strategy: her breathing treated as an agentic potentiality or a mobilizing force that exceeds the mere limits of her lungs or chest. Instead, it is breathing with one’s skin, perhaps even breathing with a trans-corporeal body that renders it “unruly,” even “unfeminine.” By questioning the restrictive ideals of domesticated, controlled, tidy, and hygienic femininity, breath affirms not only the body’s vulnerability but also its rights to be loud, excessive, and subversive, to accelerate or slow down one’s breathing rhythms, to generate an affective-material discharge like bodily fluids and vapors. Thus, breathing reveals the emotional, affective, and a body’s sexual power, grounded in its viscosity.

Indeed, the visceral view of the body in Dace Džeriņa’s work allows us to perceive the body as partially contained—its corporeal experiences seem to be arranged in a particular way. It is partially inaccessible since we do not know the reasons for its affective states and discharges. Finally, it is partially autonomous—its corporeal processes submit to neither the viewer’s nor the woman’s control. This notion explains why the body is neither rigidly enclosed nor completely diffused or enacted by its environment. At the same time, it still provides enough evidence of the social forces that can be unjust and suffocating; by striving to breathe freely and overcoming corporeal hesitancy, the body endeavors to achieve what is promised in the work’s title: a (visceral) liberation.

Thus, the work by Dace Džeriņa offers several meaningful perspectives that can be applied to the analysis of the current health crisis. Firstly, the discomforts, restrictions, and hardships of breathing (and other corporeal activities) indicate that the body and its essential functions respond to social and political processes viscerally. The diverse ways of interacting that unite the body and politics are also gendered. Therefore, the effects of the pandemic on women should be interrogated with more scrutiny. While there are already some accounts of how the pandemic has accelerated the rates of domestic violence, reinforced the traditional division of labor, and increased the amount of care work, more studies should be carried out to trace the gendered inequalities of breathing and their impact on female corporeal vulnerability.

Secondly, the visceral affect and resistance that Dace Džeriņa elaborates in her work can be used to describe the experience of COVID-19 time that is quite common: new patterns of social and political life with unprecedented restrictions, risks, and insecurities have brought about a failure to summon the full possibilities of the body, i.e., to move, to work and foremost to breathe. Paradoxically, the unexpected conditions might have also urged to focus on one's corporeal capabilities and have developed a more nuanced, alert, and intense bodily awareness. By taking away some of the corporeal benefits of the pre-Covid age, the pandemic has pointed to the bodily dimension of personal and collective survival. Moreover, the pandemic has finally foregrounded the viscosity of the body: its openness and trans-corporeality have made it impossible to shut oneself off from the unwelcome guest, the virus, nor can its corporeal effects be entirely explained or controlled. Therefore, it can be assumed that the pandemic has generated a visceral affect. While being anchored in our bodily functions and injurabilities, visceral affect can also pave the road to resistance and social critique that urges us to strive for corporeal flourishing.

Suffocation and Resistance

While Džeriņa's video serves to highlight life-affirming and politically mobilizing corporeal agency by presenting a breathing body, artist Rasa Jansone focuses on the conditions of breathlessness, oppression, and violence. Her performance, "Mother," was part of a project, "Femblock," organized by the Latvian Centre of Contemporary Art in 2017. The project consisted of 12 performances, each of them dedicated to a particular feminist movement or concept. The performances were photo-documented and published in a (note)book.⁶ For the performance, Jansone reworked the term "mothering" and built its analysis on the feminist distinction between mothering and motherhood, where the latter indicates an institution that reproduces patriarchal power and control over women. Mothering, on the contrary, encapsulates a range of positive experiences and views maternal embodiment as a source of empowerment, agency, and social change (Rich 1976; Trebilcot 1983). In a photograph of the performance, Rasa Jansone (in the middle) and two artists from the project's group stand motionless

⁶ Apart from Rasa Jansone, artists Ingrīda Pičukāne, Mētra Saberova, Vivianna Maria Stanislavska, Vika Eksta and social anthropologist Anna Žabicka also took part in the project.

against a completely dark background. Their figures appear earnest and sorrowful. Each of them wears a baby's diaper on their faces, precisely like protective face masks worn during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even though the performance does not feature a baby, conceptually, it explicitly references the holy Virgin Mary,⁷ who embodies maternity's peaceful and sacred beauty in Western culture. As the superior mother (God's mother), the Virgin Mary has defined the standard of good motherhood. According to the artist⁸, this standard has been continuously imposed upon women, even today. The purpose of the performance is not to deny the aesthetic allure of the iconic image of impossible motherhood but to reveal its unattainable demands and how they are used against women. Compared to the Virgin, no woman is good, sacred, and holy enough, and no sacrifice is too big or painful. An excellent excuse for questioning women's rights and justifying gender-based violence is found by positioning women as inferior and flawed. Recent debates about the abortion law in Poland or the hesitance to ratify the Istanbul Convention in Latvia and other countries are profound examples that show the political neglect of women's interests and the reluctance to alleviate their social and corporeal vulnerabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the corporeal vulnerability of mothers in yet new ways. For example, restrictions from having a supportive person present at birth centers and hospitals have undermined the achievement of the long struggle to prevent the separation of women from their families at birth. Likewise, the demand to wear a face mask for the first stage of labor may intervene with patterns of breathing that are believed to be rather crucial for a successful course of delivery. While these restrictions are necessary to protect the health professionals, they may negatively affect the lived experience and the prospects of maternal flourishing in labor. Ultimately, the pandemic has also aggravated the social and cultural isolation of the mothers of small children since it is not safe anymore even to call a babysitter.

The diaper on the face of each woman is a soft, good-smelling, and seemingly harmless object. Diapers are believed to be an example of technological progress and are considered crucial to facilitate the daily care work of parenting. In addition, the diaper used in the performance is decorated with animal figures to create a more favorable impression. However, this token on the artists' faces of progress and optimism also represents the myths of

⁷ The reference is strengthened by the fact that Madonna often appears in other works by Jansone.

⁸ From a private conversation with Rasa Jansone [12.12.2020.].

motherhood, referred to by Jansone as “the sweet lies” that in reality resemble the familiar substances found in a used diaper. The diaper confronts the mother’s face with its unbreathable depths; the diaper’s content is violent and oppressive yet remains invisible from the outside. Notably, the closure of the nose and the mouth also indicates the inability to breathe and speak. Irigaray highlights this double connection when she states that “listening to the other [...] is respecting his or her breath” (1996, 121). Irigaray claims that ordinary cultural and interpersonal exchange stifles breath, producing truths that are “breathless, suffocated and suffocating.” These breathless truths deceive us by inviting us to breathe less in order to come nearer to “correct thinking,” and Irigaray ironically concludes that “death would then be the guarantee of our nearness to truth.”

There is little doubt that the feminist account of breathing is more eager to embrace life instead of terminating it. Therefore one of its apparent aims is to recognize and dismiss the “correct thinking.” The performance “Mother” succeeds in unfolding the breathlessness of motherhood and renounces the social structures of authoritarian power that is reluctant to listen and respect women, wills to ignore their reproductive rights, does not recognize their specific needs, and consequently inhibits their breathing and flourishing. The suffocated and suffocating truths—the oppressive cultural, economic, and political hierarchies supported by neoliberal capitalism and right-wing policies that increase inequalities—can be counteracted by enhancing mothering as an embodied, emotional and affective experience that fosters resistance and allows women to speak of their political interests and well-being, in other words, to uphold a breathable truth.

For visceral feminism, the breathable truth that might be drawn from the maternal agency of nurturing new life ought to be redefined in terms of sharing, not giving. Whereas the latter suggests life is passed from one person to another, the principle of sharing indicates that life remains with the giver. This view opposes a more traditional understanding of motherhood as a selfless endeavor or sacred victimhood. Instead, it alleviates the unnecessary suffering of women that is often perceived as “natural” and “feminine” and expresses gratitude to the generosity of their bodies. The visceral dimension of sharing life is incredibly vivid in gestation via the transmission of oxygen to the fetus through maternal blood. This unique model of coexistence allows women to engender with their breath, invisibly and silently (Irigaray 2002, 80), which is also an enactment of one’s corporeal agency. However, the moment of engendering does not end after giving birth. It continues to be reinforced via care work and affective labor for both the indi-

vidual baby and, more generally, the social and emotional well-being of the community. The breathlessness of mothers in Jansone's performance thus signals that maternal work is often neglected, undervalued, and considered to be self-obvious, a natural extension of femininity, which renders mothering into a condition of increased social and cultural vulnerability.

The principle of sharing breath does not limit itself to mothering only. Living through the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that such engendering is part of our everyday life which unfolds in the commonly shared space of a breath. Despite the regulations of social distancing, the spread of the virus provides enough evidence that one cannot stay outside and have only her air to breathe. The practices of sharing breath might also engender considerations of sharing social and corporeal vulnerabilities, hoping they will not be violated or neglected. We are prone to suffer not only from our breathlessness but also from the breathlessness of others, especially of the most vulnerable social groups. Thus, the pandemic incites rethinking the models of coexistence, mutual interdependency, and breathable transcorporeality not only on a social but visceral level.

Since exposing corporeal vulnerability means to change the political effect of vulnerability by turning it into resistance, the artworks examined in this essay offer two different perspectives to approach the vulnerability of women. By highlighting the gender-based restrictions of the body's visceral (re)actions and encouraging us to ensure some space to breathe, move and act freely, the work of Dace Džeriņa urges to develop corporeal self-awareness understood as a condition for political engagement and social critique. Rasa Jansone, from a different point of view, reveals the corporeal vulnerability of women when their life choices are judged against the standard of suffocating motherhood—an allegedly sacred, while institutionalized and authoritarian ideal. The diapers in her performance and the immobility of the artists' bodies parallel the restrictive regulations introduced because of COVID-19. The similarity of the diaper and the face mask is evocative: while both devices are intended to collect bodily discharges, in Jansone's work, its misplacement causes violence and suffocation. While Jansone has managed to locate the reasons for mothers' breathlessness, it is yet too early to assert which kind of "correct thinking" the pandemic has produced by suffocating truths and which voices are getting silenced or marginalized. Tentatively, however, it could be suggested that the strategies used in many countries to control the spread of the virus have fostered isolation, seclusion, precarity, increased state power, the control of citizens, and reduced political activism. The pandemic has entailed losses for various communities and

social groups, art workers being among them. These losses should be measured not only in economic terms but also in their aggravating impact on one's emotional and corporeal well-being. The similarity with the ideology of motherhood is revealing. In both cases, the rhetoric of suffering's inevitability is evoked, framing governmental failures and the victims of the pandemic (the poor, the unemployed, but also women and children) as "natural" and "unavoidable." Therefore, the commitment to breathe could be the most basic and mundane form of resistance to be performed during the pandemic. The body is not only the battleground of cruel inequalities, but also a resource for the affective and material agency that can be loud, excessive, or hardly discernible.

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