

Frantzsen&Mjanger

Maria Almås Frantzsen
Ruth Hol Mjanger

Shapes of Breath

RAM Publications

(7th issue)



Shapes of Breath

Frantzsen&Mjanger

Maria Almås Frantzsen
Ruth Hol Mjanger

Shapes of Breath

RAM Publications

(7th issue)

7	Index
9	Keynote
11	Introduction — Joakim Borda-Pedreira
21	Elusive matter: glass, air, and solidarity in Frantzsen&Mjanger's work — Johanna Zanon
41	Expressions of Breath
46	To cast a breath in glass
55	Memories of Breath — Johanna Zanon
65	Biographies
70	Credits

Surrounded by

air

the breath

inside us

outside us

How can this invisible community
become visible?

What is the Shape of Breath?

Since reopening our new premises in the Kvadraturen gallery district of Oslo in 2019, RAM Gallery has published six editions of RAM Publications, a series of exhibition catalogues highlighting our exhibition program of contemporary craft. This is our seventh edition, and we are happy that this initiative has been very well received by the audience, as it seems to fill a need of in-depth perspectives of a current exhibition, while keeping accessible and low cost.

The artist duo Frantzen&Mjanger were invited to exhibit at RAM after receiving the Craft Award for their work *Holding Breath*, a prize given to an outstanding contribution) by Bildende Kunstneres Hjelpesfond at the Annual National craft Exhibition (Årsutstillingen). We are thrilled to host such a stringent and experimental artistic project, that dare to challenge set notions of the boundaries between spectator and art work that regulate the gallery space. Their work is intent on involvement and participation, encouraging human interaction as a vehicle for art production. To a point, that conforms to Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics, which views the artist as a catalyst for art, rather than a creator. Frantzen&Mjanger, the collective artist name of Maria Almås Frantzen and Ruth Hol Mjanger, however, emphasize the collaborative aspect and invite the audience not only to interact, but to co-create and take part of the aesthetic experience on equal footing with the artists.

It is interesting to note that in a time when the artist role is under strong pressure to define itself in individualistic terms, as a trademark brand easily distinguishable in the mediatic buss, Frantzen&Mjanger choose to work

collectively in a sort of ‘slow art’ tendency, where process and development is more important than authorship and end result. The exhibition entitled *Shapes of Breath* presents a poetic and reflective experience to an urban art scene that for the last few years have been more occupied, or forced to occupy itself, with the grandiosity and narcissism that has been fostered around the construction of two mega-art-museums in Oslo – the new National Museum and the Munch Museum, now chauvinistically renamed to MUNCH. We believe that *Shapes of Breath*, is a timely contribution to re-adjusting focus to the meaning of art and its place in society, moving away from a corporate vision of art as a commodity, a mere means of attracting clicks, likes and international tourism. Because like Frantzsen&Mjanger, at RAM we also believe that art can and should be a transformative experience.

Our special gratitude goes to IESGS/Norwegian Crafts for generous support of our educations program in 2021, including this publication, as well as our other sponsors, Norske Kunsthåndverkere and Oslo City Council.

Thanks to Johanna Zanon for writing two beautiful contributions to this publication, and to Kamil Kak for designing it.

And naturally, many thanks to the artists for all their hard work and a wonderful project!

Joakim Borda-Pedreira
Director RAM Gallery











Elusive matter: glass, air, and solidarity in Frantzsens&Mjanger's work

Since Frantzsens&Mjanger started their collaboration in 2017, their joint practice has explored the multifaceted and ambiguous relationship between glass and air through breath. Each iteration of their three main series, titled *Expression of Breath* (Avtrykk av pust in Norwegian), *Walking with Breath* (Vandring med pust), and *Lend a Breath* (Låne pust), takes on a different dimension of this relationship. *Expression of Breath* refers to series of glass sculptures that are blown, and sometimes broken, on the spot. *Walking with Breath* is a performance where the artists invite each participant to carry their own *Expression of Breath* through different landscapes. *Lend a Breath* consists of a performance kit containing an *Expression of Breath*, a notebook, and an audio track, giving instructions to carry out the performance. Viewers can borrow *Lend of Breath*, for example from the public library in Bergen.¹ In their first solo exhibition at RAM Gallery in Oslo, they continue to investigate breathing through blowing, crushing, and walking with glass bubbles that represent the human breath. At the same time, they develop new performative installations – *Release* and *Fragments of Breath* –, especially devised for the gallery space with the intention of exploring the materiality of glass in relation to the immateriality of air.

—1—

Playwright Samuel Beckett dramatized breath to the extreme in his play *Breath*, originally conceived for the 'erotic review' *Oh! Calcutta!* in 1969. Just 35 seconds long, it is the shortest play ever written:

1 — See Kristi Guldberg, 'Nå kan du låne kunst på biblioteket,' Bergen Public Library, March 22, 2021, <https://bergenbibliotek.no/aktuelt/na-kan-du-lane-kunst-pa-biblioteket>. See also Frantzsens&Mjanger, 'Låne pust/serie 2 (Lend a Breath),' in *European Glass Context 2021*, exhibition catalogue, pp. 126–127.

1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold for about five seconds.
2. Faint brief cry [of recorded vagitus], immediately [followed by an] inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching [their] maximum [intensity] in about 10 seconds. Silence and hold for about five seconds.
3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum [intensity] [...] in about ten seconds and immediately [followed by the same vagitus] cry as before. Silence and hold for about five seconds.²

Similarly, the theatricality of breath is a central element in Frantzen&Mjanger's work. They staged the exhibition so that it unfolds from the opening to the finissage, like a play in three acts. The exhibition is set to open with a performance by the artists: Maria Almàs Frantzen blows *Expressions of Breath* using a small furnace placed by the front window of the exhibition space. Ruth Mjanger then breaks them by dropping them from a height, setting the shards aside. After that, audiences are invited to join in with the artists, first to blow and drop the bubbles, and second to walk on the shards to create a glass carpet. By joining in, they highlight the driving force behind Frantzen&Mjanger's work: co-creation.

After the opening comes the second act. Frantzen&Mjanger planned for the exhibition to remain performative without them having to be present in the gallery. But the act of touching does not come easily to audiences, who are accustomed to traditional exhibitionary devices such as pedestals and trained to respect the precious, sacred character of art. People tend to interact with the exhibits

only when they see other people already doing it. The gallery staff can certainly encourage visitors to touch the glass objects, but the artists have focused on making the display itself conducive to such interactions. A long table presents different surfaces and textures. People can use their fingers to create mandalas in sand, the raw material for glass. The idea is that people can take the time to touch, feel and think through touching. The table thereby acquires a meditative function. It also presents shapes that are fragile, others that are stable, and casts of the same shapes – these have a different feel as they are heavy and have a raw surface; they look disgusting to some viewers and appealing to others.

In addition, a wall of pegs presents stable glass forms that are to be used for *Walking with Breath*, a new variation of their group performance that involves the audience. This is the third act to close the exhibition.

–2–

Breath control has been central to diverse religious and cultural practices, from meditation to yoga, prayers, and rituals. In the Indian tradition, in particular, breathing is 'connected to the human soul and consciousness; through a complex system of respirational exercises that involve breath control, the practitioners seek to reach a higher state of consciousness, where one is aware of every subtle change within the body and in connection to the world, making the most of one's corporeal and spiritual energy.'³

Controlling one's breath is equally important in glass-blowing: the direction, force, volume, rhythm, and strength

2 — See Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984.

3 — Christina Grammatikopoulou, *Encounters on the Borders of the Immaterial: Body, Technology and Visual Culture: Art and Breath (1970–2012)*, PhD diss., Barcelona: University of Barcelona, 2013, pp. 29–30

of breath all contribute to shaping the hot glass into the final object. Glassblowing, like other crafts, can thus be described as 'workmanship of risk,' to borrow David Pye's famous expression (1968).⁴ Pye explains: 'the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making.' Failure may occur, be it caused by inattention, inexperience, or accident. Pye contrasts risky craft practices with the 'workmanship of certainty,' found in mass production, where the quality of the result is predetermined and therefore not subject to the maker's control. Risk, inherent to the handling of glass, is at the heart of Frantzen&Mjanger's work.

The artists' starting point was a question around what happens when handling a piece that was blown 'wrong,' that is, when risks materialized: to get the glass off the blowing pipe and for the pipe to cool down quickly, one blows as much as possible in the glass.⁵ The basic action of blowing air into what is called a 'gather' of hot glass became their central concern. They started to investigate risks' creative potential: what happens if you do not control the act of blowing and let the glass move as it pleases? The risk is both physical and intellectual as focusing on such a basic principle of glass art could be considered by some too simple or naive.

Unlike artists, audiences rarely get to experience the risks at play in craft making. Several versions of Frantzen&Mjanger's *Expression of Breath*, however, provide an opportunity for the public to experiment with risk-taking both in glassblowing and interacting with glass. In their first *Expression of Breath* (2017), the duo set up a

4 — David Pye ([1968] 1995), *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, London, UK: Herbert Press, p. 20.

5 — Lecture by Frantzen&Mjanger, 'Expressions of Breath – glass as material in outdoor participatory performance art,' at the 2020 Glass Art Society (GAS) Virtual Conference, May 20–23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjC6NLfuTKY&t=26s>.

small furnace outside in the streets and invited passers-by to blow their own glass bubble, exhausting their breath into the hot glass, and thereby pushing the material to its limits. One can never predict what type of shapes one gets as an expression of breath, and so the bubbles illustrate the riskiness of this workmanship.

In an early occurrence of *Walking with Breath*, a participant broke the glass bubble they were carrying. Here the interaction with the glass vessel can be characterized as a 'viewership of risk,' to echo Pye's term, where risk becomes integral to the viewer's experience. While the artists were intrigued by the incident, the person in question felt miserable. To avoid guilt and distress, Frantzen&Mjanger opted for mitigating risks in their next endeavour. They conceived heavier, less fragile shapes.⁶ These were the shapes I encountered at *Walking with Breath* (2021) in Svolvær.⁷ These are also the bubbles attached to the peg wall at RAM Gallery. Making them secure is yet another way through which to facilitate interaction.

While that may be seen as putting certainty back into the experience, Frantzen&Mjanger transfer the 'viewership of risk' to activities performed in a controlled environment. At RAM Gallery, as part of the *Fragments of Breath* performance, participants are invited to walk on the shards of the glass bubbles. Breaking glass is usually forbidden in a contemporary art context – galleries protect artworks behind cases and pay expensive insurances to ensure their integrity. But to actually do it – with the

6 — The way in which these shapes are made is similar to that of the more fragile ones, but, instead of pushing the material to its limits, Maria Almås Frantzen stops blowing at some point. So the resulting forms are heavier, more stable. In addition, they go through a cycle of annealing (meaning that they are cooled in a kiln), while the thin and fragile shapes are not annealed (meaning that the glass is in thermal shock, and therefore is unstable and cracks).

7 — See 'Memories of breath', in this catalogue.



consent of the artists as an act of co-creation – has the potential for audiences to let go of control and experience release. With such productive destruction, the piece also has the potential to reframe the audience's expectations about contemporary art.

—3—

As Western art started to question its own materiality in the twentieth century, breath became a newfound territory for exploration. As art historian Christina Grammatikopoulou puts it, 'From representation to abstraction and from the materiality of the object to the fluidity of experience, the trajectory of the artwork from the beginning of the twentieth century until today has subjected it to a constant questioning of its material substance and an incessant expansion of its communicative means.'⁸ In parallel, crafts art, including glass, has witnessed a renaissance from the 1970s onwards, with the fundamental understanding that 'materiality matters.'⁹ This trend was further sustained by the emergence of 'new materialism' at the turn of the millennium. Because their work combines the immateriality of breath with the materiality of glass, Frantzen&Mjanger straddle the line between two antithetic aesthetic systems, in keeping with conceptual crafts.

In Frantzen&Mjanger's work, breath is both a subject and a prime material – the work is partially made of air. It therefore makes it possible to see or feel something that is otherwise unsubstantial. The artists' work expands the viewers' perception by establishing a space to interact beyond the material. Besides, the focus on breath brings

8 — Grammatikopoulou, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

9 — See Joakim Borda-Pedreira & Gjertrud Steinsvåg (eds.), *Materiality Matters*, in *Documents of Contemporary Crafts* 1–5, vol. 2, Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Publishers, 2014.

immateriality closer to our own corporeality. From a phenomenological perspective, perception plays a foundational role in our experience of the world. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty understands perception to be an ongoing dialogue between one's lived body and the world which it perceives.¹⁰ He emphasizes that the body, and not the mind as it was long presumed by Western philosophical tradition, is the primary site of knowing the world. Merleau-Ponty states that the body and that which it perceived could not be disentangled from each other. As the artists use breath as an element of creation, which transforms the artwork and engages the spectators to participate in the artistic action, they highlight how we experience the world through the body.

Frantzen&Mjanger, in 'creating situations that invite to a physical exploration of their work,'¹¹ highlight the sensory dimension of glass. Sight, the sense traditionally privileged in art, is here solicited through the many different visual aspects of glass from transparency to opacity, although the artists do not blow coloured glass. Glass indeed interacts with light. The smaller the fragment, the more light it reflects. Additionally, the artists activate other senses. While smell is elusive – breath is a prerequisite of smell, but only the act of inhaling brings scent molecules in reach of one's olfactory glands, blowing does not –, heating glass, blowing glass, crushing it, walking on it, evoke as many operations as they do sounds. Touch is paramount to their work. Their three series explore the ways in which the different glass shapes feel. Some fragile shapes feel as if they will break under the softest of touches. They are almost moving in the viewer's hands. At other times, the glass can feel like plastic. In their

10 — Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945.

11 — Lecture by Frantzen&Mjanger, *op. cit.*

participatory interventions, members of the audience can lift, lay down, hold, touch, and walk with glass sculptures. They reverse the sensory paradigm, placing touch before sight. They shift the focus from observation to participation, from understanding with the mind to perceiving through the entire body.

—4—

Frantzen&Mjanger's artistic practice has a minimalist quality. Contrary to many contemporary artworks dealing with the breath, theirs is low tech in that it does not involve engineering.¹² They are not interested in technicity and sophistication, nor do they try to produce a visually striking effect. The glass artefacts they produce are made of transparent glass, an everyday, one could even say banal, material. This also makes their collaborative, interactive work easier to relate to, as everybody in Norway (like in many other places) has drunk in transparent glasses and used countless other transparent glass containers, from water jugs to vases, etc.

Yet transparent in aspect does not signify transparent in meaning. Glass historian Freyja Hartzell has indeed shown that the meaning of transparent glassware in inter-war Germany was fluid and controversial.¹³ Glass was mobilized by both sides of a polarized political landscape, practically and politically, for both its material and immaterial qualities. Promoted by the Bauhaus in design and architecture, it was subsequently appropriated by the

12 — For instance, I think of the work of Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, including his *Vicious Circular Breathing* (2013), which are engineering feats as much as performative works. I also think of most of the contemporary artists whose work is discussed in *Going Aerial: Air, Art, Architecture* (Monika Bakke ed., 2006), especially those who work on the air as a medium of communication.

13 — Freyja Hartzell gave a lecture precisely on this topic, titled 'Frozen Light,' during the 'States of Glass' symposium, in the afternoon preceding Frantzen&Mjanger's *Walking with Breath* performance in August 2021.

Nazis, who, although they condemned the movement as 'degenerate,' attributed to transparent glass the ability to convey 'purity' and 'cleanliness.' To the benefit of the Nazi dictatorship, transparent glass created the 'illusion of a modern regime deeply invested in providing German citizens with cutting-edge conveniences in the latest style.'¹⁴ However, as Walter Benjamin would have it, 'Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets,'¹⁵ and the Nazis depended on secrecy, hypocrisy, and opacity. When Hartzell queried this apparent paradox, she underlined the power of glass to encapsulate shifting and conflicting values and meanings. This ability of glass is similarly expressed in Frantzen&Mjanger's pieces, where the transparency is but deceptive.

Their transparent glass bubbles aim at representing the human breath, which is otherwise not visible to the human eye. The transparency of *Expression of Breath* supposedly lets our eyes see through its surface and thus reveals what is found inside: air, the contents of a breath. The glass has been dematerialized, it has evacuated colour, texture, and expressiveness.¹⁶ Its surface has become invisible, yet it is what delineates the air that it holds. It should be disregarded, yet it directs the gaze. We see *through* it, in both meanings of the word.

Ultimately, though, Frantzen&Mjanger's transparent glass bubbles, whether whole or shattered, cannot truly show breath. Breath remains ephemeral, transparent,

14 — Freyja Hartzell, 'Cleanliness, Clarity – and Craft: Material Politics in German Design, 1919–1939,' *The Journal of Modern Craft* 13:3 (2020), pp. 247–269.

15 — Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty,' in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, pp. 733–734.

16 — See Freyja Hartzell, 'Experience, Poverty, Transparency: The Modern Surface of Interwar Glass,' in Yeseung Lee ed., *Surface and Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, pp. 163–184.





invisible. The promise is destined to be unfulfilled. Air is conspicuous by its absent presence – it is there, everywhere, always, but because it is invisible, it fades out of our focus. One has to imagine it at all times, one has to remind oneself that it is there. What people do not see is what really matters. But our inability to remember that we share a limited resource with others at all times hinders our ability to think collectively – it is an apt depiction of our individualistic nature (albeit a stern one).

In visualizing air, Frantzen&Mjanger's work echoes the experimentations of Giuseppe Penone in the late 1970s. Commonly associated with the Arte Povera movement, he created nine large clay sculptures resembling vases. In *Breath 5* (1978), Penone left an imprint of his body on the side, while he topped the sculpture with a clay cast of the inside of his mouth. The sculpture looks as if it is 'a "breath" taken by the artist as he leans forward with billowing forms of air around him.'¹⁷ Unlike in Penone's work, the question of whose breath it is, is left unanswered in Frantzen&Mjanger's. Is it that of the maker(s), who blew their breath into the glass, or that of the viewer who experiences the sculpture – or maybe those of many viewers, past, present, and future? There is indeed a temporal dimension to sharing breath: there is a constant mixing of past and present breaths. Natural theologian Charles Babbage (1838) thought that aerial pulses united present generations to those preceding us, all the way back to the Greek philosophers.¹⁸ This temporal dimension gives Frantzen&Mjanger's work a connective and social dimension.

17 — See Richard Martin on Giuseppe Penone, *Breath 5*, 1978, Tate Modern, 2016, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/penone-breath-5-t03420>.

18 — Charles Babbage, 'On the permanent impression of our words and actions on the globe we inhabit,' *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise*, 2nd ed., London: John Murray, 1838.

The invisible that is made visible is not just air, it is what we all share: our common humanity.¹⁹

—5—

Frantzen&Mjanger's work is a timely reminder that we all share the same atmosphere, bound to earth by the force of gravity. There is a relational dimension of working with breath. The glass bubbles have a hole to let air in and out, symbolizing the flow of air surrounding us. They connect what is inside the body with what is outside, thereby questioning the boundaries of our own body and its integrity. Air is around us, and inside of us. The sculptures also symbolically link one individual to the other as participants breathe the air that other participants are also breathing. The air inside one's body ends up inside the body of someone else. We necessarily exchange air. The notion that has been referred to as 'co-presence,' in reference to the work of Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, is also suitable to describe the coexistence of bodies, perspectives, and experiences in Frantzen&Mjanger's work.²⁰ Co-presence also implies trust, amongst the participants, as well as between the participants and the artists.

In focusing on the relational dimension of breath, Frantzen&Mjanger departs from a certain strand of conceptual art that started with the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. Marcel Duchamp captured *50 cc of Paris air* in a glass ampoule in 1919 as a souvenir for a close friend and patron.²¹ Piero Manzoni blew his

19 — Frantzen&Mjanger, card handed over to participants as part of *Walking with Breath*, Svolvær, August 20, 2021. See 'Memories of breath', in this catalogue.

20 — Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in 'Kathleen Forde & Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in conversation' July 22, 2013, p. 10. In Kathleen Forde ed., *Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Vicious Circular Breathing*, exhibition catalogue, Istanbul: Borusan Contemporary, 2013.

21 — The one preserved at the Philadelphia Art Museum was broken and later restored in an absurd Dadaist fashion, as the air is probably no

breath into plastic balloons in 1960 and attached them to wooden supports.²² His *Artist's Breath* work explored the fetishization and commodification of his own body substance. The balloons deflated, their plastic melted, their miserable remnants glued to the wood remaining as an empty memory of breath. This strand of art continues to this day as exemplified in the work of Sissel Tolaas, who recorded 365 breaths and 365 molecules in 365 days and 365 glass bubbles in 2020, to capture continuous change.²³

Shifting away from the memorialization that capturing air implies, Marina Abramović and Ulay in their *Breathing out – Breathing in* performance explored the sharing of air as early as 1977.²⁴ The artists breathed into each other's mouth until the oxygen was used up, and they were on the verge of collapse. They kept one another alive, showing the interdependence of humans in the most dramatic fashion. Breathing bound them together, but also threatened their existence. Sharing air indeed has both positive and negative implications. It signals generosity and codependency, as much as it connotes forced cohabitation, including in the public space.

The political resonance of breathing is constantly re-actualized through contemporary situations, from 'I can't breathe,' the rallying cry of Black Lives Matter's fight against police brutality in the US, to pollution and the necessity to regulate CO² emissions to halt or slow

longer from Paris, questioning why the air provenance should even matter, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/51617>.

22 – See Sophie Howarth on Piero Manzoni, *Artist's Breath*, 1960, Tate Modern, 2000, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/manzoni-artists-breath-t07589>.

23 – See Sissel Tolaas, *Still/ALife*, 2020, in 'Sissel Tolaas RE_ _ _ _ _', October 8-December 30, 2021, Astrup Fearnley Museet, <https://www.afmuseet.no/en/exhibition/sissel-tolaas/>.

24 – See the video of Marina Abramović and Ulay's performance at Stedelijk, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collection/9811-ulyay-breathing-out-breathing-in-%28performance-10%29>.

down the climate crisis, to global health crisis like the global pandemic of COVID-19, an airborne virus. The latter suspended or limited social gatherings, while it made breath suspicious as a carrier of disease. Frantzen&Mjanger had to rethink the conditions of reception. They devised *Lend a Breath*, a performance kit that enables viewers to experience the interplay of glass and breath in a self-chosen environment. Yet even when experienced alone, Frantzen&Mjanger's glass sculptures remind us of our common humanity, which can become the basis for solidarity. Hence, Frantzen&Mjanger's work can be characterized as 'gentle solidarity,' a nudge in the direction of care for both human and nonhuman species.



We call the glass shapes Expressions of Breath. The unique sculpture captures the dialogue between the person blowing into a gather of glass and the glass's response to that breath. The glass's rapid transition from liquid and hot to cold and hard makes it possible to preserve this moment.

Frantzen&Mjanger





To cast a breath in glass:

Make a silica and plaster mould around a blown Expression of Breath, fill it with glass frits or chunks or both, and fire it in a kiln at approximately 840 degrees. Cool it down slowly over 14 days, cross your fingers that it worked, it's only one go - remove the mould material.

Frantzen&Mjanger











Memories of Breath

I took part in Frantzsen&Mjanger's *Walking with Breath* performance in August 2021 in Lofoten, after a day's symposium on the 'States of Glass'.¹ As the symposium participants left the Kulturhus in Svolvær at around 6pm, they found the glass bubbles already lying on a ledge near the exit.

There was something subversive about these bubbles, outside, on the floor, unprotected from the weather or from human touch. Wouldn't they get scratched? In the dimming light of a windy evening, under a sky heavy with rain, they had the radiance of diamonds on concrete, the glistening appeal of forbidden fruit.

After a few words of introduction by the artist duo, we were handed what looked like a business card. It read:

Alle puster.

Everybody breathes.²

Hvordan kan dette usynlige fellesskapet bli synlig?

How can this invisible fellowship become visible?

Hva er pustens form?

What is the shape of breath?

Hvordan opplever vi oss selv, hverandre og omgivelsene med Avtrykk av pust i hendene?

How do we experience ourselves, each other, and our surroundings with Expression of Breath in our hands?

We were asked to select a glass bubble. 'Take your time, try several, and grab a shape that appeals to you,' was what they said. I already had my sights set on one particular bubble,

1 — 'States of Glass - a symposium', Lofoten Kulturhus, August 20-21, 2021, Nordnorsk Kunstnersenter website, <https://nnks.no/en/program/glasstilstander-et-symposium-2>.

2 — The English translation is mine.

but I picked up two or three others, to make sure it felt right – and to comply with the artists’ instructions. My bubble was not too small, but nor was it conspicuously large. I wanted one that would best be carried with two hands, something that would be challenging enough to hold it consciously.

Soon after, we left the town centre, and walked towards the island of Svinøya, with an air of excitement and mystery. We were to walk in silence. What would happen?

How were we supposed to hold the bubble? Was there a proper way of doing it? It is one thing to know that what matters is your subjective experience, and quite another to hold an object ‘naturally’ when being so used to seeing the likes of it hung on exhibition walls and placed on plinths. I observed the artists, as well as the other participants. We all did. Grabbing the bubble firmly between both hands, cradling it gently, or holding it by the tip like a bowling ball – most bubbles even had a hole, for adventurous fingers – those were the options that seemed available to us.

I was restless at first. Walking in silence with a group of people I barely knew – most participants were artists who had attended the symposium and whom I had met for the first time – was a slightly awkward experience. These social occasions usually involve commenting on the event, engaging in small or serious talk, and getting to know one another.

Carrying the bubble made it impossible to find refuge in my cell phone. I had to endure this extended moment of silence-induced hyper awareness. Was I walking at an acceptable pace? Was I too close to the other participants, stealing their air, so to speak? Or, quite the opposite, was

I too distant, giving them the impression that I wanted to avoid them? This interior monologue continued as we walked and the situation remained open.

Anticipation was building up: When were we going to stop? Would we hear more about the performance? Would we share our experience? Had I missed something?

Time went by. We kept going. At some point, maybe about 15 minutes into the walk, it became clear to me that carrying a shape of breath was the actual performance. With that realization came both relief and release. Freed from social obligations for the time being, I could finally ease into the performance and shift my focus to breathing and thinking about the relationship between glass, air, and space.

Soon, however, a familiar problem arose. By concentrating on my breath, I could not avoid awakening the old fear of breathing too loudly. Breathing is supposed to be a given; mechanical motion that the body performs automatically, on its own, from birth. But at the age of 11, I was diagnosed with nasal polyps.³ I progressively lost the sense of smell. By the age of 14 I could no longer smell anything at all. I also came to breathe exclusively through my mouth. This is louder and has since been a source of embarrassment. I cannot recall how many times strangers walking ahead of me in the streets suddenly turned back to see who the loud, threatening presence in their midst was – realizing quickly, with a look of surprise on their face, that I am unlikely to pose a serious threat. I have tried regulating the sound of my breath, taking in either the smallest of breaths or deep, regular ones instead. It does not work. Paying attention to

it usually makes it worse. But in a walk about the shape of breath, it suddenly felt appropriate to breathe as loudly as necessary. It was the first platform where I got to experience breath in a safe environment.

Once we had crossed the bridge to Svinøya, I thought we had reached our destination, but we kept walking, past the picturesque rorbuer – those old fishing huts converted into tourist accommodation – with the archipelago's dramatic landscape with its spectacular peaks in the background. We passed by a recent residential area, with its buildings clad in wood to blend in with the landscape.

That is when we heard a voice reverberating. Was it reciting a poem? Was it calling for prayer? More importantly, was it part of the performance? A moment and a few meters later, a silent consensus had been established that it was not. We found out afterwards that the voice belonged to the motivational speaker of the Arctic Triple, a triathlon taking place at the harbour opposite.

We entered an industrial zone, cluttered with bundle-like containers and referred to locally as 'Kuba'.⁴ To me they looked like giant laundry bags and I imagined them filled with clothes ready to be shipped and discarded somewhere far away.⁵

A narrow path in the grass led us away from the industrial grounds. Suddenly, I realized we had left the town for good. The terrain was no longer flat and easy to negotiate. It had started to drizzle, enough to wet the rocks under our feet. I was nervous that I would fall and break the glass bubble in my care. Would I hurt myself? I could see the unease

4 – I searched for the place names after the walk, when writing this text.

5 – As a fashion scholar, I have become familiar with issues of neocolonial waste management, according to which tons of clothes are sent from the Global North to countries like Ghana. This undoubtedly influenced my perception of the landscape. See for instance, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-12/fast-fashion-turning-parts-ghana-into-toxic-landfill/100358702>.

of other participants around me. Yet the pace of our walk hardly slowed down.

After we crossed the rocky terrain, we walked under the giant wooden structures of Kjeøya Kystbatteri where cod are left to dry in the cold air and the wind. The racks, a characteristic sight on the Lofoten islands, were empty at this time of year, as fish hang on them from February to May. I had seen these impressive structures from the road, but actually walking under them, with the glass bubble safely between my arms, reminded of the action of the wind to move the air we breathe, in what was for me an odourless experience. Did others get any residual smell of stockfish?

We continued to move forward until we hit the pier. There, at the tip of the island, a giant sculpture of a fisherman's wife by Per Ung, her back to the viewer, faces the open sea, waiting for her husband to return.

Our one-hour journey from urban to coastal landscapes ended here. We gathered together and exchanged a few words. The artists did not formally request that we each express how we had felt or what we had thought during the walk, though a few participants volunteered their thoughts. Some said they had reached an almost meditative state. Someone else would have liked to break the silence to share their observation of a nifty seabird dropping some shellfish from on high to crack it open. I did not say anything myself. My experience felt too private, self-centred even. I had hardly thought about our sharing of breath and common humanity during the walk.

I wondered how I felt about the whole performance. Basking in the warmth of a social entourage without having

to be social turned out to be comfortable. It left space for inner exploration. But was opting for silence not taking the easy way out when there is so much to be said and shared? Both for me as a participant, and for the artists? A pet peeve of mine has been to resist the widespread ideology that an artwork (or a performance) ‘speaks for itself’ in contemporary art. In most instances, the belief ignores the fact that viewers need to have considerable cultural capital to make sense of an artwork – or even to trust that their personal experience of the work is valid and indeed legitimate. However, in this case, participants did not need any knowledge of art history – although both breath and walk have a long history in the arts –, nor specific material knowledge about glass to relate to one of the most basic bodily functions sustaining life in the situated context of the guided walk. Of course, there is no guarantee, as my example shows, that participants reflect on the topics and issues that are of interest to the artists. But does it really matter?

I was pulled out of my reverie when conversations resumed. The social rules that had been momentarily suspended were reinstated. Instead of being alone together, we were back together, busy interacting. The glass bubbles were not ‘expressions of breath’ anymore, but empty glass vessels.

Oslo, October 23, 2021



Video documentation of 'Walking with Breath'
(Svolvær, Norway, 2021)







Frantzsen&Mjanger

was established in January 2017 and consists of Maria Almås Frantzsen, MA in visual art/glass and Ruth Hol Mjanger, drama/theatre. The artist duo is located in Bergen and draw on their interdisciplinary competence to search beyond conventional glassmaking techniques and skills. They challenge the traditional approach to glass by connecting craft and performative, contemporary art. Glass serves as a tool for engagement that invites their audience to become co-creators in their artistic practice.

Their debut was at the Annual craft exhibition 2017 and in 2019 the duo was awarded the Norwegian Craft prize from The Relief Fund for Visual Artists (BKH) for the piece Holding Breath. Over the last five years they have had collaborations and presented their work in a variety of venues; outdoor art events, galleries, performance festivals, and universities. In March 2020 they started a year-long project with the public library in Bergen where a series of Lend a Breath was made available for loan. Internationally, they have presented their work at the Glass Art Society Virtual Conference 2020, Glass, Meet the Future 2021 and European Glass Context 2021.

Maria Almås Frantzsen

(b. 1977) received her bachelor's and master's degree in art with a specialization in glass from Edinburgh College of Art. For almost eleven years she was part of the team at S12 Galleri and Verksted (2009–2021). In the beginning of 2021 she made a change and has since focused on her own full-time artistic practice in Frantzsen&Mjanger and Kunststone, a community-based public art project. Her work is presented in the permanent collection of KODE in Bergen and Sogn og Fjordane kunstmuseum and revolves around human, emotional and physical experiences.

Ruth Hol Mjanger

(b. 1977) is an associate professor in drama at NLA University College, with drama education from Agder University College and Bergen University College, in addition to intercultural studies at NLA. Mjanger has for the last 10 years been a project coordinator for NLA's involvement in developing teacher education in Nepal. With her background as an artist, teacher and researcher, she often works in interdisciplinary and relational collaborations which explore connections between art, body, space and existential issues. Her artistic research practice is related to Frantzsen&Mjanger.

Johanna Zanon

(b. 1988) is a curator and researcher, based in Oslo since 2014. She holds an MA in Art History, an MPhil in Curatorial Studies (French equivalent), and a PhD in History. Her curatorial interests span wide, both across disciplinary and chronological divides, with a proclivity for topics seemingly at the margins of contemporary art. In 2020, she curated the exhibition *As Handsome as the Chance Encounter* at RAM Gallery in Oslo. Later that year, she initiated the curatorial platform *Critical Fashion Walk*, which is supported by KORO and Kulturrådet. She has published peer-reviewed articles, catalogue essays, and exhibition reviews, and organized a wide range of events. She is a member of Norsk Kuratorforening and of Kunsthistorisk Forening. In addition to her own independent practice, she currently works as a programme curator at Norske Kunsthåndverkere.



ISBN 978-82-692454-5-5 Trykt, heftet (myk perm/softcover)
ISBN 978-82-692454-6-2 E-bok (PDF)

Shapes of Breath by Frantzsen&Mjanger

Editors: Joakim Borda-Pedreira, Kamil Kak

Texts: Frantzsen&Mjanger, Joakim Borda-Pedreira, Johanna Zanon

Graphic design: Kamil Kak

Photos:

Page 13: Otilie Brubæk Stokseth / Mørkerommet

Pages 14–15, 47–53, 68: Frantzsen&Mjanger

Pages 16–17, 26–27, 61 (detail): David Zadig

Pages 18–19: Patrícia Šichmanová

Page 20: Maria Helena Nerhus / Mørkerommet

Pages 32–33, 40, 42–45, 62–63: Daniel Bolstad

Pages 34–35, 54 (detail): Petter Lønningen

Page 64: Anett Haukås

www.frantzsenmjanger.com

www.ramgalleri.no

Frantzsen&Mjanger's production is supported by

NLA | University
College



This publication was supported by

RAM
GALLERI

NK
NORSKE
KUNSTHÅNVERKERE

**Norwegian
Crafts**

