

Breath as gentle subtraction

By Giulia Bortoluzzi

In his collected fragments, Anaximenes of Miletus is said to have identified the *arche* with the *pneuma*: “The breath and air embrace the whole world”. This pre-Socratic philosopher conceived the universe as one breathing organism, the original and universal principle. For Anaximenes, and, more generally for the Greek and Roman traditions that gave origin to our culture, air is one of the four “roots”, as Empedocles of Agrigento used to call it, along with earth, fire and water. “As our soul, which is air, holds us together, so the breath and air embrace the whole world”, reads Parmenides’ poem *Around Nature*. This concept of breath as a synonym of life is recurrent in various Western and Eastern cosmogonies, from the “spirit” of the Jewish (*ruah*) and Christian (*pneuma*) traditions to the akasha (ether), which is the essence of all existing things in Hinduism. Air always appears as one of the vital elements on whose balance the survival of the cosmos depends. Underlying this conception of harmony between the human microcosmic dimension and the natural macrocosmic dimension, which is needed to maintain existence, there is, however, a dichotomy between the world and the living. But what if it’s not feasible to physically separate the two? This is the exercise that Emanuele Coccia has most recently invited us to undertake. He proposes a new cosmogony starting from the plant-inspired conception of atmosphere and photosynthesis to demonstrate the immersion relationship between life and the world. Thanks to the example offered by plants, the Italian philosopher highlights the intermingling of organisms, the transitivity of life that circulates everywhere, in one’s own breath and in that of others. In his essay *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza* (2016), he writes: “The air we breathe, the nature of the soil, the lines of the earth’s surface, the shapes drawn in the sky, the colour of everything around us are the immediate effects of life in the same sense and to the same extent as its principles. The world is not an autonomous and independent entity of life, the world is the fluid nature of each environment: climate, atmosphere”¹. The atmosphere, then, is the very principle that makes the world habitable, a space of intermingling in which every breath is an act of immersion, a medium connecting the forms of life that populate the world. If knowing the world, therefore, means breathing it, and breathing is not just an act of

pure survival of the animal that we are but the very form of the world, it is no longer possible to think of the living as an entity separate from the environment. These philosophical premises are the starting point for Laura Pugno’s most recent research on air, entitled *Mal d’Aria* (2023). With an expression that almost seems to refer to a feeling of nostalgia or a sort of malaise caused by the lack of a lost “air”², the substance is here understood both in its metaphysical meaning as the root of life and in the physical composition according to whose quality the ecosystem is modified. Through a direct dialogue with professors and researchers, and a study that embraces multiple perspectives (environmental, architectural, medical and social), Pugno reflects on air as an emblem of the sustainability of global development and, more specifically, focuses on the damage caused by pollution, particularly in the Po Valley, and possible solutions provided by technologies. In fact, the air quality in these areas is strongly influenced by industrial pollution, road traffic and the domestic use of fuels leading to soil acidification and the loss of aquatic biodiversity. Public health problems are also aggravated, with harmful effects on respiratory and cardiovascular health caused by fine particles such as PM10 and PM2.5. Despite being one of the primary sources of life, without which existence would not be possible (birds would not be able to fly, plants would wither, and humans would suffocate), air remains challenging to perceive, and all the problems associated with it less tangible and comprehensible precisely because of its volatile nature. Its invisibility makes the air less noticeable but no less present; commonly, human beings call themselves inhabitants of the Earth, but to quote Coccia again: “We do not inhabit the Earth. Through the atmosphere, we inhabit the air. We are immersed in it, just like the fish in the sea. And what we call respiration is nothing but the agriculture of the atmosphere.”³ The recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought the subject of air to the forefront of the public domain again. The use of an aero-centric terminology has spread globally, talking of “respiratory syndromes” has become common, daily customs and behaviours have been greatly altered due to the nature of a virus that spreads by “air” routes. Not only that. The link between the disease and pollutants has been studied, precisely in Pugno’s areas of interest, as has the “pull” of premature deaths of people already suffering from airborne diseases such as cancers, lung diseases or type 2 diabetes⁴. There have been global fears for the tightness of health and environmental balances, as well as political and economic ones. Still, as Serge Latouche wrote in 2012 in *L’âge des*

limites, the moment the relationship between the world and the living is unbalanced, the human inability to stand in the infinitude of the cosmos is revealed: “We do not destroy the planet, only our ecosystem, that is, our chances of surviving on it”⁵. The pandemic has helped to raise an elephant that had probably been in the room for more than a century, i.e. ever since Western countries embarked on the road to *thermal industries*.

In 1962, Rachel Carson wrote a ground breaking essay, *Silent Spring*, in which she denounced the severity of the ecological crisis and the looming threats to the future. She predicted the effects of using chemical insecticides and poisonous pollutants in agriculture. After her, other authoritative voices were heard, such as that of Laura Conti, for example, considered the mother of Italian environmentalism, who narrated the 1976 Seveso disaster - in *Visto da Seveso* (1977) and *Una lepre con la faccia di bambina* (1978). The accident at the ICMESA chemical factory in Brianza, which caused the release of a toxic cloud of dioxin, was considered by Time magazine to be the eighth most environmentally severe accident ever in the world⁶. Higher in that ranking were, among others, the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in Ukraine (1986), the toxic gas disaster at Bhopal in India (1984), and the oil explosion in Kuwait at the end of the Gulf War (1991). Although climate urgency is now a political issue of global concern, from the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to the European Green Deal, achieving the goals is still a long way off.

With *Mal d’Aria*, Pugno, who takes inspiration, among others, from the action of these women pioneers of environmentalism, performs a symbolic act of resistance, dragging eight wooden boards, painted with oil pastels and covered with black spray paint, along the *calli* of

Venice with a group of students. The slow and tiring towing on the uneven urban ground, aggravated by the weight of cement sacks, a well-known high-impact polluting production material, causes an abrasion of colour, or an erasure, that reveals a snapshot of the present. Something is lost, or missing: when the colour is scratched off by the impact with the ground, the invisible theme of air becomes immediately present, tangible precisely in the sign of absence. Deletion as a creative process, as well as direct action on materials and across places, is a practice for Pugno, as already expressed in works such as *Moto per luogo* (2018) - a series of photographs partly abraded by contact with the artist’s body imprinted on the ground of the landscape portrayed in them - and *A futura memoria* (2018) - a cast of snow made with ceramic plaster that, by crossing its surface layers and solidifying the air, generates a sort of polar fossil. A practice of gentle subtraction. Through the alteration that the bodies exert on the environment, the negative that results from Pugno’s action becomes a speaking and obvious image of a notoriously impalpable material. With *Mal d’Aria*, Pugno invites us to embrace the metaphysics of mixture proposed by Coccia, which unites the world and the living in one great breath, and move from this awareness to a concrete action of survival. Rachel Carson drew public attention to the urgency of reviewing the unregulated praxis of the world-living relationship over fifty years ago, and we still find ourselves at the same crossroads today. In her words: “The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one “less travelled by” – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth”⁷.

1. E. Coccia, *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, Il Mulino 2018, p. 64. (Cfr. *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Polity Press 2018)
2. See the common Italian expression “mal d’Africa”, literally “Africa-sickness” by which one refers to nostalgia and the desire to return to Africa.
3. E. Coccia, *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, cit.
4. See for example G. Borruso, G. Balletto, B. Murgante et al, COVID-19. *Diffusione spaziale e aspetti ambientali del caso italiano*, in “Semestrale di studi e ricerche di geografia”, vol. XXXII, f. 2, 2020. https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/semestrale_di_geografia/article/view/17031
5. S. Latouche, *Limite*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2012 (*L’âge des limites*, Milles et une Nuit 2012).
6. See: https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1986457_1986501_1986449,00.html
7. R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin 2002 (1962), p. 277.

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