

Breath Variations is a new body of work created by Northern Irish artist Christopher Steenson (b. 1992) for Flat Time House, the former home of British conceptual artist John Latham (1921–2006). Using sound, video, and transmission-based methodologies, *Breath Variations* explores the materiality of time – its permanence and evanescence – and the power that attention has over its transmission and state of matter. By manipulating and extending the sonic dimensions of Flat Time House, Steenson investigates the capacity of breath as a ‘least event’ – Latham’s term for the shortest departure from a state of nothingness – to punctuate linearities of time and space.

The site-specificity of *Breath Variations* was driven by a residency at Flat Time House, undertaken by Steenson in April 2023. Alongside periods of archival research, through which the artist delved into the history of the space, Steenson gathered sound and video recordings connected to the gallery and the surrounding area. During his residency, Steenson worked in correspondence with the environments around him, leading him to intuitively relate to the notion of breathing, which forms a central thread to this exhibition.

Through engaging with Latham’s archive, *Breath Variations* has taken particular inspiration from Latham’s artwork *Big Breather* (1972) – a structure that simulated the movement of tides using seawater and a bellow system that produced a low continuous drone. Latham designed the structure as a proposed method for capturing tidal energy and formulated a concise set of calculations that argued for its potential economic return as a renewable source of energy. *Big Breather* was shown as a proof-of-concept artwork at Gallery House, Imperial College, and the Tate. Unfortunately, it was never installed as a functioning tidal energy system at Latham’s proposed location of the North Sea, 12 miles southeast of Arbroath, Scotland. Nevertheless, the piece reminds us that an artwork’s value cannot be simply measured by its monetary worth, but also by the degree to which it can continuously capture our attention. Within the present context of energy crises and much-needed forms of renewable, green energy, *Big Breather* perhaps feels more prescient today than it did when it was first presented.

Taking direct inspiration from *Big Breather*, Steenson’s transmission-based sound work, *inhale, exhale (oi-io)*, is the first work visitors encounter as they approach the facade of Flat Time House. Drawing on Steenson’s existing artistic practice which investigates broadcasting technologies, *inhale, exhale (oi-io)*’s presence is signalled by a horn speaker installed outside the gallery, which broadcasts a short sound piece in synchronicity with the high or low tide times of the North Sea. In doing so, the work makes direct reference to the proposed location of *Big Breather*, sounding a memorial for past ideas and potential futures. *inhale, exhale (oi-io)* probes the circulatory action of inhalation and exhalation by broadcasting both outside and inside the gallery, similarly to how Latham’s book sculpture *How the Univoice is Still Unheard* (2003), transects the front window of Flat Time House.

As the broadcasts for *inhale, exhale (oi-io)* only transmit at specific times – as directed by the moon’s natural time-base – the duration of the work is punctuated by prolonged periods of silence. This silence allows viewers to observe the infinite expanse – as well as the ebb and flow – of time. We become attuned to overlooked or undervalued ambient sounds which populate our environment. Gently cutting through this silence, the intermittent synchronisation of the sounds of breathing to the earth’s tidal cycles collapses the distinct timescales of each of these elements. In such moments, our attention is shifted; the breath becomes a connective tissue between ourselves, the outside world, and time¹.

In the back gallery – which Latham labelled as ‘The Hand’ – *Breath Variations* premieres Steenson’s first significant moving image work, *untitled (thesamethesamethesamethesame)*. Using visual and sonic elements recorded during the artist’s residency – ranging from the minutiae of passing road markings and electrical wires to emanating fields of electromagnetic signals – the work expands upon the idea of the ‘least event by’ meditating on the relationships between breathing, electricity, and through-lines of time. *untitled (thesamethesamethesamethesame)* visually and sonically investigates the concept of interconnectedness through parallel, diverging, converging, and synchronising relationships. The relationships drawn together by this piece question the co-existence of various elements, beings, and timeframes, and whether their distinct patterns, repetitions, lines, and rhythms can interconnect. Moreover, *untitled (thesamethesamethesamethesame)* expands upon the push and pull movements of breath explored in *inhale, exhale (oi-io)*. In this video work, the inward and outward motion of breath becomes a way of thinking about how matter flows through our bodies and our environments, emphasising the porous boundaries between these elements.

Just as the sonic and visual perspectives of Steenson’s residency have been reorchestrated for *untitled (thesamethesamethesamethesame)*, the spatial arrangement of Flat Time House has also been altered. Latham conceived of Flat Time House as a ‘living sculpture’, where each room in the house was allocated anthropomorphic and temporal qualities. For *Breath Variations*, Steenson has responded to these ideas by closing off ‘The Body Event’ – a space dedicated to daily physical needs and habits – by turning it into a sound-producing element of the video’s spatial soundtrack. In its new capacities as a ‘speaker’, The Body Event explores sound’s ability to make tangible the impalpable qualities of time, emanating as breaths that punctuate the moving images viewed in the work.

Ultimately, *Breath Variations* invites us to become attuned to the various ways that our bodies intersect and are interconnected with agents and forces around us. *Breath Variations* foregrounds how, by prioritising moments of contemplation, we can begin to reorient our relationship with our surroundings, recognising the webs of relations that shape and structure our world.

¹Sozita Goudouna, *Beckett’s Breath: Anti-Theatricality and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018) p. 171.

Breath Variations

- 1** Christopher Steenson, *inhale, exhale (oi-io)* (2023), horn speaker, and audio broadcast system (synchronised to the high and low tide times of the North Sea), broadcast monitor. Infinite duration (or until the moon leaves the Earth's orbit).
- 2** John Latham, *Big Breather* (1973) 6' 40", colour, silent, originally shot on 16mm.
- 3** Documents from the John Latham Archive relating to *Big Breather* (1973).
- 4** Christopher Steenson, *untitled (thesamethesame thesamethesame)* (2023), 4', black and white, HD video (transferred to SD), broadcast monitor, 6-channel surround sound.

