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The Art of Breathing

Gary P. Anderson¹ and Tom Kotsimbos²

Affiliations: ¹Lung Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia. ²Dept Respiratory Medicine, The Alfred Hospital, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Correspondence: Tom Kotsimbos, Dept of Respiratory Medicine, The Alfred Hospital, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. E-mail: tom.kotsimbos@monash.edu

"Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen."

– Leonardo da Vinci

"Some painters transform the sun into a yellow spot, others transform a yellow spot into the sun."

– Pablo Picasso

"The tongue can paint what the eye can't see."

– Chinese Proverb

We *think* in images and when we reach the limits of our *seeing* our imagination takes over. Medicine and visual art have been inextricably linked since antiquity. Meticulously rendered images, and detailed polychromed models, have captured and codified the human body in its magnificence and rendered its manifold decrepitudes. Physicians need to parse visual appearances with the sophistication of connoisseurs every working day. And when great medical thinkers like Paul Erlich first imagined the "antibodies" and "receptors" that now underlay the science of almost our entire therapeutic pharmacopeia, that imagining was conveyed in beautiful conceptual diagrams that still astonish in the refinement of their artistry and inductive insight.

It was with this background in mind that the *European Respiratory Journal* ran its "From the Museum" series in 2014–2015 [1, 2], the brainchild of one of us (T. Kotsimbos). The series probed the philosophical keystones of thinking about thinking by re-presenting images from revolutionary European art in thought-provoking combinations. These contextualised packages were designed to unpack the interdependencies of thinking, seeing and doing in a uniquely intellectual way, emphasising the cross-disciplinary natures of science, art and philosophy. Individually, and as an interconnected whole, the series was well received [3] as it offered inter-disciplinary potentialities and a fresh way to reflect on what we know/don't know, how we see/don't see and the choices we make/don't make as clinicians, scientists and policymakers [4, 5].

However, there is more.

Physicians and scientists not only have a natural affinity with the intellectual aspects of Western European art as its thinking alternated between the epoch defining counterpoints (classicism *versus* romanticism, impressionism *versus* symbolism and modern art absolutism *versus* post-modern relativities), but also with art's ability to encourage dialogue across many dimensions and its ongoing dynamic evolution.

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The Art of Breathing is a conceptual meditation of art juxtaposed with notions of respiration and emotional thinking <http://ow.ly/i7D9305ikM1>

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Gary Anderson, PhD FThorSoc FERS, is a basic lung researcher and has served as an associate editor of the *ERJ*. He read art history and science concurrently as an undergraduate and holds Masters degrees in both contemporary art and fine art.

Tom Kotsimbos, MBBS MD FRACP, is a physician-scientist and has served as an associate editor of the *ERJ*. He has been a life-long student of languages, critical thinking and a philosophical approach to creative existence.

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Where then is the need for art now when the eidetic role of painting has been supplanted by high-end medical imaging and the conceptual role of the drawing is increasingly eclipsed by hyper-real computer simulations? In today's *post post-modern* phase we may still appreciate the magnificence of once revolutionary art works but they no longer seem as essential to current day thinking relating to complexity science, systems approaches to biology and a networked social world.

This shift in utility was exactly the crisis that confronted art in the early 20th century: the time when the mechanical reproduction of images enabled by photography wiped aside the need for representation as the rationale for art. It seems unbelievable now that there were more than 100 000 visual artists working in Paris alone in the late 19th century up to World War I, when their numbers plummeted catastrophically.

Yet, at a time when we have never had less need for the made image, art, like science, is incontestably one of the most vibrant and dominant streams of Western intellectual culture. The French artist and thinker, Marcel Duchamp, is widely credited with explaining why. He reasoned that in the face of the technical means of Modernity the role of art had to shift from the representational to what he called the "post-retinal". This insight marks the transition of art towards the conceptual and in doing so re-imagines a lot of primitive and non-Western art. As the latest installment of art's progressive march forwards, contemporary art's response is to embrace the uncertainties of the human condition with the even deeper thinking *and* feeling that results in/is induced by its embodiments rather than first order appearances. A large number of contemporary art works either do not even exist physically or are associated with extra, non-visual sensory dimensions as approaches to deeper truths. In this setting, how these creative pieces *breathe* both individually and with the collective becomes a unifying metaphor for how their deep emotionality resonates directly with our neural circuitry and shared humanity – no matter how defined across time and space.

And so in 2016 the *ERJ* embarks on another foray into the imminent, yet intangible, interplay of art and medicine with a new series "The Art of Breathing", again conceived by Tom Kotsimbos. Over the next months this project will unfold as a series of juxtapositions of works from the world of high-end contemporary art with more familiar images from the full spectrum of world art. Having a life-long interest in art, I was delighted to be asked by Tom to suggest relatively unfamiliar contemporary art works that might simultaneously relate to notions of "respiration" and "emotional thinking" for the project.

Duchamp famously described himself as a "Respirateur". To make the series we therefore adapted a Duchampian "chance" technique to pair works we had selected individually. To give the series structure the paired images were then arranged along the arch of a notional deep and very slow breath-cycle (titled *inspirationally* across the series) and framed by a punctuating haiku-like poem (*expiratory* breath for each individual series piece). A red-blue colour palette for each pairing further evokes the cyclical spectrum of *emotional mood* and a *breathed* experience.

The Art of Breathing series is therefore both an *extension of* and *complementary to* the Art of Thinking. These two series are uniquely separated but deeply connected to each other, just as thinking and feeling are. Within and between both series the paradoxical dichotomies of order *versus* chaos, intuition *versus* determinism, thinking *versus* feeling serve to provide a model in which the uncertainties of the ambiguous middle is what the creative life is all about. All rigidly held extremes are maladaptive and so not only must one breathe in before they can breathe out, they must also breathe out before they can breathe in again. Superimposed on this cycle, is humanity's take on the second law of thermodynamics: *Life must be lived forward but can only be understood backwards*.

Although each chosen work may be accompanied by a short, contextualising introductory note, any such text will be purposefully minimal and should not be thought of as explanation. This series is all about the subjective and intangible. The real goal here is the unexpected imaginings and emotional wanderings we hope the project might engender in the mind and body of the viewer.

When you *look* at these pairings put literal thinking to one side and let art help your mind *slide into* the realm of the post-retinal imagination and your body *breathe in* the moment!

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