



At first glance, Chris Komater's *Out of Breath* resembles any other grid of buttons, the remote for my TV, for example. Then I become aware that the grid is breathing. The sound generates space and turns the grid into a room. The black means that the room is dark. It's too dark to see, but what would I be looking at? It is big enough to enter.

Narratives develop. *Out of Breath* could be a hymn to Genet in his prison cell, close quarters and heavy breathing. Are they in a cell, back room, or bathhouse? A bunkhouse, cabin, or truck stop toilet? Each breath has been located somewhere on the web, seized, and dragged across an electronic abyss to this black rectangle, so I can say each breath has been taken prisoner. A hymn is musical, and I control this orchestra of breath with a click, so I am the composer. Each instrument has a personality: here's the man trying to contain his pleasure, here's the man allowing pleasure to dismantle him. I imagine most of these lavish sounds actually derive from other activities; repetition and proximity to each other make them sounds of pleasure. Can we hear behind the rush of breath, say, a swimmer coming up for air? Or a runner struggling toward the finish line? Do these original activities become metaphors for sex?

When I operate this piece, I am summoning a utopia in which we find our identities in the moment of orgasm. We recognize ourselves in disembodied sighs of joy in which meaning proliferates delightfully, because these men have gone over to sex, sex has transformed them into its citizens. In fact, it is sex that breathes, sex itself strafes these voices, sex categorical. Komater banishes the rest of experience—including the distorting need to become a sexual object that someone can recognize, fuck and perhaps love.

I used to hear these sounds in bathhouses, the unmistakable shift in register as pleasure takes over, the body becoming animal, a loss of control leading to involuntary spasms. But that was sex on the hoof, and here sex expresses itself without needing to surmount the constraints of biography, space and flesh. Is this genre? Pornography stripped of its

resistance and shame? I can literally turn these men on (and turn them off) with a button. Is that arousing?

To this disembodied sex, I enlist my own body and overcome resistance in my own flesh as I make choices that call these frantic breathers into existence. It is up to me to create turbulence. I can't simply turn them all on, I must choose the voices one by one to make a crowd. Choose me, says each button, even though it is less than animate. The little space between buttons becomes tense, separating neighbors. We can't see the men so it must be a night we are sharing with them. The light on the buttons is the spirit each man possesses.

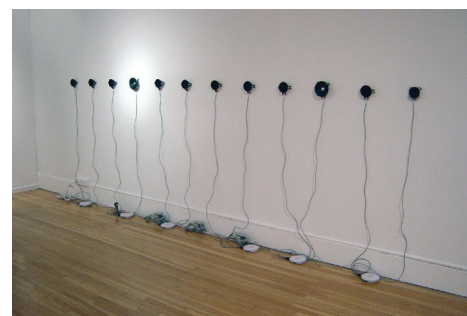
How much biography can I project onto a particular breath? Generally I would hear this intimate gasping only if his headboard stood against the other side of the wall from mine. Or is he the sinister breather on the phone, another disembodied voice? Do I hear the sound of my own panting in the dark when suddenly I become conscious of it. Or the agitation of my lover's breath—I enjoy bringing it to a pitch, the result of my ministrations.

Yet this grating sex-breath is a noise Komater never makes—in fact, he's silent, emitting in the crisis at most a huff. Now he has magnified that little huff a thousand times and suspended it in a grid: 25 buttons, play and pause. After ten years together I can count on one hand the occasions when he has made such sounds. Like librarians who write about cataclysms (George Bataille), Komater promotes a brand of freedom that he doesn't pursue away from the computer. But perhaps I am barking up the wrong tree, and *Out of Breath* begins with the commotion Komater likes to produce in me, Bob, his noisy partner.

The desire to systemize fragments meets the desire to build a tumultuous environment. Abstraction (flatness, grid) dispatches the collision of personal and public history that shapes any sexuality, as well as the shame of sex, the dirt of sex, the need for sex, and abjection and power. Take those away and what do you have? An essence, a spirit (as breath is spirit) of masculinity? Music? The containment of the uncontainable? An environment that is chaotic and overwhelming? Then I subdue the crowd till only one breather remains.

Komater also enjambs desire and abstraction in his photo grids of skin, such as *Every Inch of Jacek* (1997), but in his earlier installation work he conveyed environment through the ear. In the "western" *High Noon* (1993) he built a Greek chorus of chattering townsfolk, and in *Killer's Kiss* (1991) the audience moved through snippets of dragon lady dialogue that twisted the space into film noir. Look for themes of film and masculinity in all of Komater's work. *Out of Breath* is not only made out of breath, it alludes to *A Bout de Souffle*, Goddard's homage to the Hollywood version of gangster macho.

Later, in *Personals* (1994), Komater mounted as trophies the recorded voices of men responding to a sex ad. You could say *Out of Breath* is a computer installation. It was first conceived as a gallery installation, but deleting a spatial dimension and leaving sound has created the perfect "environment" for this work, elegant and acute in combining abstraction with the sound of pleasure, the aural image irreducible in a way that a visual image can't be, not even a close-up of skin. Where else could *Out of Breath* exist in its intensity and artifice? The shift between depth and no depth, between the fragmented and the global—the stuff of the internet—corresponds to a remarkable degree with the depth and lack of substance of arousal and fantasy.



Out of Breath, gallery version, installation view: mixed media, sounds of men breathing and panting

out of breath

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