

HOW DOES
THE WORLD
BREATHE
NOW

FILM SERIES
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EVERY WEDNESDAY

PARTICIPANTS Nora Adwan Dani Gal Chus Martinez Nasan Tur Antje Majewski
Vittorio Gallese Binyavanga Wainaina Theo Eshetu Angela Melitopoulos Anri Sala Braco Dimitrijevic
Candice Breitz Gertrude Koch Jin-Heon Jung Juan Pedro Fabra Khaled Kurbeh Köken Ergun
Lawrence Abu Hamdan Maria Thereza Alves Marion von Osten Nino Klingler Rachel O'Reilly
Simon Sheik Sinziana Paltineanu Stefanie Schulte Strathaus Taiye Selasi and many more

CONCEPT Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung
TEAM Elena Agudio Antonia Alampi Pia Chakraverti-Wuerthwein

**S A V V Y CONTEMPORARY
THE LABORATORY OF FORM-IDEAS**

C O N C E P T

In what can be considered one of the most poignant and profound poems of the 20th century [see below], Indonesian poet and playwright Raden Mas Willibrordus Surendra Broto aka Rendra, laments in utter awe the inscrutable state of the world today. The term “today” in its relativity and endless elasticity is that day, week, month, that moment in 1960 when the poem was written, and that point in time “today,” when you notice that the today of 1960 and the today of “now” could easily step in as a surrogate for the today of 1960. In this seminal poem *Sebuah Dunia Yang Marah (An Angry World)* the hypocrisy and senselessness of speeches, conferences, institutions that offer lip service while the world crumbles under greed, betrayal, megalomania and kleptocracy. He writes of despair, viciousness and empty lives. Of impotent bitterness. On forlornness on the face of the earth inhabited by hopelessness, hate, murder. Of a world haunted by lies, confusion and, for lack of a better term, sin. And at some point he breaks down, breaks it down and asks in a state of desolation – “how does the world breathe now?”

That this question forces one to reminisce on Eric Garner’s “I can’t breathe” is neither a matter of haphazardry nor a footnote in a narrative, but rather the main stream in a constructed narrative or path of a world struggling under the burden of misused power, whiteness, manness, patriarchy, misogyny, racism and coloniality.

So, HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW when, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in this year alone that hasn’t even come to an end, already 3034 people have disappeared in the Mediterranean on their way from Africa or the Middle East to Europe, and when in 2014 some 9986 souls found their premature unrest at the bottom of the Mediterranean? HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW in an age when demagogues around the world preach sermons about building walls between countries to keep out certain groups of people they consider rapists or not worthy of even the basic human treatment? HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW when people all over the world are persecuted for their sexual orientations, the colour of their skin, their religion or non-faith? HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW in an era in which the prison system is an economic model, children are baits, citizens are pawns in geopolitical chess games, and humans are just commodities in a neoliberal economic establishment?

HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW?

How could the world even breathe when in a bid to fulfill our longings for wealth, energy and comfort we destroy its veins and arteries; reap it of its resources; dehumanize other humans and commodify all that comes our way? How could it even think of breathing if the weakest in its ranks can barely feed themselves, but we can afford to build stadiums for the one-off hosting Olympic games... or as Gil-Scott Heron put it:

A rat done bit my sister Nell
With Whitey on the moon
Her face and arms began to swell
And Whitey’s on the moon

I can’t pay no doctor bills
But Whitey’s on the moon
Ten years from now I’ll be paying still
While Whitey’s on the moon

Art, or frankly put, good art has always been the witness bearer of the epoch in which the artist lived, the catalyst for reflections on things that touch the nerve of time in his/her day. Art is the container of sensibilities, possibilities, spirits and cognisances of various moments, what one might call the Zeitgeist. So when James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, wrote about “the incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long”¹ he not only most aptly captured the Zeitgeist, but also echoed and reflected Rendra’s queries “how does the world look now” and “how does the world breathe now?”

This capturing of the moment can be seen in the works of poets like Ama Ata Aidoo, Pablo Neruda, Christopher Okigbo, Efua Sutherland, Claudia Rankine, Maya Angelou, Ingeborg Bachmann, Giorgos Seferis, Abdellatif Laâbi, Amiri Baraka, Czesław Miłosz, Kamau Brathwaite, Forough Farrokhzad, Derek Walcott, Mahmoud Darwish, Anna Akhmatova, Oka Rusmini, Wisława Szymborska, Langston Hughes, Vladimir Mayakovsky and many, many more. Poetry, especially, has been a medium par excellence through which, and a vessel into which sociopolitical thoughts are poured. Their understanding and teaching, unsettling and comfort have often been the point of departure for many S A V V Y Contemporary projects –including this one. Their criticality, their sheer vision, tenacity and ability to tackle, or better put – confront – their realities stand out as witness bearers of their contemporary which we similarly find in films like Věra Chytilová’s *Daisies (Sedmikrásky)*, Santiago Alvarez’ *Now*, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Film*

Socialism, Lav Diaz' *Hele Sa Hiwagang Hapis (A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery)*, Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*, *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* and *Crude Oil*, Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* or *Appunti Per Un'orestiade Africana*, Ivan Ivanov-Vano's *Black and White* and many more.

Despite the weight and profundity, the momentousness and fundamentality of most of these works, and the works of many others that touch a nerve ending of their time, the issue at stake here is not only the strength and agency of the content, but also and chiefly the aesthetic sophistication and poetics of its container. For the content, in fact like water, takes the shape of its container.

The project **HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW?** is a venture of acknowledgments in a twofold way: On the one hand, an acknowledgement of the artist's role in society that can be understood as a reflection of his/her time. As Baldwin so aptly put it, the state and the role of the artist is to correct our delusions and expose to us the beauty of the states "of birth, suffering, love and death, which are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable."² And most especially, according to Baldwin the artist "must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen. That a society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. (...) The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides."³ Thus this series will aim at examining how works of art could reveal the instabilities of society and give breath to the tensions of the artist's time.

On the other hand, the project **HOW DOES THE WORLD BREATHE NOW?** is an acknowledgment of the fact that we are not islands. We learn from others and teach others. We exist because others exist-both the living and the non-living. This project is thus an effort to acknowledge a genealogy of artistic practice that engages with the social, the political, the bigger and smaller obstacles and beauties in the quotidian, but above all an acknowledgement of artistic practice that digs deeper beneath and beyond the visible reality. It is to this end that the project **how does the world breathe now?** invites artists, curators, and thinkers of all walks of life to propose an outstanding film/filmmaker that aptly captured/captures the *Zeitgeist* of his/her/its epoch –besides the work of the invited. On a weekly basis for over a year, **S A V V Y Contemporary** will be host to an evening of presentations, screenings and discussions around the work of a filmmaker. The invited will have the chance to present why he/she chose this particular work, its relevance to the time it was made and possibly to our time, and if need be, make a relation to his/her practice.

SEBUAH DUNIA YANG MARAH [AN ANGRY WORLD]

After two world wars
the chatter of guns and munitions in the air,
how does the world look now?
After so many speeches and conferences
the establishment of fine institutions
merely to quarrel
through a thousand slogans
and stab each other in the back,
how does the world breathe now?

Here in this part of the Earth
there are wounded faces
in the dark night of the spirit.
We do not need a map
to show where our people are.

This is an angry world.
Full of bright vicious eyes,
cruel hopeless faces,
and trembling hands
grasping at empty life.
In which
homes, men and rubbish
are all one.
Full of impotent bitterness.

World wars and rebellion
did not change our weary earth.
Murder after murder
hatred after hatred
gave birth to nothing
but sin, doubt,
and disbelief.

Gave birth to nothing
except the sacrifice of the powerless.
The continually questioning faces!
Driven into a world
of confusion and lies
they are always alone.
They grow from sin. They give birth to sin.

Our world is always wounded.
The poor walk with their hunger.
They are like thin dead sticks.
They regret their birth
but refuse to die.
They are sterile. They produce nothing.
They cling to the earth—
for that is their mother.
The others are their enemies.

In our tattered world
the poor beat out their bloody lives
suffering sin
unconsciously. Unwillingly.
God stands amongst them

He is wounded with them.
And the world rejects Him.

God cries with them.
But they do not hear Him.
God is sad and suffering
buffeted by angry feet.
Buffeted by bitterness
And restless fear.

Father!
Avoiding death
is their main problem
not welfare or sin.
How can they understand the voice of heaven
if they have never heard the voice of life?

Father!
While the world understands only guns and
deceit
stretch out Your loving hands
Your loving wounded heart.
Your wounds! Father, Your wounds!
Only through wounds
Can the world understand love.

God cries and understands.
God continually cries and understands.
He is always stabbed. Always betrayed.

Raden Mas Willibrordus Surendra Broto/
W.S. Rendra, 1960

1 Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*, 1993 (1963), p.19.

2 Baldwin, James. *The Creative Process in Creative America*, Ridge Press, 1962 [17-21].

3 *Ibid* p.17.