

following
the
breath



We are living through one of the most breath-aware periods in human history. Across the spectrum of communities and ways of life, people are realising how keenly the breath needs our attention, protection and care. The current environmental crisis and the coronavirus pandemic have highlighted the significance of this vital but vulnerable bodily function, revealing how fundamentally interconnected we have always been when it comes to our individual and collective breath.

Artist Sam Winston has spent the past few years exploring how London, its people and plants breathe. Tracing a web of connections, he has investigated how the complex relationship between the urban environment and the breath manifests in substances and living organisms as disparate as the aquatic plants of London's waterways; the particulate matter emitted in the fumes of petrol and diesel engines; discarded cigarette butts; and the survival responses of local trees such as oaks and London planes. Winston collected specimens from each of these examples and transformed them into a range of inks, with which he drew images that explore the synergy between environment, breath and creativity. These same tints have been applied to cards, available for your own exploration of the connections between your breath, environment and drawing.

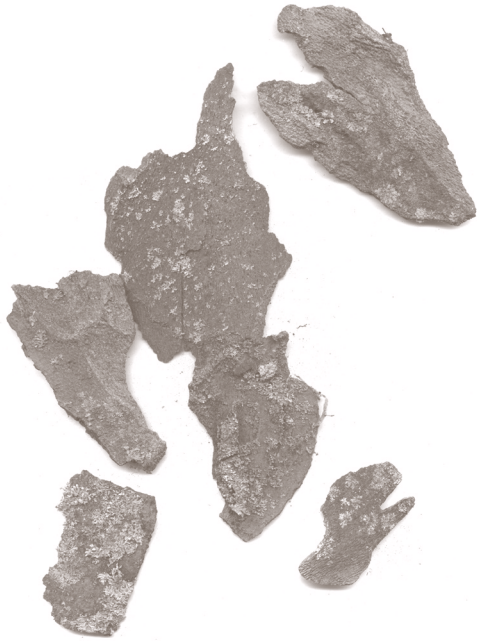
Over the past decade, Winston has used the act of drawing to consider questions around foundational concepts such as time, space and distance, and to challenge some of the interpretive frameworks that humans have imposed on the world. Drawing is one aspect of a wider practice through which Winston turns his attention to topics including the structures and components of language; natural and artificial materials; human perception and physical responses; and individual and collective creativity. His aim is to unlock some of the potential latent in these vast subject areas and to foster unexpected outcomes, so often stifled by cultural reflexes or systemic imbalances. His approach might involve phases of observation or deprivation, such as when he spends long periods of time drawing in the dark, or the attempt to repeat identical actions under different conditions. With *Following the Breath*, Winston invites you to breathe and draw, because he believes that 'drawing bypasses cognitive overload and lets intuition in. It teaches us how to deal with complexity without the need to control it.'

But Winston isn't asking you to simply believe him about this. Rather, he is inviting you to experience these insights for yourself. To explore the sensations of the paper and writing tool you use: a fast ballpoint gliding over a smooth sheet, or a dry pencil scraping lines into existence? To sense how the act of making your mark as you breathe more fully can occupy your entire body and mind. To feel, for just a moment, how you might let the preoccupations of your busy life disperse. Can you live in your breath, in your hand, in the simple movement of pen on paper?

Each of the inks Winston produced is made from a material gathered within a 3km radius of the Barbican. When applied to paper, they form visual tributes to the varied spectrum of London's inhalations and exhalations, to the respiration of its myriad pores.

Each drawing references a location within London and a duration of time breathing within that space.

London Plane Tree and Potting Compost
London parks and Barbican Conservatory, 2021



A golden-brown tint made from the bark of London plane trees is invisible when applied, oxidizing into view as it dries. Every year London's plane trees ritually shed their outermost layer of bark and with it the toxins they absorbed from the atmosphere, which otherwise we would have to inhale.

200g London plane tree bark
20g iron sulphate
4 tablespoons gum arabic
2 tablespoons vinegar
1 tablespoon salt
6 whole cloves
1000ml distilled water

As the water evaporates from the brown wash created from compost used in the Barbican Conservatory, it sediments into microscopic replicas of the landscapes stored in its memory.

Each line in the drawing records the length of an exhalation. The number of lines matches the number of breaths the artist took whilst collecting the materials to make the ink. The time recorded in this work was 20 minutes: the time the artist spent in the Barbican Conservatory obtaining the potting mix.

750g John Innes compost no.3
1000ml distilled water



Road Particulate Matter
Rotherhithe Tunnel, 2021

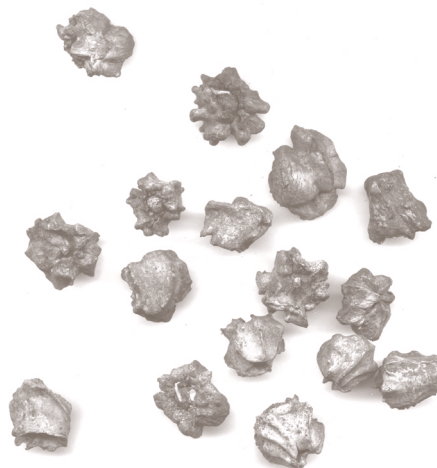


Particulate matter collected inside the Rotherhithe Tunnel is the tangible residue of London's exhaust fumes. A refined assailant, it is the primary ingredient in an ink that paints a fine-grained, almost photographic, image. As precise on paper as in its ability to penetrate the tissues of our lungs where, almost imperceptible, it can have devastating effects.

Each line in the drawing records the length of an exhalation. The number of lines matches the number of breaths the artist took whilst collecting the materials to make the ink. The time recorded in this work was 30 minutes: the time taken to gather the soot from the tunnel wall.

Road particulate matter (traffic fumes)
Collected with a cloth and 1000ml of distilled water

Knopper Oak Galls
London parks and Epping Forest, 2021



An exquisite ink made from oak galls — the knobbly growths produced by the oak tree after gall wasps lay their eggs in acorn blossoms — matures from translucent to indelible black. This ancient pigment, whose use can be traced back to Roman times, was used by luminaries including Leonardo Da Vinci, and in the transcription of historic documents such as the Magna Carta.

Each line in the drawing records the length of an exhalation. The amount of lines correlates to how many breaths the artist took whilst collecting the materials to make the ink. The time recorded in this work was 12 hours: the time it took to gather the galls from parks in East London and Epping Forest.

48g knopper oak galls
11g iron sulfate
5.5g gum arabic
4 whole cloves
473 ml distilled water

Used Cigarette Butts
London pavements, 2021

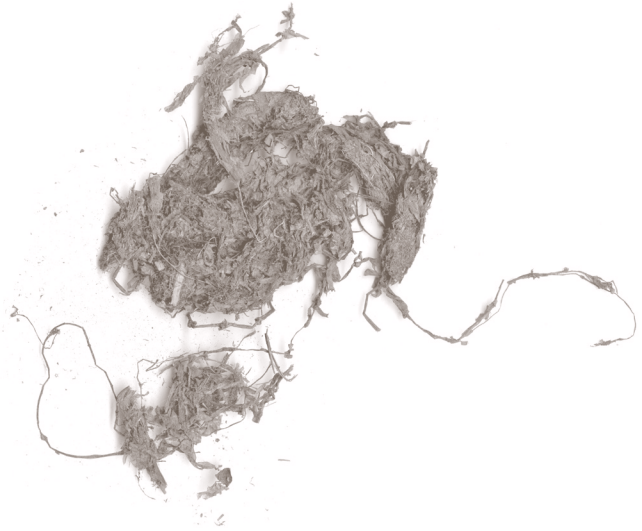


Spent cigarette smoke is rehydrated and liberated from discarded butts harvested from the pavements of London. Although the effects of tobacco use can be deadly, the ink's golden tone is a reminder of the sacred aura the plant has for many cultures around the globe.

Each line in the drawing records the length of an exhalation. The amount of lines correlates to how many breaths the artist took whilst collecting the materials to make the ink. The time recorded in this work was 5 hours: the time it took to forage the used cigarette butts outside bars and from pavements.

56g used cigarette butts
2 tablespoons vinegar
1 tablespoon salt
4 whole cloves
500ml distilled water

Aquatic Plants and Serrated Wrack
River Lea and Northumberland Coast, 2021



Aquatic plants breathe both above and below the surface of London's rivers, oxygenating their surroundings as the water flows back to mother Thames and the sea beyond. With time and heat, these weeds yield a tint with an evocative sepia tone.

Each line in the drawing records the length of an exhalation. The amount of lines correlates to how many breaths the artist took whilst collecting the materials to make the ink. The time recorded in this work was 4 hours: the time it took to collect the plants on a circular walk along the River Lea.

50g aquatic plants
300ml River Lea water
300ml distilled water

124g serrated wrack seaweed
2 tablespoons vinegar
1 tablespoon salt
4 whole cloves
300ml sea water
300ml distilled water

Art offers us the freedom to connect existing fields in new ways. It gives us license to challenge received wisdom and outdated definitions, enabling the creation of knowledge and meanings that better reflect lived experience. *Following the Breath* weaves together a broad range of research and practice strands including plant respiration, durational performance, abstract art, air pollution, collective co-creation and city living. But the essence of the project is the relationship between the breath and mark-making.

The breath is one of the body's autonomic responses, as are heart rate, digestion and blood pressure. Together they form a wondrous system that evolved to keep us safe by enabling our bodies to react quickly and efficiently to changes in the environment. But the breath is special because it is the only autonomic response we can easily control, which means we have the capacity to override unhelpful breathing patterns that may have set in as a result of stress. Bringing our awareness and intention to the breath can have a near-immediate effect on our sense of safety and wellbeing. Which, in turn, can affect the way we think about things: about ourselves, others, the world around us.

Drawing is a physical act — it involves the body and, by consequence, the body's responses. If we give ourselves permission to set aside judgement and let go of expectation, to trust in a time-honoured process, the act of drawing might take us somewhere new and unexpected, beyond the realm of cognition. This, in turn, will have an effect on the quality of our thoughts and beliefs, and, in time, on the behaviours that ensue.

There is no mark without breath.

And where there is breath, its characteristics influence the nature of the mark. Think of how your handwriting might look in an angry note scrawled while your chest is tightly clenched, or in a loving message penned with a generous breath.

Spending time turning our attention away from the myriad distractions of life and towards the breath is one way of creating and holding space for ourselves: space we hold in our lungs, in an unlikely tropical greenhouse within a concrete citadel, in a busy day, or on a rectangle of card. Allowing the breath to settle, to find its time and place, takes some care and attention. It may feel as though this is isn't always readily available; a luxury granted to some thanks to inherited or acquired privileges. Giving our attention to the breath can be a matter of survival, and it can be a matter of choice. When it does become possible to observe the breath for a few moments, get to know it better, pick up a pen and let the breath guide your hand, then you are in the realm of creativity.

The breath breathes you.

The drawing draws you.

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