

Emilio Mogilner – One Breath Time

*By Linda Weintraub**

Why is it customary to say "God bless you" when someone sneezes? One theory is that when we sneeze, air is ejected with such force, it signals death and the need for a speedy blessing. Indeed, nearly all words now meaning 'soul', 'spirit' and 'life', trace their origins to words meaning 'breath' or 'wind'. For example, the words 'spiritual' and 'respiratory' both derive from the Latin word 'spiritus', meaning 'breath'.¹

Unlike makers of myths and believers in religion, modern biologists tend to reject such animating energies as unempirical. Within their professions, breathing neither indicates the presence of a soul nor is it proof of the continuance of life. Scientific evidence reveals that the fully alive body and the newly dead body are arbitrary points along a continuum of decreasing organization.

"One Breath Time" is the name of a unique artistic practice that assigns a new significance to breath that straddles these contrasting philosophies. Emilio Mogilner only starts painting when he stops breathing. The inception and conclusion of his creative act is measured by the seconds that lapse before he refills his lungs with air. Literally and metaphorically, this demanding creative process announces the urgency of his message. He declares that Earth is in jeopardy. Only seconds remain for humans to activate the imperative to stay alive.

A breath is an elemental unit of biological time. These units vary in duration. A single breath for a plant is leisurely. It occurs once every twenty-four hours because plants inhale during the day and exhale at night. Cells, in contrast, can complete the breath cycle in 1/10,000 second. The average time required for human organisms to inhale and exhale is three seconds. Emilio Mogilner is not an average human. Within his artistic practice a breath is not merely an instance of routine inhaling and exhaling that sustains life. Instead, a singular breath carries the significance of the gasp of astonishment and the blast of a shout. His art practice engages these special breaths that are permanently transforming. Such breaths only exist in units of one. Within this condensed span of time, Mogilner produces compelling paintings.

Videos document some of the acts of creation. They record Mogilner taking a breath and releasing it slowly. When breathing stops he lunges at the painting, often dispensing with paint brushes and working feverishly with his palms and fingers. He sweeps and wipes the canvas with the ferocity of the life-and-death struggle it is designed to address. His explosive frenzy propels

¹ "Spirit. Soul. Mind" by Frank R. Zindler in *The Probing Mind*, February 1985.
<http://www.atheists.org/Atheism/mind.html>

him to point of oblivion. In some cases it drives him to collapse, momentarily, in a stupor. The painting is finished when the artist's breath is gone.

These extreme measures are designed to convey a comparable danger. His work refers to the Earth's struggle against severe environmental hazards. This real life drama is reenacted by the artist's primal effort to paint. Like the build-up of hydrocarbons choking the Earth's atmosphere, an asphyxiating quantity of carbon dioxide has accumulated in the artist's lungs. His collapse foretells the possibility of global failure.

Mogilner proclaims in his "One Breath Time Manifesto"², "At the dawn of civilization there was almost no information, but there was abundance of time. Now we live with abundance of information but no time. Time is breath"³. This statement echoes frequent complaints about having no time. It confirms pundits' warnings that we are confronting an environmental catastrophe. It dramatizes forecasters' predictions that humanity's time on Earth might be terminal. The artist states, "Everything from the perspective of the infinity of the universe is a flash. It took 600,000 years to change the desert. Then, in a flash, humans conquered Mother Earth. Now the human race has only one breath time to change its behavior to save Mother Earth".

Each painted stroke congeals the frenetic speed of Mogilner's creative process. His painting is not a private affair concealed within a studio. His missionary outreach demands witnesses. For this reason, painting is also a performance. 1,000 onlookers watched as he created a One Breath Time painting entitled "Modern Civilization is Conquering Mother Earth" (2004). 2,000 children actually participated in creating a huge painting entitled "Save the Sea" (2004). Participants join the creative act by counting in unison. At the count of ten everyone stops breathing and starts to paint. The entire painting is completed in a few feverish seconds, the time it takes to dislodge the false sense of security and replace it with behavior tuned to an emergency mode. Mogilner says it is like "a seismograph that records the earth's trembling".

Taking breaths, one at a time, is a rehearsal for "survival momentum", a term Mogilner uses to describe the urgent need for salvation efforts to deliver the soul/ breath/ life of the planet and all its inhabitants. The painting process not only enacts a state of alarm, it actually introduces strategies of rescue. It teaches the skill of summoning one's energy and devoting one's capabilities to Earth-saving deeds. Mogilner places his faith in the individual. "No one is like us humans. Each person is a galaxy – each one of us is that powerful. What took nature a million years to create, mankind is destroying in just one breath time. We may not have created Earth, but we have created its current condition, and we are the only ones who can create the future. If humans destroy Earth, there is nobody who can fix it for us".

Mogilner demonstrates several means of repair. One consists of moderating the scale of our ambitions. By working on canvases of different sizes, he

² April 2002

³ All quotes based on a telephone interview with the artist in March, 2005

reveals how to make judicious use of the Earth's finite resources. Once again, he depends upon an analogy between the Earth and his body, relating Earth's finite resources to the finite quantity of air available in his lungs. He is able to endure for two minutes if he paints a small picture, but his air supply is exhausted in barely fifty seconds when he works on a large format. Like all human undertakings, his painting process involves a trade-off between magnitude and longevity, and reveals three truths that apply to any endeavor: the larger the size, the greater the energy consumed, the faster the resources deplete. Mogilner comments that "the bigger our ambitions, the more futile our results".

Another lesson conveyed by "One Breath Time" involves cultivating human capacities that promise to secure our future. He decried the fact that the information that is taught, what we learn, and what we know involves how to destroy Mother Earth. Knowledge has become damaging. 'Survival momentum' in art making is applicable to all human activities. "We must stop painting with technique and mind. The new art is not about the imagination, or originality, or expressionism, or ready-mades. The world of art is passing to a new dimension". Painting with utmost urgency bypasses information and obliterates the possibility for reflection. Mogilner's creative process relies upon primal functions of the human mind, the source of the wisdom to direct our own rescue mission.

Likewise, Mogilner is certain that technology won't save us. To demonstrate this brazen rejection of a mass dependency, he discards tools and dives into visceral space that is rarely explored today. No intermediaries separate him from his medium. He works with his hands, a fact that gains significance when the artist states his belief that it is the human desire to avoid work that motivates us to amass powers. This pattern is not a recent development. "Once, this power was expressed through slavery. Then we learned to rely on technology. Now we are becoming slaves of our technology. We are working more hours and we waste time in activities that are not related to survival".

Mogilner does not merely sermonize about people living, as if in a trance, wasting time and resources while both are running out. He actually changed the speed, size and composition of his own life to manifest a sustainable life style. He owns a property in Israel on which he built a stone house in the ancient manner and then planted orchards and groves and vineyards and gardens. He raises worms, preserves seeds, makes compost. The property also serves as an ecology center where he conducts workshops to teach the basics of permaculture. Rather than displaying his work in galleries and museums, where the paintings can lose their context and the message can be twisted, he has recently established a museum for One Breath Time on his own property. Thus, his art that deals metaphorically with extending time and mitigating emergencies is presented within the context that actualizes these ideas. Mogilner says, "People come from everywhere. They come for days or months. Some volunteers live here. Members of the local community come to garden every day. I conduct workshops with children and adults – Arab and Jewish alike – to help them connect with their 'survival momentum'. I create

One Breath Time paintings with the people. This is the only place where they can see the true story".

Mogilner says he is living in Paradise. "God never threw us from Paradise. We threw ourselves out of Paradise with our brain". The sweeping reform he conveys is applicable to everybody who owns land. There is a best selling book that could serve as the thesis for One Breath Time. Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking by Malcolm Gladwell asserts that we can make better decisions with less knowledge because too much information paralyzes the decision-making process. Gladwell's goal is like Mogilner's goal. Both promote unconscious judgments that synthesize years of experience and knowledge into a split second.

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This piece concerning Emilio Mogilner's unique artistic practice and way of life will be published in Weintraub's next book, entitled "Micro. Muckro. Macro. An Exploration of Eco-Art", and included in art programs in American universities.