

A BREATH OF ETERNITY

As the average lifespan gets longer, *the end* concerns us more than ever. With, on the one hand, the States that legislate on the end of life, and on the other hand, the spokesmen of transhumanist thought promising us eternity. We are dealing here with one of the greatest taboo of humanity: death. Or how to offer it to those who ardently await it when we conceive, at last, the possibility of eradicating it. But at what price? Scientists are in the habit of stirring up the world of ideas, like Michele Spanghero, and it is up to artists to give shape to this societal problem. In 2010, it was in such a context that Spanghero had the intuition of a work that he hastened to document in his sketchbook, as if not to lose it. His idea, unexpected to say the least, was to connect a set of organ pipes with an artificial respirator. Since the organ is as essential to sacred music as the respirator is in a hospital environment, two points of view on eternity coexist in the creation of the first sound installation *Ad lib.* in 2013. Since then, the Italian artist has created other versions, as engineers and other luthiers do.

Ad lib. refers to the Latin expression *Ad libitum*, which means "at the discretion" or "at-will". It's also an annotation that composers add to their scores to allow performers to repeat musical phrases as many times as they see fit. What is at stake here is the decision to continue or to interrupt, as in ethical debates regarding what is termed "therapeutic persistence." The forms of Michele Spanghero's sound sculptures are just as harmonious as the notes they simultaneously repeat until the audience is fully satisfied. The different versions of *Ad lib.* also have in common to be rhythmized on human breathing. Inexorably, they end up dragging us into a common breath. Spectators of such a wind sculpture tune their breathing into the unconscious experience they collectively make of what is also an instrument. By slowing down our biological rhythm, this sculpture-instrument, somewhat literally at the crossroads of the visual arts and those of the performing arts, soothes us to the point of even reassuring us.

If there is a time when we collectively need to be soothed, reassured, it is indeed the time of this pandemic that affects us all in various ways. And we remember that in the spring of 2020, many companies temporarily interrupted their usual production to design the artificial respirators that were sorely lacking in the intensive care units of our hospitals. Suddenly, the life support device crystallized our visceral attachment to life. Our individual or collective experience of *Ad lib.* is reinforced today, in this new world that is emerging. The sculpture-instrument with the unique score that revealed itself to the Italian artist long before this pandemic is today even more contemporary. Yesterday we mostly observed organ pipes, whose sounds evoke the sacred, today we focus on the artificial respirators that have saved so many lives. When, from such an assemblage in the sphere of art – a sphere which is more than ever essential to us – a breath of eternity emerges, it projects us well beyond the political debates and health crises agitating our society.

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