

Politics

‘We’re All Breathing the Same Air’: How Jeppe Hein’s Participatory Art Project United Schoolchildren and Heads of State During Climate Week

The artist sees the piece as a way to encourage communication and break down barriers.

Sarah Cascone, September 26, 2019



Jeppe Hein with his piece *Breathe With Me* (2019) at the United Nations Headquarters, New York. Photo courtesy of the artist and ART2030.

Take a deep breath. That’s what Danish artist Jeppe Hein is asking the public to do as part of his participatory art project *Breathe With Me*, which invites passerby to exhale while painting parallel vertical blue lines on canvas.

The project began as a way for Hein to center himself as he battled a serious illness, but expanded to encompass a broader group of participants and a quest for healing on a much more monumental scale. On view in New York's Central Park—and coinciding with a show of Hein's work at 303 Gallery in Chelsea—the piece measures 10 feet tall and 600 feet long.

After painting a line, Hein told artnet News, “you look up at the blue sky and you say ‘I feel good because I can breathe.’”

His message resonates all the more during New York City's Climate Week, which runs through September 29 and coincides with the UN Climate Change Summit. *Breathe With Me* had a presence at the UN too, thanks to Danish art nonprofit ART 2030, which has dedicated itself to staging art projects that support the UN's 17-point agenda for global sustainable development.



Jeppe Hein, *Breathe With Me* (2019), Central Park, New York. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

Hein and ART2030 had already gotten the permits to stage the project in Central Park—New York's communal backyard—when the UN called the organization's founder, Danish collector Luise Faurschou,

and asked if there were any plans for art projects during Climate Week. She told them about *Breathe With Me*. “They said, ‘Why don’t you do it in our house too?’” Hein recalled.

At the UN, the artist spent the Youth Action Summit and the Climate Change Summit explaining his concept to people from all over the world, many of whom didn’t speak English. Several heads of state added their breath to the work, including the presidents of Greece, Peru, and Bhutan, as well as former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. Hein missed a photo op with French President Emmanuel Macron, who stopped by while the artist was in the bathroom.

Central Park has drawn a different crowd, including hundreds of local children who’ve shared their breath thanks to a partnership with the education department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their contributions stand out, the lines starting lower on the canvas due to the children’s height.



Jeppe Hein and ART2030 founder Luise Faurschou watch Michael Bloomberg add to Hein’s *Breathe With Me* (2019) at the United Nations Headquarters, New York. Photo courtesy of the artist and ART2030.

The museum’s director, Max Hollein, also took part. “*Breathe With Me* was a moving experience, and a moment of both relaxation and reflection,” he told artnet News. “Jeppe’s work is inspirational, and invites participation and collective awareness.”

Despite language barriers and cultural differences, Hein has found the work to be universally relatable. “We’re all breathing the same air,” he pointed out. Originally, he did not conceive the work as related to climate change, although he recognizes the link today.



A child adds to Jeppe Hein's *Breathe With Me* (2019) at Central Park, New York. Photo by Renee Delosh, courtesy of 303 Gallery.

He developed a practice of painting lines while focusing on inhaling and exhaling a decade ago during a serious illness, as a way of dealing with panic attacks. The participatory element came later, when he started showing the line paintings in museums.

Hein also grew up on a bio-dynamic farm run by his parents, so he's always understood the importance of taking care of the earth. “If you can't breathe, you can't live, the trees can't live,” he said. “It's a very important thing.”



Jeppe Hein, *Breathe With Me* (2019), Central Park, New York. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

The artist plans to donate many of the individual canvases from Central Park to the schools from the Met program. He would have donated some to the UN, but red tape and concerns about corruption led him to scrap that plan. Museums have already expressed interest in showing that ten-panel UN work, and Hein envisions visitors to the show breathing on the walls around the canvases, expanding on the piece even further.

“Children, adults—anybody can share their breath,” Faurschou told artnet News. “That’s really the power of the universal language of art, to take something as fundamental as our breath, that we all know, and link it to something as complicated and complex as climate change.”

“Jeppe Hein: Breathe With Me” is being created in Central Park at 72nd Street and Center Road (between Sheep Meadow and the Naumburg Bandshell) in New York, September 25–27, 2019, 11 a.m.–6 p.m. The UN version is on view at the United Nations Headquarters, New York, September 21–October 5, 2019.

“Jeppe Hein: I am With You” is on view at 303 Gallery, 555 West 21st Street, New York, September 12–October 19, 2019.