



## Edgar Leciejewski “BREATHE IN / BREATHE OUT”

Having recovered from Covid-19-related illness, Donald Trump returned to the campaign trail in October 2020 with a mass gathering in Florida, where he uttered what sounded like a threat: “I’ll kiss everyone in that audience. I’ll kiss the guys and the beautiful women [...] Just give you a big fat kiss.”<sup>1</sup> The scandal was calculated: in the pandemic age, kissing a stranger (or, for that matter, a friend) carries a high risk of—potentially lethal—infection. As the episode also reminds us, before the pandemic, kisses—and especially political kisses—were a commonplace interaction, but they were arguably never a harmless one. Neither, as it happens, were handshakes, which the 45th president during his tenure deftly turned into a silent form of mano-a-mano combat on the world stage. For the time being, new hygiene rules have largely made these and similar gestures disappear, replacing them with more distanced forms of greeting.

The current situation sheds fresh and distinctive light on Edgar Leciejewski’s new series “breathe in / breathe out,” which is dedicated to the peculiar form of greeting we may describe with the clinical term “politicians’ kiss.” Leciejewski has assembled seventy-two photographs of politicians; printed as a fanfold booklet, the sequence of images folds out, in an instance of form matching content, into a parade of global politics. In selecting the pictures, Leciejewski has limited himself to the past two decades, and so one of the revelations that emerges from the series of sometimes bizarre photographs is that the famed “socialist brotherhood kiss” beloved by Eastern Bloc potentates is by no means a historic outlier. Democratically elected politicians, too, avail themselves of the powerful symbolism of public kissing.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Maggie Haberman and Annie Karni, “At a Campaign Rally, Trump Offers to Give ‘a Big Fat Kiss’ to Attendees,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/world/at-a-campaign-rally-trump-offers-to-give-a-big-fat-kiss-to-attendees.html>



“To kiss,” the cultural critic, writer, and scholar of courtesy Claudia Schmölders pointed out a few years ago, “is to recall an entire penumbra of meanings, for the gesture establishes a semantic as well as a physical synopsis. Consider only the kisses of peace between kings, the custom of genuflecting before kissing a pope’s hand, the lips pressed on crosses, icons, and relics of all kinds in an act of despair or passion. A ritual ensemble from our cultural history that can even be tapped for intimate relationships and scenes in family and civic life: for the parental kiss, the kiss of reconciliation, the kiss before the officiant sealing the marriage covenant, and so on.”<sup>2</sup> As the photographs in Leciejewski’s “breathe in / breathe out” illustrate, we understand only half of the act of kissing if it makes us think solely of love and affection.

Kito Nedo (translation Gerrit Jackson)

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2 Claudia Schmölders, “Auf weichen Küsse(n) gebettet,” in Alain Montandon, Der Kuß. Eine kleine Kulturgeschichte, Berlin: Wagenbach 2006, pp. 7–12, quote p. 8.