

THE POLITICS OF SMELL: HOW SCENT TECHNOLOGIES ARE AFFECTING THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE SPACE, SENSE OF PLACE AND ONE ANOTHER

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the history of our relationship with smell, from the perfume industry to the burgeoning air-freshener and deodorizing industry. It examines how smell can deeply effect the way we experience space, our sense of place and one another. It examines how advancements in smell simulation technologies are being used and manipulated, not simply by corporations as an elusive marketing tool, but by governments to support and promote their agendas of war. And, as they embark on some of the most advanced research into smell, this essay looks at how these technologies are also changing and challenging artistic practice as artists begin to question and counter with research and agendas of their own.

SENSORIAL ESTRANGEMENT

Estrangement from the senses and from the natural world they enable us to perceive charts a long history. One could say that the path was set with the development of written alphabetic language, for this form of communication began to replace the sentient means of transmitting and receiving meaning (such as body language, non-verbal sounds, touch, taste and smell) of which our natural world was a part. As communications became increasingly word-based they began to exclude the surrounding environment – rendering Nature more “inanimate object” than “living, breathing and communicating” – and altering our social relationships. Yet, while written language may have marked the beginning of our separation from the natural world and sentient engagement, it was with the onset of the modern industrial age (and factory labor) that capitalist agendas began to break down heterogeneous, multi-sensorial, *lived* experiences of duration and rebuild them into the homogeneous, reproducible fragments that speed and profitability inherently demanded. Our experiences became increasingly stripped of all that made them unique, fluid and intimate, creating a longing that needed to be filled and making us vulnerable; in the age of industry, this need was filled through object consumption. In the contemporary age of media and technology however, this consumption extends well beyond objects and into our most intimate social fabric. Isolation continues to be manufactured, yet now the means through which we access and experience intimacy are becoming redesigned as well.

As our reliance upon heavily ocularcentric technologies evolves and our daily interactions become more deeply immersed in remote, fractured, often-virtual experience, our reliance upon and relationship with our senses devolves. And while these technologies are, on the one hand, literally at our fingertips, offering the impression that everything is close and that we are able as never before to configure our own individual experiences, they are, on the other hand, highly mediated, homogeneous and stripped of direct multi-sensorial richness. Here as never before,

the media responsible for connecting us so effectively to one another also inherently prescribes physical and psychological estrangement. And at the same time that our technologies distance us from sentient experience, they enable us to more effectively dupe the senses, creating fully fabricated images, sounds, smells and tastes. Experiences are no longer simply mediated but can now be manufactured to reside deeply within our sense memory.

THE VULNERABILITY OF SMELL

While all of our senses become increasingly susceptible to manipulation within this contemporary condition, smell may actually be among the most vulnerable. The perfume industry has a long history of enhancing or altering our body's natural odors to make them more attractive, masking the smells we don't like with ones that we do. And while this is not new, as Constance Classen notes in her book *Aroma*, “smell is hardly ever considered as a medium for the expression of class allegiances and struggles” nor is it seen to have the power of sight or sound to serve as a “political vehicle.” [1] While it is one of the most emotionally potent senses and is thought to be one of the strongest triggers for memory, it remains the least considered. As experiences become more fractured and we become less familiar with and tolerant of the natural smells around us, olfactory simulation technologies continue to advance. Now they are being developed and utilized not simply by the perfume industry to make us smell better, but by corporations as a subversive marketing tool and by governments to facilitate war. And, as they embark on some of the most advanced research into smell, these technologies are also changing and challenging artistic practice, as artists begin to question and counter with research and agendas of their own.



Fig. 1. *Anthropodino*, 2009, Ernesto Neto, mixed media, Installation view of at the Park Avenue Armory.

Ernesto Neto, quickly becoming one of Brazil's most important artists, creates immersive environments meant to reacquaint us with our physical selves and with sentient experience. He constructs large installations that reference the body's interior. Often made from thin, semi-translucent, stretchable fabrics that recall human flesh, they, at times, also include intensely aromatic spices that fill portions of the material and hang down like giant organs, releasing their scents into the air. Visitors are invited to move inside these spaces and to "experience" the work more than "view" it. With installations such as *Anthropodino*, housed in the Park Avenue Armory in New York in 2009 and *The Edges of the World* at the Hayward Gallery in London, 2010, Neto says he was much more interested in the air inside the sculpture than in anything else—that his passages "privilege the air." [2] In an interview about the work he noted the importance of re-engaging the senses within a culture of remoteness "*I wanted to touch people with smell because it is very dangerous to [physically] touch people*" alluding to both the desire for and resistance against direct human closeness. [4] In this way, Neto not only uses smell as a potent reminder of the sentient nature of our being, but perhaps also as a means for exposing our estrangement from this nature within daily experience. For, while the vast, industrial space of the Armory in which *Anthropodino* is housed is all-too familiar, within the close, lush, fleshy, smelly interiors of the work we are somewhat displaced.

Intellectually elusive and emotionally potent smell, more than any other sense (save taste, which functions together with smell), has the ability to elicit feelings that are intensely visceral. A smell can trigger a deeply embedded memory we may not even "remember remembering" because odor memories accumulate "outside of awareness." [4] And this bank of smell memories develops even without our conscious knowing; we need not intend to smell smells or be attentive to their presence, yet they build up and are stored with every breath: Etymologically speaking, a breath is not neutral or bland, it's cooked air; we live in a constant simmering. There is a furnace in our cells and when we breathe we pass the world through our bodies, brew it lightly and turn it loose again, gently altered for having known us. [5]

The nature of our response to smell operates outside of language. "Our sense of smell can be extraordinarily precise, yet it's almost impossible to describe how something smells to someone who hasn't smelled it. Smell is the mute sense, the one without words, lacking in vocabulary." [6] These smells that we draw in can subconsciously evoke responses that are deeply emotional. They can trigger feelings of comfort, yet equally quickly set off a kind of squeamish disgust and this forms one of the predominant aspects of smell. This inherently visceral response opens an even greater vulnerability as our culture becomes ever more obsessed with purification for, while we are drawn to smells that are 'good,' nothing serves to keep us in a state of isolation and remoteness more than the *fear* of the unclean. Ivan Illich in his essay *The Dirt of Cities, The Aura of Cities, The Smell of the Dead and Utopia*

of an Odorless City notes how our tolerance and attitude toward bodily smells began to shift as we became more deeply acquainted with the process of death and decay.

[The living] demanded a special apartheid between live bodies and corpses at just the time when the innards of the live human body were beginning to be visualized as a machine whose elements were "prepared" for inspection on the dissecting table. The dead became more visible and less awesome [...] The presence of the dead was suddenly perceived as a danger to the living [...] For the first time in history the utopia of the odorless city appears [...] Space had to be stripped of its aura once aura had been identified with stench. [7]

THE SMELL OF COMMERCE

Corporations understand and are increasingly capable of making specific use of this olfactory vulnerability. The perfume industry was developed to feed a growing desire to the mask odors (specifically body odors) that came to be defined as unpleasant and soon we began to equate 'good smell' with status—the better you smelled, the richer you were. That has changed over the years however, as ever more intimate interactions reside within increasingly remote technologies and we become further obsessed with purification. Classen notes, "The olfactory social scale is the reverse of what it was in earlier ages in the West [...] Now, however, power resides not with perfumed potentates, but with inodorate businessmen." [8] The burgeoning and much more recent air-freshener and de-odorizing industry preys upon our *fear* of the unclean and fuels the belief that some smells need to be eradicated altogether. It is no longer enough to 'mask' a foul odor so as to make it tolerable; it has now become necessary to 'kill' a dangerous one in order to make it safe.



Fig. 2. *Fear 9*, 2006 Sissel Tolaas, scent, Image via: <http://www.ediblegeography.com/talking-nose/>.

Norwegian artist Sissel Tolaas is one of the first and most significant artists to work with smell. With a background in mathematics, linguistics and chemical science, she became interested in working with smell as a means of communication

and to see what can be learned when it is distilled and decoded. Tolaas embarked on some of the most advanced research into chemically simulated smell and in 2004 established the research lab IFF re_searchLab Berlin for smell & communication. In her project the *FEAR* of smell – the smell of *FEAR* (presented in several different iterations in exhibitions including the Tirana Biennale in 2005 and at MIT's Visual Art Centre in 2006) she used smell to situate viewers directly between the conditions our techno/human interface prescribes us to inhabit; the need for intimacy within the experience of remoteness and the utopic vision of purification within the inescapable reality of stench. [9]

In this project Tolaas collected the sweat from 14 – 25 men in various parts of the world, all of whom are prone to anxiety and panic. She developed a tool that, when placed under the arm during an attack, captures sweat molecules and records their smell. Tolaas then took those smells into her lab where they were broken down into their various chemical components and recreated. The simulated versions of each individual's scent were then reprocessed into molecules and embedded into a special paint that would release the smell upon touching. [10] For the exhibition, the artist prepared a freshly painted white room, devoid of any visual stimulus and fully reliant upon our senses of touch and smell to engage. The gallery space presented a utopian vision—pure, white and unsullied. The simple act of touching however was enough to break the veil of purity and expose the odor of the body. Once released, these smells elicit an experience in the “viewer” that is involuntary and anti-intellectual, as our response to smell is inherently subconscious and visceral. And this response, different for each individual, could reveal much about where each of us resides within the techno/ human condition. For some the initial white room may have appeared comforting and clean, while for others, cold and unsettling – and the smell of the bodies? Some visitors reported being overwhelmed by feelings of nausea and disgust, while others (such as a woman who returned to the exhibition daily and spoke to the scent of one particular man) found the smells to be familiar and intimate. [11] Not only were visitors affected in some way by the experiences their touch and smell afforded, but they also affected the space in return, contributing traces of themselves as the oils from their hands became overlaid onto the ghost scents and built up upon the surface.

While Tolaas' makes use of the long-standing tradition of the “white cube” very specifically in this work, her choice of body odor (as opposed to any other smell) also holds particular significance. There are many different kinds of smells that can evoke disparate individual responses ranging somewhere between the pleasant and the putrid, but our response to the smell of the body is particular. Carolyn Korsmeyer, in her book *Savouring Disgust* notes that disgust is an “aesthetic affect” that can only be elicited in response to organic material experience in response to living matter. [12] This is because disgust is a feeling that alerts us “to the presence of danger indicated by decomposing vegetable or

animal matter.” [13] Disgust is elicited when we are pushed up against the reality of our decomposing nature. The more difficult this becomes to reconcile – the further removed we become from the notion that we are mortal beings bound to decay – the greater our fear and disgust in the face of it and the greater our desire for and comfort in, an eternal state of purity. Korsmeyer explains the phenomenon in this way:

The aesthetic affect [of sublate disgust] gains intensity from the hallmark visceral repulsion of disgust, which registers the inescapable, dolorous frailty of material experience [...] organic life is mortal, we are living organisms that will live out our allotted time and then pass from existence. Part of that passing away is a stage where the remainder of our corporeal selves will suffer disintegration and putrefaction. No one is surprised to make this discovery. But like so many existential truths, its magnitude slips through the mind and cannot be held. The sublate aspect of aesthetic disgust permits a moment of sustained recognition, providing a time to dwell upon mortality from a particularly intimate and fragile perspective. [14]

In the *FEAR* of smell – the smell of *FEAR*, Tolaas uses simulated smell to reconnect us back to the reality of the body. She has noted that, with the constant bombardment of perfumes, deodorants and sterilizers in the atmosphere (arising from our desire to banish the smell of our mortality), we no longer even know what our bodies truly smell like. Her work to collect, dissect, decode and recreate these smells is in an effort to “go back to zero” to “bring us back to the origins” of what we no longer smell. [15] And in the contemporary environment, not only are the smells that we deem unpleasant being masked by something more desirable, but more and more we are learning to erase the smells we don't want and replace them with ones we do want.



Fig. 3. Smell of fear, Sissel Tolaas. Image via <http://crossjack.blogspot.ca/>.

The fast-growing air freshener and de-odorizing industries were built upon and perpetuate a growing *fear* of the unclean. Now we are not simply covering over unpleasant odors, we are sterilizing a dangerous environment. The more *fearful* we become of our corporeal condition and of the contaminated environments that

threaten it, the more products we consume to protect us. And at the same time that we buy products to rid our surroundings of “bad” smells, we are inspired to shop for others through the infusion of “good” ones. As consumers become increasingly savvy about “artificial” scents, corporations work to develop more convincing simulations of the real. Where we once smelled perfume with an undertone of the original ‘unpleasant’ odor we can now smell coffee where there are tires or lilies where there are over-worked bodies. Smells are being simulated and orchestrated to such a degree that we can now be completely duped. They no longer relate to the existence or presence of something, as they no longer require any point of origin; something that exists need not smell and a smell need not come from something that exists. A McDonalds french-fry, no longer cooked in beef fat can, through chemical simulation, still smell (and taste) as if it was. [16] And this simulation will also assure that every french-fry, no matter how good the potato crop, will smell exactly the same. Every new car, shopping mall bathroom or florist’s rose can, through chemical simulation, have its smell exactly determined and precisely duplicated. In this way, even smell is being broken down and rebuilt into homogeneous, reproducible, mediated fragments. This ability to chemically reproduce, manipulate and control smell, known to so effectively and elusively influence us, offers it up to corporations as a most effective marketing tool. And it may also offer it up to governments to advance their agenda of war.

THE SMELL OF WAR

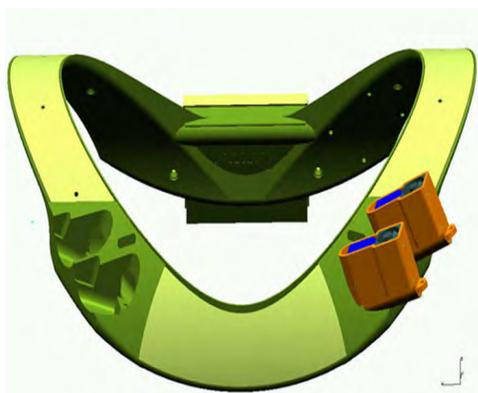


Fig. 4. USC Scent Collar, 2009, Image via: http://skydeas.smugmug.com/Professional/Morie-USC-Scent-Collar/17611389_8hcR4z/1341914470_qrcCPVP#!i=1341915751&k=MRvddjx.

The efficacy and potency of smell has also become of great interest and concern to the U.S. Government. We are sensorial beings bound to our physical nature. We perceive our environment through our senses and this perception forms the basis for our understanding of self and of our place in the world—and smell, more so than any other sense, can elicit strong, deeply ingrained responses to what we perceive. The government soon began to recognize that the responses triggered in soldiers by the smell of war were running directly counter to those required to carry it out.

When Sissel Tolaas exhibited her *FEAR* project in New York City, the New York Times published an article on her exhibition and research. Tolaas said that soon after, the U.S. Government contacted her about the possibility of working together. [17] They were particularly interested in the advancements she was making in chemical olfactory simulation. The U.S. Army and Department of Defense had already begun working with other artists and scientists on research and developments of their own. In 1999, they formed a strategic partnership (ICT) with the University of Southern California and several major entertainment industry leaders (including Disney, DreamWorks and Time Warner) (Macedonia, 2000) specifically focused on olfactory research. The Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) developed the first *Scent Collar* prototype for the military in 2002 [18] for which it won the patent in 2009. [19] This collar is specifically designed for use with soldiers in virtual simulation training. Troops can be trained to fight strategically through virtual video game-like recreations of the battlefield but once deployed they are ill prepared to deal with their intense and involuntary responses to smell. The *Scent Collar*, designed to wrap around the neck during training sessions, delivers overwhelming simulations of the real smells they will encounter in battle in an attempt to acclimatize them to the smell of war: The smell/memory/emotion connection is tantalizing to military simulation experts [...] Veterans cannot forget the odors and newly deployed soldiers are often so overwhelmed by the olfactory assault that it distracts them from the task at hand. To prepare troops, the Army and Marines use simulations that expose soldiers to noxious odors such as melting plastic and rotting flesh before deployment, where the smells may be encountered for real. [20]

The *Scent Collar* is designed to train soldiers to override the very instinct that their olfactory triggers alert. Olfactory simulation affords the military the opportunity to rewire soldiers’ inherent responses to smells such as decomposing matter and death – those of *fear* and disgust that alert them to danger or inspire human empathy – so that they may fight more effectively. The ability to manipulate and circumvent our natural responses to smell is becoming an invaluable tool in war precisely because the senses are our understanding of mortality, they enable compassion and empathy and bind us in a shared human experience.

THE SMELL OF COMMUNITY

Dutch artist Birthe Leemeijer began work on *The Essence of Mastenbroek* in 2005. This project elucidates how central the ability to engage with and experience the (unmediated) smells that surround us – those we have become most disconnected from – is in building our sense of self, defining our sense of place and developing our sense of community. Undertaken in a late-medieval Dutch polder in the province of Overijssel, Mastenbroek has a rich farming history. Leemeijer began working with the residents there who expressed a desire to create a visceral expression of their deep relationship to the land and community that are now coming under pressure from urban and industrial development. It was

decided that this could be communicated most potently through smell. This led to the development of the *Essence Club*. The purpose of this club was to meet, discuss and develop the scent or more importantly the combinations of scents, that embody the experience of Mastenbroek. Club members frequently met to share experiences, recount memories and pour over photographs as a means for excavating and articulating the complex olfactory landscape in which they were immersed. [21] The group was interested in finding the smell that could convey their “shared” experiences, one that could provoke something meaningful for each of them and signify their bond. They discussed the importance and impact of the changing seasons on various smells and developed an archive of those they felt most prominent such as fresh cut grass in the silo, shearing sheep in autumn, stables, fresh milk, ditches, hay, etc. Once all of the smells had been discussed and recorded, they began working with perfumer Alessandro Gualtieri. [22] The group then convened to sniff samples, home in on essential smells and work through combinations and balances until they felt they found the one that embodied and recalled Mastenbroek. Because of the complex and ephemeral nature of olfaction, smell allowed the group to create a potent reminder of this specific place, without reducing it down to any singular vision. The smell could be drawn from some common place – convey something commonplace, yet evoke for each individual that smelled it their own unique feelings and experience – something familiar yet layered and indefinable.



Fig. 5. *The Essence of Mastenbroek*, De Bron, 2005 Birthe Leemeijer, fragrance. Photo: Ben Vulkers, Image via <http://crossjack.blogspot.ca/>.

Now the smell is being distributed throughout the community and to the surrounding urban centers that threaten it. Perhaps it is in the hope that it may inspire a connection to place and community even for those who do not live there. Or perhaps it is a memorial of sorts, for a land and a lifestyle that may soon be obsolete. Many of the farms are being sold as urban communities begin to encroach and younger generations become less likely to work them. Every resident who leaves Mastenbroek is given a bottle of the fragrance as a memento of their experiences there and “owners” of the perfume are invited to refill their bottles from the large communal container known as De Bron (The Source) housed in the local visitors center. [23] The club even designed the containers and packaging for the scent and, not unlike Ernesto Neto’s lush Anthropodino, housed inside the stark, industrial

Armory, *L'Essence de Mastenbroek* comes in a clean white box with spare black script. Once opened, the smell is released and colourful images of the rich, pastoral landscape from which it comes are revealed inside. And not unlike the smells of bodies that fill Sissel Tolaas’ pure white gallery space some may find the smell comforting and familiar while others may find it unpleasantly pungent. But with each whiff will come an emotional and visceral response that reveals much more about the smeller’s own experience and understanding of being in and amongst the world than anything else, such is the nature of our relationship to smell.

The past decade has given rise to major advancements in smell simulation technologies. Research labs have made great strides in the development and integration of chemically remanufactured smell; however, this industry has, for the most part, maintained a proprietary and hermetic profile. Ubiquitous in its applications, from food fragrances (and flavorings), to environmental augmentations, to corporate marketing strategies, to war simulation training, smell technologies have gone largely unnoticed and most certainly under-considered, altering our environment and influencing our experience. Drawing our attention to the impact of smell through unexpected means, artists are exploring our visceral and complex relationship with the olfactory sense as this terrain becomes ever more fractured and disorienting. They have begun to respond to and in some cases lead, developments in these areas, creating new hybrid forms of practice able to question, elucidate and challenge larger social and political considerations and agendas. Elusive, invisible and emotionally potent, smell seeps into our consciousness and, whether we are aware of it or not, with each breath informs our understanding and experience of space, our sense of place and one another.

“He threw the window wide open, delighted to take a bath of fresh air [...] [T]hese scattered whiffs of perfume came together and the familiar scent of frangipane, the elements of which his sense of smell had detected and recognized, spread from the valley [...] assailing his jaded nostrils, shaking anew his shattered nerves and throwing him into such a state of prostration that he fell fainting, almost dying, across the window-sill.” [24]



Fig. 6. *The Essence of Mastenbroek*, 2005 Birthe Leemeijer Photo: Renate Boere, Image via: <http://classic.skor.nl/artefact-296-nl.html>.

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