



Peter De Cupere, "Sweat Dance", 2010. Image courtesy the artists's web site.

Primal Art: Notes on the Medium of Scent

CATHERINE HALEY EPSTEIN on September 30, 2016 at 8:55 AM

Art is in transition: that is one certain fact. And it is one more reason why it would be vain to attempt anything in the nature of pontifical judgement on its immediate manifestations. We should be content with the fact that art is alive – more vital and experimental than at any time since the Renaissance.

– Herbert Read, *Art Now* (1936)

"The act of smelling something, anything, is remarkably like the act of thinking itself.

– Lewis Thomas, *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony* (1995)

In 1850 when Gustave Courbet exhibited at the Paris Salon he changed the course of art history simply by choosing to depict the real. Previous to his showing “The Stonebreakers” or “After Dinner at Ornans,” artists painted large-scale paintings of only historical or mythological subjects. Courbet’s works were the same size as history paintings, though they depicted peasants and the everyday instead of gods and heads of state. The audience was shocked, thought it vulgar, and his work was, at first, dismissed by critics.

The same may be said for scent as a medium. Scent has historically been relegated in the popular imagination to *parfum* and cologne, for women or men, and rooted firmly in the French *histoire et vocabulaire*. However, artists over the past 20 years or so are now making scent work that destabilizes the normal and deals directly with the everyday, much like Courbet’s Realism. While there are still artisans making fragrance, and many artists collaborating with professional perfumers or perfume companies, there is a clear trend in professional artists using scent as a medium to instigate, propel, and inspire. Like Courbet, who equated realism in his art with political anarchism, so are artists now looking to use scent to break taboos and question the course of everyday thinking.

Why Scent Now?

There are three reasons why scent has bubbled to the fore as a medium: 1. because of the tsunami of images and visual clutter a medium with a direct hit to our limbic system is triumphing as the most powerful route to communication; 2. In a time when we are increasingly anti-social on social media, scent requires an unprecedented engagement – you actually have to be there to experience it; and 3. after years of making massive installations or Festival Art, as coined by Peter Schjeldahl, the pendulum is naturally swinging to the more intimate art forms where proximity and experience are paramount to size and scale.

Most Direct Medium

Scent is invisible and profoundly effective in engaging audiences. A painting would never overwhelm the audience – one can simply look away or close one’s eyes. A scent is most direct, affecting our limbic system instantaneously. One must leave a room should an odor overwhelm or disagree with them. Conversely, one may be drawn directly to a scent that triggers their curiosity, their hearts and their minds at once. This makes for a powerful tool in an artist’s arsenal. Much like music can soothe or irritate, scent can explain the vibe of the apocalypse, a garden party or a revolution much more quickly than a painting one might argue.

Prosocial

At a time when social media and rapid diaspora threaten to erase our connections to one

another, artists have taken up scent as a medium – perhaps unconsciously, to connect to one another on a human scale. Whether the fragrance is designed to repel, remind or rapture, one needs to be there to experience it – and the connection is immediate and undeniable. Scent then becomes a sort of prosocial medium. Even more so than socially engaged art (which can alienate depending on a person's gender, race, politics or place), scent connects without borders.

Intimacy

This prosocial art is humanizing – many artists are working with scent to break taboos about the body and our perception of the body. Sweat, fear and bacteria join hands in intimate projects by artists such as Anicka Yi, Peter De Cupere and Sands Murray-Wassink. Anicka Yi, now famously via *Artforum*, took swabs of 100 women and cultivated the bacteria with a synthetic biologist in a billboard designed to “assault visitors” by asking the question “What does feminism smell like?” In 2010, De Cupere created a piece titled “Sweat,” where he collected a troupe of dancers sweat and sprayed it on a wall of the dance lab protected by glass. Visitors could smell the sweat through a hole in the glass while the performance was being played on a nearby video. In 2013, Sands Murray-Wassink performed with the work's title “Acceptance Art” painted on his chest while sharing his collection of 170 fragrances with people at his opening. For each visitor, he would select the perfect fragrance based on conversation and exchanges with them.

While these are aggressive examples of intimacy and scent studies of the body, there are some less obvious scent attributes to installations that create a sense of proximity. When poet Benjamin Péret roasted coffee behind a screen at the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme (1938), the artists were attempting a progression from exhibition to total environment and in doing so clashed the common scent of coffee with the surreal creations. For example, Edward Keinholz's “Beanery” (1965) was scented with alcohol, smoke and his own urine which may have attracted the viewer to the familiar, and intimate environs of the pub, or conversely repelled them from the claustrophobia of pubs. Or, in 2011 when Karla Black created a sprawling installation of a work at the Venice Biennial there was an accidental scent element that pulled viewers in. The work she called being “caught between thoughtless gestures and seriously obsessive attempts at beauty,” was full of colors and textures reminiscent of a teenager's makeup arsenal. She was sponsored by the company Lush, so the inevitable rush of their scented bath bombs catapults the viewer to either the mall or the cozy space of their bath tub.

The Sticky Sauce: Art vs. Applied Art

When researching and considering the use of scent in one's practice you will find thousands of monikers of people practicing in this arena. These includes names like olfactory designer, senselier, synesthete, multi-disciplinary conceptual artist, and conceptual perfumer. Is it important to demarcate the titles, or can a professional perfumer be considered an artist? This is the age old question of fine art versus applied art. Just like a fashion designer may come across

as an artist, so may a perfumer. I will go on an unpopular limb by saying that in fact neither a fashion designer nor a professional perfumer is an artist. In the same breath just because someone is an artist does not necessarily mean the scent work they are producing is art.

If, with our 21st century lens, the definition of applied art is to apply art or design to enhance everyday objects to make them aesthetically pleasing, and art is solely to produce an object which provides no purpose other than providing an aesthetic and intellectual experience – then scent art would need to fall into the category of art. A fragrance for purchase to wear daily would by definition be applied art.

Therein lies the confusion. So artists who do sell their wares with stockists (e.g. stores and boutiques) might draw the parallel that these fragrances are editions, much like prints are used for a painter as a way to support their more laborious or conceptual work. But is it art then? In the case of artist Lisa Kirk, (in collaboration with scent designer Ulrich Lang), she actually sells through a boutique a “Revolution” fragrance (originally shown in 1995 at MOMA Ps1) made of tear gas, blood, urine, smoke, burned rubber, and body odor (15ml bottle for \$90). I believe this is art still, and in some ways the fact that it is in a boutique is a revolution all its own. On the other hand artists (e.g. painters, musicians, dancers) making a fragrance that is pleasing and tenuously related to their practice seems less like art. We would not claim Kiki Smith is a scent artist for her collaboration with fragrance designer Christophe Laudamiel for the “Kiki” fragrance, for the same reason some art projects seem more like merchandise.

Gap in Criticism

That said, we live in a terrific time when multi-hyphenate careers exist and there is no judgement as to whether someone makes fragrance or not while carrying on a legitimate art practice. I think there is some shaky grounds of calling the fragrance ‘art’ full stop. One of the reasons we are having the confusion is the gap in criticism. Historically, scent is described as good or bad, and the lack of vocabulary for it’s description feeds the disparity between fine art and product. The very fact that there is no vocabulary for scent art makes it an exquisite playground for artists to play in.

Sissel Tolaas, a Norwegian installation artist, has been working continually since 1990 on her alphabet for the nose or *Smell Archive*. She began independently maintaining the smells in over 7,000 airtight jars. Since 2004, she continues the archive under the guise of the Re_Search Lab. The Lab is supported by the giant fragrance house International Flavors & Fragrances (IFF), where their equipment and materials are used in favor of her notoriously unfettered scent art projects. She has “invented the first words for a language of smells” known as the NASALO dictionary. She made words such as “Biish” and “Hoxon” to describe smells of rubbish and countryside respectively. While there are words to describe romantic or apple pie scents, the

majority veer to dog shit, diesel and mold. In 2005, with the help of IFF's equipment at the Tirana Biennale, she was one of the first artists to collect human body odor (specifically of men who were having fear and panic attacks) and turn it into a liquid – which was then smeared to a wall for an exhibition titled “FEAR of smell – the smell of FEAR.” On no uncertain terms, by associating themselves with such an independent thinker and artist, IFF (revenues of over \$3 billion USD) will keep their pulse on scent as an art medium for some time.

While Tolass is attempting to create an alphabet, an archive and a dictionary, there really is no canon to scent as an art medium. There is no critical theory to lay a blanket of criticism on scent projects, and no true patron and sponsor relationship to explore desires and prejudices (except in the commercial realm). The writing about scent seems to sway to aesthetics, that which pertains to the senses, though a set of principles underlying scent as art are absent. So really you have a large group of scent writers discussing beauty and their taste, while another very small group of writers merely cataloging the nascent movement of scent art. There is no real dialog yet about scent as a fundamental art medium, which I stress is a good thing for experimentation.

Once there is more scent-related artwork to look at in a broad sense, so as to see the patterns amongst the work (e.g. body scent art, scent-scape, environments), a language will be created to support the work. Hopefully it won't stymie artists as we blindly and blissfully contemplate the power of scent. That said, there are fledgling organizations and documenters of scent art that are creating a valuable service for artists. A nice resource for getting acquainted with current voices on scent writing is “The Smell Culture Reader” edited by Jim Drobnick.

There are also institutions moving bravely into the arena of scent exhibition. A seminal exhibit of scent happened in 2015 at the Museum Tinguely in Switzerland titled “Belle Haleine – The Scent of Art.” The main focus of the exhibition was a selection of artworks from the last twenty years where the olfactory is called to work in many ways. The organizers of the exhibition stressed it was “neither a perfume exhibition nor does it pursue the aim of an art historically comprehensive chronological collective exhibition. Its approach is deliberately experimental and its intention is to prompt reflection on our often neglected and at the same time so important and exciting sensory capacity.”

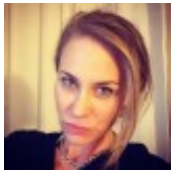
In 2014, the Santa Monica Museum of Art had an event for one day where the artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter presented a collection of eleven fragrances that represent the major regions of Los Angeles. For this event titled “Sillage,” museum patrons would identify the area in which they lived in and museum staff would spray them with the scent accordingly. The Hammer Museum teamed up in 2016 with the The Institute for Art & Olfaction to host a multiple day scent and art fair, The AIX Scent Fair. The DIA Art Foundation hosted artist Koo Jeong A's scent installation titled “Before the Rain” in 2011, and in 2010 New York's New Museum shared

Haegue Yang's "Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Voice and Wind" – which was originally shown at the Venice Biennale in 2009. The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam has held symposiums on smell, and in 2015 the Tate launched its "Tate Sensorium" as a way for patrons to experience four paintings through all five sense including scent.

The independent Institute for Art and Olfaction (IAO) was founded in Los Angeles in 2012 by Saskia Wilson-Brown. In their words, IAO is "devoted to creative experimentation through cross-modal arts and technology projects with a focus on scent." Their emphasis on independence and experimentation is creating a platform for exciting cross disciplinary projects using scent. Wilson-Brown sees some of the brightest work coming from artist including Klara Ravat in Berlin, Marcos Lutyens in Los Angeles, and the Sense of Smell team in Breda (Netherlands). The real challenge Wilson-Brown sees is that artists move beyond the gimmick, and use scent in increasingly conceptual ways.

When assessing whether scent is art or simply a product, it really boils down to the thinking behind the making. What is the artist thinking? What is the question the artist is exploring? If the answer is specific to an audience, it may very well be a product. If it is specific to a real universal concept, and it purposely explores nonsense and the irrational (which both bridge to the imagination) it may very well be scent art. The very reason that there is no lexicon makes the medium one of the most exciting to practice today. There is no beginning or end, no edges and no movements in scent. This gives an artist profound freedom in the studio, in planning and visualizing a project with scent. There is no Grand Poobah setting a course, there is only uncharted territory to explore our most powerful sense.

I'm hoping many are inspired to work with scent remembering always that this can be as simple as adding powder to a space, grass to a platform or air in a bottle. You don't need headspace technology or a lab of 2,000 molecules to make scent art [(see Marcel Duchamp's "Air de Paris" (1919) or Jannis Kounellis "Untitled (12 Horses)" (1969 and 2015)]. A word of caution: many sculptural mediums have been extremely hazardous to artists working with them, and artists and viewers must be aware of potential health hazards of working with scent. Remember when you smell it and breathe in, scent particles go into your nostrils and your lungs. While body odors are innocuous, many synthetically derived scents whether for art or product may be serious hormone disruptors. Which may ultimately be a litmus test for major museums to actually have high-profile and mass marketed scent exhibitions. We'll see, or rather smell.

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Catherine Haley Epstein is an artist, writer and curator. She is Co-Founder of Point + Line, an online site for dialog between artists and art enthusiasts. Catherine has served on the panel for Visual Artist grants for the National Endowment for the Arts and as Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of Visual Thinking Strategies, a non-profit based in New York City. She is a lifelong advocate for arts in schools and has worked with organizations such as Right Brain Initiative, Levi's Strauss Youth Arts Program, De Young Museum and Southern Exposure.

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THERE IS 1 COMMENT [ADD YOURS](#)**DAN LENG** on 30 September, 2016 at 11:59[Reply](#)

Wonderfully interesting piece, especially from the standpoint of someone with no background in scent art, aside from experiencing a bit of your work in Portland. I find it especially interesting to think about working in a medium with no canon, vocabulary, or history to speak of. I do wonder if (visual art) history will repeat itself in the future of scent art. What would the Bauhaus of scent art look like, or how would the medium be affected if there were to emerge a Josef Albers of scent art...

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