



Being and Making the Olfactory Self. Lessons from Contemporary Artistic Practices

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Introduction

“Smell and listen, you will see”¹: this motto by Oswaldo Maciá¹ can be applied also to other contemporary artists whose conceptual works and multimodal installations use odors in order to make us aware of who we are and challenge social stereotypes and mechanisms of power. Smells are fleeting, yet their mnemonic traces are long lasting and intensive. Also olfaction is developed along three axes: transitivity (we smell the world), intransitivity (we are smelly to others) and reflexivity (we sniff at ourselves). Olfactory memory and body odor form two major pillars that support the constitution of the olfactory self. The body odor is itself a perceptual architecture in which artificial scents form a cultural vault that is arched over the uncontrollable ground of biological, genetic cues; together they form the “essence” of an individual, her an-anonymous or nameless body signature. Unlike nonhuman animals, people are able to model even their natural body odors through diet, sport, perfumery and other daily practices: the olfactory self is to a large extent being made, be it unconsciously and involuntarily, be it through deliberate choices and identification with gender roles and social models. In addition to designing an ideal olfactory self, the memory saves smells of people, situations and places.

In general identities are produced through bonding and delimitation. On the one hand, body odors contribute already to mother-infant bonding (Croy et al. 2019), and the smellscape of childhood influence feelings of attachment to certain environments. On the other hand, social and racial discrimination, marginalization and

¹<https://www.oswaldomacia.com/>.

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exclusion have for a long time invoked offensive odors of others' bodies and places; in spite of their elusiveness and transience, odors divided as sharply as a knife populations and supported oppressive apparatuses. The nose draws a clear line of demarcation between me/us or mine/ours and the others and privileges the own; here is no place for negotiation or compromise. Bonding and separation, self-legitimation and domination, recollection and topophilia are thus mechanisms that shape personal, social and cultural identities by engaging the individual into relations to spaces, to other people and to oneself.

During the past decades, anthropologists and (cultural) historians have extensively discussed the manner how the sense of smell constructs various types of gender, social, racial and religious identity (Classen et al. 1994; Reinartz 2014; Harvey 2006). However, less consideration was paid yet to general theories of identity. The following four models – proposed by John Locke, George H. Mead, Anthony Giddens and Gernot Böhme – serve here to better understand the relevance of olfaction for processes of identity building and to contextualize the provocations of contemporary olfactory art. Also by laying emphasis on the corporeal dimension of identity, they criticize the logocentric tradition that represses the humans' animality as well as the modern obsession for self-control.

The Self, Caught Between I and Me

Identity is commonly regarded as a modern problem, although already the ancient Greek philosophers, from Heraclitus to Plato's *Parmenides*, were puzzled by the question how can something be in flow and still remain the same. As for smells, their ephemerality was one of the reasons for considering them epistemically unreliable and for assigning them only a hedonistic function. In the early modernity, John Locke subsumed identity to the category of relation, because it emerges from comparing a thing either to others or to itself in different moments of time (Locke 2015, book II, chap. 27, p. 1). In his view, the supreme form of identity is the specific human, personal identity and implies consciousness and memory (ibid.: 10 sq.). If memory holds together the self, then the recollection triggered by odors is a precious means for establishing a temporal continuity between different episodes of experience; this aspect – famously evoked later on by Proust – has frequently been discussed in the Smell Studies with reference to empirical evidence. More interesting for the topic at hand is however the fact that Locke's approach to identity as a form of relation implies the representation of a diacritical instead of an essentialist identity: The "essence" of the olfactory self acquires a meaning only *in relation to* me as another (which is me in the past) or to other selves.

The crucial role of the others for the formation of the human mind in the process of conduct was emphasized also by George H. Mead (1934). According to Mead, the child's self emerges first by taking the others' attitudes toward himself and toward one another and by making them his own: "He becomes a self in so far as he can take the attitude of another and act toward himself as others act." (Mead 1934, p. 171) Yet the behavior is developed in specific social situations and acts, in which

the incipient self adopts corresponding roles; in a second stage, these elementary selves have to be organized into a complete, unitary self. Moreover, the individual achieves the unity of self when he takes not only individual attitudes, but also the attitudes of the own social group as such. In this way, this “generalized other”, as Mead calls it (Mead 1934, p. 155), or the organized community controls its members’ conduct. At the same time, the individuals are able to co-operate within the same group precisely because they share the same attitudes. At the end of these two phases, the child has become “an organic member of society” (Mead 1934, p. 159). To rephrase this in a “smelly” manner: the child has learned the rules of the game and picked up the smell of the group, which Germans call “Nestgeruch” or “Stallgeruch” (nest or stable smell). She is integrated and can be instantaneously recognized by the other members as one of their own, just like she is able to make herself the difference between insiders and outsiders. Nevertheless, the process does not end with the formation of this social “me” who has passively internalized the others’ attitudes; in a later phase, the “I” is developed, who reacts to the purely mimetic behavior of the self and gradually grows into a personality endowed with a character. Obviously, essential for the constitution of the ego is reflection. Finally, I and me are distinct, but they still belong together in the self; even more, only together they form a personality who is able to adjust oneself to situations and react back. On the whole, the self is “not so much a substance as a process”, a game of give-and-take or a dialogue between the socially obedient me and a “never entirely calculable” I (Mead 1934, p. 178). Needless to say, olfactory references are absent in Mead’s theory; yet his social behaviorist view is insofar relevant as smells are not confined to subjective perceptual experience, but trigger intersubjective reactions. In spite of Mead’s descriptive-explanatory approach, identity is a social demand that guarantees the individuals’ reliability in processes of social interaction.

A few decades later, the spokesman of high or late modernity, Anthony Giddens, considered that self-identity has become irreducible to continuity and persistence over time; instead of *being* a self, the individual has to *make* her self through deliberations, choices and practices (Giddens 1991). Self-identity or becoming a person has converted into a reflexive project and also an imperative, a task and even a burden because of the generalized doubt and the confusing variety of possible options. Since everyday life has been emptied of traditional criteria of identity and behavioral models, one has to voluntarily choose one’s self. In order to acquire a biography, the individual has to engage into a dialectics of trust and risk and accept the strange mixture between openness for the unknown and diffuse anxiety. If the modern age symbolically begun with the Cartesian radical doubt, late modernity is permeated by unspecific worries, restlessness or unease; crises turned into daily occurrences. In social settings defined by instability and rapid social developments, risk assessment is crucial, but not always possible; therefore, it is necessary to develop “an early sense of ontological security” – otherwise put, trust –, as the only favorable medium of interaction that conditions personal growth (Giddens 1991, p. 3). This generalized loss of certainty reached also the body and increased its importance as an identity clue, yet not as a firm, unchangeable ground: “Like the self the body can no longer be taken as fixed – a physiological entity – but has

become deeply involved with modernity's reflexivity." (Giddens 1991, p. 218) From given, the body converted into a site of voluntary intervention and appropriation. Trust, anxiety, biographical narratives and the production of identity are also leit-motivs of contemporary olfactory art.

More recently, Gernot Böhme confirmed that mirroring and acknowledgement are the two mechanisms of identity building: the formation of the subject requires to recognize myself (like in Lacan's mirror stage) and to gain recognition in interpersonal and social settings (Böhme 2012). However, reflexivity and "work" on the own biography represent only one side of the identitary coin; the reverse of this agency is inextricably marked by passivity and passibility. These engage "das Andere der Vernunft", the opposite of will and rationality (Böhme 2012, p. 6), namely contingency, body, and affectivity, in other words, what is given to *me* and my being affected by what happens to *me*. Seen from this perspective, Giddens' biographical project ultimately appears to be a desperate struggle against losing identity, a permanent effort of "maintenance" in a historical context shaped by crises, wars, migration, technological changes, and political turmoil.

Partly similarly to Mead, Böhme explicates the formation of subjectivity as a "dialectics of Me and I" (Böhme 2012, p. 17), in which advisable is neither the polarity, nor the unity between the conscious person and the pre- and unconscious self, but their interplay. Life is a paradoxical swaying between having been given to oneself and the assignment of remaining the same by becoming a subject, between being and making one's self. The active I emerges from the depth of a pathic Me; the latter is described, under Hermann Schmitz's influence, in phenomenological concepts as a given that is being affected ("betroffene Selbstgegebenheit", Böhme 2012, p. 7) or – in grammatical categories – as a kind of existence in the middle voice,² between the subject's agency and mere passivity. As for the mind, this does not evolve from the Me simply by giving itself rules irrespective of any external reference (autonomously), but through a ceaseless delimitation from the other – which recalls again Locke. Under these conditions the ideal is not autonomy, but sovereignty, not self-control through seclusion *from* the world, but a controlled experience *in* the world: the sovereign I allows that something happens to Me. By that, the place of the independent and rational I is taken by a relational Me and identity acquires an emotional connotation, given that what happens to me is never neutral, but it always somehow concerns and affects me. Regarded in this light, thinking itself begins to look like letting something come to my mind, and acting becomes a letting oneself engage in something.³ The disempowered I mutates from a center of activity into a supervisor of what occurs to me as effect of a foreign agent. Under these circumstances, Böhme recommends a philosophy of Me that overcomes logocentrism without capitulating in favor of irrationalism; rather it is more like an ironical counterpart to the Cartesian

²"Mediale Seinsweise" (Böhme 2012, p. 17). Böhme's examples – "mir tut etwas weh", "mir ist kalt", "mich geht etwas an", "mir fällt etwas ein" are partly difficult to translate into English without using the active voice ("I have an ache", "I am cold", "I am concerned", yet "it comes to my mind").

³"Sich etwas einfallen lassen" and "sich auf etwas einlassen" (Böhme 2012, p. 17).

cogito, since it transfers the mind/I from the evident starting point of reflection to the end of it, as an “infinite task” to be fulfilled (Böhme 2012, p. 22).

Contingency and affectivity, the acrobatic balancing on the threshold of passibility, between doing and letting be affected, are common features also of contemporary olfactory art. The following selected artistic examples illuminate from various perspectives the aforementioned concepts of identity: as a result of relating to oneself and to others (Locke), as a multi-staged process of exchange between the individual and society (Mead), and as a challenging game of risk and trust (Giddens) that assumes the contingency of the world and the facticity of the own being (Böhme). In all these hypostases, identity is only insofar “essential” as it operates with olfactory essences; in essence, however, it remains fluid, fragile, not free of self-contradictions and painful dissonances, longing for stability and hating imposed conventions.

Identity Through Emplacement

How is it possible to be(come) a self when nothing stays the same? A possible answer would be to develop attachment to things that persist over time in a certain place and by that to derive the own continuity from relations to things and environments, like a vine growing up a wall. It goes without saying that olfactory memories can be empowering and gratifying, like Proust’s famous experience, but also traumatic; not all environments foster life and growth. However, vegetal smells commonly evoke positive associations across cultures and their use can contribute to enforce identity through emplacement. Besides, in contrast to images and sounds, the industry of artificially reproducing smells is still in its infancy; as a result, many odors are undetachable from objects and places, requiring a perception *in situ*.

The evocative power of smells is largely used in olfactory installations. For example, Maki Ueda is a Japanese artist who describes herself as a creator of “scents that capture childhood, identity, a mood, or a historical event” by extracting “the scents of daily life, including foods, ambient aromas, and bodily scents”.⁴ In *Unconscious Smelling. Passport to Ishigaki Island* (2019), she invited the visitors of the Ishigaki City Center for Culture to lay down in a dark space, to relax and just smell. The lying position intensifies the sensation of being “‘in’ the scent, drown, or completely immersed”.⁵ For the installation Ueda extracted the essences of various plants that can be found on the Ishigaki Islands, where she lives. Her story says that she wanted to reproduce the scent of night flowers which is unconsciously inspired when lying in bed during hot and humid summer nights on the island. Distancing and recontextualization – the artificial transfer of a quotidian experience into a museum setting – are strategical conditions for becoming aware of what happens to us so often that it unperceivably molds our self. In addition to this message to the

⁴ <http://www.ueda.nl/index.php?lang=en>.

⁵ http://www.ueda.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=304&Itemid=876&lang=en.

own countrymen, the installation about her “fragrant island” (Ueda) uses the potential of the classical *locus amoenus* island to stir imagination and wake positive emotions. Also for Yi-Fu Tuan smells help to identify and remember places in general, and islands in particular are typical examples of so-called good places that produce topophilia (Tuan 1974, pp. 9–10 and pp. 118–120). Topophilia – the name Tuan gave to the affective ties with the material environment – is a multilayered feeling that includes the aesthetic appreciation of environment, a sense of well-being and the attachment to familiar places, including pride of them.

Other olfactory artists opt for provocation by using unconventional bad smells related to urban environments. The visitors of *Smell the City* (2013) by the British artist Victoria J. E. Jones could explore the fat deposits in the city sewers of London and Cardiff – two cities she was familiar with –, without having to get down there (Jones 2018). Obviously, the artist’s intention could not be topophilic, to bind people to their city home, but merely to create “an experiential story” that could be shared to others “as a bit of fun”, for she “assumed that people would think it was a joke” (Jones 2018, p. 10). The public reacted with a mixture of disgust and delight, she said. Neither real, nor entirely fictive, the sewer fat exhibits belong to the “other spaces” in a city that are usually neglected or even repressed, to use Foucault’s concept. In this example, curiosity in exploring the home city prevails over the reiteration of experience in pleasantly smelling places, and the discovery of the other in the same is more important than the recognition of the same in spite of alterations. Nevertheless, Jones explicitly referred in her comments to Tuan’s concept of topophilia and related her installation to the human making sense of place: “Making place is a part of human identity.” (Jones 2018, p. 15)

Both good and bad smellscape change through the time; places have olfactory “biographies” no less than humans, though on another temporal scale. This means that places reshape their identity or, to paraphrase Böhme, they are *subject to* something that happens *to them*. Their dynamic topo-graphies or stories are interlaced with their inhabitants’ narratives and become intrinsic part of their life. Therefore Julia Feuer-Cotter designs artificial olfactory spaces as a means to trigger storytelling and reflect on the own attachment to real places. Her collaboration with a group of women from Northern Alaska in *Smell of Change* (2018) was meant to draw attention to the transformations suffered by the Arctic landscape as a consequence of oil industry; her installation represents “a collective smellscape narrative” in which indigenous women told of their home to outsiders (ibid.: 61). The lesson drawn from this project is that the disruption of local identity, reflected by olfactory alteration, can take place (and invade a place) even faster than a human individual’s lifespan. The impermanence of odors is rescaled for an entire smellscape. The story of Feuer-Cotter’s installation tells of dwelling as part of individual and collective identity, of identity as a struggle not to lose sameness, and of sameness as resource of life for the inhabitants of a place. Smellscape co-shape the identity of lived spaces no less than the identity of their residents and their transformation produces anxiety and nostalgia.

In late modernity, the experience undergoes a manifold “sequestration” or impoverishment; even places tend to lose the significance they had before and become

“phantasmagoric” due to disembedding mechanisms (Giddens 1991, p. 146). The permeation of the local by wider spatial layers up to the ungraspable, abstract global space results in a loss of emplacement. From this reason, many initiatives were started by architects and artists, often with the support of the local authorities, which aim to enhance the identity or the specific character of a place (currently known as *spiritus loci*) and gear regular practices that would bind people to their places of residence. One of these strategies to reshape the sensory urban tissue is its design with fragrant plants and waterscapes (Xiao et al. 2018). Small interventions can transform neutral spaces into living places the smellscapes of which depend on weather parameters, such as wind, temperature and precipitation, and evolve along the natural rhythms of day and night or seasons. Vegetal and aquatic smellscapes increase the quality of life and intensify the sensory experience, producing unforgettable memories, but they also induce meditative practices, decelerating modern urban life and reconnecting urban dwellers to a cosmic order (Diaconu 2012, pp. 94 sq.) – in one word, they counteract the disembeddedness mentioned by Giddens.

Also olfactory artists attempt to chart the smellscapes of neighborhoods and cities, organize smell tours and produce olfactory site-specific installations with materials extracted from a specific area. For example, the American Brian Goeltzenleuchter is interested in how olfactory experience deposits personal and cultural narratives; for this purpose, he “creates maps – not for way-finding, but for place-making – as a means of locating the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in the city” (Goeltzenleuchter).⁶ In 2018 he gave a lecture on smell at the Baltimore School of Arts and organized with the students a “smell walk” throughout downtown Baltimore, during which the students had to notate smellscapes. Ten years before, my students at the University of Vienna were charged to draw two types of smell maps of various parts of Vienna: mind maps and monitoring maps, as an exercise to reflect on spatial patterns and on the potential and limits of visualization (Diaconu 2012, 2016). Sensory mapping is only one of the strategies of researching and enhancing emplacement that gain momentum at present.

Trust and Anxiety

Emplacement supports identity through the habitualization of specific encountered or produced olfactory experiences. This mechanism, however, obviously functions for both humans and nonhuman animal species, think of territorial behavior and biological scent-marks. In olfactory terms, territories are familiar places that smell trustworthy, while unfamiliar odors raise attention and alert. That is why odors that were often experienced in the early childhood tend to be considered pleasant the entire life solely due to their anchoring in the past, while other people who are not used to them can consider them offensive: behind the preference for cow manure or exhaust fumes one can often detect the person’s rural or urban origin. According to Giddens, self-identity is built along the axes of trust and anxiety.

⁶<https://www.bgprojects.com/>.

However, disquieting are not only unknown odors which can betray the “invader”, but also the absence of smells. The “whiff of nothing” – in phenomenological terms, the presence of an olfactory absence – produces the atmosphere of “the smell of the hospital” and consequently anxiety (Stenslund 2015). The reason is obvious: hospitals, like prisons or other places associated with suffering, can hardly produce emplacement and topophilia, that is, home-like feelings. Environments that smell of nothing, clean and sterile, are implicitly assumed to cover their *real* identity, which can be only negative: weakness, pain and death. In the animal world, the sense of smell serves to find food, a suitable mate and to avoid dangers, being thus closely related to the survival instinct and the perpetuation of life. The manifold sequestration of experience in high modernity includes the banning of death; from a natural unavoidable end, death has been converted nowadays into “a technical matter” that is entrusted to medical personnel and is “routinely hidden from view” (Giddens 1991, p. 191). For modern people, death brings evidence for the limitation of rationality and human control, marking the point of contact with the other than me, “my” a-logic (mute and non thinking) corpse, the place where the process of identity implacably reaches a dead end.

As a reaction to the repression of death from our society, artists use its smell to produce the typical anxiety related to the return of the repressed. Such an example is Teresa Margolles. Trained as a morgue technician, the Mexican artist filled in *Vaporización* (2002) a New Yorker gallery with a thick, humid fog; a small notice informed the visitor that the air was filled with the vaporized water that had been used to wash corpses. Her installation was a form of protest against the violence in Ciudad de Mexico, but was experienced by the public as a disquieting, “visceral encounter with the other side, with the physical residues” of the victims of urban violence (Melendez 2006). If the immediate experience as such was claustrophobic, the information about the perceptual *fusion* with the victims of crime – to recall Kant: the problem with the smells is that their inhalation is unavoidable and causes an intimate contact with their source (Kant 1968, p. 157) – produces an uncanny atmosphere.

Another example for how the mere knowledge about the diffusion of unperceivable odors in a closed space unleashes anxiety is the installation *Hypothèse de grue* (2013) by Carsten Höller and François Roche. The artists built a fog machine which was said to emanate pheromones and other neurostimulating substances; the visitor of the exhibition *Belle Haleine* at the Museum Tinguely in Basel (11.2.–17.5.2015), where this “crane” was exhibited, could not detect anything in the air – yet this was precisely the reason for feeling uneasy: while fear has a perceivable dangerous object, the deeper reasons for *Angst* are related to the loss of self-control and even of one’s *self*, given that smells blur boundaries and efface identities. While euroamerican modernity mistrusted olfaction for being an animal, irrational sense, present science prefers to say that smells contain information which is often decoded only subliminally.

Being with Others: Individual Recognition

Also in other respects olfaction links us to the animals in a way that contributes to the formation of personal and collective identity. Research in the field of evolutionary biology demonstrated that “in many species, ranging from invertebrates to mammals, odors provide exquisitely nuanced information about individuals, relatedness of individuals to one another, social groups of individuals and, among invertebrates, nests or colonies of individuals.” (Johnston 2008, p. 439) Olfaction is a kind of social knowledge that enables the individual recognition in a wide range of species, from shrimps to whales and elephants. These can discriminate between odors of individuals from the own species and other species, because the complex composition of the body odor encodes information about the degree of genetic relatedness. The humans’ kin recognition and preferential treatment of kin on the basis of olfactory cues are rooted in the animal kingdom.

If we turn now to the humans, body odors still have their “expressivity”, even though the laws of civilization gradually interdicted people to sniff one another in public. At the peak of modernity, the ideal body was inodorous and the use of perfume was considered suspect of covering unpleasant body odors. The case of body smells confirms Giddens’ remark that in the secular modern society shame tends to replace guilt (Giddens 1991, p. 64 sq.), given that “animal” body odors, like sweat, not to mention the odors of more intimate parts of the body, are typical reasons for shame: we are shaming for having a body or at least for not being able to control it. Yet these “smelly” parts of the body are precisely the sources from which olfactory artists extract the body smell. Their artworks are often paradoxical, for they at the same time look back with nostalgia, reminding the cultivated visitors of galleries and museums of their animality, and critically sanction persistent racial and gender discrimination.

In some cases they look like a Nietzschean gesture that recuperates the “low” origins of art against its sublimation and intellectualization. Such an example is *7 Smells* by Maki Ueda (2008). At the request of a dance company to distill their “essence”, the artist produced a perfume by extracting the body odors of the seven dancers from the sweat residues in their costume fabrics. “The metaphor of the sweat is strongly intertwined with the essence of human movement”, commented Ueda, a sort of “scented fingerprints of spent energy” (Ueda). Also both a performance and a scent are elusive and evanescent; the “essence” of the dance company captures in a flacon the fleeting, evaporated moment of a cooperative creative process. One could also add that art implies physical effort no less than any other work – art is not purely spiritual, non-mundane creativity, but sweat is both the evidence and the by-product of hard work. Moreover, the essence of the company fuses into one single scent composition what is most personal of individuals: their body odors, sealing the unity of the group.

Whereas *7 Smells* is a perfume for sale, the Canadian-British artist Clara Ursitti prefers a more conceptual and less commercial approach. In *Eau Claire* (1993, 2002) she extracted her own body odor collecting menstrual and vaginal secretions. Exhibited in a hand-blown bottle that recalls perfume flacons, *Eau Claire* is the

opposite of the aforementioned “whiff of nothing”; instead, her sealed bottle is the symbol of an inaccessible experience, the absence of a presence, and this gap between knowledge and perception remains unbridgeable as long as the touch interdiction forbids museum visitors to open the flacon. At the same time the artist “shamelessly” exhibits her intimate essence and conceals herself beyond touch and smell, so that shameless are ultimately only the visitor’s curiosity and imagination, like in the dictum “honi soit qui mal y pense”. *Eau Claire* is therefore a game of giving oneself and evading. Also in her series *Self-Portraits in Scent* (1994), Ursitti “isolated and synthesized the scents produced from specific parts of her body, such as the vagina, armpit, scalp and feet. Dispensed in electronically activated ventilation booths, discreetly diffused into gallery atmospheres, or offered to visitors on swatches of blotting paper, she aims ‘to create in the room a feeling of something having been there that was living and breathing’”, as she stated (Drobnick 2002, p. 87). Every scent is the trace of a presence, an evidence for the passage of a living being in the past, yet the experience of Ursitti’s *Self-Portraits* resembles rather a hunting of what has never been there, an expression of something subtle and indefinable, a reproductive copy without possible representation. The *Self-Portraits* have an origin, but their original source is anarchic, resisting visualization, as well as an-archic, prior to any museum visitor’s *possible* experience.

Olfactory Reflexivity: Self-Acceptance and Self-Rejection

In the animal world, odors provide information about the physical condition, the hormonal state, the diet and the dominant status. Human individuals, too, have specific body odors, resulting from a unique amalgam of gender and age factors, eating habits, physical occupation, etc. The olfactory self is unstable; a poor health condition and the use of medicines suffice to alter the “normal” odor. The trigger for Clara Ursitti’s *Smell of Fear* (1996)⁷ was a biography of Judy Garland which mentioned that the actress suffered from a strong body odor due to her addiction to diet and sleeping tablets and she was sweating extremely on stage. Being aware of it, Garland attempted to cover her body smell by copiously using perfume. Ursitti recreated synthetically, with the help of a biochemist, the mixture between this body odor (or what she presumed it was like) and one of the perfumes Judy Garland used to wear. This odor was then integrated into a synaesthetic installation in which one could also faintly hear Garland singing and watch a video projection of her performing live shortly before her death; in the video she “cries at the finale, leaving the stage”. It is well-known that frightened people sweat profusely; the cry and the reek of perfume create a vivid impression of Garland’s torment and *Angst*.

The sense of smell is essential for self-acceptance; liking myself implies also to like my body odor, that is, to identify myself with my body. The feeling of the slightly perceptible own odor in private situations is often reassuring, as if it were an evidence of my own existence. On the contrary, disruptions of this olfactory

⁷<http://claraursitti.com/smelloffear.htm>.

self-acceptance announces mental problems. Anosmia affects the joy of life and is often accompanied by depression. Other ailments regard the false belief of emitting offensive smells, for example of ammonia, oily or fishy, of old food, detergent, burned rags, candles or rotten onions (Phillips and Menard 2011). This dysfunction affects more female than male and was called olfactory reference syndrome (ORS), but it was described also as parosmia, olfactory hallucination, chronic olfactory paranoid syndrome, halitophobia, olfactory delusional syndrome, etc. Partly because of their olfactory hallucinations and partly because they misinterpret other people's behavior in their presence or their comments, the patients are convinced that their body odor is so unpleasant that others would not work or share their lives with them. Obviously, they are strongly preoccupied with body odor and develop a compulsive need to control it by excessively smelling oneself to check for odor, showering and changing clothes. Additionally, they avoid activities that would make them sweat or let them be felt by others and, just like Judy Garland, they try to mask their body odor with perfume or gum. This fear of offending the others with their body odor results in a social phobia; people who hate their body smell avoid social interactions and even have periods of isolation when they do not leave their homes. The high level of morbidity of the ORS manifests through depressive disorder, suicidal ideation and even suicide attempts (Phillips and Menard 2011, Tellenbach 1968).

The strange behavior in the olfactory reference syndrome represents a pathological exacerbation of the common need to control the own body odor, mostly through hygiene practices. The artists James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau responded to this fear of smell by producing a *Smell suit* (2006), which was "devised to facilitate control over both incoming smells and smell emissions".⁸ The functioning of the *Smell suit* was described as following:

Sealed polyurethane pouches encapsulate the apocrine glands (scent glands containing pheromones), preventing oxidation (which creates unpleasant body odors) and channeling the body's olfactory information to the chest mounted control unit. All incoming smells also arrive here allowing the wearer to have control over which smells are experienced. (Ibid.)

In addition to the promised control over both "smell input and output", the suit was designed for "training and calibrating the sense of smell" in various contexts and imitated a similar device used for the training of police dogs (ibid.). Also in the same year the artists designed in *Health* another smell suit that, according to them, could be used as a diagnostic tool; as source of inspiration served this time the long use of smells for medical diagnoses since Greek antiquity. Moreover, the artists praised the ability of dogs and cats to detect undiagnosed illnesses.

On advanced technology counts also Lucy McRae to help people who suffer of hyperhidrosis (a compulsive sweating disorder) to get lost of their strong smell. The *Swallowable Parfum* she developed in collaboration with the synthetic biologist Sharef Mansy is advertised by the artist as "a cosmetic pill that works from the

⁸<http://smellthecontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2012/12/smell-suit.html>.

inside, emitting fragrance through the skin's surface when you perspire".⁹ Instead of enveloping the natural body odor in an artificial scent, the project programs the skin on the micro-level to emit "a biologically enhanced fragrance". In McRae's words: "the body is turned into an atomizer and the skin sweats cosmetics". The rebel olfactory self is finally subordinated to the I and the own body is consciously appropriated. Identity is no more and no less than an assignment to be fulfilled; the unescapable contingency Böhme recommended to assume is successfully removed (at least the artist pretends it can be) and the olfactory self-identity is entirely transformed into a reflexive project, as Giddens prognosticated. Body odor becomes a subject of lifestyle and life-planning, and technology promises to transform our bodies according to our wishes. To paraphrase Giddens again, powerlessness is transformed into (re)appropriation (Giddens 1991, p. 191).

Being (Post)Human, Becoming Animal

One of the strongest reasons for the denigration of the olfaction in the western culture was the so-called anthropological difference, that is to say, the self-understanding of humans as being essentially different from animals. However, the line of demarcation between humans and (other) animals runs *through* the human body. As a result, the human senses were divided between higher, so-called theoretical senses (sight and hearing), and lower senses, which included olfaction. Therefore, to have a fine nose was tolerated for children and women (regarded as being closer to "nature"), yet the formation of the (moral, rational) subject required to leave behind the "intuitive" knowledge provided by the nose; the adults' fixation on the olfactory betrayed their arrested development, mental retardation and degeneration.

If being a human meant for both secular and Christian culture to repress the animality in oneself, the contemporary olfactory art illustrates the return of the repressed. Animals with a refined sense of olfaction, such as dogs, cats or bees, are openly admired for the complexity of their chemical communication through odors. Also artists resort to modern technology in order to reactivate and augment the human sense of smell. This technological enhancement is evidently in line with the theories of the post-human, but this post-human paradoxically rehabilitates "nature" and the pre-human (animal) skills. "Smell is an important cue", claims Susana Soares, but "half of our smell receptors have fallen into disuse".¹⁰ Her project *Sniffing Others* (2007) makes the enticing promise to enable people to smell the other's genetic code and by that help them find genetically compatible mates. This smell augmentation could be achieved with the aid of a sensory nanoparticles interface that would stimulate the vomeronasal organ (that serves to detect pheromones) and transmit information about others' body odors. The gradual development of new technologies – from "items that would stimulate our smell receptors, to cloth that would emphasize scent glands, such as the t-shirt and the neck collar, to nose

⁹<https://www.lucymcrae.net/swallowable-parfum>.

¹⁰<http://www.susanasoares.com/?id=76>.

plugs that activate smell” (ibid.) – should go hand in hand with reflection on the difference between socially acceptable and unacceptable odors. What is at stake in such projects on smell enhancement is the generic identity of the human being. Instead of rejecting or playing down the animal in us, olfactory artists call for rediscovering and (re)assuming it, yet in a novel way, which combines animal and technological features into hybrid bodies. “The use of technology is unique to our species”, declare also Auger and Loiseau;¹¹ that is why devising technology for smell enhancement sets forth reflexively the evolutionary process and voluntarily shapes our generic “self”.

At the same time, be(com)ing an animal cannot be separated from our being with (other) animals. The same artists Auger and Loiseau dream of training animals with developed perceptive abilities, like bees, to recognize natural and man-made odors, including biomarkers related to specific diseases – again for the use of humans. Reading about such projects, one can hardly suppress the feeling that they do not change in essence the traditional self-understanding of man as master of the living world. New technology practically serves the same old purpose: to appropriate the “potential” of other species in order to enlarge human power and control. The “co-habitation with natural biological systems”, to use Soares’ words,¹² ultimately does not break up with an expanding human agency and what environmental philosophers called “the arrogance of the humanism” (Ehrenfeld 1981).

Other olfactory installations playfully draw upon analogies with the animals’ scent-marking behavior, in spite of their rather sophisticated description as a “researching space exploration”.¹³ Meant is here Maki Ueda’s *Olfactory Labyrinth 5*, subtitled “Invisible footprints” (2019), in which visitors can choose slippers impregnated with different odors and then walk on the floor, leaving fragrant footprints. In addition to this, they are encouraged to attempt to follow others’ traces, by “sniffing like a dog”. The *Olfactory Labyrinth* invites to take a temporary olfactory identity in a seek-and-find game and forget the limitations of real life.

Gender and Social Roles

In the everyday life natural and artificial scents were associated across broad chronological periods with sexuality, gender roles and more generally with female bodies. The virgin, the marriageable woman, the adulterous woman, the prostitute and the witch were supposed to emanate different odors, from sweet-floral and clean to putrid and pungent. The reek of perfume or putrescence gave away moral cupidity and excesses of sensual pleasure, and strong scents raised the suspicion about seductive intentions. Historical and literary narratives abound in such stereotypes, which were extensively discussed in anthropology, cultural studies and the aesthetics of

¹¹ <http://www.auger-loiseau.com/projects/augmented-animals>.

¹² See Soares’ “Bee’s Project” (2007–2009), <http://www.susanasoares.com/index.php?id=52>.

¹³ http://www.ueda.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=302&Itemid=874&lang=en.

smell (Corbin 1982, Classen et al. 1995, Reinartz 2014, Diaconu 2005 etc.). Put it in a nutshell: “Many people across cultures and ages would have agreed with Montaigne’s suggestion that ‘the most perfect smell for a woman is to smell of nothing.’” (Reinartz 2014, p. 21) Needless to say, the existing literature is dominated by male authors, while women’s reports about the smells of men are blatantly absent. A surprising explanation for this unbalance comes from the German dermatologist and sexologist Iwan Bloch who a century ago put this higher frequency on men’s superior olfactory sensitivity; in turn, Jonathan Reinartz preferred to parallelize this asymmetry of the women being subject to the ‘male nose’ with the famous ‘male gaze’ that regarded the female body as passive objects of the masculine sexual pleasure (Reinartz 2014, p. 114).

The recent trend to challenge the boundaries between genders, expressed among others by the spreading of unisex fragrances, can be also detected in the olfactory art. Jana Sterbak’s *Chemise de nuit* (1993–2013) mixes cues of the female and the male body in a traditionally unisex garment: the nightgown is scented and made of organza silk, but has human hairs on the chest. By that, an article of clothing that should evoke rest and sleep has become disquieting and ghostly: once again the onlooker is tempted to imagine the missing body with his/her dreams and representations of the own gender identity. Less uncanny is Ueda’s *Eau de Parfum: Perfect Japanese Woman* (2008); the artist unmistakably expressed her intentions by labeling it “a perfume art for filling imaginations for a perfect Japanese woman”.¹⁴ Ueda produced four fragrances: of nukamiso (salted rice-bran paste for making pickle, described as the scent of motherhood), tatami (the scent of freshness, alluding to the Japanese proverb: “Wives and tatamis are better when they are new.”), miso soup (“the scent of a woman in the kitchen”), and soap (associated with pureness and cleanness). The concept is explicitly ironical: Ueda recommends female visitors to wear this scent when appropriated to the situation, in order to meet the expectations of the Japanese society from women. As a matter of fact, *Eau de Parfum* is meant to make us aware of the stereotypes that construct female identity and ironically plays with another male stereotype about women: the masquerade, suggesting precisely a practice of ‘as if’. For example, related to the smell of soap Ueda notes: “Japanese men prefer women that represent pureness and cleanness. Don’t worry if you aren’t. This perfume will also emphasize the attractive contrast in yourself.”

Less social-critical is the olfactory event designed by Brian Goeltzenleuchter in 2011:¹⁵ *Sillage* aimed no more and no less than to draw the “MCASD Patron Demographic Profile”, that is, the demographic profile of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego’s Downtown Jacobs Building. For this purpose, Goeltzenleuchter created first a collection of 25 fragrances that corresponded to the top 25 zip codes that patronized the museum in San Diego. Then, in the evening of the exhibition opening, event patrons revealed their zip code at the entrance and the

¹⁴ http://www.ueda.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=101&Itemid=792&lang=en.

¹⁵ <https://www.bgprojects.com/home/2017/9/4/sillage-mcasd-patron-demographic-profile?rq=Sillage>.

museum's staff sprayed the corresponding scent on their wrist. As a result, during the opening, the space was filled with "a collective scent of the museum's demographic"; on the same occasion, the "collective mass of regionally scented patrons" had to "develop, creating a relational blend of fragrance, an interconnected 'profile' scent of MCASD patrons" (ibid.). Finally, after the event, the artist used the collected data to produce an olfactory formula and donated the flacon to the museum. As a matter of fact, the project did not only function as a survey of the demographic structure of the museum visitors (which could be used afterwards for marketing purposes), but also as a strategy to make unknown people communicate with each other and coagulate individuals into a community.

Collective Selves

Corresponding to the double function of olfaction to bond and separate, the mechanism through which olfaction contributes to the formation of collective selves is ambivalent. The anthropology of the senses provides rich evidence for the discursive construction of ethnicity through smells and for the class and racial prejudices related to odors: it is only the Other – either ethnical or the poor – that smells foul. However much olfactory clichés supported a discriminative policy, it is still true that occupations no less than quotidian habits, such as cuisine preferences, grooming or consumer practices, leave traces both on body odors and their dwellings. Therefore it was only a matter of time until an artist would take up the question of living together in multicultural cities. *I Woodchurch Road, London NW6 3PL* does not only sound like an address, but it is one – as well as the title of an installation by Oswaldo Maciá (1994–2008) about the smells of his neighborhood in northwest London in the 1990s. Its residents had Irish, Lebanese and English ancestry, were singles and families, belonged to different generations and had various cultural backgrounds.¹⁶ This "smell sculpture", as Maciá called it, consisted of five metal rubbish bins and presented a "cross-section of smells" that – according to the artist – would be characteristic of the apartment complex: "One smells of naftalin (mothballs), another olive oil, a third Listerine mouthwash, the fourth eucalyptus, and a fifth baby powder." (Ibid.) The visitors were invited to lift the top of the cans and sniff their content. The idea was to make people "reflect upon how a sense of community develops from a heterogeneous mix of identities" and identify various personalities and lifestyles that cohabitated at the aforementioned address, like in a kind of "sociological shorthand", as the artist put it (ibid.).

The formation of post-traditional communities represents a priority of our age. Discontent with the atomization of society and the crisis of solidarity, social scientists, urban policy makers and architects, among others, face the challenge how to deliberately build again communities, however – in contrast to modernity – *within*

¹⁶<https://www.oswaldomacia.com/1-woodchurch-road-london-nw6-3pl>. Initially, this work was presented at the Masters final exhibition at Goldsmiths College. In the meantime Maciá received the Art and Olfaction Award 2018.

the society at large and not against society, that is to say, without discriminating other groups or supporting a fundamentalist politics (Gertenbach et al. 2010, pp. 58 and ff). Communities fulfil a double function: they condition the achievement of an individual identity, which means “a stable self-image, a consolidated character or a coherent structure of personality”, and they represent an indispensable social capital for societies, given that no social interaction is possible without solid relationships within communities (Gertenbach et al. 2010, p. 92). It is not the place here to go into theoretical debates between liberals and communitarians, but only to sketch the social and ideological context in which contemporary olfactory artists move.

In 2004, the New Yorker multimedia artist and theorist Gayil Nalls created for the “collaborative Exhibition exploring identity” “Plays Well With Others”¹⁷ the scent called *Imprint*, an essential oil formula based on collective information gathered by way of questionnaires and interviews from the other artists participants in the exhibition. *Imprint* was conceived as expression of the common olfactory culture of a creative group and was therefore described as a “Group Identity Olfactory Sculpture” (ibid.). The scent was diffused into the gallery for the duration of the exhibition, so that the act of sharing the same atmosphere and co-inhaling the same scent would physically symbolize also a mental and emotional unity. Nalls is aware of the fact that “olfactory imprinting” is an odor information that is inherited genetically, influenced by environment and acquired in a specific cultural setting. What in normal situations requires a long interval of time in order to create bonding as a result of reiterated olfactory experiences – as it is the case with the processes of emplacement or socialization – is here accelerated and compressed by the artist.

Nalls’ example demonstrates how olfactory artists can support social activism and commit themselves to social change. Her constant interest in crowds and political protests found an expression also in *The Smell of a Critical Moment* (2012), in which she tried to capture the participants’ feelings during the Occupy Wall Street movement:

Visitors experienced chemosensory messages of Occupy Wall Street protestors from tee shirts worn by participants: physical Occupiers, working group members and solidarity marchers. A tag hangs from each shirt, some revealing identification and contact information for each individual and their statement of dissent. In this way, the shirts give form to a body of messages, having been worn for the previous week, absorbing the individual’s molecular odorprint.

The artist spoke in this context about the “transparency that grows a vital discussion” and the “distinct olfactory aesthetics” that is inherent to collective experience (ibid.). Let me leave to readers the decision whether this olfactory project convinces as an efficient political gesture and if politics ought to be reduced to a chemical communication and neuro-aesthetics. According to her statement, Nalls was influenced by Joseph Beuys’ idea of social sculpture; consequently, she characterizes some of her projects as “social olfactory sculptures”, such as her most important work so far, the *World Sensorium*, for which UNESCO made her a Good Will

¹⁷<http://smellthecontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2012/11/imprint.html>.

Ambassador.¹⁸ The project ambioned to create the scent of the world as a message for peace and understanding and its preparation took ten years before it could be realized in New York's Times Square at the Millenium Celebrations in 2000. First Nalls asked country representatives of the world to identify a culturally significant fragrant plant that would have meaning for their country and in this sense act as "olfactory imprints and memory triggers for large numbers of people of cultures in every region of the world" (Nalls in Avery 2009). After gathering these "Country Cultural Statements", the natural scents were mixed in a formula based on country population percentages to the global whole and were "rained down in microencapsulated paperworks with the confetti" at the midnight between the two millennia (ibid.). *World Sensorium* is thus a symbolic "world scent's formula" in which countries and cultures engage in a communication about the importance of the sense of smell and its connection to place and culture:

World Sensorium is about memory and how it equates to individual personality, societal culture and national identity. Without memory and this relationship to nature of place, we lose who we are. (Ibid.)

By that, this highly conceptual work brings us back to emplacement as the starting point of our reflections and confirms once more the contribution of the olfactory experience to the formation of identity due to its strong connectedness to emotional memory.

As we have seen, the olfactory artists have various motivations and often collaborate with natural scientists for the realization of their projects. However, as a guiding thread of numerous artworks, installations and so-called "scent sculptures" can be detected the intention to raise awareness about the importance of olfaction for constituting different levels of individual and collective identity, from the personal to the local, cultural and global identity, as dwellers of the planet, and even up to our generic identity as human species. Some olfactory artists challenge the traditional anthropological difference and rehabilitate the sensitivity of the nose as animal and instinct-driven, emphasizing the interspecies communication; others point at the social communication through odors and design participatory projects. Modern technology nurtures the hope that the limits of genetically inherited and culturally achieved identity can be overcome and supports old dreams of enlarging the spectrum of olfactory perceptibility and exerting complete control over the body. Whether subversive and ludic, pioneering-experimental or simply nostalgic, contemporary olfactory art is hardly to be reduced to a common denominator and even more difficult to be univocally related to a single concept of identity. Nevertheless, in an indirect, transversal way, it endorses present philosophical and anthropological theories about the construction of identity and its challenges in late modernity.

¹⁸<http://www.worldsensorium.com/>.

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