

Scent, Science and Aesthetics.
Understanding Smell and Anosmia

WORKSHOP

Thursday 23 May 2013

9:50 – 10:00 Marta Tafalla (UAB),

Welcome

10:00 – 11:30 Larry Shiner (University of Illinois),

Fragrance, Aroma, Stench: Perfume Among the Olfactory Art

11:30 – 12:00 Coffee break

12:00 – 13:30 Emily Brady (University of Edinburgh),

Smells and Negative Aesthetics

13:30 – 15:30 Lunch

15:30 – 17:00 Jim Drobnick (Ontario College of Art and Design),

Art and Atmosphere: Curating Olfactory Art in the Anosmic Museum

17:00 – 17:30 Coffee break

17:30 – 19:30 Laura López-Mascaraque (Head of the Spanish Olfactory Network, Cajal Institute-CSIC, Madrid),

How do we smell? + OLFATORY EXPERIENCE FOR ALL THE PARTICIPANTS

Friday 24 May 2013

09:50 – 11:30 SMELL WALK THROUGH BARCELONA,
departing from the Residencia, guided by Victoria Henshaw (University of Manchester)

11:30 – 12:00 Coffee break

12:00 – 13:30 Victoria Henshaw (University of Manchester),
*Urban Smellscape Experience and Design: Addressing Fears of Sensory Manipulation
and Environmental Sensitivities*

13:30 – 15:30 Lunch

15:30 – 17:00 Cain Todd (University of Fribourg - University of Lancaster),
The Structural Ephemerality of Odours

17:00 – 17:30 Coffee break

17:30 – 19:00 Barry Smith (University of London, Founding Director of the Centre for
the Study of the Senses),
Selective Anosmia and the Pleasures of Smell

19:00 – 19:30 Round Table with all the speakers,
Conclusions

Residència d'Investigadors, c/Hospital, 64, Barcelona

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FRAGRANCE, AROMA, STENCH: PERFUME AMONG THE OLFACTORY ART

Larry Shiner (University of Illinois)

Although claims that the scents produced by perfume designers are art works is not new, such a claim to fine art status has been put forward in a provocative way by a recent exhibit, “The Art of Scent 1889-2012,” at New York’s Museum of Arts and Design (Nov. 20, 2012-March 1, 2013). The exhibition’s curator claims that “scent” should be considered “an artistic medium alongside painting, sculpture, and music” and uses the rhetoric and display strategy of “white cube” painting and sculpture exhibits to support his point. Thus, although all the “art works” on display in the exhibition originated as perfumes, the exhibition attempts to make visitors forget that these works were mostly conceived as commercial products to be worn on the body. Among the numerous theoretical issues raised by the general claim for the art status of scents originally designed as perfumes, I will critically examine what might be called the argument from analogy – a type of argument found in other discussions of perfume as art. Are designed scents to be understood as like paintings (the current exhibition’s display strategy), or like music (e.g. the traditional perfumers’ preferred language of “notes,” “accords,” “compositions”), or are they more like fashion design (since perfume scents are made to be worn on the body)? After examining the theoretical cogency of each of these analogies, I will argue that the most important analog for thinking about the art status of perfume scents should be the established practices of olfactory artists. The best known of these practices is the use of odors and fragrances as part of installation and performance works by artists such as Peter de Cupere, but one can find instances going back as far as Duchamp. Although most of these uses of scents combine them with other materials and/or actions, there are a few cases of artists creating or commissioning specific scents that are exhibited alone, to be appreciated only for their odor, such as some works by Clara Ursitti or Sissel Tolaas. It is these last kinds of art works that offer the most germane comparison for assessing the art status of scents originally designed for a non-art purpose. Of course, as is typical of much contemporary art, many olfactory artists seem to favor works with a negative aesthetic charge, preferring stench to fragrance or aroma.

Using the model of olfactory art works that consist purely of scents, I will examine whether and in what way one may consider perfume scents to be instances of olfactory art. I will argue that most scents that were originally developed as perfumes should continue to be understood as part of the category of design rather than art. Yet one might still try to justify appropriating commercial perfumes for exhibition as art on the grounds that we accept a similar appropriation of things like pieces of furniture or ritual artifacts for exhibition as art works. Thus, art galleries and museums separate African masks from their costumes and ritual dances and present them as isolated sculptures, just as art dealers earlier took apart Medieval altar

pieces and sold the individual panels to museums to be exhibited as isolated paintings. But such practices, while familiar and taken for granted, raise complex issues about the role of intention and function in the constitution of art. After offering reflections on those issues, I will conclude with some comments on the specific claims and strategies of “The Art of Scent” exhibition.

Larry Shiner is Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Springfield where he taught in the philosophy and history departments. He is the author of *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2001) and *The Secret Mirror: Literary Form and History in Tocqueville’s “Recollections”* (Cornell, 1988), as well as articles on such topics as the concept of craft, the art status of tribal artifacts, the relation of aesthetics and function in architecture, and the aesthetics of olfactory art.

SMELLS AND NEGATIVE AESTHETICS

Emily Brady (University of Edinburgh)

Although interest in the nonvisual senses (and their objects) in aesthetics has been increasing, smells, considered apart from gustatory tastes, are still largely ignored in the literature. This paper explores smells in negative aesthetics, that is, smells in more difficult or negatively-valenced aesthetic experiences, from the sublime to the ugly, in everyday life and natural environments. Are smelly objects ugly, or just disgusting? Can stench be sublime, as Burke contended? To answer these questions, I begin by establishing that smells can in fact be aesthetic objects, contrary to the claim that they are too unstable or transient for aesthetic attention. I then move on to examine the ways in which unpleasant smells are aesthetically appreciated, arguing that smells cannot be sublime because even overwhelming ones fail to exhibit the characteristics of paradigm cases of the sublime. I contend that bad smells are more fitted to the category of ugliness or to the neighboring category of disgust, and I consider the relationship between these two kinds of disvalue.

Emily Brady is Reader in Aesthetics in the Institute of Geography and an Academic Associate in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests span aesthetics, environmental ethics, Kant, and eighteenth-century philosophy. In her new book, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), she argues that far from being an outmoded concept, the sublime is a distinctive aesthetic category which reveals an important, if sometimes challenging, aesthetic-moral relationship with the natural world. Brady has also published: *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, and as co-editor, *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley; Humans in the Land: The Ethics and Aesthetics*

of the Cultural Landscape; and Human-Environment Relations: Transformative Values in Theory and Practice.

**ART AND ATMOSPHERE:
CURATING OLFACTORY ART IN THE ANOSMIC MUSEUM**

Jim Drobnick (OCAD University)

Olfactory artworks in museums or galleries implicitly explore the charged relations between smell and architecture and force a rethinking of the “white cube” exhibition space and its purely visual paradigm of display. The anosmia of such spaces, and of architecture in general, have led artists to intervene and transform the pristine features of certain spaces through the use of aromas to destabilize their geometric sanctity and undercut their implied transcendental quality. This presentation will discuss recent projects I have curated that utilize smell as a strategic addition to the “museum atmosphere,” one that subverts sensory ratios, infuses neutral interiors with pronounced affect, and poses critiques of the lived experience of buildings. These shows and other olfactory artworks bring forth an enhanced attention to the materiality of the gallery/museum environment and, by extension, the context of the senses in contemporary society as a whole.

Jim Drobnick is a critic, curator and Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory at OCAD University, Toronto. He has published on the visual arts, performance, the senses, and post-media practices in recent anthologies such as *Art, History and the Senses* (2010) and *Senses and the City* (2011), and the journals *Angelaki*, *High Performance*, *Parachute*, *Performance Research*, and *The Senses & Society*. He edited the anthologies *Aural Cultures* (2004) and *The Smell Culture Reader* (2006), and recently co-founded the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. He is a co-founder of DisplayCult, a curatorial collaborative that recently produced *Odor Limits* (2008), *MetroSonics* (2009) and *NIGHTSENSE* (2009) (www.displaycult.com). He is working on an upcoming book on smell in contemporary art.

HOW DO WE SMELL?

Laura López-Mascaraque (Instituto Cajal-CSIC, Madrid)

Talking about olfaction a brief understanding of the smell brain processing is necessary to understand how we perceive odors. Odorous molecules are detected by the receptors sited in the sensory neurons cilia of the olfactory epithelium located in the nasal cavity. When an odor-molecule interacts with a receptor, an electrical signal travel to the glomeruli located in a brain structure called olfactory bulb. Each glomerulus receives input from olfactory sensory neurons expressing only one type of olfactory receptor. From the olfactory bulb, the transmitted signal is sent to both olfactory cortex and limbic system of the brain for further processing. The sense of smell, together the taste, is considered a chemical sense, and humans are able to distinguish over 10,000 scents. After a brief lecture focusing on the sense of olfaction, participants of this meeting will have the opportunity to perform some practical tests such as odor threshold, olfactory discrimination/memory and tasting tests.

Laura López-Mascaraque received his PhD in Neurobiology from the University Autonoma of Madrid in 1987. After post-doctoral training at the Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. and The Salk Institute, La Jolla, Ca., she was appointed as Research Associate at the Cajal Institute (Spanish National Research Council, CSIC, Madrid) in 1992, where he was promoted to Staff Scientist in 2002. She is President of the Spanish Olfactory Network (ROE), Head of the "Olfactory System Development Laboratory" at the Cajal Institute, Associate Coordinator in Biomedicine Spanish Granting Program and Associate Editor in "Frontiers in Neurogenesis"

Her current research is focused on the molecular and cellular mechanisms of cell fate specification in the developing and adult nervous system using as a model the olfactory system of mice. Her research employs a multidisciplinary approach by combining cutting-edge imaging techniques, and conventional cellular, molecular methodologies. In addition, her team has developed new genetic tools by in utero transfection of a combination of vectors encoding different fluorescent proteins under the control of a specific promoter. This allow to track, in vivo, new-born cells migrating in the adult mouse forebrain include neural lineage tracing to analyse the development of different classes of glial and neuronal cells.

SMELL WALK THROUGH BARCELONA

Victoria Henshaw (Manchester Architecture Research Centre, University of Manchester)

Smellwalking is a form of sensewalking which Adams and Askins (2009) describe as a varied method by which we might "...investigate and analyse how we understand, experience and utilise space" and usually involves focussing upon sensory information gained through one or more of the senses. Since its introduction in the 1960s sensewalking has been used by a range of disciplines in different ways: for research, educational or documentation purposes. Primarily a tool used in the research of urban soundscapes, sensewalking has more recently been used in studies which explore human experiences and perceptions of smell in the city.

Barcelona's smellscape is a highly controversial topic experienced and reported differently in online accounts:

'Barcelona smells. It really stinks...I'd say it is two parts brine, one part rank garbage bags left vegetating on the street, another part the stench of city drains, two parts wafts of tangy marijuana, a sprinkling of oniony kebab remains, and three parts urine intermingled with sooty pavement filth, vaporised by the heat" (resident and travel writer, 2009)

"The smell of Barcelona has changed a great deal, and each street smells different. Today, the wealthy areas of the world all smell pretty much alike, and they look more and more alike. And then we have places like El Raval, where you can't tell where you are by the smell, in the Middle East or in Barcelona" (actor, date unknown)

"I had a love-hate relationship with Barcelona. It was really a wonderful place BUT Barcelona smells horrible. I'm quite serious. The entire city smells like a combination of cigarette smoke, car fumes, and poo!! You'll be walking down a side street and suddenly a gust of foul smelling wind will gush past you from an alley and almost knock you over with the smell" (visitor, 2007)

In this organised smellwalk we will explore Barcelona's varied smellscape and determine for ourselves what odours we can detect in the city and what we think about them. We will visit a range of different sites including Las Ramblas, La Boqueria Market, the Beach and El Raval. Our individual findings will be plotted on a map and uploaded to a World Smell Map, enabling us to compare Barcelona's smellscape with that of other cities across the world. Please remember to wear comfortable walking shoes and to bring along a drink and a pen, maps will be provided on the day.

Victoria Henshaw is a Research Associate in Architecture and Urbanism at the Manchester Architecture Research Centre, where she is a specialist on the sensory design of urban environments. Victoria leads a project on Smell and the City and teaches a module on Sensory Architectures at the Manchester School of Architecture. She is author of '*Urban Smellscapes: Understanding and Designing City Smell Environments*' (2013) and the blog *Smell and the City* (<http://smellandthecity.wordpress.com/>). Her work has featured in broadcast,

print and electronic media around the world including in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Japan and across Europe. Prior to entering academia Victoria worked for many years managing town and city centres and urban design projects and she remains an active member of the design community.

URBAN SMELLSCAPE EXPERIENCE AND DESIGN: ADDRESSING FEARS OF SENSORY MANIPULATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITIES

Victoria Henshaw (Manchester Architecture Research Centre, University of Manchester)

The sense of smell has long been undervalued and frequently overlooked in the design of cities and the spaces and places within them. However, with increased interest in olfactory elements of product and service design, and informed by insights from the flourishing field of sensory studies, urban smellscape design presents new opportunities and prospective challenges in place-making practices for built environment practitioners and city leaders.

In this talk, I will draw from the findings of smellwalks carried out with architects, urban designers and other stakeholder groups in towns and cities across the United Kingdom, Mainland Europe and North America. I will explore participants' perceptions of the sense of smell and the roles it has to play in everyday urban experiences and design; outline different control and management practices used by built environment professionals in organising smell experiences in and of the city; and identify tools available to architects and urban designers when incorporating smell into their work. In doing so, I will highlight some of the issues faced when thinking about smell in the city including: the identification and representation of smell in urban environments; dealing with conflicting perceptions of smell and their shifting transient nature; and explore concerns regarding smell design as a manipulative practice with potential to heighten environmental sensitivities.

I will argue from the position that smell has an important contributory role to play in experiences and perceptions of different types of urban space and the towns or cities within which they are detected, and highlight perceptions of odours as situated within environmental, cultural and political landscapes.

THE STRUCTURAL EPHEMERALITY OF ODOURS

Cain Todd (University of Lancaster – University of Fribourg)

Olfactory perception, it has frequently been claimed, is informationally poor by comparison with visual perception. Vision represents its objects as spatially extended and bounded in a way that lends these objects a complex spatial structure, that allows us to individuate them and identify them as unified from different perspectives. In this way, the objects of visual perception are (for the most part) thought to be *solid*. Olfactory objects – odours – are by contrast thought to lack any such structural complexity, indeed are often claimed to lack any (or at least any definite) spatial location at all. They are ephemeral rather than solid.

In the first part of this paper, I argue that odours can exhibit structural complexity in a way that allows us to individuate and identify the source objects of which they are properties. In doing so, I argue against the claim that the identification of such objects is cognitive rather than strictly perceptual. Olfaction is not saliently different from vision in this respect, and I reject the assumed dichotomy that underpins such claims by appealing to the role of cognitive penetration in olfactory and visual experiences. My focus, however, is on the class of what I will call ‘odorous objects’ – objects entirely constituted by some combination of odours. Wines and perfumes are paradigmatic examples of such objects. The structural complexity of odorous objects is not determinately spatial in the way involved in the paradigmatic cases of objects of visual perception. Nonetheless, olfaction in such cases does allow for two phenomena that illustrate the structural potential of odours: occlusion and temporal development. The second part of the paper offers a discussion of these.

I claim that certain olfactory objects – odorous objects – can exhibit layerings of odours that we detect as such. Indeed, we may even experience the occlusion of one odour by another, once we are acquainted in the right kind of way with the olfactory structure of the object, and much of the discussion of this part of the paper is dedicated to exploring exactly what is involved in this. Drawing on the previous discussion of cognitive penetration, such experiences of occlusion are, I contend, closely related to our interesting capacity to smell the absence of certain properties, as well as our ability to smell the potential development of odours and the odorous structures of which they are a part. I illustrate these ideas by examining certain cases of aesthetic perception, in which the involvement of certain forms of expectation, attention, and intention play crucial roles. Finally, against claims to the contrary, I examine and defend the capacity of odours and odorous objects to exhibit temporal development by arguing that odours are not saliently different to sounds in their capacity to form ‘objects’ that have temporal parts. The ephemerality of odours is in this respect an aspect of their nature that grants to olfaction an

informational richness that vision lacks. I conclude by considering some implications for the aesthetic value of smells.

Cain Todd is Lecturer in Philosophy at Lancaster University (United Kingdom) and since 2011 has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) where he is working on the three-year project 'Imagination, Emotion, and Value' funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Most of his work has been in aesthetics and value theory, with a recent focus on emotions and the relationship between imagination and perception. He is the author of 'The Philosophy of Wine: a case of truth, beauty and intoxication'.

SELECTIVE ANOSMIA AND THE PLEASURES OF SMELL

Barry C. Smith (Institute of Philosophy, University of London)

I'll be looking at the fact that we are all subject to selective anosmia and this may enhance or sometimes deprive us of the pleasure we take in certain complex aromas, in wines, in flowers, etc. There is some evidence that having an aversive odour as part of the mix of a complex but familiar aroma can give us greater pleasure. Perhaps we need contrast in order to have the more satisfying experience.

Barry C Smith is a professor of philosophy and director of the Institute of Philosophy at the University of London's School of Advanced Study. He is also the founding director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses, which pioneers collaborative research between philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists. He has held visiting professorships at the University of California at Berkeley and the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He is a philosopher of language and mind but now works mainly on the multisensory perception of flavour and has published in *Nature and Food Quality and Preference*, as well as carrying out consultancy work for the food and drinks industry. In 2007, he edited *Questions of Taste: the philosophy of wine*, Oxford University Press 2007).