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SMELL

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It. Odore/olfatto; *Fr.* Odeur/odorat; *Germ.* Geruch/Geruchssinn; *Span.* Olor/olfatto. "Smell" designates both the chemoreception of airborne molecules, i.e. olfaction, and its objects, called odors, aromas or scents. Compared to other language families, modern European languages have a poor terminology for olfaction and odors. The verb "to smell" is both transitive and intransitive, and the names of odoriferous qualities are often synesthetic, indicate the source of smell or describe their hedonic effects. Historical research indicates that this conceptual underdevelopment in contrast to other senses has partly resulted from the repression of smell during the process of civilization. Modern aesthetics inherited a metaphysical anthropology in which senses and emotions were considered inferior to thinking, and smell was ascribed a low position in the hierarchy of the senses. The "idealist or moralist prejudice" (Shiner, Kriskovets 2007: 275) rejected the sense of smell for being irrational, part of our animal nature (sexuality and survival instinct), and increasingly useless in civilized society, and disqualified its "objects" for their ephemerality. According to Plato and Aquinas, smells can be only pleasant, but not beautiful. Kant limited their experience to sensory (in)satisfaction and denied the possibility of their intersubjective appreciation (2007, §§ 32, 39). To Kant's and other (*nota bene* male) philosophers' fear of smells, if not anosmia, contributed pseudoscientific theories about the airborne transmission of epidemics, as well as the ideal of autonomy, which was incompatible with the intrusiveness of smells. On the contrary, Hegel dismissed olfaction in aesthetics because it destroys the autonomy of the object itself, by consuming it (Hegel 1970: 61). Modern Western culture in general developed a "regime of olfactory silence" (Classen *et al.* 1994: 161). The strongest rejection of an aesthetics of odors went along with puritanism, whereas the French and the Russian cultures were more smell-friendly (Rindisbacher 1992). In the 18th c. the sensualist Condillac still emphasized the role of olfaction in the constitution of the subject; a century later, the defenders of the cognitive and aesthetic potential of smells are mere exceptions, such as Charles Fourier, Jean-Marie Guyau, and Friedrich Nietzsche (Le Guérer 1992). No sooner than in 1977 Harold Osborne still endorsed the Kantian distinction between the subjective pleasantness of fragrances and the reflexively mediated

pleasure of art; however, he admitted that the evocative qualities of smells may provide an aesthetic satisfaction derived from the expanded awareness of sensory context. Other objections against smelly art regarded the lack of complexity, of structure and of a settled taxonomy of odors, the subject's reduced capacity of discrimination, and the low fatigue level of smelling compared to sight and hearing. Some of these arguments have a physiological basis, others give away the philosophers' missing connoisseurship in the field.

During the past few decades, several factors converged to raise the interest of aesthetics in smells: scientific discoveries and controversies about the physiology of olfaction, the representation and memory of odors, the development of technologies of odorization, the boom of olfactory practices in everyday life, and the challenge smells pose for digitalization. Furthermore, the establishing of an olfactory aesthetics was favored by the corporeal turn and the emotional turn in human sciences and philosophy, that removed also the academic taboo on smell, by anthropological research of non-Western cultural traditions and concepts (e.g. the Japanese incense ceremony *kôdô*), the extension of aesthetics beyond art under the label of "aisthetics", as well as by the moving away from work- to practice-centered approaches, and from formal to material and narrative aspects. Finally, the aesthetic acceptance of smell in the interdisciplinary olfactory studies finds support in the postcolonial, gender and animal studies, that call into question the logocentrism and the heritage of the *Aufklärung*.

Olfactory aesthetics implies at present four major fields: perfumery, olfactory design, olfactory art, and the production of smellscapes. These domains are more or less distinct, their practitioners having different academic backgrounds, intentions and discourses.

1. *Perfumery* has still not been integrated in the philosophy of art in spite of its long practice worldwide and although the perfumers use aesthetic categories like style, beauty, form, and aura. Kant and Etienne Souriau are the main references in Edmond Roudnitska's "esthétique de l'odorat" (1977). The perfumer argued that the mixture of odorant materials with the aim to produce a beautiful and characteristic olfactory form is an art. In his view, fragrances that evoke natural smells correspond to Kant's applied beauty and are inferior to the "free beauty" of "pure" perfumes, which have an original "subject", invent a new world and have their meaning in the formal unity of the scent. He and other "noses" conceive the scent composition in analogy with music and architecture. In line with Roudnitska's understanding of scents as *formes-qualia*, the perfumers from the Groupe du Colisée described scent creation as the metamorphosis of *formes-matières* (Blayn *et al.* 1988: 37). However, if Roudnitska privileges the perfumer's imagination, the creation of a fragrance implying nothing but the materialization of a mental olfactory form, François Blayn explains it as a dialogue between the ideal imagined form and suggestions coming from the fragrant materials themselves. For J. Stephan Jellinek creation is an evolutionary process: The "nose" composes a basic accord from few essences; this "draft" is then varied either by modifying the proportions between components or by introducing new elements. At each step the best version is chosen as basis for further "mutations", until the final form is achieved (Jellinek 1997: 73-80). The successive selections are guided not only by aesthetic criteria (originality, evocative power), but also by technical parameters of the fragrance (impact, diffusion, tenacity, substantivity, volume), by safety requirements

and the compliance with regulations regarding the use of natural ingredients. Also the product has to meet the expectations of the *maison de parfum* with respect to the taste and affordability of the target group. Contemporary perfumers often complain that their creativity is restricted by extra-aesthetic considerations and call for readiness to experiment and courage to educate the clientele instead of following its conventional taste. Jean-Claude Ellena (2007) describes scent creation as a poetical, artistic and reflexive activity that does not exclude accidents, in contrast to science, design, and marketing. His own style stresses the temporality of scent perception and reproduces everyday impressions with minimal ingredients, yet of best quality.

New approaches in philosophical aesthetics dismiss Roger Scruton's, Monroe Beardsley's and Frank Sibley's objections against the olfactory aesthetics and ascribe perfumes structure and formal complexity, expressivity, temporality, function of exemplification, and symbolism no less than to other works of fine art (Shiner 2015: 381). The perception of scents implies several layers: elementary feeling of pleasantness, power of triggering memories (the Proust effect), fictional-imaginative evocation, and formal analysis of the composition (Diaconu 2005: 304-308). However, many people choose their scents primarily guided by visual clues, given that perfumery includes the design of flacons, packaging material and advertisement. Even if most advertising slogans are still indebted to French Romanticism, the advertising visual style reflects the change of gender roles and specific trends (e.g. gourmand, historical). Recent developments include scent exhibitions in art museums, scent reviews in print media, perfume blogs, the emergence of journals for olfactory culture, new institutions for olfactory training and awards for perfumery, DIY online courses and courses at academies for art and design; all these nurture the hope in the spreading of olfactory cultivation and a corresponding aesthetic discourse. New philosophical concepts, such as atmosphere, aura and resonance, promise to innovate also the theory of perfumery (Diaconu 2018).

2. The industry of scented products and services, i.e. the *olfactory design*, experienced a spectacular growth during the last decades. The perfumery itself can be regarded as art or design, depending whether scents are created to be worn or are regarded as abstract compositions (Shiner 2015). Also well-known designers try themselves as perfumers and marketing experts predict success to multisensory brands (Lindstrom 2005). For Henshaw *et al.* (2018) the practices of designing with smell range from olfactory art (including the use of DIY distillation and diffusion, multimedia presentations, digital technology and iSmell-devices) to olfactory mappings and smellscape design, from retail and service design to learning environments, museal reconstructions of historic smellscapes and theatrical performances. Some practices are already a firmly established part of our everyday life, others are confined to experimental art (in film, theatre, dance, video games), finally others belong to a nascent industry (Scented Out of Home advertising). At present scholars describe the empirical advantages and challenges of such practices; these issues have not been addressed yet by the emergent philosophy of design and the aesthetics of everyday life.

3. The diversity of olfactory practices inspired de Cupere's (rather unprecise) terminological distinctions between olfactism, olfactionism, olfactorism, and olfactourism (2014). The *olfactory art* in his broad meaning includes installations, paintings, sculptures, performances, environments, architecture,

perfumes, cinema, dance, city maps, and digital technology. De Cupere belongs to the best known olfactory artists, together with Ernesto Neto, Clara Ursitti, Sissel Tolaas, Jenny Marketou, Meg Webster, Martynka Wawrzyniak, Maki Ueda, Lucy McRae etc. They are often self-trained or collaborate with professional “noses” for specific works. The subjects of olfactory art revolve around the individual and collective memory of places, body odors, gender identity and sexuality (mostly in female artists’ work), basic emotions, politics, power, and discrimination, urban environments, the ecological crisis and even indigenous worldviews. Some artists develop olfactory devices (e.g. Wolfgang Georgsdorf’s organ of smells), others adopt a conceptual approach in the footsteps of Duchamp’s *Air de Paris*. Exhibitions about olfactory art present odoriferous installations, objects and performances, but they display also classical and modern artworks that represent smells. Also art historians rediscovered and even reenacted synesthetic performances of the 20th century (e.g. futurism). On the one hand, the medium smell attracts contemporary artists – in particular artist-researchers – due to the same features that were repudiated by rationalistic aesthetics : volatility and evanescence, strong emotional impact, lack of reflexive distance and a diffuse “enveloping presence” (Shiner, Kriskovets 2007: 276). On the other hand, the use of smells in museums of art and history is restricted by monetary difficulties, technical challenges related to the controlled diffusion of smells, and the fear of the visitors’ negative reactions.

4. The recent aesthetics of atmosphere awakened the awareness for the olfactory experience of natural and manmade environments (Jean-Paul Thibaud, Peter Zumthor, Jürgen Hasse). The *smellscape design and monitoring* rediscovered traditional olfactory practices that were used in Far-East and Arabic cultures for living, but also for producing a sense of sacredness. The architects’ aesthetic motivations converge with the landscape and urban planners’ practical interest to ban olfactory nuisance, enhance the quality of life and attract tourists. The mapping of city smellscape and smell walks serve as heuristic methods to reflect on olfactory spatiality, explore the potential and limits of visualization, develop the sense of observation, foster creativity, and experiment new practices of appropriating the public place (Mădălina Diaconu, Henshaw, Brian Goeltzenleuchter). Specific topics concern the design of urban smellscape with fragrant plants and water for purposes of wellbeing and healing, question the advisability of top-down-regulations and call for participation in olfactory politics.

Open questions are related at present to the distinction between olfactory art and design, the search for suitable frames of interpretation (formalist aesthetics, phenomenology, “aisthetics”, social aesthetics, contextual theories, aesthetics of atmosphere), and strategies to increase the acceptance of smell in the art scene. Whereas the formalist approach is still prevailing in the theory of perfumery, the olfactory art *stricto sensu* and all the more the protean olfactory practices in the everyday life require a distinct and even multi-layered hermeneutics. The improvement of the “olfactory literacy” requires to develop sensory training apart from commercial interests, as well as a specific terminology and discourse, including critical thinking. The present flourishing of cross-disciplinary Smell Studies raises the question regarding the opportunity of a disciplinary specialization. Whereas some scholars praise the imprecision and the permeability between disciplines as propitious for artistic creativity and innovative research (Drobnick 2018: 273-275), others back the institutional organization and the inclusion of olfactory studies in public educative environments, including art universities (Henshaw *et al.* 2018: 157-195).

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