

Olfactory Art

Chairs: Adrian Kohn, Massachusetts College of Art and Design;
Chandler Burr, Museum of Arts and Design

Smell is the most visceral of the sensory faculties, but olfactory artworks are hard to find in most accounts of the history of art. In order to redress that omission, this panel examines art of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries based in olfactory experience. This exploration encompasses at least three approaches. First, we study the aesthetic goals and technical practices of individual olfactory artists. Second, we seek to understand the broader implications of these artworks in terms of how we come to know the world through our sense of smell. And third, we investigate what the label “olfactory art” means as an art-critical and art-historical designation, specifically how scent is analogous to other art mediums and also how it is aesthetically, experientially, and psychologically different.

Perfume Is the Next Photography

Chandler Burr, Museum of Arts and Design

As music is the art form that speaks to the sense of hearing and painting to sight, perfume is the art form that speaks to the sense of smell. The full acceptance by the academy, gallerists, and the public of photography as art medium is relatively recent. Scent will be the next major artistic medium to be recognized as such. Its artists have always worked within the stylistic modes of mainstream art history. Aimé Guerlain’s *Jicky* (1889) and Jacques Cavallier’s *L’Eau d’Issey* (1992) are clearly of the Romanticist and Minimalist schools. The barrier to recognition—comprehension—of works of scent as works of art by perfumers, who are the full equals of sculptors, composers, and architects, has been simply a language to make olfactory art understandable aesthetically and intellectually. Apply the art-historical language we already have, and scent is revealed as—instantly, obviously—art.

What Sound Does a Scent Make?

Clara Ursitti, Glasgow School of Art

My art practice focuses on the nonvisual, and I have been working with fragrance since the early 1990s. I present some of my scent-based installation and performance work and discuss this in relation to some thoughts on recent advances in the scientific study of the senses through a crossmodal sensory model. Much of this talk is based on research conducted while I was the Arts Council of England Helen Chadwick Fellow at the University of Oxford, where my thinking was both challenged and affirmed by the Crossmodal Research Laboratory. The importance of “being there” and the experiential is emphasized.

The Use of Smell in Art, an “Olfactology” Art Research

Peter De Cupere, MAD-Faculty, Hasselt

Smell offers many possibilities for use in the arts. It can add meaning to a piece or make a statement and explore a concept on its own. Through several examples, this presentation provides an overview of how smells can be used and the problems one may encounter when working with them. Some of these difficulties arise not only from environmental conditions such as temperature, humidity, and materials, but also from social aspects, cultural habits, and psychological connotations, all of which form the complicated context of an olfactory artwork. After conducting creative research in a lab and in an art studio into

the activation and continuity of smells, it is clear from the reactions of visitors that smell still has many unknown characteristics that can advance the art world.

Olfactory Landscapes

Christian Stayner, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

The disciplines of landscape architecture, urbanism, and design have long privileged purely visual and allographic tools for describing and theorizing inhabitable space. Through rereadings of various canonical projects in landscape history, this paper foregrounds smell as a rich design and historical methodology. Working within this framework, the paper also recounts a series of olfactory landscapes I codesigned with Jennifer Bonner for a large urban public park in Canada and an installation at the Istanbul Modern Museum of Art.

Inhaling the History of Art: On the Role of Olfaction during the Avant-Garde

Caro Verbeek, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and Royal Academy of Arts, The Hague

Several artists have incorporated an olfactory dimension in their work from the beginning of the twentieth century, a practice that has gone nearly unnoticed by most art historians. The “lower” senses were the main focus of several manifestos, theories, and works of art by artists such as the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Dadaist and Surrealist Marcel Duchamp. This paper describes the context that paved the way for this sensory interest in smell. Three historical examples of olfactory experimentation illustrate different ways scent was applied: Giacomo Balla’s manifesto *Arte degli Odori* of ca. 1916; the *International Surrealist Exhibition* of 1938 at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris; and Marcel Duchamp’s *Belle Haleine* of 1921. These works of art demonstrate that certain smells can become nonlingual symbols that enter our emotional brain and simultaneously address our (cognitive) collective memory and consequently represent concepts and/or (national) identity.

The Olfactory Imaginary in Modern and Contemporary Art

Jim Drobnick, Ontario College of Art and Design University

Even as sensory aesthetics becomes a burgeoning genre of artistic practice, little has been written about its art-historical precedents, especially with regard to the sense of smell. Focusing on the era of modernism and the avant-garde, this paper provides an overview of how odors, perfumes, aromas, and fragrances have been featured in a period often discussed in purely visual terms. While the appearance of olfactory artworks was intermittent in the early twentieth century, a prominent concern with smell can be discerned in the numerous mentions of odors in artists’ writings, demonstrating that an olfactory *imaginaire* had been in preparation long before its actual blossoming in current artistic practice. This paper traces the presence of smell in several of the heroic trajectories of modern art, such as the evolution of abstraction, the dialectics of art and popular culture, and the infusing of art with sociopolitical relevance.