



MOLECULAR MATERIALITY

AS ARTISTS ARE DISCOVERING SMELL AS A MEANS
OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION, A WHOLE NEW WORLD
IS UNFOLDING

TEXT — Arielle Bier

ANICKA YI
K 6 Dig th Spit, 2015

In tallativ ew, Kn th lle Basel, 015
Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York
Ph o Philip Hig r



Tip
ANICKA YI
K 6 Dig th Spit, 2015

In tallatio ew, Ka th lle Basel, 015
Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York
Pb o Ph lip Hig r

Above
ANICKA YI
Of All Thing Orn g o Ma edu in Wine, 2015

Ka th lle Basel, 015
Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York
Pb o Ph lip Hig r

THE MOST BASIC MATERIAL SIGNATURE OF A SUBSTANCE IS ITS CHEMICAL STRUCTURE. YOU CAN NEVER GET OUTSIDE THE MATERIAL.

SEAN RASPET

Human beings breathe in and out an average of 23,000 times a day. Our respiratory system is vital to our survival. And if the lungs, heart and arteries could adequately be described as its infrastructure, then the nose is its control facility, processing information relating to sex, danger and nourishment to the body's command centre, the brain. Considering its importance in the way we understand the world, art has long engaged with sense of smell. However, it has traditionally done so through representation, and

artists have rarely explored fragrances as an artistic medium – until now. Artists are rediscovering the associative power of smell and its ability to influence behaviour. One recent example of this was Pamela Rosenkranz's show at the Venice Biennale in May. Reeking of baby powder, it challenged the perception of materiality in art by using such a supposedly immaterial medium as smell. Of course, the molecules involved in chemical reactions that produce odours have a physical presence, even if they seem

invisible to the naked eye. But what was interesting about Rosenkranz's show was that it challenged the prevailing aesthetic order of Western art, which has long privileged solid matter over liquids and gas. To an extent, this is just common sense: without the appropriate skills and access to the correct materials, it's quite difficult to make art from a vapour. However, following developments in molecular sciences, research of sensory perception in the brain and the availability of technology, artists have begun to use science to tease apart olfactory elements as tangible working materials.

SMELLS LIKE ART

Spearheading this new movement is New York based conceptual artist Anicka Yi, whose work Artnet has branded as "techno-sensual alchemy". In June, her exhibition "7,070,430K of Digital Spit" at Kunsthalle Basel included the work "The Last Diamond", in which hidden scent diffusers emitted a fragrance designed by Yi and the perfumer Barnabé Fillion. Entitled "Aliens and Alzheimer's", the perfume was inspired by the smell of Alzheimer's patients and the imagined hum of a foetus inside an amniotic sac. Designed to symbolise the "scent of forgetting", it was also infused into the paper used for the monograph that accompanied the exhibition. A copy of the publication was also present at the centre of the exhibition, rotating over a blue flame that burnt the book and released the aroma throughout the

gallery. For Yi, smell and memory are inextricably linked, their fleeting essences pointing to the other as a source or origin, their presence continually deferred.

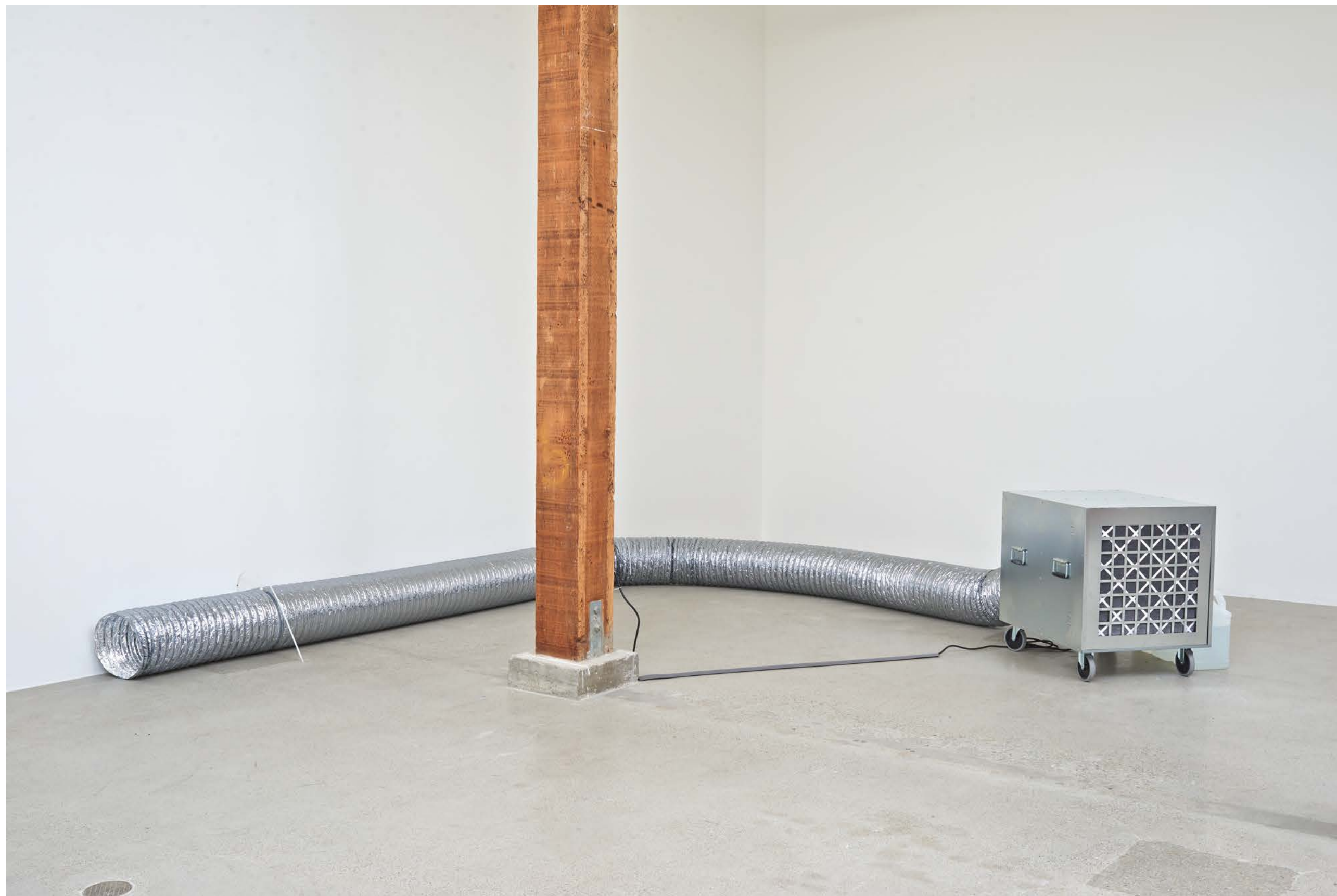
Berlin-based New Zealander Dane Mitchell explores similar themes. His September exhibition "Let us take the air" at the Hopkinson Mossman in Auckland featured a scent-based work, "Concentrated Form of Loss: Alpha-Ionone/Beta-Ionone", which was also concerned with the process of forgetting. Made with molecular extracts from violets called ionone, its bouquet causes momentary anosmia – a temporary loss of smell – by blocking receptors in the nose. After a few breaths, the receptors reset, and the sweet scent returns anew. Unlike Yi, Mitchell's meditation on memory and smell isn't nostalgic; for him the molecules in scent are like ready-mades.

L.A.'s Sean Raspet, is helping fellow artists configure custom-made smells. In 2014 he started Air Variable, a company that specialises in capturing air samples, calculating their molecular composition and reissuing them. For his 2014 show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco he created "Micro-encapsulated Surface Coating (Encapsulated Contents: Standard Recovery [GC/MS VOLATILES-WHOLE AIR: 37.784749°; -122.414129°])", a work that recirculated the institute's sampled air through scratch-and-sniff coatings. By foregrounding the background noise of

the gallery's scent, he revealed the functional, material elements of the seemingly overlooked and unseen in the daily working environment.

Inspired by technology and consumer society, Raspet's work follows a lineage that includes the UK's Art & Language, a Sixties collective that used air as a material, and American artist Robert Barry, who in 1969, staged an art event in which he released five noble gases into the atmosphere. However, unlike these works, Raspet does not consider his fragrances to be purely abstract forms. "The most basic material signature of a substance is its chemical composition," he says. "You can never get outside the material. Nothing is ever dematerialised, everything is still material." Piece by piece, artists like Raspet are proving that atoms and molecules, the basic building blocks of our universe, should also be considered material for artistic production.

At the Center project space in Berlin, artists Clemence de La Tour du Pin, Dorota Gaweda, and Egle Kulbokaite have been using these gaseous mediums to reflect on notions of identity. This spring they staged "Agatha 1.2.0.1", an exhibition based around a post-gender online avatar named Agatha Valkyrie. Part of the show revolved around eight scents called "Cloud", "Rita", "Linda", "Luz", "Ricky", "Jill", "Jeff" and "Supernova", that evoked different aspects of Agatha's persona. Designed by perfumers from International



Flavors & Fragrances, de La Tour du Pin agrees that this is one way to materialise the seemingly immaterial. “Agatha lives on interfaces – always awake and articulated by a constellation of codes, she flows through metallic structures like devices and cables,” she says. Here, scent is used as

a way to connect lived and digital experiences with an otherwise immaterial figure whose life exists only online.

MARKETING MATTER Institutions have also been picking up on this trend. In 2013, New York’s Museum of Art and Design

held “The Art of the Scent 1889–2012” in which fragrance-releasing dimples emitted unique scents. Museum Tinguely in Basel, has also had an exhibition on smell; “Belle Haleine – The Scent of Art”, which opened in February 2015. The first in a series on the five human senses, it

featured sculptures, paintings, drawings and installations all relating to artists from Nouveaux Réalism, Pop Art, Conceptual Art and Fluxus. Works included an alleged can of Piero Manzoni’s shit (“Merda d’artista n. 78” from 1961); Jenny Marketou’s 2003 reality TV spoof “Smell you >

Smell me”, and Carsten Höller and François Roche’s “Hypothèse de grue” (2013) installation of a dragon’s head spewing pheromones. The exhibition was also named after Marcel Duchamp’s “Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette” (“Beautiful Breath, Veil Water”), where he

relabelled an empty perfume bottle and included a portrait of himself as alter ego Rose Sélavy as the advertising image.

At the time, Duchamp was posing a critique of the marketing practices in art. Despite this, art has continued to work alongside advertising – and

science is joining in too. To inaugurate its headquarters on Sloane Avenue in London this spring, the Fiorucci Art Trust and Creative Perfumers presented “I’m here but you’ve gone”. Curated by Milovan Farronato with Stella Bottai, they gave artists such as Magali

Reus, Prem Sahib and Ed Fornieles access to an oil fragrance library and then commissioned them to create a unique site-specific work for the building. Elsewhere, perfume line Etat Libre d’Orange has teamed up with the Tom of Finland Foundation to create a fragrance that

encapsulates the style of Touko Laaksonen’s work. The company’s website promotes the fragrance with vivid descriptions “Tom of Finland is beyond sexuality — he is sex”. Bringing into relief the character’s sexual appeal and the ephemerality of the perfume functions as a reference to the past that is made to be used in the present but which projects into the future.

who after a long night of taking recreational drugs found he could distinguish all his friends and his patients by smell. Years, later Sacks revealed that the doctor was actually himself, yet despite this artistic license, his description of this episode could well be applied to the experience of art too: “So vivid, so real!” he says. “It was like a visit to another world, a world of pure perception,

IF ONLY I COULD GO BACK SOMETIMES AND BE A DOG AGAIN!

OLIVER SACKS

This shift from using art to critique commerce, to using commercial opportunities to develop new aesthetic ideas that might otherwise be off limits is helping to expand the potential of human perception and an understanding of transcendence in non-object art. And as the science of perception becomes more exacting, so does the ability for creative outlets to describe and experiment with it in their work. Today it seems that art is beginning to realise its kinship with science – a relation that science has always carried an awareness of.

Although founded on inductive reasoning, science still requires a level of abstract thinking that art best represents.

In his 1985 book “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat”, the late British neurologist Oliver Sacks gives a good example of this when he tells the story of a young doctor

rich, alive, self-sufficient, and full. If only I could go back sometimes and be a dog again!” In fact, it could well sum up the feeling of attending the smell-inspired exhibitions of contemporary artists like Yi, Mitchell, Raspét, de La Tour du Pin, Gaweda, and Kulbokaite et al. Perhaps the potential of molecular art has only just begun to unfold.

SEAN RASPÉT
Neg in Air, 2014

Pressn c d ff ren ial g n rated
Omni-Aire OA2200C negative air machine
with HEPA filter and activated carbon
VOC/odor filter
8 68 c m

SENSE OF SCENTS

20 CREATIVES FROM PAUL SMITH
TO OLAFUR ELIASSON TAKE A SNIFF.
A PORTFOLIO OF SCENT
AS INSPIRATION

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