

Olfactory Fatigue

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by Alice Hatrick

'I'm Here But You've Gone' is the result of a ten-month collaboration between the Fiorucci Art Trust and Creative Perfumers. Eight London-based artists were commissioned to make scented installations for the Trust's first fully-fledged exhibition at its HQ in Kensington. I hear that 400 people went to the opening but when I go to 10 Sloane Avenue with a friend it's just us. The front entrance of smells like 'freshly boxed products': rubber, synthetic materials, freshly applied adhesives and newly pressed cardboard ('Untitled', by Magali Reus). We lie on a bed in one of the rooms at the top of the house, our faces in sheets that smell like they've been slept in. (Adam Christensen's 'Smell of Intuition' – the result of mixing the scents of brown things together – has infused into the pocket of his Raf Simons cord jacket, which hangs in the wardrobe). The space makes us want to misbehave – it's the domestic environment and the fact we're unsupervised. There are directions and maps but there don't appear to be any rules. Downstairs in the laundry room, warm and moist from the heat of the boiler, we inhale Celia Hempden's Lupa, 'vagina perfume'. I automatically compare it to the smell of my own and find affinity and difference: not mine.

The Fiorucci Trust's exhibition comes at a time in which contemporary artists are increasing engaging with scent within the gallery context. As part of Anicka Yi's 'Divorce' at Canal 47 last year, she showed *Washing Away of Wrongs* (2014): two stainless steel dryer doors that opened onto holes in the gallery wall. Inside diffusers emitted two scents designed by French perfumer Christophe Laudamiel – *Traennen* (fried food and soggy cardboard) and *Bullfrog* – that attempted to undermine the myth of domestic purity and gendered bodily self-care by implicating mess, contamination and dirt. 'I'm Here But You've Gone' is indicative of a broader turn towards the 'chemical' senses in contemporary art, promising to counter the insistent privileging of the eye.



Anicka Yi, *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables*, 2015, Perspex, agar, female bacteria, fungus, 215 × 62 cm. Courtesy: 47 Canal, New York, and The Kitchen, New York; photograph: Jason Mandella.

For 'You Can Call Me F' at The Kitchen, New York, this spring, Yi filled the space with the scent of Gagosian's Madison Avenue gallery – 'the ultimate patriarchal-model network in the art world'. This mixed with the smell of another, less defined, less mobilized network: the women of the New York art world. To produce *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables* (2015), Yi and a synthetic biologist from MIT, Tal Danino, cultivated bacteria donated by one hundred female artists, collectors, dealers and curators on a bed of agar. The smell was bad and, unlike the smell of Gagosian, overpowering. It described the threat of a body that refuses to smell 'clean' and 'pure': to smell of nothing, like a gallery space, fresh air or clean water.

According to Hippocratic doctrine, stagnant water, decaying plant matter and corpses released miasma, or 'bad air', which explained why people got sick in some places and not in others. Hippocratic theory is dead but, as Yi's work shows, 'bad air' is still associated with women's bodies as sites of both contagion and intoxication. We keep them away from each other in case the infection spreads. (It was Michel de Montaigne who wrote that, ideally, a woman should smell 'of nothing'.) As Yi says in the first episode of her *Lonely Samurai* podcast, a series of conversations recorded at New York's Chapter Gallery, titled 'What Was Collaboration?': 'What I observe are a lot of females that are ambitious and intelligent having to cut themselves off in order to succeed.' By making bodily odour pervasive and visible – you could see the bacteria, the antithesis of bodily care and the sterile gallery space, growing – *Grabbing At Newer Vegetables* reminds us of the insistent materiality of bodies within a network.

Perfume, on the other hand, plays into the fantasy of losing one's body, becoming virtual, fluid, diffuse – vapourous, even. As a mist, perfume is able to penetrate objects, escape containers and take up spaces. For the Swiss Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, Pamela Rosenkranz filled the space with a pool of lightly churning scented water the colour of a standardized central European skin tone. The artist tasked perfumers Dominique Ropion and Frédéric Malle with designing a scent that approximated the liquid monochrome. *Our Product* (2015) describes flesh as fluid, and the distinctions between the 'organic' and 'synthetic' as equally diffuse – perhaps they have even evaporated.

For Rosenkranz, scent provides a metaphor for identity as a synthetic construction. Perfumes are mixtures of 'natural' and 'synthetic' materials – plant extracts and molecules isolated in labs. Synthetic aromachemicals have largely replaced animalic and plant-based materials in commercial perfumery, and are often designed to replicate the effect of so-called 'natural' ingredients. (Famously, Albert Baur first developed nitro-musks – predominant in *Chanel No. 5* – during his experiments with TNT in 1888). We have incorporated these chemicals into our bodies and our sense of selves. The cyborg body, as Donna Haraway put it in her famous 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985): 'was not born in a garden [...] it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust'. The notion of bodily 'purity' is used to sell products that are anything but: perfume, cleaning products, cosmetics, bottled water. (Of course, flesh is used in advertising to attract us to all number of products: the more skin, the more attention an ad gets.)

The paradoxical fabrication of 'natural' beauty was also the subject of Elaine Cameron-Weir's exhibition 'venus anadyomene' at Ramekin Crucible in New York last spring. The show featured several giant clamshells (*venus anadyomene 1–5*, 2014) containing olive oil, sand and mica, and resins of benzoin, myrrh and frankincense heated over a flame. Their title – from the Greek 'Venus rising from the sea' – refers the story of Aphrodite, born whole from the sea, unsullied by the process of human birth. The shell, featured in treatments of 'The Birth of Venus' by Botticelli (1486) and William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1879), is a symbol both of the goddess's divinity, her purity, and of her carnal form: simultaneously toilette and vulva.

The scent of the Gagosian Gallery was captured and re-created for Yi by the artist Sean Raspet. Last year, for his show 'Residuals' at Jessica Silverman Gallery, Raspet collected air samples from the exhibition space, which were sent away to analyze its particular scent profile. This was then re-created as a micro-encapsulated 'scratch-n-sniff' emulsion that was sprayed on the gallery walls. The artist also incorporates scented products into his sculptural work: works in the 'Arbitrary Embodiment' series (2013–14) combine fragranced hair gel with polypropylene and silicone in Perspex containers on steel shelving units. Raspet negotiates functional perfumery – the practice of scenting everyday products – at the level of molecular chemistry. This is culture at its most abstract but also its most valuable: the level of the patent (his more recent work has involved manipulating Coca Cola's chemical formula).

By its nature perfume is reproducible – fragrances are patented formulas, which are nevertheless marketed as unique and personal. Sometimes, reproducibility can be part of the appeal – celebrity-endorsed perfumes, for example, sell the fantasy that a scent can re-create a lifestyle. The packaging of ‘clean living’ – of which scent, or scentlessness is an implicit part – as an advertising or corporate branding strategy is something that many artists have mimicked of late, in a form of ambiguous critique. For example the curatorial collective DIS’s contribution to this year’s New Museum Triennial (curated by Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin), *This Island* (2015), comprises is a horizontal shower-come-kitchen unit fabricated by luxury appliance maker Dornbracht; the piece is activated by a (clothed) female performer who lies in the shower every Saturday. As with many pieces in the exhibition, the work gestures towards the absorption of technology into the human body, but it also explores the idea of cleanliness and purity as commodities that can be bought and sold. In a similar vein, Ed Fornieles’s contribution to ‘I’m Here But You’ve Gone’, *Cornucopia, the unbearable lightness of being* (2015), figures personal choice as predictable, even formulaic, and the ‘modern family’ as yet another marketing product. The scent is a mixture of ready-made fragrances, rather than perfume ingredients – the best-selling perfumes for mothers, fathers, daughters and sons. Emitted from a small hole in the eye of a young girl in a mock-perfume advert, the mixture is overwhelmingly sweet, familiar and somehow diluted. I have to climb on the toilet to get close enough to smell it.

In recent years, major institutions have started to engage with perfumes as art objects. ‘The Art of Scent 1889–2012’ at the Museum of Art and Design, New York, in 2012, was former perfume critic for the *New York Times*, Chandler Burr’s attempt to raise modern perfumery to the level of artwork and included Aimé Guerlain’s *Jicky* (1889), one of the first based on synthetic molecules that heralded the beginning of modern olfaction, Oliver Cresp’s *Angel* for Thierry Mugler (1992), which Burr associates with surrealism, and Daniela Andrier’s ‘neo-brutalist’ fragrance *Untitled* (2010). Last year, Comme des Garçons, the Japanese fashion label known for its unisex ‘anti-perfumes’ that smell of things like warm metal and oxygen, produced a fragrance for the Serpentine Gallery. According to the promotional material, *Serpentine* is an attempt to capture the smell of ‘nature in a city’: grass, asphalt and pollution. Tracey Emin – who made her name by challenging notions of feminine cleanliness – designed the packaging.

Back at Sloane Avenue, in a top-floor bedroom, Patrizio di Massimo’s contribution to ‘I’m Here But You’ve Gone’ (*Odour of Sanctity*, 2015) is encountered in a ‘miraculously’ leaking urn. As the Biblical narrative has it, to be mortal is to stink of sin – Adam’s original sin. Divine bodies smell sweet and beautiful; living bodies smell of what they consume and digest. They smell of where they have been and what they have been doing. In death, they decay. The corpses of saints don’t corrupt as normal bodies do. Saint Thérèse de Lisieux’s corpse smelled of roses and Saint Demetrius’s tomb in Thessalonki still reeks of myrrh. Di Massimo’s version smells like sweated-off moisturizer, in a nice way. After all, fragrance works through disappearance and transformation: people leave their scent on their clothes, and in the spaces where they have been. Scents linger and evaporate, making meaning through dissipation, at once present and invisible, visceral and intangible.

There are several artworks downstairs – leftovers from a temporary installation by Nick Mauss, Franz West’s wrapped in plastic, a Helen Marten wall piece. What, then, is ever fully gone? I think of the invisible labour it takes to scent a whole house-come-exhibition space: refilling diffusers, bottles, urns and coat pockets – a domestic kind of maintenance, or care.

When we leave Sloane Avenue, it’s all up our noses. We can smell everything on the street, everyone’s perfume, car exhausts, and food, our ‘chemical’ sense heightened. You get that when you leave the perfume floor at Liberty too.