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Art pieces in olfactory effects

Suzel Balez

Abstract. *Although the relations of smell with the built space remain little explored in the contemporary scientific world, numerous artists use it today. Their experiments, putting on stage the odors in built environments, test the properties of smell itself, in a sometimes-renewed implementation. They question simultaneously the frames of our social and esthetic standards. A directory of olfactory effects allows for the understanding of phenomena, between the physico-chemical, sociocultural, individual worlds, active in the olfactory artistic actions. However, these deciphering sometimes reveal gaps, mysteries, which are as many leads to be explored to enrich this olfactory effects directory or to direct new strategies of research.*

odors, fragrant works of art, olfactory sensation, olfactory effects

Introduction: Roasted coffee, aldehydes and olfactory effects

During the design and the development of a building, odors only hold a subsidiary place within the broader field of air quality control. Studies about smell in the built environment still hold the advantage of being done in situ. However, if they do try to tackle odors' spatial and temporal context, it is mostly to identify sources and/or areas of "olfactory nuisances". The studies often represent inventories of fragrant sources, more or less located in space and time (Grésillon, 2010; Henshaw, 2014). These works very rarely focus on the ways smell is perceived in situ, whereas their historical, social and/or cultural contexts might make it a nuisance. Different research, including on odors themselves, nonetheless show that the concept of nuisance often depends more on the sensitivities in opinion, on types of social relations and/or on behaviors of class than on the physical or technical qualities of that specific signal (Corbin, 1986; Herz and Schooler, 2002; Howes, 1990). The approaches of olfactory inventories, which focus solely on the odor sources' identities and/or their localizations and consider smell as a nuisance only, not considering the circumstances of such an interpretation, are missing fundamental questions, such as the ordinary perception of odors in the built space, the identity or the contemporary olfactory representations of places. However, if the relations between smell and built environment remain little explored in the contemporary scientific world, numerous artists use it today. Their experiments, highlighting smell in places, test the properties of smell itself, in a sometimes-renewed implementation, and simultaneously question the frames of our social and aesthetic standards.

In 1938, during the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris, Marcel Duchamp bathed the visitors in the scents of Brazilian roasted coffee, in a sort of cave's dim light, covered in dead leaves (Jaquet, 2010). Indeed, the start of the 20th century represents a turn in artistic practices that involve smell. At a time when artists were striving to reach synesthesia, modern chemistry was establishing itself and democratizing the access to fragrance. Of course, in other places and other times, fragrant practices already existed, such as *Kōdō*, i.e. the Japanese *Way of fragrance*. This practice, whose rules were codified between the 10th and the 14th century, was however reserved to those who could afford the precious wood types (Gatten, 1977). The chemical synthesis enables us not to use the source-objects that were used until then, and even to generate fragrances that were still *unsmelled*, such as the famous aldehydes implemented in 1920 by Ernest Beaux in Chanel n°5 (Roudnitska, 1991). In opening once again the concept of art to everyday life and to direct contact with the viewer, the 1960s tried to go beyond the sole visual perception; the works of art involving smell and odors thus started to appear. There is a great deal of contemporary artists who are looking to use smell in order to question our time, going beyond the simple anamnesis. These artistic pieces often represent singular experimental confrontations that highlight and question the relations between smell and space, as an aspect of ambiance.

The concept of "olfactory effect" (Balez, 2001) represents a perspective to explore the complex phenomena that are in play in an olfactory artistic piece. An *olfactory effect* is an interaction between the physico-chemical olfactory environment, a socio-cultural community's olfactory milieu and everyone's "internal smellscape"¹. It enables to gather and confront the perceptual, physiological, physical, etc. phenomena. For example, the classic situation in which someone discovers their own odor in a room they have just left,

¹ Neologism inspired by the concept of "internal soundscape", coined by M. Periañez (1983, 1981).

after being inside for a while, is the result of physiological (recovery phenomenon²), physical (little air renewal) and potentially psychological (attention given to the changes) phenomena. It is named *recovery phenomenon*. concept indicates the necessary cause for its existence and should, moreover, present itself as the trace of an event. Like an *effect* involves a situated milieu that is singularly qualified by its context, the physical and human dimensions find within it, if possible, a global sense.

Schemes that are common to several effects allow for them to be classified into two big categories and five groups and ordered depending on the importance of their spatial components (fig. 1). The first category corresponds to *dynamic effects*. It brings together the group *movements*, which agglomerates the effects revolving around displacements, and the groups *spaces* and *durations*, where are located respectively spatiality and temporality, which are essentials of the described odor effects. The second category is that of *semantic effects*. It includes the groups *meaning* and *decodings*, which are mostly about the interpretation itself of the smell, the meaning that is given to it when it is recognized and its physico-chemical “reading”.

This repository, composed of forty-five effects, offers a grid for analysis of different artistic pieces involving smell. The choice of the presented pieces has here only been decided by the presence of odors in it, whether it is an object or a larger installation on the scale of a site, for example. Even if the odor’s potential as a memory activator is proven, the artistic pieces that were revolving only on that dimension were set aside. These analyses of olfactory pieces, through the prism of sensory effects, will open scientific reflection in a field that remains little explored, which involves the modalities of the presence of odors in the built space.

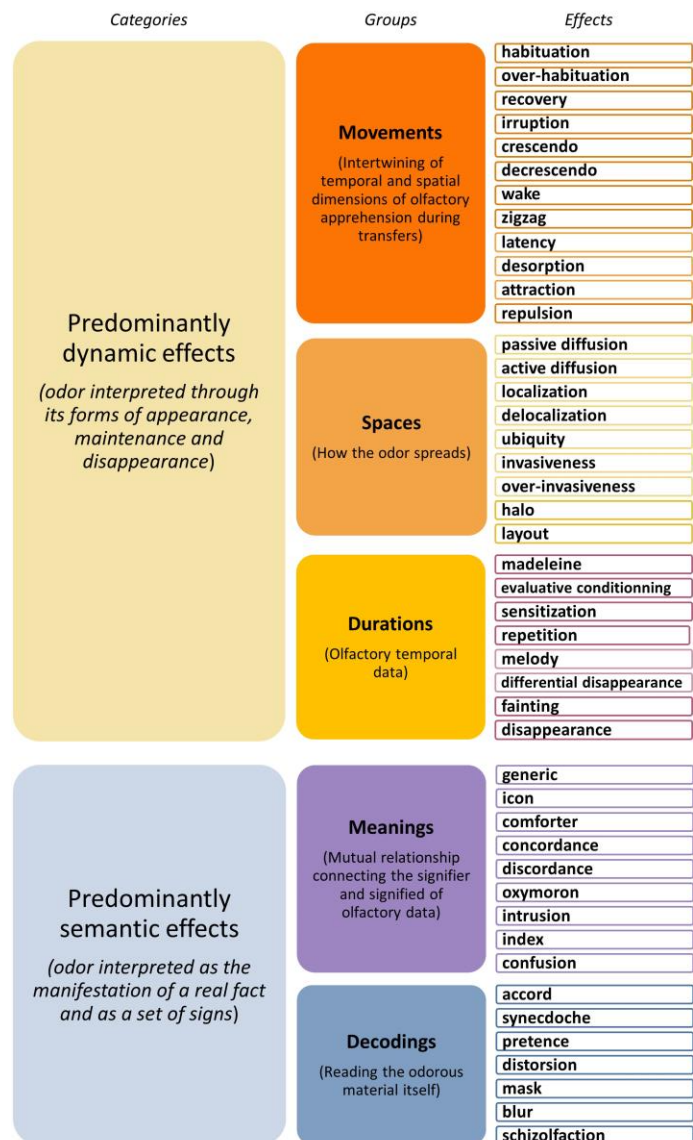


Figure 1 : Categories and groups of the repository of olfactory effects

Artistic actions in fragrant effects

Beyond anamnesis

An odor is a sign of disappearance: its own. To prevent the odor to escape, some artists lock it up in containers, which paradoxically turns their pieces into odorless ones. It is the case for Piero Manzoni, who locked up his breath inside balloons (*Fiato d’artista*, 1960), then his excrement in tins (*Merda d’artista*, 1961). Jana Sterbak did the same with body odors in her *Container for Olfactive Portrait* (2004), and in *Aura Soma* (2002), Sylvie Fleury lines up hundreds of colorful vials to question contemporary odorophile tendencies. Brigitte Nahon, in her *Demotica* (2009), which is exhibited at International Museum of Perfume of Grasse, visually demonstrates the inevitable olfactory disappearance. A series of vials, containing jasmine essential oil, is hung up on an Indian scale, balanced and next to pebbles. The disappearance of the smell from the essential oils will gradually unbalance the installation. Smell tends to disappear, it is its nature, and the fragrant piece, neglected, always ends up odorless. This art piece leverages mostly the *passive diffusion* effect, which implies the physico-chemical and psycho-physical characteristics³ of the molecules that are vectors of

² After a couple of minutes around one odor, one cannot smell it anymore: it is the habituation phenomenon. Some time around another smell is enough to recover the ability to sense the first one: it is the recovery phenomenon (Köster and de Wijk, 1991).

³ Their volatilities and the human olfactory sensitivities simultaneously.

smell⁴ from the fragrant source. This ephemeral odor is also displayed in Warhol's *Piss Painting* (1978), a canvas that is covered with copper pigments that have been discolored with urine. These canvas gave off their strong urine smell for eight years after their creation (Foiret, 2013). The smell can also get distributed in the air around its source, thanks to the air movements that mix the smell and the "neutral" air. It is the *active diffusion effect*.

Still in the spatial effects group, the *invasion effect* refers to all the air of a volume being "filled with smell". In 1975, in order to superimpose different time and reality levels, Bill Viola combined *vapor*, odorized vapor, video and sound in a complex installation to represent the changes in water phases. The visitor finds himself in the middle of an artwork that he can smell and in which he can participate (through the video). In Jean-Gilles Decosterd and Philippe Rahm's *Paradise Now, Vol 2* (2004), the viewer is immersed into a specific atmosphere, which is generated by an object that emits lights and smells (essential oils from plants). These installations do not only refer to specific properties of the fragrant signal, but also to the modalities for spatialized olfactory meetings. Set into a closed space (through a door), the meeting with the odor will happen through a direct sensory cut, an *irruption effect*, whereas if the installation is set in a bigger space, the smell meeting could be more graduated. During the *Les Papesses* exhibition in 2013, Jana Sterbak displayed her *Bread bed* (1996) in a location within Avignon's Popes' Palace that was usually not available for visitors. Was it the artist's choice? The *crescendo effect* from the smell of freshly baked bread (forming the "mat" for a bed made of steel) guided the visitors to the art piece.

Boris Raux's *l'escalier* installation was a compulsory step to reach another exhibition⁵, located on the third floor. The artist describes the visitors' reaction, who were walking up a first flight of stone stairs while "smelling, without acknowledging it, a smell that was getting stronger", before stopping abruptly when the smell and the change on the floor suddenly made them realize that they were walking on soap (Raux, 2015, p. 202). Here, we are dealing with an art piece in which a game is established between the initial *irruption effect*, that of *delocalization* that follows and the potential *discordance* between the smell of soap and the location of the smell.

Such effects take into consideration the layout of odors within space, and depend on the spatial and temporal apparatus for the diffusion. Michel Roudnitska is one of the rare artists who explored the differentiated properties of fragrant components. During his shows (*Quintessence*, 1996; *Pierre de Soleil*, 1998; *Un monde en senteurs*, 2002), he releases some of his own fragrances. These arrange themselves in a twofold construction: first, that of their layered appearance, since the constitutive elements have different volatilities. When a first smell is released, the viewer-smeller does not feel it at once in its entirety: he first smells the fragrant elements that are the most volatile. Then, after a few seconds or minutes, the fragrance's different elements are superimposed, and it takes "shape" in his nose. This first olfactory construction depends essentially on the distance between the point of fragrant emission (through the nebulization of a fragrant oil) and the viewers-smellers. The bigger the distance, the slower the fragrant construction and the better it allows to understand the smell that is displayed. However, Michel Roudnitska designs his fragrances to follow a precise order of release, which represents a second spatial and temporal level for his polysensory shows. The order for their release is thus not random: the fragrances arrange themselves with the previous one, to eventually form a grand finale. The categories of dynamic and semantic effects allow us to appreciate the properties of the studied smell in Michel Roudnitska's "sons et lumières et odeurs", in particular the fragrant tiering, which refers to the present vectors of smell's *accord* and *differential disappearance effects*, connected to the release space, as well as the composition that is being released.

Other pieces question more specifically the modality for the meeting with smell within space. Ernesto Neto's *We stopped just here at the time* (2002) is an installation that is composed of sorts of lycra bags that are hung decimeters above the floor. The viewer threads his way between the bags, and by moving them, the smell of the spices that are inside gets released. The visitor's movements, his tactile meeting with these suspended bags, triggers the odors' arrival, all in a same smell register (spices), but in an order that is conditioned by the journey. In the case of Michel Roudnitska's shows, the viewer remains still, the odor comes to him in an execution that had been decided by the artist. Ernesto Neto's installation is the opposite, since the visitor moves within the art piece, and it is he that determines, via his journey, his own olfactory and tactile meetings.

⁴ The "odorivector" term, coined by André Holley (1999, p. 54) refers to a molecule, emitted by a olfactory source, whose properties are such that they can be detected by the human sense of smell, and the resulting sensations and mental representations are then interpreted as smell.

⁵ « Sculpture qu'en est-il ? », 2004, Galerie Le Rire Bleu, Figeac. The stairs are made of soap bars. Another version of this art piece is available at the International Perfume Museum Grasse.

During the olfactory meeting, the control of intensity implies active devices that enable choices in terms of diffusion frequency. Therefore, in the early 2000s, after Gwenn-Aël Lynn (2017) noted in his first fragrant installations that the spaces between his olfactory diffusion points were filled with a mixture of smells (like a *halo effect* from the sources), he improved his devices and the position of his different products in the exhibition space in order to gain the olfactory heterogeneity that he wanted from the beginning (*layout effect*). By setting several fragrant sources within the space, the artist wished for the visitor to experiment the smells individually, so that they could remain specific sensory events along the journey suggested. The artist is trying to make his original layout visible, while avoiding the superimposition of each source's halo. It has thus turned from a continuous vector of fragrance to a fragrance diffusion that is triggered by the visitor's approach. Such olfactory experimental approaches help building strategies regarding the power of fragrant sources, in relation to the frequency of their diffusion and their spatial distribution, in order to serve the designers' intentions. Within the architectural project, the *layout effect* for fragrance could, contrary to the *invasion effect*, bring some heterogeneity to a location that is too homogeneous spatially-speaking, to add diversity, which helps qualifying some spaces.

Smile, smoke, sweat... Peter De Cupere's fragrant art pieces

Peter De Cupere is a prolific artist in terms of fragrant productions. He works in particular on individuals' perception and memory organization in concrete situations in his art pieces, the artistic semantics. For example, *Smile Room* (2010) is a bathroom-shaped installation, literally covered in mint-flavored toothpaste⁶. This redundant installation is facing a *Smoke Room*, which is covered in cigarette butts. Each room is closed, and the visitors are struck by the eight square meters of fragrant space that are at their disposal when they enter. Beyond the initial *irruption effect*, the installations' visual, olfactory and even semantic redundancy is included in an *accordance effect*: smells seem to be in accordance with the nature of the location or the moment when it is perceived. Conversely, in his *Garbage City Holiday Park* (2004-2012), Peter De Cupere highlights olfactory expectations, in cabins composed of garbage (cardboard balls, steel barrel, garbage bags) that are odorized with natural products, such as mint leaves. With these installations, Peter De Cupere plays with the discrepancy in meaning between the real context and the emerging meaning. The semantic effects that are implied are often connected to smell's primitive and informative function (identification and recognition of the fragrant source). In situations when the fragrances do not seem to be adapted to the location where they are experienced, the *discordance effect* can either generate a feeling of discomfort or, through the discrepancy it creates, be experienced with humor. Therefore, *Sweat* (2009), another artistic action by Peter De Cupere, consisted in the collection of five dancers' sweat as they were wearing plastic suits during a 15-minute long performance. Beforehand, they had eaten a meal, each one from a different menu. The collected sweat, which was concentrated in a glass box, was exhibited at the entrance of the dance company's building to let the visitors smell it through a hole in the glass. The discrepancy, and thus the humor, is not so much on the olfactory level (what is so surprising in a dance rehearsal space that smells like sweat?), but rather on the emphasis on what our society considers worth hiding, especially in a dance company, where it would be more agreed upon to find photos of the dancers on the walls...

These diverse artistic experiments question both the design of fragrant ambiances and their sharing systems. The olfactory effects repository enables the understanding of phenomena, at the crossroads between the physico-chemical, socio-cultural and individual worlds, which are active in fragrant artistic actions. However, this decoding reveals sometimes shortfalls and mysteries that represent other paths to enrich this repository or to guide new research strategies, whether scientific or architectural. Many artists, for example, go beyond the sole mention of fragrant objects, to depict how smell is present within a location. The ways to encounter those fragrances represent a promising reflection, which would help going beyond the sole inventory of fragrant sources in the built environment, in order to progress in the understanding of the design of olfactory ambiances.

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⁶ 3400 tubes of toothpaste were used, and they appeared in the art piece itself : they fill the bathtub.

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