

Odor Limits

This essay accompanied the exhibition “Odor Limits,” curated by the authors, at the Esther M. Klein Art Gallery in association with the University City Science Center and the Monell Center in Philadelphia, PA from May 9–June 28, 2008.

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DisplayCult is a collaborative framework for interdisciplinary studies in the visual arts founded by Drobnick and Fisher in 1994. Their exhibitions include *CounterPoses* (1998), *Vital Signs* (2000), *Museopathy* (2001), *reminiSCENT* (2003), *Linda Montano* (2003), *Aural Cultures* (2005), *Do Me!* (2006) and *Listening Awry* (2007), among others.

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The sense of smell is often considered to be beyond the realm of the aesthetic. In most theories, smell serves as the negative example that justifies the conventional dominance of the visual and sonic arts. Arguments mobilized against smell range from the arbitrary to the biological. For some, the fact that some odors are repugnant means that none can be artful. For others, smell is too animalistic or sensuous for serious intellectual pursuits. To admit smell to the pantheon of arts would thus serve to undermine the two central tenets that

have been operative in aesthetics for the past two centuries: the notions of disinterestedness and autonomy. Smells are thought to be too subjective to allow a disinterested, or universal, experience of art, and they disturbingly implicate the beholder's body so it is impossible to entertain the illusion of separateness from the artwork.

In an increasing number of contemporary artworks, however, the distinctive qualities of scent – such as its ephemerality, evocativeness, intimacy, variability, intensity, and so on – turn out to be quite attractive to artists, especially those seeking to redefine aesthetic experience. Artists have not waited for theoretical justification in order to incorporate smells into their practice. Perfumes, fragrant substances, diffused aromas and synthetic odors have appeared in recent artworks despite the exclusion of scent from conventional aesthetics and art history. Because scent is unexpected in the visual art experience, it can give rise to works with a surprising element of directness and complexity (see Drobnick 1998).

Works in "Odor Limits" employ scent to innovatively rethink the traditional artistic genres of portraiture, landscape, reverie and abstraction. The visceral nature of scent also provides a sensorially immediate way to address pressing issues that are faced by today's society, such as pollution and xenophobia. Because of the sense of smell's inherent subjectivity and intimacy, these olfactory artworks generate thought-provoking insights into cultural difference, spirituality, and the philosophy of the body. The four artists included in this exhibition – Oswaldo Maciá, Jenny Marketou, Chrysanthe Stathacos and Clara Ursitti – have each demonstrated a long-term commitment to investigating the nature of scent and have pioneered its use in installation, performance, video and relational artworks.

1 Woodchurch Road, London NW6 3PL, by Oswaldo Maciá (Figures 1 and 2), highlights the odors of an apartment complex in northwest London. When the artist lived there, it housed singles, families, and a mix of generations and national backgrounds. The residents included individuals of Irish, Lebanese and English ancestry (the artist himself hails from Colombia), and so offered a range of culinary tastes and consumer practices. Composed of five garbage cans, the installation presents a selection of smells that Maciá found most typical of the building's occupants: naftalin (mothballs), olive oil, Listerine, eucalyptus and baby powder. Visitors lift the tops of the cans (much like the artist's own method of research) to inhale and guess the identity of the vaporous substances. In a form of sociological shorthand, Maciá's olfactory clues hint at diverse personalities, lifestyles and domestic situations, whether it be that olive oil connotes a Mediterranean sensibility, that mouthwash belies an excessive concern with personal hygiene, or that baby powder evidences the nurturing concerns of a young family. Other interpretations are possible as well, for visitors can draw upon their own associations about the olfactory ambiances of everyday life. Each sniff of the contents of the containers inspires reflection



Figures 1 and 2

Oswaldo Maciá,
1 Woodchurch Road,
London NW6 3PL
(1994–95), scents, trash
cans. Photographs
courtesy of the authors and
the artist.

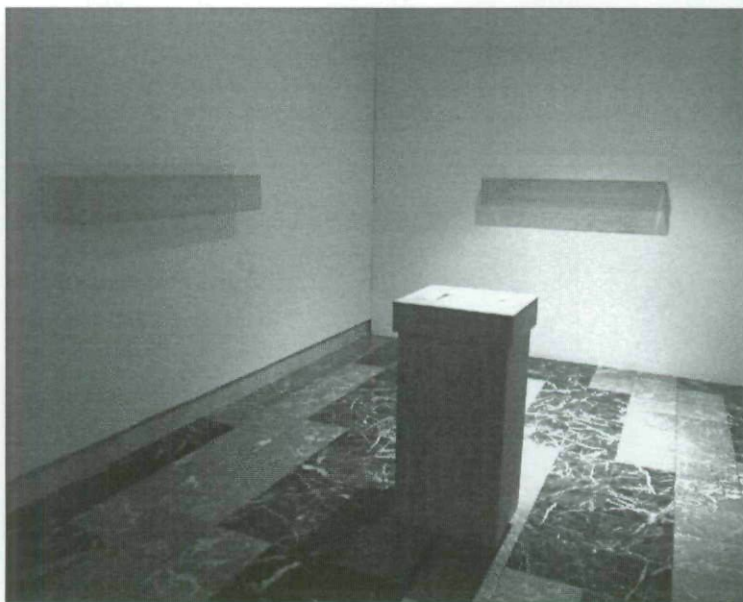


upon how a sense of community can develop from a heterogeneous mix of identities (see Drobnick 2002a).

Smellscape (Figure 3) continues Maciá's interest in place, here expanded to encompass the entire globe. Working with perfumer Ricardo Moya, Maciá's installation features a unique arrangement of scents from a series of "notes" found along the route of the famous circumnavigation by Phileas Fogg in Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. In the novel, Fogg crossed continents and engaged transportation as varied as trains, sledges and elephants, and in this piece Maciá imagines the array of olfactory encounters that Verne's protagonist must have experienced. The artist has chosen four composite scents, designed to represent the key sites in Fogg's itinerary: London, India, China and New York. Ranging from pleasant to unsavory, floral to putrid, ethereal to industrial, the scents are designed to challenge visitors' acuity in perceiving and identifying dozens of smells encoded in the complex chords. Verne's adventure was first published in 1873, a time in which technology began to shrink what used to be overwhelming distances. The moment also marked the zenith of British colonialism, when the romanticized fables of far-away lands obscured the harsh truths of military and economic occupation. *Smellscape* addresses both aspects – the mythical and the political – as exotic scents and industrial reality are odoriferously juxtaposed. For visitors who have traveled widely, Maciá's scents may trigger olfactory memories; for others, the blend of familiar and novel sensations will be an addition to their own odor *imaginaire*.

Figure 3

Oswaldo Maciá,
Smellscape (2006),
Plexiglas, scents, monitor,
video. Photograph courtesy
of the authors and the
artist.



The convention of the smell map dates back to the eighteenth century when the forces of modernity began to institute massive sanitization campaigns that reconfigured cities from medieval labyrinths to public boulevards. Smell maps, such as those by Jean-Noel Hallé, located “morbific vapors” and earthly miasmas that were thought to cause disease, and prioritized the places needing to be drained, covered or deodorized. After 200 years, the project of cleansing odors from the urban environment has been so successful that J. Douglas Porteous (2006) calls the result a series of desensitized, alienating “blandscapes.” The smell map by Jenny Marketou differs from this tradition by urging visitors to attend to, record and enjoy the scents of the city that linger despite the best efforts at eradication. With a schematic of Philadelphia and colorful markers, gallerygoers are invited to walk around the neighborhood to document their olfactory experiences. Back in the gallery, an interactive map is posted so that personalized olfactory notations can be added throughout the show. *Smell It: A Do-It-Yourself Smell Map* (Figure 4) encourages participants to consider how a focus on smell alters the vision-centered structure of the city. While smells are expected in the context of nature or in rural areas, to discover the olfactory in the midst of the concrete jungle is both a challenge and a thrill. In today’s odorophobic culture, the act of sniffing in public can appear odd, even suspicious, yet as the contributions to Marketou’s smell map grow, it will become possible to chart the subjective importance of scent, the subtle olfactory shifts from one hour, day or season to the next, and the elusive significance that smells bestow upon the overall character of the urban landscape.



Figure 4
Jenny Marketou, *Smell It: A Do-It-Yourself Smell Map* (2008), site-specific, interactive wall installation, SAV (wallpaper) on Sintra Mount, 72 x 120". Photograph courtesy of the authors and the artist.

Marketou's other work in "Odor Limits" is a video that is loosely based on the "Diary Room" footage found in the reality television show, *Big Brother*, where contestants speak directly and candidly to the camera. *SMELLYOU>SMELLME* (Figure 5) features an international roster of guests who respond to a set of questions posed by the artist relating to the sense of smell. Created originally in the context of a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts and broadcast live on Banff's public television station, the ten guests provide confidential, entertaining and sometimes racy testimonials about their preoccupations with smell. Perfume, body odor, olfactory memories and the stench of death are just a few of the topics discussed. Intimate thoughts are revealed about how smell intersects with the lived aspects of experience – such as personal and cultural identity, geography and community, and idiosyncratic odor likes and dislikes – as well as contemplations about the nature and philosophy of smell in general.

Figure 5

Jenny Marketou,
SMELLYOU>SMELLME
(2003), single-channel
video with sound (30:00).
Co-produced with the
Banff Centre for the Arts
and originally broadcast
live with the support of the
Public Television Station in
Banff, Canada. Photograph
courtesy of the authors and
the artist.



Chrysanne Stathacos' installation draws its inspiration from the artist's travels in India and her eventful encounter with a blessed tree. Since ancient times, Sanskrit literature refers to the phenomenon of *kalpavriksha*, or wish-fulfilling tree, which bestows divine gifts. Devotees of such trees, typically banyan or bodhi trees, make offerings, light candles, meditate, and adorn the branches with colorful strips of cloth to both convey their wishes and show their gratitude when granted. Stathacos translates this Hindu and Buddhist tradition into the postmodern Western context, where consumerism has overrun spirituality and material goods promise salvation. *The Wish Machine* (Figures 6 and 7) is a customized Art Deco vending machine and



Figures 6 and 7
Chrysanne Stathacos, *The Wish Machine* (1997–2008), digital photograph, customized vending machine, scent multiples. Photographs courtesy of the authors and the artist.

backdrop that feature an image of the tree the artist witnessed at Delhi's Chharthapur Mandir in its full devotional finery. Instead of gum or candy, the machine dispenses a wish-conjuring artwork, one per viewer, designed to stimulate the sense of smell and inspire reflection. Each multiple includes a photocollage of a fragrant flower or herb along with a vial of its essential oil. Together, the plant, scent and image invoke a range of basic human desires: basil for money, clove for lust, eucalyptus for health, hyacinth for peace, lavender for happiness, lilac for hope, lily for sleep, rose for love, mint for communication, and rosemary for home. Like the use of incense in ritual, smell can intensify meditation and connect the human realm to the celestial one. Transformation is at the heart of Stathacos' project in which materialism and mysticism converge according to the reality and imagination of each person's aspirations.

Two untitled videos by Clara Ursitti explore the sense of smell pertaining to body odor. In previous works the artist analyzed, isolated and synthesized her own body scents, as well as those of other individuals, to create olfactory portraits that challenged the traditional reliance upon visual recognition to confirm identity. In the first video (Figure 8), she tests the notion that each person possesses a unique "odor signature" in a performance executed with the assistance of the Strathclyde Police Department. Here the artist had herself tracked down by a specially-trained bloodhound named Blue in Possil Park, Glasgow. The performance illustrates the fact that persons exude an individualistic aroma and inadvertently leave "odor tracks" of their travel and whereabouts. In the realm of smell, the body is not confined to the limits of the skin; indeed, discreet traces of it persist in the landscape, available for detection by suitably sensitive noses. Like an interspecies game of hide-and-seek, the video radiates a playful innocence as the dog sniffs its way through the fields and bushes of the park, and ultimately finds the artist positioned behind a tree. The denouement is friendly and

Figure 8

Clara Ursitti, *Untitled* (1995), single-channel video documentation of performance with the Strathclyde Police Department (3:30). Photograph courtesy of the artist.



shows the artist smiling and introducing herself to the dog and police handler after being “caught.” Yet the overall performance also harbors ominous hints of tabloid criminal dealings and intimidating police activities in which one’s olfactory identity constantly leaks out to give oneself away – leaving no safe place to hide (see Drobnick 2002b).

Sniffing is also the main activity in Ursitti’s second video (Figure 9). Collaborating with Dr. George Dodd, a renowned scientist, perfumer and aromatherapist, the artist reclines like an odalisque and makes her skin available for olfactory examination. In dispassionate, precise language, Dr. Dodd identifies the odoriferous parts of the human body and the chemical compounds typically found in what he calls

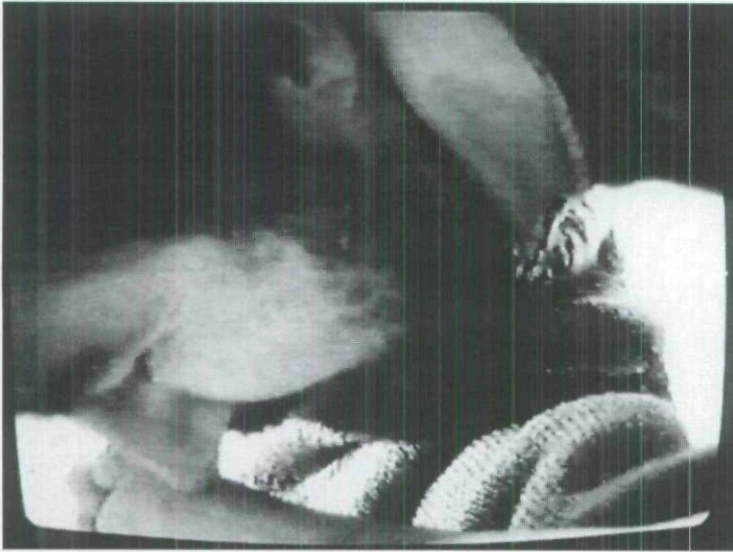


Figure 9
Clara Ursitti, *Untitled*
(1995), single-channel
video with Dr. George
Dodd (11:00). Photograph
courtesy of the artist.

a person’s “olfactory atmosphere.” Scent glands produce different suites of aromas depending on their location on the head, in the armpits, at the back of the knees or the feet, but they collectively merge to form the essence of one’s being. His conversation brings out fascinating connections between human odors and those found in animals, plants, gourmet foods and expensive perfumes. Knowing that some of the chemicals produced by the body mimic the sublime fragrances of jasmine or sandalwood, and also constitute the same delectable smells associated with vintage wine, cheese, truffles and champagne, dispels many of the commonly held assumptions about body odor as merely an indicator of abjection and disgust. Not all cultures are as odorophobic as the West, and Dr. Dodd points out the significance of body odor to mother–infant bonding, intimate relationships and other social customs. While body odor may be overdetermined by the hygiene anxiety induced by deodorant and

soap advertisements, Ursitti's video erases some of the stigma heaped upon natural bodily emanations and contextualizes them within the broader continuum of olfactory phenomena.

"Odor Limits" explores the potential of smell to create compelling aesthetic experiences. As much as olfaction tends to be regarded by mainstream culture as a "limited" mode of perception, one with only a basic fragrant/foul experiential range, the art presented here demonstrates the ability of scents to defy limits, transgress boundaries, and exceed expectations.

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