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How to Choose Your Perfume: A Conversation with Sianne Ngai and Anna Kornbluh

By [Jude Stewart](#) March 23, 2022

FASHION & STYLE

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*Even after writing a whole **book** about smell, I still resisted finding “my” perfume. Perfume has always seemed gimmicky, too expensive, anti-feminist. But researching my book got me rethinking these objections. I wanted to get to yes with perfume but do so honestly.*

*I mentioned this to my friends **Sianne Ngai** and **Anna Kornbluh**, who both really like perfumes. Sianne is a professor of English at the University of Chicago and specializes in aesthetics and affect theory in a Marxist context. She has written books about the “ugly feelings” of envy and irritation; contemporary aesthetic categories like “cute,” “zany,” and “interesting”; and, most recently, a theory of the gimmick. Anna is a professor of English at the University of Illinois Chicago and specializes in formalism, Marxism, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis.*

Sianne, Anna, and I are middle-aged women who admire each other, loudly and often. Our sensibilities overlap but also diverge in intriguing ways. We met for this conversation in September at Sianne’s high-rise apartment in Chicago’s South Loop. It’s an airy, glassed-in space with views of Lake Michigan and the South Side in many directions. The day was unseasonably warm, so we’d brought our bathing suits to swim in her building’s rooftop pool. But first we spread out tiny bottles of perfume on her kitchen table, and sprayed and sniffed for a good long while.

NGAI

Let me start by asking, Why *a* perfume? Why not several? A lot of people have perfume wardrobes. You can have a depersonalized relationship to perfume and just ask, How do I want to smell, in a performative way?

I like perfume. I got really sucked into it and then I had to pull away because I had a dog whose nose was very sensitive. The irony is I ended up with a boyfriend who’s so romantic that he gets upset when I wear anything other than the scent I wore when we met.

When I first got into perfumes I thought about it all wrong. It was very conceptual, like, I bet I’ll be someone who likes citrus. I was reifying my identity, thinking of myself as a certain kind of person. It turns out I don’t like citrus at all in perfume. I don’t like florals either, especially jasmine or rose. I do like earthy, woody smells. When I leaned into what felt good at the level of sense, it became easier.

KORNBLUH

Smell really vexes the problem of aesthetics because it's always a judgment. I smell something, I identify it, and it smells good or it's not good. But what authenticates the judgment?

NGAI

What is interesting is that middle ground where you're finding concepts for an experience that's profoundly immediate and spontaneous. You remove the layer of, Do I like it or not? It becomes more about, How will I use language? What's amazing is that the vocabulary works.

In your book, *Jude*, you asked, How could I become a better smeller? I like how you shifted away from questions of connoisseurship. You didn't want to cultivate better aesthetic taste than other people. You just wanted to take in more of the world. Fredric Jameson once said, paraphrasing Adorno, that when you're doing aesthetics as a Marxist, you can't get away from the fact that art is a luxury item. It shouldn't be, but that's the guilt of the art object for certain critics. There's an anecdote I've heard about Herbert Marcuse being interviewed at his home in La Jolla, California. The interviewer says something challenging, like, "Herbert Marcuse, you're a Marxist thinker, but I'm looking at all this luxury. We're lounging around your swimming pool. What do you say to that?" And Marcuse supposedly replies, "Nothing is too good for the people." That's a great response to the guilt thing.

STEWART

Yeah. I wanted to inhabit my body more and stop doing this head-in-a-jar screen thing. It's funny, when you write about the *smell* of freshly sharpened pencils, you can't just go to Wikipedia and start your research there. You have to get actual pencils—a lot of them, it turns out—and sharpen them first. With smell, you bump into thingliness at every turn.

KORNBLUH

You were trying to have a sensuous basis for ideas you'd generate and translate them back into prose. That's a conundrum because you're having this deeply embodied experience. We know that the perfume will smell differently on you than it does on Sianne.

NGAI

And we're spontaneously going to like or dislike it.

KORNBLUH

Right. Even though smell is our most sensitive sense, it's the one around which we have the least cultural apparatus. You can't traffic in smell the way we traffic in images or sounds.

NGAI

There's a school of thought that says concepts kill beauty. Knowing history won't help you find the stone more stony. But that's where that philosophy was completely wrong. Jasmine has a history and a set of values associated with that history, and the more you know about something, the more you can perceive in it. So your perception is expanded by the conceptual and not broken by it.

Back to embodiment. We're never just smelling the thing, like freshly sharpened pencils. The pencil is also a tool, with a certain production in the world. Your book suggests it's wrong to say that those things aren't also being smelled in pencils. As you write in your jasmine chapter, when we smell jasmine, we also smell civilization, well-ordered beauty, luxury. I have to say, when I smell jasmine, I smell gender.

KORNBLUH

Let's spool this out a bit. I think the whole denigration of luxury is entailed in the denigration of women, for many reasons. Smell is a determinant of atmosphere. It can accord sensation to people. It prompts and triggers many things. And who's in charge of atmosphere?

STEWART

Not women, usually.

KORNBLUH

Some of smell's power might be associated with masculinity in the sense of controlling the environment.

Thinking about Marcuse's remark on luxury, some of the more contentious arguments in Marxist theory circle around whether we can have luxury or not. Some Marxists think there shouldn't be a scarcity of pleasure, that beauty and sensuousness can arise inside a different mode of production. Others think it's a fantasy of hyperconsumption and we need degrowth. And those positions present themselves more and more in our time of ecocide as the environmentally realist position. But they are deeply misogynistically motivated, because of this long historical, artistic, and rhetorical association of women with too much consumption, with uselessness and ornament.

NGAI

Which is racialized, too.

STEWART

This idea that smells control environments is true in a different way. Only twenty percent of fragrances are luxury perfumes, the ones we're talking about. The other eighty percent are so-called functional perfumes in laundry detergents and personal products. We live in a smell reality that's much more edited than we realize. It's mind-bending. But we were talking about gender and who controls environments.

NGAI

A friend once told this story about another friend who'd wear a strong perfume and then try on clothes in stores. She liked leaving her trace on all the clothes. My friend found this appalling.

STEWART

Well, it is. It's a power move marking her territory.

KORNBLUH

That also speaks to the situation dependence of smells. If you're flying on an airplane or going clothes shopping, should you spray your perfume?

STEWART

How much scent is too much is both personally and culturally dependent. Take *oud*, a super expensive incense that Middle Eastern people scent their clothes with. If you've ever strolled through an international airport, you know the scent bower can be large. Part of what one is choosing with perfume is to create a nimbus. The question is, how social or private should that nimbus be?

NGAI

How I approached perfumes is that they were for me. When I'd perform in public I'd wear something for me to smell, like a halo of protection.

STEWART

Who said that fashion was armor? Perfume can be a kind of invisible armor, too.

KORNBLUH

Another thought about perfume and gimmick is that perfume is a shortcut to charisma. It's a way of projecting a nimbus of self into the world that other people can respond to without words. Does that imply perfume is more for single people?

NGAI

Some perfumes are complicated and aren't a good shortcut to anything precisely for that reason. I'm upset because there's a perfume that exemplifies this that I've been searching for and can't find. It's called Dzing! by Olivia Giacobetti, for L'Artisan Parfumeur. Dzing! is discontinued. It smelled like a mixture of horse, leather, sawdust, cotton candy, popcorn, and poop. I loved Dzing! so much, but it's not a good shortcut.

STEWART

Speaking of horses, have you seen the Adam Driver [Burberry Hero](#) perfume commercial? It's incredibly weird. Perfume ads almost justify my complaint about perfume as gimmick. They're so awful.

KORNBLUH

They're not as stylized as fashion photographs and don't have a clear point of view. They're just trying to convey evanescence and mystique and whatever.

NGAI

They always tell a flattened story. And they're also very white.

STEWART

Yeah. What they're trying to convey more than anything is white subjectivity. But I do want to figure perfume ads out. *So much* gets crammed into them that almost nothing gets communicated about what the perfume smells like.

I actually think perfume ads are quite accurate in their semiotics. For example, the [Clinique Happy](#) ad with the puppy. You can tell this is a sporty, citrusy, feminine scent and not something with *oud* in it.

STEWART

In your [latest book](#), Sianne, you say a gimmick is something that's somehow working too hard and not hard enough. After writing my book about smell, I can't say that perfume is not working hard enough. It's insane how much effort goes into developing perfumes—and how much money they make. Possibly perfume is working too hard. For you, why is perfume not dismissible as a gimmick?

NGAI

Oh, I don't know. Perfumes can contain gimmicks, sure. Do you know the novel [Clear](#) by Nicola Barker? It consists primarily of people discussing and justifying their aesthetic tastes to one another. All these conversations are catalyzed by the dangling of an enormous gimmick over a public space in London—the illusionist David Blaine starving himself in public in a glass box in 2003. This piece inspired such strong feelings from the British public that it made them newly aware of themselves *as* a public.

There's a conversation about perfume in [Clear](#) in which one character sniffs another and says something along of the lines of, Oh, you're wearing [Comme des Garçons Odeur 53](#). That's a perfume designed to have a space in the middle of it, meaning the middle or heart note is intentionally empty. And then she disparagingly says something like, Of course you bought that. Implying he fell for a cheap Conceptual art move. So, yes, there are definitely gimmicks in perfume.

That makes me think of another book, Teresa Brennan's [The Transmission of Affect](#), where she makes an analogy between affects, feelings, and smells. She's interested in the idea that we can feel other people's feelings before they're conceptualized or named. Feeling tension in a room is similar to smelling it.

STEWART

There *are* emotions [we can smell](#) from each other's bodies: fear, joy, and disgust. And smell also

out? Intelligence is implied in smell.

NGAI

Probably because smell moves across borders. That's why affect theorists like it. It's relational and causes boundary confusions. Is it out there or is it in me? Well, if you're smelling it, it's both.

STEWART

In preparation for today, I wore different perfumes and reflected on them. My questions were different in practice than in theory. I wondered, What am I asking from a perfume as an aesthetic experience? I also considered logistics, like, Am I choosing the right pulse points? Am I putting perfume on at the right time of day? In short, I tried to create aesthetic encounters around perfume with myself, over time.

NGAI

I love that. What's cool about perfumes is that they're narrative, they change over time. My friend [Tina Post](#) uses this metaphor of filters, like on Instagram, to think about aesthetic experiences. A filter can describe how the same perfume smells subtly different on different people. You observe different patterns of decay of one note and the emergence of another.

KORNBLUH

This brings us back to the problem of describing smells. There's the narrative lapse of how they change over time. There's a situatedness of how they wear on different people. And there's the problem of aesthetic vocabulary. If I tell you I'm buying a lipstick-red couch, you probably know what I mean, but we don't have a well-honed cultural sense of describing smells. You're always using other smell words, with narrative, subjective, and even biochemical complications. I don't like jasmine, but you have no fucking idea what I mean when I say that. Do I dislike the top note of jasmine? Do I mean jasmine on *my* body? Jasmine on *your* body?

STEWART

Jasmine has many, many notes but they're unusually well-balanced, as if a perfumer created them. And jasmine does have a fecal decay note. That might be the note you object to, Anna—but it's also the note someone else loves. All the perfumes I didn't like after wearing them seemed too one-note, they didn't make me want to figure them out. For example, this one isn't my favorite but

opening notes of roast beef and parsley, and then it mellows out into an interesting smokiness. [We apply CB Beast and sniff.]

I'm getting a hot-stone thing.

KORNBLUH

The pine is very strong.

NGAI

Yes, it's a medicinal smell. It's menthol and eucalyptus and dried black things, a little scary. Like my grandma's Chinese medicine cabinet.

KORNBLUH

Here's the problem, though. I'm sniffing this and don't dislike it. A beef perfume concept was disgusting to me before I tried it on. But if I had purchased it for that beefy note and then didn't think it smelled like beef, is the defect in me or is it in the commodity? You know, Where's the beef?!

STEWART

That gets back to the question of what you want perfume to do for you.

NGAI

I want to be bold enough to wear a perfume like CB Beast. Not to please to other people, but to smell like, Fuck you.

STEWART

Yeah. I'm intrigued by fuck-you perfumes. At the other extreme, I liked these subtle perfumes that invite someone to come closer. Here are two—[Cyan Nori](#) and [Green Cedar](#), both by Abel Odor.

Green Cedar is resinous. It's very secretive and contained. Nori Cyan smells like the sea—but not in a Jean Naté, fresh, clean, overly simplistic way. It's more like the actual sea, with a little rot and that live, hunger-making quality of ocean air. These scents were like cool techno music, where the

music is so spare it doesn't feel complete. They're roomy. You complete the music, or the fragrance, by moving your body around.

NGAI

I like how wearing perfume extends your personal space. When you encounter dangerous animals in nature, you're often supposed to make yourself bigger. And perfume lets you spread out and become bigger.

STEWART

I like the idea of smelling something to snap yourself into a mood, too. For instance, actors keep smells on hand if they need to cry for a scene.

KORNBLUH

It's a short circuit to intensity again, because the smell process is much faster than the other senses. Smell's rapidity may give us the illusion of power as disguise. But you know, nobody can ever see women. Right? The lady camouflage.

STEWART

Two things fascinated me when thinking about smell beyond perfume. One is how smell makes you aware of air. We're not sitting in a void, we're in a room filled with gasses. Air's existence, its movement, becomes palpable because smells ride on air.

The other thing was how perfume interacts with time. Perfumes unfold over time, but also smell collapses memory. We can visit a historical landscape or even an imagined landscape via smell. You can smell Napoleon's perfume and even **buy** it. Green Cedar reminded me of a small cedar-lined closet we had in my childhood house. It was full of tennis balls and sweaters. That scent has a physicality that's very close.

NGAI

You're suggesting that perfumes also have scale.

STEWART

Air has more dimensionality than we credit to it, and time and space are forms of dimension that are part of smell and perfume. While I've been trying with perfume to articulate an aesthetic experience, just sitting with a sensory experience you can't explain is also a defensible pleasure. We've established that it doesn't matter what those aesthetic preferences are. The pleasure comes in finding that friction.

*Jude Stewart is the author of three books, most recently **Revelations in Air: A Guidebook to Smell**. She has written about design, science, and culture for The Atlantic, the Wall Street Journal, Quartz, The Believer, Fast Company, and many other publications.*

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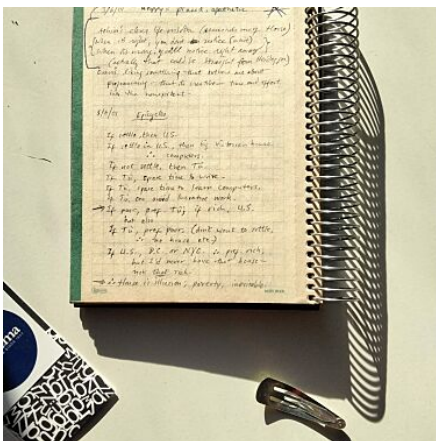
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