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Skank, or the Queer Fascination with Animalic Notes in Contemporary Niche Perfume

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ABSTRACT | *This article looks at the popularity and overt foregrounding of animalic notes in contemporary niche perfume. Although the natural animal notes are rarely used in contemporary perfume and are usually replaced by synthetic aroma chemicals, the idea of them still intrigues. This article proposes the importance of understanding this desire for the animalic in terms of the psychology of disgust, theories of the abject, and a Western history of scatologic art. It examines some of the spaces and places in which the author encounters perfume and the related affects. The article also proposes that the fascination with animalic fragrance also speaks to the ontology of the sense of smell, a fragile ontology that rests on the unreliable narration of memory. The possibility of developing a queer understanding of this subjectively disrupting fascination with the animalic through the lens of postcontinental queer theories is examined.*

KEYWORDS | *perfume, smell, disgust, abject, ontology, animalic, queer*

It is less easy to give a definition concerning the sense of smell and what can be smelt than concerning those we have talked about. For it is not clear what sort of quality odour is, in the way that it was clear what sort of quality sound or colour was. The reason is that our sense of smell is not accurate but worse than many animals. For man smells poorly.—Aristotle, *De Anima*¹

A Whiff of the Monstrous

When rumors that Mother Monster's first fragrance was going to evoke the smells of blood and semen—an olfactory evocation as provocative and vivid as her performance and visual identity—proved to be untrue, and that Mother's—that is, Lady Gaga's—*Fame* (2012; created by Gaga in collaboration with American beauty product firm Coty) turned out to be a perfectly

pleasant but unremarkable Floriental eau de parfum, with the actual notes being of honey, apricot, jasmine sambac, saffron, and orchid, disappointment was one of the major threads on perfume review blogs. Fragrance fans and little monsters were primed and ready for something dirty, unsettling, rank, animalic, dark as the liquid itself.

Popular Abjection

Blood and semen—that is pretty filthy. William Ian Miller, in his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, looks at, among other things, disgust in relation to orifices and bodily wastes. He notes that you do not have to go far into the writings of the Christian West to see semen understood as a pollutant, and in a number of ways. There is the pollution of fertilization. The vagina becomes the site of “rank fecundity and generation”²—swampy, teeming, and moist. And Miller speculates that semen has the fascinating power to feminize whatever it comes into contact with. He notes that “in a sense, semen is more feminizing than the vagina itself. Whatever receives it is made woman.”³ Is this what Mother Monster was after—a very unsubtle pollution and corruption of her fans and anyone else fortunate enough to receive and apply this fragrance? You mean I can spray it on my face?

But we have been here before, and I am sure Gaga knows this. Her Franc Fernandez–designed “meat dress” of 2010 is a very clear citation of Jana Sterbak’s 1987 creation *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*. Pop culturally, Gaga is a clever trendspotter and an avid bricoleur. She has the ability to access and process the edgy and the avant garde, but at the same time she draws them into the mainstream—a loving act of recuperation, but recuperation nonetheless.

His Story, in Affect

You see, there are different pathways that lead toward fragrance appreciation. I come to this inchoate, having always enjoyed fragrance but, like so many, uncertain of the protocols, the rules and etiquette. Bewildered in the duty-free, becalmed between arrival and exit, caught in the middle of the marketing constructions of For Him and For Her, unsettled that these were my only options, I badly needed assistance.

In 2012, I found this help in the form of two books. Denys Beaulieu published *The Perfume Lover*, which frames the social and cultural contexts of perfume within the pathway (and the travails) of developing a fragrance for pioneering niche firm L'Artisan Parfumeur (now lamentably owned by the multinational company Puig).

The second book, written by Tania Sanchez and Luca Turin, is an acerbic, witty, and vicious—but above all passionate—set of perfume reviews called, rather grandly, *Perfume: The A-Z Guide*. It is beyond the scope of this article to review both of these publications other than to note the astonishing and persuasive influence—for better or for worse—of *The A-Z Guide*.

Prospect magazine (in the United Kingdom) offers one of many laudatory citations, as quoted on *The A-Z Guide*'s own website, since archived: “bigoted, snarling, monomaniacal, subjective, triumphalist, and quite magnificent.”⁴ In contrast, I have spoken to a woman who runs a niche fragrance store in Australia who is not able to forgive Turin for his comments about a particular nose (an idiomatic term in perfumery to describe the actual creator of the scent) and for Turin's reviews of her company's first releases, his influence such that this company was (apparently) driven toward bankruptcy. Both books gave me histories, names, something like a canon to work from. They gave me a new place to start and a (borrowed) vocabulary to proceed with.

There is still the vexing issue of *what I can know* with my nose, and so there is something ontologically unstable about fragrance. Smell, as a sense, is intrinsically linked to taste, and so much of the language of smell is shared (charitably) with taste. Our very individual responses to smells—and palette of borrowed metaphoric language—renders knowledge expressed about smell incomplete, diffuse, inarticulate. It does not help that perfume, as perhaps the most complex and sophisticated result of our entanglement with the sense of smell, also comes freighted with a social history, another kind of engagement with taste. Initially unable to know what I was smelling in terms of its credibility or quality and acutely aware of the organizing and normative principles of class, of taste, I fell back on received wisdom and cliché: If it is expensive, it must be good; expense surely connotes the very best ingredients; Made in Paris is my guarantee of quality; celebrity perfume is obviously bad; and so on.

Beyond the duty-free concessions, there are some fragrances that can only be bought from certain, select places—the flagship store in Paris, the isolated atelier in Rimini. As it happens, I became curious about a range of fragrances

issued by Chanel and tellingly called *exclusifs*. Based on perfumes created early in Chanel's career, some incompletely developed or long discontinued, they have been issued more recently to evoke the life and world of Coco Chanel. They are only available through Chanel boutiques and very exclusive outlets. And it is in a Chanel boutique, attended most solicitously by the (inevitably) exquisitely dressed and poised retail staff, that I feel most out of place, most aware of some other realm of society, Eliza Doolittle temporarily abandoned by my Higgins, trying on the aroma of class (although I now have seven Chanel exclusives, and I am learning not to feel so intimidated).

I still breathe too fast in a duty-free store, I rush, get a little febrile. I am thinking of my bags circling endlessly, unclaimed on the luggage carousel; or worse, the bags retrieved, mistakenly snatched, kidnapped by strangers. Yet I know that I am not meant to linger in duty-free. The concession stands are angled like the hairs on the inside of a pitcher plant, so that any way you approach, there is only one way out—going back tears at you. But how can you not linger over smell? Why should I rush the selection of this particular fragrance? All around the world, sitting in cupboards and on dressers, are hastily snatched perfumes, misunderstood, unloved, and barely used. This contributes to, rather than thins, the mystification around perfume, telling us that we cannot trust our noses.

Outside of duty-free, in the city, in the *parfumeurs* and *profumerias*, a different affect takes place. I am encountering fragrance unavailable in airports, in a retail environment more like a salon, frequently even with the appearance of an atelier (in the case of Le Labo outlets). I am learning to calm down, to label the strips, to take the testing strips home, to let the sense memory activate, and to let the fragrance haunt me, during the day, overnight, or even over the course of a year. Again, the idiomatic word for these kinds of fragrances is niche, and that probably deserves a definition.

Niche

That said, a definition is not easy. My personal sense of a niche firm rests on its conceptual sensibility, so rather than being driven by the need to shore up normative gender constructions—For Him or For Her—and sell as many units as possible, a niche house might be imagining a perfume line based around blood types (Blood Concept); ancient empires, perhaps in recognition of the history of the orientalist impulse in the perfume industry (Parfum d'Empire); or the nature and explicit recognition of the fragrance

notes themselves (Le Labo). A niche house might even conceptually reject the Western tradition of alcohol-based formulations in favor of water- and oil-based scents (CB I Hate Perfume).

This is a fraught exercise, however, because many firms that were previously understood as niche have recently been acquired by multinational companies: Le Labo is now owned by Estee Lauder, as is Frederic Malle; L'Artisan Parfumeur, as previously noted, was purchased by the Spanish firm Puig. And although he is considered to have a maverick, niche sensibility, Serge Lutens has long been supported by Shiseido.

This purchasing of previously independent houses (independence being another niche signifier) has been cause for much discussion in print and in fragrance blogs and comment threads. There are very real concerns, in light of previous acquisitions, about the breadth and quality of the perfumes in a line, about reformulations (where a fragrance recipe is retuned with the addition or removal of certain ingredients) to conform to budgets, with the use of cheaper aroma chemicals instead of more costly natural ingredients.

The poster child for this shift in circumstances is the great French house Guerlain, which was founded in 1828 and bought out by Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH) in 1994. This house is now perceived to be seriously compromised in terms of the quality of new releases, the treatment—reformulations and discontinuations—of perfumes understood for generations as classics replaced, it seems, with a slew of unwanted flankers (extensions of existing fragrances sharing something of the DNA of the original).

Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson offers us the opportunity to understand niche as an emergent phenomena, even potentially oppositional to the dominant culture of perfume. But this is problematic if the term is purloined by the marketplace, recuperated in an attempt to suggest radicalism, edginess, rarity. Bluntly, Chanel exclusifs extend the demographic base, but given the history of the firm, it is hard to see them as niche.

Perhaps niche could be understood as a kind of attitude. And if that attitude is truculent, noncompliant, even confrontational at times, I could start to understand niche as queer, especially if we look at the niche as signifying a place, a calling, an action, *un métier*.

That Queer Smell

Another thing I come to perfume understanding with, if you will, is an already keen appreciation of the body of the lover, especially the taste and

smell. It could be said that I come to the idea of the skank, the rank, not from the top down but the bottom up.

Returning briefly to the nature of the ontology of olfaction, in the duty-free perfume hall, if I reject the heteronormative framing of fragrance as For Him/For Her (a rejection that sometimes unsettles the sales custodians), what remains? This is a commercially transgressive act, a refutation of marketing strategies, a rebuttal of perceived understanding of what constitutes a suitable fragrance for him, for me, and in that respect a rebuttal of what constitutes a *him*. There, somewhere between arrival and departure, a small act of rebellion takes place. I could choose to purchase from any part of the store, disregarding the designated territories of gendered fragrance. Or I could reject this particular enterprise entirely: The pickings are slim, and beyond the celebrity endorsements, the fragrances themselves subscribe to banal and ubiquitous formulas, clean and neat, untroublesome.

What remains? Between For Him/For Her lies the queer smell, the transgressive, the abject, the animalic. Embracing the animalic would be to re-embrace a psychosexual developmental stage I was meant to have left behind in childhood—an anal-erotic engagement with the body and its liquids and fragrant matter.

Theorist (and postman) Michael O'Rourke offers me a way forward, in speculating on the possibility of a queer understanding of fragrance, in his writing about the current state of Queer Theory. He proposes that we might consider a contemporary understanding of queer theory—with a lowercase *q* and a lowercase *t*—in terms of Derrida's *l'avenir*, the to-come.⁵ The *l'avenir* is unpredictable, unforeseeable, an arrival that cannot be planned for. O'Rourke asserts that "part of, perhaps all of, the attraction of queer theory is its very undefinability, its provisionality, its openness, and its not-yet-here-ness."⁶

In theoretical terms, this is not a quest for the transcendent but rather a postcontinental embrace of *immanence*, knowledge of the divine and the corrupt found within our lived experience. As far as my interest in fragrance goes, as part of a longer-term inquiry, I seek to connect the historically relegated and ontologically fragile sense of smell through perfume (and in particular the animalic urge) to a reinvigorated queer sensibility, proposing a new way of understanding scent, a queering of the nose.

This, then, is an act of mapping—the outlier sense, with its ability to surprise and destabilize, across a sensibility that is oppositional, that *problematizes* circumstances, and all this through the vector of perfume.

Graphic Solutions

And what a lot niche perfume fans knew was that there was already a fragrance around that was engaging with a set of ideas that Gaga's Fame was only ever rumored to be contemplating.

Skank (You Know You Want To)

However, before we get to that particular juice, it might be useful to briefly look at a contextual definition of *skank*. In perfume terms, its origins are quite specific.

Denyse Beaulieu, in her book *The Perfume Lover*, identifies it as a term originating out of the blog Perfume Posse by the writer March Dodge in 2006.⁷ Dodge was using it as a way to describe the fragrances, preformulation or vintage, of the great French house Guerlain, particularly the foundation accords or base notes from which its fragrances were built, but also a kind of house character or style. Dodge lays it out like this:

Mentally I term it the Guerlain Skank. My guess is that you either love it or loathe it—there probably isn't much room for compromise. Jicky has the Skank. Mitsouko has it. Cuir Beluga and Angelique Noir, lovely as they are, don't have it and are not interesting to me. And let me be brutally clear: the Skank is not gracious, or nice, or even fundamentally pretty. The Skank is about sex, and only sex. It's a rump-grinding, head-shaking invitation to a booty call, no matter how politely the scent's been dressed up at the opening.⁸

There are many notorious perfumes, all the way back to the likes of Guerlain's Mitsouko of 1919 and Schiparelli's Shocking of 1937, that are heresiarchs, breaking with conventions of taste and propriety and messing with your nose. But it should be remembered that the association of certain notes, accords, and perfume genres with a gendered specificity, as masculine or feminine, has changed many times in the last few hundred years. So has the decision about whether or not to wear perfume at all and the particular places and ways to deploy personal scent.

Alain Corbin's *The Foul and the Fragrant* investigates, within the context of our relationship with odor, the waxing and waning of the habits of

perfuming. For example, in France in the mid-nineteenth century, as an issue of good taste, a young girl should not wear—in fact did not need to wear—perfume: “There was absolutely no need to mask, however lightly, the effluvia that emanated from the slender body, the nature of its odor as yet unspoiled by male sperm.”⁹ For older women and men, real perfume was not to be visited on the skin, only the lightest of toilet waters. Yet at other times, and with the influence of a royal court or in response to a state of urban odiferousness, a stronger musk or a sweeter and less discreet floral could be all the rage.⁹ In *The Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, Paul Jellinek made the intriguing discovery that in mainstream perfume brands, it is only the fragrances directed toward women that include the animalic notes of cumin and costas—the narcotic indolic notes.¹⁰

And in contemporary times, there have been notorious perfumes that seem to revel in their skankiness: Serge Lutén’s *Muscs Koublai Khan* (1998), technically a chypre (and as such based on a combination of oak moss, labdanum, patchouli, and bergamot) but understood in comments on the *Fragrantica* website as “fur, flesh, cumin, candlelight, *exertion*” (italics added), as smelling like human sweat, as the point of contact between the leather saddle and the crotch of the unwashed mongol warrior. That is where your nose is! These are just a few comments from the thread on only one website.¹¹

Miller Harris’s *L’air de Rein* (2006) was a fragrance designed especially for actress and singer Jane Birkin, and the name suggests something indeterminate (the air of nothing)—the perfume equivalent of John Cage’s 4:33, a fragrance that offers a window to acknowledge all the other smells in the world. This is all very well, so long as that bag of smells also includes Birkin’s dirty underwear, cats’ bottoms, the pissoirs of Paris—making it essentially an intimate and slightly grubby skin scent.

The list is long and the desire for this juice is immense, some even going so far as to film videos of themselves trying on the perfumes as if they were the yuckiest, foulest, most revolting, most dangerous perfumes imaginable, like a fragrant extreme sport, a dare, a challenge. There is a theatricality to it that I speculate owes a debt to certain subcultural sexual practices, an eroticized engagement with abject fluids, a shifting of the subject through an act of self-pollution. And what I am also suggesting is that the creators of these perfumes know and play to this desire.

Secretions Magnifique

Perhaps it is all about direction, about what you are told to expect. Denyse Beaulieu identifies certain notes, suggesting that from a particular vantage it would not be hard to smell in cumin

sweat. Jasmine, poop. Civet: ditto. Narcissus: horse dung. Mimosa: used nappies. Costus: dirty hair. Blackcurrant bud: cat pee. Honey: public urinals. Grapefruit, BO with a hint of rotten egg (it contains mercaptan, the sulphurous molecule used to scent the odourless natural gas so that we can detect a leak).¹²

And this contemporary fascination with the carnal, the animalic, this embracing of skank reaches a kind of climax (or nadir) in a perfume from niche firm État Libre d'Orange. Playful provocation is part of what État Libre d'Orange does, deliberately undermining your expectations or offering a kind of unsubtle misdirection, suggesting that as we walk in this world, everything has a smell worth considering, that a palette evinced only as rose, as bergamot, fig, and iris, is a fragrance orthodoxy telling only part of the story.

Christopher Brosius, with his lines *CB I Hate Perfume* and the extensive *Demeter Fragrance Library*, explores the smells of the world around us. What of the smell of rain on hot concrete, of newly cut grass, of freshly chopped wood, of clean windows, of the interiors of offices and cupboards, of dirt, of babies and hair (even the smell of New Zealand)? His work asks *Are these smells not worthy of consideration on their own terms?*

Founded by Étienne de Swardt in 2006—with the motto “Le parfum est mort, vive le parfum!”—État Libre d'Orange goes beyond the smells of everyday life into a world of everyday eroticism, with a range celebrating *Fat Electricians*, fancy hotel whores, romance and carrion (*Charogne*), and the end of the world (spent in the arms of Tom of Finland).

But it is the firm's *Secretions Magnifique* that caused a stink. Like something worthy of the Dada project, the notes we are meant to entertain, to imagine, are the smells of blood, saliva, semen, sweat, and maternal milk. These are the designated notes on the site, and on the packaging, reinforced by an image of an ejaculating penis.

And again, thinking of the longer-term aims of this inquiry, I want to offer this as a kind of queering of the palette, and even the act of smelling: so you are encouraged, forced, teased (dragged kicking and screaming) to put your nose into the muck.

Or put another way—and this is something that the fans of Lady Gaga’s Fame perfume and fans of Secretions Magnifique sometimes miss—is that it does not have to have actual blood or semen in the juice *to smell like it does*, if you are given a little push.

Disgust

Nina Strohminger, in a paper from 2014, “Disgust Talked About,” surveys the current state of research and inquiry into the psychology of disgust. Obscure and somewhat snubbed during the 1980s and 1990s, disgust has had something of a turnaround, becoming an academic hot topic. Strohminger sees this as being linked to studies in moral psychology, a field also on the rise.¹³

Disgust, these days, is widely understood as an emotion that functions to help us avoid contamination and disease—as she notes, a kind of behavioral extension of the immune system.

And disgust recognizes ambivalence: the need for food against the possibility of poisoned matter; the need to socialize against the possibility of communicable disease; the value of exploration against the possibility of danger and risk.

Disgust, then, is a gatekeeper emotion “policing the semi-permeable membrane between the self and the treacherous unknown.”¹⁴

Yet there are instances—and here we can even go back to the work of Caravaggio, Bosch, and Goya¹⁵—where we invite disgust: We go to horror movies, we go on the extreme eating trip, consuming the hottest chili, the crispiest cricket, the most hot dogs.

As a way to think about this, Strohminger cites professor of psychology Paul Rozin’s concept of “benign masochism.”¹⁶ Experiences may be unpleasant, but there is no *real* danger, and there is gratification from a certain kind of mastery over a circumstance or environment. What you have, then, is the thrill of a novelty or sensation and curiosity that offers a rewarding kind of knowledge of our immediate surroundings.

Strohminger remarks:

It seems that we watch this paradox play out in culture, where our aversion towards the strange and the odious is balanced with curiosity about these very objects.¹⁷

Is this what *Secretions Magnifique* offers us? The founder of *État Libre d'Orange*, Étienne de Swardt, and the nose behind the fragrance, Antoine Lie, disagree about the intent—Lie did not initially see this as a literal evocation of the smell of semen but rather as being structured around an abstract “adrenaline” accord, an investigation of the internal fluids that provoke desire.¹⁸

As he remarked in an interview with Beaulieu,

the mechanics of internal fluids represent beauty in its purest state. Because in fact, that's what's true. When you feel an emotion, it's triggered inside, hormones circulate, blood pulses, you sweat, you get goose bumps . . . that's what I wanted to express: that what happens inside smells like *that* [italics in the original]. It's not disgusting. It *seems* [italics in the original] disgusting to you, but it's something true: you don't cheat.¹⁹

I have *Secretions Magnifique*. In the complex interplay between smell and taste, I get the smell of the taste of tarnished teaspoons, which is the metallic blood note at play. There is also a kind of marine floral note (the taste of semen, the salty tang of a lover's sweat), but I do not know if I want to smell like the *exertion* of sex, even as the evening's enticements are enhanced through other perfumes, his and mine.

In a literary analogy, I would suggest that if *Secretions Magnifique* were a book, it would be J. G. Ballard's *Crash*. This is not the Ballard of sand dunes, abandoned hotels and empty pools, disconsolate ménage à trois, and the enervations of an austere futurity. *Crash* does something different, honoring a rash promise, the understanding that breaking out of the *Concrete Island* is only possible by embracing, really, the machine, and that the symphorophiliac impulse is the defining theater of our lives.

Although *The Terminal Beach* is my favorite Ballard short story, deploying all of his tropes, with an incandescence, a phototoxicity that is intoxicating,

radiant, *Crash* tugs deeper at the psychogeography of our lives and, like Secretions Magnifique, is unsettling and seriously humpy.

A Little Animal

At this point, it might be worth pointing out that the animalic notes are not new; they have been in fragrance as long as we have been making and using it:

- Musk: Natural musk comes from the dried secretions in a sac in the abdomen of the musk deer and is now mostly replaced with synthetic nitro musks; it was originally developed in the late nineteenth century as an accidental byproduct in the search for new explosives.
- Civet: Civet comes from the anal glands of a nocturnal, cat-like animal.
- Ambergris: This scent comes from a secretion in the intestines of the sperm whale.
- Africa Stone: Africa Stone comes from the fossilized urine of the hyrax.
- Castoreum: Castoreum comes from the castor sacs of the beaver.

As Paul Jellinek notes in *The Psychological Basis of Perfumery*:

Once man had come to recognize the stimulating effect of his own odor, the most obvious way to enhance this odor was by enlisting the help of odorous materials that are in some way reminiscent of it and that could therefore intensify and enhance it. This explains why the odor materials of animal origin, musk, civet and ambra, were among the first odorants used by man in the cultures of antiquity.²⁰

And although many animalic perfume notes are derived from animal sources, the plant world offers up a few delights as well: an array of resins and balsams—in myrrh, styrax, and labdanum, we may encounter the balsamic note of the scalp, something sweaty and pungent. From costus root comes an oil with a sultry odor, akin to rancid fat, and from the jewel

hibiscus we get ambrette seed oil, which has strong sweaty and fatty notes, the plant equivalent of musk.

Stercus: An Ending

Sigmund Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, offered an origin myth that explains why civilization and the order it requires are antithetical to anal eroticism; rising up from our place, from four feet in the dirt to two feet on the ground, fundamentally changes the balance of the senses. Smell is degraded, sight is privileged; the anal becomes repressed with the genital pronounced.²¹

Hal Foster tells us that the rest is history:

With his genitals exposed, man was returned to a sexual frequency that was continuous, not periodic, and he learned shame; and this coming together of sex and shame impelled him to seek a wife, to form a family, to found a civilization, to boldly go where no man had gone before.²²

Foster goes on to note:

It does reveal a normative conception of civilization—not only as a general sublimation of instincts but as a specific reaction against anal eroticism that is also a specific abjection of (male) homosexuality.²²

William Ian Miller, again from his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, laments:

I need not spell out just how contaminating, how disgusting, the anus is. It is the essence of lowness, of untouchability, and so it must be hemmed in with prohibitions. The anus is to be properly only an exit for foodstuffs that first entered via the mouth. Of course it can be penetrated and therein lies the danger. Even those penetrations consented to and not forced lower the status of the person so penetrated.²³

It is not completely clear how much this is Miller's proposition, rattling off a truth-we-hold-to-be-self-evident, a comforting shibboleth, although I prefer to see it as darkly sardonic.

And yet—and yet—

Beyond the familiar (and family) masterplots of Freudian psychoanalysis into a much more contemporary space of inquiry, we must return briefly to the idea of benign masochism, as theorized by Paul Rozin. As already stated, the notes we are talking about have been in perfume forever. You could even make a case that, in a sense, they were the origins of human perfume. They *are* fragrance.

But the interesting thing for me is the way that the notes are actively foregrounded in these more recent and quite conceptually driven houses (with the notion of the conceptual being one of the marker points of niche perfume). Once told, it is hard to go back, to shake off the direction. Luca Turin, in *Perfumes: The A-Z Guide*, is able to understand Secretions Magnifique (to which he gives a coveted five stars) as a huge floral scent, in part because of a “stupendous bilge note,” which he identifies as an organic compound known as nitrile.²⁴ But it is in *exactly* this note that the cum and the blood come slipping through.

In discussing the abject in art, and in particular what he calls the “shit movement” in art, Hal Foster offers divergent paths, framed by the surrealists Andre Breton and Georges Bataille, who both deployed the abject as a way to test sublimation (a mechanism that Freud understood as a signifier of maturity and civilization). Yet they could not agree: Breton, to Bataille, was a

juvenile victim involved in an Oedipal game, an “Icarian pose” assumed less to undo the law than to provoke its punishment: despite his celebration of desire Breton was as committed to sublimation as the next aesthete.²⁵

And Bataille was the “excrement philosopher” refusing to rise above big toes, mere matter, sheer shit. Foster notes that both these impulses can be seen in art in the name of the abject, the Bataillean ideal

adopted by contemporary artists discontent not only with the refinements of sublimation but with the displacements of desire. Is this, then, the option that abject art offers us—Oedipal naughtiness or infantile perversion?²⁶

Naughtiness? Infantile perversion? The resistance to civilization and its blandishments, embracing the low, the primitive, the louche? There is perhaps one more fragrance to discuss.

Created by Alessandro Gualtiere, founder of the niche house Nasomatto (*crazy nose*), a new line of six fragrances has come out under the name Orto Parisi. This line is inspired by his grandfather's garden and is said to reference the planting, fertilization, cultivation, and ultimate harvesting of the material of this garden. In a biographical note on the Orto Parisi website, Gualtiere writes:

The idea rooted from the fact that he, my grandfather Vincenzo, used buckets to collect both his needs that timely ended up fertilizing the garden. . . . To my grandfather Vincenzo Parisi and to those that seize the time experiencing and diffusing the perfume of life.²⁷

Gualtiere extends this notion, a celebration of the frugal and pragmatic approach to fertilization on the part of his grandfather, in his site manifesto:

The parts of the body that carry more smell are those where more soul is collected. The strong smells have become unpleasant to us, because the excess of soul is intolerable to the extent that our innate animalism is repressed and breaking from civilisation.²⁸

Until July 2016, the Orto Parisi line comprised five scents: Bergamusk, Viride, Brutus, Boccanera (*dark mouth*), and one more.

Now, a very important material within the fragrance industry is indole, an organic compound found in orange blossom, jasmine, tuberose, and other flowers; it is crucial to modern perfume. It is the compound that gives these flowers that sweet, sultry, putrid, and intoxicating smell. It has also been identified in human feces. Gualtiere never publishes his notes, but it is very likely that there is an indolic component within his fifth perfume.

The fifth fragrance in Orto Parisi's line is called Stercus.

Which is Latin for shit.

So, it is not difficult to understand Stercus in terms of the abject and in terms of (shit) art.

Coda: Dry Down

As of July 2016, there has been one more fragrance by Alessandro Gualtiere added to his Orto Parisi line. Can you guess what it might be?

It is called Seminalis.

The late queer theorist José Estaban Muñoz wrote, in establishing a queer temporality, a rejection of chrononormativity (the timely order of our lives). He offered an invitation and

a request to stand out of time together, to resist the stultifying temporality and time that is not ours, that is saturated with violence both visceral and emotional, a time that is not queerness. Queerness's time is the time of ecstasy. Ecstasy is queerness's way.²⁹

I have brought together observations about a contemporary fascination with the overtly animalic fragrance, with a way to start thinking about this that might succeed in formulating a quite particular ontology of the broader world of smell. I have remarked that there is a fragility or precariousness to our understanding of smell, about what we can know with our nose, and the nature of that knowledge. This suggests that my wider inquiry, of which this text is just the beginning, need also look at the epistemology of smell. I am not offering a conclusion but rather a place from which to see the way forward, and I turn to the world of perfume to help construct this platform.

Fragrances are built from bases or accords, mini-fragrances in themselves that help establish a new scent. To these accords are added individual ingredients, notes that are in response to some conceptual or thematic concern, that turn or complicate or add accent and drama, shifting a straightforward *cuir* or *fougère* into something scintillating.

There is a perfume pyramid, a structural-temporal way of constructing a fragrance.

If I understand this text as a speculation on the increased and overt celebration of the animalic notes in perfume, in terms of the fragrance pyramid way, this would be the structure.

The top notes are floral, teasing, beguiling, visual. This accord embraces my own visual practice, with an interest in the material and matter of fragrance. Like the top notes of perfume, the scopic is the hook, the first encounter that fades the quickest, opening us up to the heart notes, but although the fleeting nature of the top notes seems to match our current

cultural velocity, in earlier years the top notes were treasured as revelatory and as a signifying mark of quality.

The heart notes speak of the possibility, the necessity of a queer ontology of perfume. The accord here combines and purposes new writings and configurations of queer theory as a way to interrogate the nature of the olfactory. Pulling the sense of smell and queer theory together recognizes the strangeness of the first and the strangers of the latter. Michael O'Rourke sees this as an "opening up to the incalculable strangeness of the future to-come."³⁰

The base notes, to begin with, are happily *base*, grubby, animalic, abject, athwart. And this is where the animalic base notes—musk, civet, ambergris, and others—are traditionally located; they are responsible for the longevity and depth of the fragrance. Certainly, as with Alessandro Gualtiere and his *Stercus* and *Seminalis*, there is a gleeful, infantile, and perverse quality to long-term ruminations on the abject.

But in this accord we must also encounter disgust—of the *base*, the anal erotic—and a queer recuperation of these practices. This is a place of alchemy, of turning shit into gold.

This recipe may require reformulation over time.

Images

These images are from a long-term project called *Fragrant Matter*, an investigation into the material forms of the sites of fragrance in everyday life. These are from a series called *Emollient*, macrophotographs of body wash and other personal bathing and cleansing products.

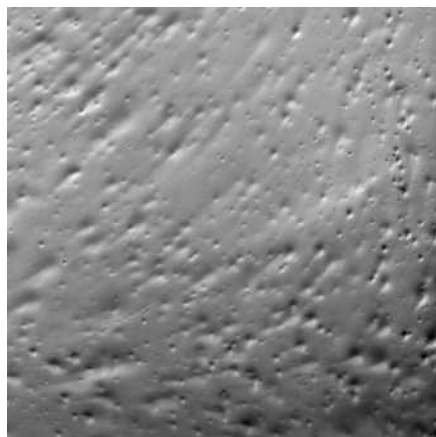


Figure 1 | *Fragrant Matter* Active 1.

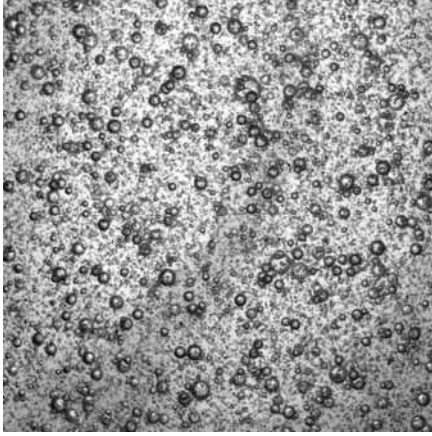


Figure 2 | *Fragrant Matter* Apricot 1.

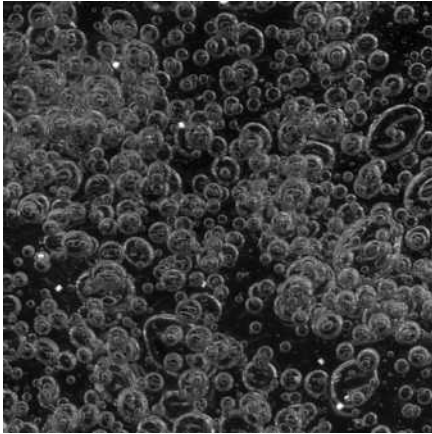


Figure 3 | *Fragrant Matter* Frozen 1.

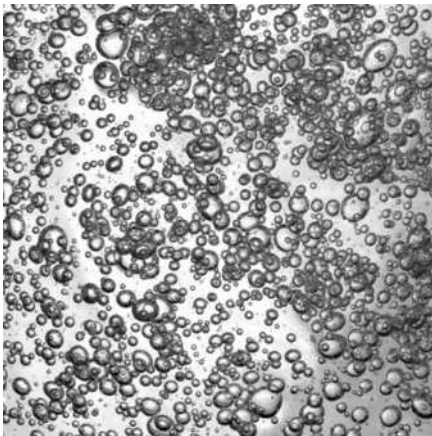


Figure 4 | *Fragrant Matter* Frozen 2.

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NOTES

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