

**Burnt Offerings (Incense)  
Body Odors and the Olfactory Arts in Digital Culture**

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The title "Burnt Offerings" refers to incense or animal sacrifice. The aromas released communicate between the mortal and the divine.. The odor of incense or smoke simulatenously infuses the mortal bodies congregated together, muddling the aura of individually and socially distinctive body odors into one communally shared smell. Smell is, as David Howes pointed out, a marker of transitional states from one category to another, in this case of a materialized to a dematerialized state. What I am going to suggest here today is that our new century is becoming increasingly infused by odors that mark a cultural transition into a digital culture. After brief remarks about whether smell is already "virtual" and why it is so difficult to render digitally, I am going to introduce and discuss smell art by three contemporary artists, Helgard Haug, Clara Ursitti and Jenny Marketou.

Smell is already virtual insofar that it is an immaterial and largely invisible atmosphere that announces a body or an environment. Like the virtual, it is a thing or a world in effect, but not actually. Odors mixed and distributed in the atmosphere are most often apprehended accidentally and subconsciously. However, a odor can suddenly become conscious, evoking a strong sense of another time and place, the so-called "Proustian effect." Trygg Engen explains that "One reason odor memory is so vivid [because] it always involves odors encountered in the environment here and now. It is in fact limited to recognition; we cannot recall odors at will in the absence of such stimulation as we can recall visual or auditory images." Thus smells defy categorization and are discursively silent and easily forgotten until they reoccur.

Since the 18th century in Europe, when body and environmental odors began to be vigorously combated, smell has been the least valued sense--except by isolated individuals and movements that include Charles Fourier, the symbolists and the situationists. Because it is undefinable, formless and continuous, one could say, as Hans Rindisbacher suggests, there is no aesthetics of smell and furthermore, no olfactory art. However, I am going to counter that assertion with examples that show just as odor has become more socially important, distanced and controlled phenomenon in certain spheres of society, odors have emerged more conciously as an art form used to make an aesthetic and cultural statement. Consider how artificial smells have crept well beyond the perfume industry, saturating products and the atmosphere of stores and offices with

artificial odors that are meant to stimulate consumption or spur productivity. Rindisbacher suggests that smell is increasingly more artificial, a thing in Baudrillard's sense that "while undeniably has ties to phenomenological reality, [...] behaves, in the public sphere, as a free and clean simulacrum." For instance, "Quest International, the world's third-largest fragrance company, and the Paris subways system have concocted a sweet, woody-smelling scent know as Madeleine to cloak the smells of tobacco, filth and fumes in the Paris metro. The scent will be mixed with detergent and applied to floors and other surfaces in the metro everytime the soaping machine passes through."

In fact, signs are that the traditional perfume industry is in decline, not only because of overproduction, but because the younger generation has less interest in sweet or floral fragrances associated with elderly ladies than in smells that evoke an environment and suggest a playful and somewhat distanced relation to the body. The palette, organ or database of smells is thus changing in a way that could be compared with the advent of sound art that works with noises rather than music, drawing from an environmental repertoire that includes sounds disappearing in the din of contemporary life. Thus perfumes available on line include such scent lines as "Virtual Cocktail Party," "Virtual Log Cabin," with its scents "Waffle" and "Rain" and the scent "Funeral Home" (mahagony and lily).

Smells are an inevitable and unintentional part of digital culture--consider the data suit which visitors to the exhibits at ISEA Rotterdam donned for teledildonic experiments. A friend of mine tried it on reluctantly after it reeked from the body odor everyone who had used it over the week. Clearly, machines smell too, even though they are symbolically neutral or odorless. I had also always thought of the vacuum of outerspace as odorless too. The distinction between actual odors and the metaphorical smells of good, bad and neutral that define social categories hit me like a revelation when I heard an interview with the astronaut Jerry Linenger, (author of *Off the Planet*) who lived with cosmonauts on the space station MIR for five months. He compared the feel of the shuttle to "going into your grandmother's cellar down in the basement, sort of a moldy smell..."

Flying into MIR, it smell sort of like dirty sweat socks in a guys' locker room. Actual smell of space, though, that's a very interesting question. When we would open a hatch, for example, that was exposed to the vacuum of space, there's always a double hatch, and so you open the one hatch, you now have the pure smell of space. And it's a tough -- you know, any aroma is tough to describe, but it has a distinct smell, and it's sort of a burned-out after the fire, the next morning in your fireplace sort of smell. (on Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*)

So, the universe actually smells like the big bang after several billion years. As Myron Krueger, one of the inspirations for this essay, said in interview, "reality smells, why shouldn't virtual reality?" However, the intentional production of smells to create an artificial or virtual reality or to disseminate in video games or on the web depends on costly machines and processes (one used in

Philadelphia costs \$80,000); identifying its molecular constituents and concocting a smell might cost around \$20,000.) Once the chemical components are isolated, toxic concentrations must be assembled, mixed and diffused. Krueger compared the problems with viscosity to the difficulty ink jet printer manufacturers have in preventing clogs and delivering ink evenly. Once a smell is diffused, there is also the problem of clearing it for the next scent, as well as the problem of spatializing the smells, so that turning one's head results not only in a different point of view but a different odor landscape.

Thus many are sceptical that Digiscents, a firm producing corporate "snortals," and a peripheral designed to store, mix and diffuse scents triggered digitally on the web, in video games and more, will be able to realize its aims easily or soon. The firm's web site is witty, full of puns and rather low humor, but no smells (yet). . Digiscents has developers working on, for instance, the smell of "rotting corpses" for use in video games. One wonders how realistic such a smell could afford to be in a game context. No matter; people easily learn to substitute and take artificial for actual smells.

Now to the revelations of smell art. The artists in question work with actual smells, but their endeavor is involved with contesting or deconstructing the metaphorical smells that define social categories. Engen explains that smells are not perceived just bottom-up in the amygdala, but are simulataneously categorized by cognitive processing in the same organ. Thus actual odors are always immediately also social metaphors. Thus, the "other" as defined by the dominant social group always stinks: for instance, the distinction between marine and pastoral groups, one anthropological study shows, it is the "fish" group, a lower social category that stinks while the socially dominant cattle group considers itself fragrant or deodorized. Within the cattle group, the status of men and boys and women and girls is also divided according to good, bad and neutral not according to any intrinsic quality, but socially.

Helgard Haug: U-deur (Alex/A)

When I went to East Germany to do research in the late 1970's, I remember asking a Putzfrau, can you tell me what it is that smells so strongly? Of course she was offended. What I smelt was brown coal, the primary industrial and household heating fuel; after a few days of my stay, the smell sunk into the background of my consciousness. Since reunification the two German cultures, brown coal is a memory but East and West remain socially divided categories. Helgard Haug, a young performance artist won a prize in support of a Berlin public art piece at the subway station Berlin Alexanderplatz, once the social center of East Berlin. She decided to distill the scent of Berlin Alexanderplatz and put it into little souvenir glass vials or flacons in a dispenser that was set up from June 2000 for one year in the station. She worked with a "nose," from the industrial aroma producing factory H and R in Braunschweig, Karl-Heinz Burk, to produce her "u-deur". He didn't chemically analyze the scent, but designed it

based on his own whiff of the station. One of the primary odors was of bread; interestingly enough, this was already a simulated odor in the station, pumped out by a bread shop that did not itself have a bakery. "U-deur" also included the smell of cleaning agents, oil and electricity. Burk's inclination was to make the smell sweeter or more fragrant than it actually was, while Helgard's struggle was to make the scent less euphoric. The written response Helgard received from the public was remarkable. The little vial was said to have evoked thoughts of smell in general in divided Berlin, for instance, the "dead" stations that West Berlin subway trains went through after the Wall, as well as thoughts about the Stasi smell archive, a collection in canning jars of socks, handkerchiefs and other items saturated with body odor of East German criminals and dissidents.

In fact, every human body has a distinct odor as individual as his or her genes that can be used in surveillance. (Interestingly enough, the entrepreneurs of Digiscents made their money with an informational web site on the human genome.) The blind, deaf and dumb Helen Keller, the most famous "nose," described strong body odors as being linked to "vitality, energy and vigor of mind." She described "the odor of young men" as "something elemental, as of fire, storm and salt sea. It pulates with bouyancy and desire. It suggests all things strong and beautiful and joyous and gives me a sense of physical happiness." personality "smell face"(Synott). Thus we come to the "smell portraits" by the artist Clara Ursitti.

Clara Ursitti: "Bill"

Women in modern Western society also mythically "stink" like fish, supposedly in the genital area in particular. While men definitely have body odors, they are metaphorically neutral or odorless. Thus, the artist Noritoshi Hirakawa could claim . "Men's underwear doesn't have odour..." in an interview with Jim Drobnick about a piece called The Garden of Nirvana that consisted of donated used women's panties on sticks.

As a young art student in Canada influenced by feminist discourse on the body, Clara Ursitti "deconstructed" lipstick by manufacturing her own and coloring it with her own menstrual blood. She found the experience liberating. She then went on to distill her own body odor (or "Eau Clair") in an unstable medium. It was when she joined with professional nose George Dodd, a scientist/perfumer and academic, supported by the Wellcome fund that she was able to undertake sophisticated smell portraits: their first "chemical portrait" was the Sub Club discotheque in Glasgow, the 8th of August 1998. Ursitti then collaborated on self portraits of the smell of her scalp and other body parts. Her other video work includes a commercial advertising a dating service that depends on scent,

sniffed by George Dodd in a creepy manner that evokes the figure of Grenouille in Patrick Susskind's novel, *Perfume* (video Untitled 1995), who makes perfume from the body odors of murdered girls. Rather than combatting her own body odors, Ursitti has adopted a critical, playful, and distanced relation to them as objects for aesthetic appreciation. Her most famous "celebrity portrait" with Dodd is called *Bill*, presented in an otherwise empty room in the wake of the Monica Lewinski scandal.

### Jenny Marketou and Smellbytes

Though Jenny Marketou best known for a digital (albeit smellless) piece, *Smellbytes*, it was preceded by a long period of work with actual smells that includes a Proustian journey to the Greek island of her father's birth to discover the aromatic environment of her ancestors (*As It Happens* 1997) and a *Smell Map* in the Situationist mode that asks visitors to mark colors and smells on a map as they walk around Valencia. *Smellbytes* is an installation and web site with an intelligent agent named *chris.053* who evokes Grenouille of *Perfume*. (clip) *Chris* roams the web sniffing out the images of bodies on CU-C ME chat lines; these body images are captured and instantly categorized into smells and numbers, based on an algorithm for symmetry, (that is, orientation to the camera.) This transformation of "beauty" into body odor is based on the research of the Ludwig Boltzman Institute for Urban Ethology and Human Biology in Vienna, that, (alarmingly reeking of racial and social prejudice,) "determines a direct relationship between the symmetry and harmony of the face and body smells." The smells in *Chris.035's* "stinky gallery" are metaphorical and the cultural work *Smellbytes* performs is not only to raise surveillance on the web to consciousness in a playful demonstration but to suggest the arbitrariness of social categories based on smell.

Each of these artists then has made the "smell of the other" or "of self as other" into her subject in a way that not merely performs odors, but works critically on largely subconscious categories of social subordination and exclusion.

### Abstract submitted:

What is olfactory art in a digital age? Pieces by three contemporary artists who work with odors ask what such olfactory expression teaches us about the body in cyberculture. Widespread assumption about the disembodied and hence clean and odorless nature of digital realms are set in question in the process. Other questions arise including whether smell is already virtual to some degree and whether cyberspace is inherently smelly. Olfactory art is set in the context of shifts in the perfume industry and contemporary initiatives to reationalize, digitize

and distribute smell virtually. [due to time constraints the talk had to leave out the historical context below] Historical studies on the uses of odor in the ancient and premodern world and theoretical concepts such as Benjamin's "aura" and Anzieu's olfactory envelope illuminate the role of odor in relation to the network of associations that compose memory and the imaginary of community.