

SURREAL AROMA'S:

(Re)constructing the volatile heritage of Marcel Duchamp

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No 'visual' artist addressed the sense of smell as often as Marcel Duchamp did. Whereas his solid objects can still be studied visually and textually, the scents he used have by now evaporated, and a vocabulary to describe them is lacking until today. What we have left are nose witness reports and the possibility to smell olfactory reconstructions. Rereading canonical text with a more sensory gaze and inhaling these historical fragrances, such as cedar, erotic perfumes and coffee, will enable us to reconstruct the olfactory dimension of our highly ocularcentric history of art.

Not many classic-modern artists can be linked to smell and volatility as often as Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968). He intentionally added scents and perfumes to most of the international Surrealist exhibitions, which he considered to be Total Works of Art or *Gesamtkunstwerke*. Cedar, coffee, burning hemp rope, and seductive perfumes were experienced by the thousands of visitors of their sensational shows which took place between 1938 and 1959.

In the following paragraphs I will discuss and contextualize three works of art by Duchamp that either conceptually or directly addressed the sense of smell.¹

***Belle Haleine* : The signature smell of Rose Selavy**

In 1921 Man Ray brought a vial of the immensely popular perfume *Un Air Embaumé – Eau de Violette* by Rigaud from New York and gave it to his friend. Duchamp appropriated the bottle altering the color of the glass from peach to green and created a new personalized label. A picture of Duchamp's female alter ego Rose Selavy adorned the top.



Marcel Duchamp: Belle Haleine – Eau de Voilette (1921)

He finally renamed the perfume *Belle Haleine – Eau de Voilette* and a world famous assisted-ready-made saw the light. The title clearly is a pun, referring to both mouth water and the classic beauty Helene of Troy. Interestingly, the wordplay also reveals something about the contemporary (and very ancient) use of perfume as medicine: in the first half of the 20th century eau de cologne's were used as mouth wash for their anti-septic purposes.

Since the word 'Voilette' (which replaced *Violette*) and the picture both refer to veiling or covering, the meaning of the perfume bottle instantly becomes apparent. Interestingly it wasn't an art historian but a literature expert to extensively analyze the importance of the olfactory dimension in this work of art². Our olfactory aura isn't just part of our identity, it can even create (a false) one. It can mask information about health, age and fertility. Body odours are said to be essential for the attraction of partners and successful reproduction³. Since this work is about seduction and sexual arousal, it is clear that Duchamp wants to make us aware of the role of the nose in relation to sexual identity.

International Surrealist Exhibition, Paris 1938

In 1938 André Breton commissioned Duchamp to design an exhibition in the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. With the *International Surrealist Exhibition* the

former Dadaist sought to derange the visitors by addressing all senses, yet frustrating the one sense that is most common in art: sight.



Marcel Duchamp: *Twelve Hundred Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling over a Stove* (Installation view of *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938); source: Arturo Schwarz *The complete works of Marcel Duchamp* (1997), p.408.

The exhibition area was entirely darkened. Leaves and soil on the floor and heavy coal bags hanging from the ceiling blurred steady dichotomies of inside-outside and above- below. Audio recordings of psychiatric patients were transmitted through an environment that was (and still is) commonly known as area of well-behaviour and sophistication, since the museum was typically a place for the upper classes. One aspect was permeating the entire area beyond the reach of the ears and eyes. The smell of coffee was inescapable. Man Ray: "The poet Péret, who had lived in South America, installed a coffee-roasting machine, whose fumes assailed the nostrils of the visitors."⁴.

The olfactory dimension of the exhibition broke conventions and defied expectations. In Paris one would rather expect this smell in a crowded terrace than in the most renowned cultural institution in entire Paris. After all, conditions in a museum are aimed at enhancing visual perception and contemplation, so any circumstance that disturbs this is considered unwelcome.

More than just any coffee, this was the smell of a certain type, as De Beauvoir recalls in her memoirs: "The whole place smelled of Brazilian coffee". In one of his final interviews with Pierre Cabanne, even the not so talkative and secretive Duchamp spontaneously shared his thoughts on the same experience: "Il y a aussi

un détail qui amuse, c'est l'odeur du café. Nous avons, dans un coin, un poêle électrique sur lequel on faisait griller du café. Cela donnait une odeur merveilleuse dans toute la salle et cela faisait partie de l'exposition. C'était surréaliste quand même."⁵ This emphasizes that the smell wasn't just coincidental, but absolutely intentionally diffused, and artistically part of the greater whole. In fact, it made the show even more surreal! But why was this particular scent chosen? Is it a coincidence that 1938 was the year Brasil joined the Surrealist group?

In contemporary olfactory art 'mapping' is one of the most frequently occurring themes. The world renowned artist, chemist and linguist Sissel Tolaas mapped over fifteen cities, linking local odours to designated areas in towns, demonstrating that in spite of its volatility and instability, smell can be connected to fixed locations (although depending on the season and time of the day). When asked for what purpose, she is very clear: we think we base our decisions on what we see and what we hear, although unconsciously smell plays a much bigger role, contains a lot of information and lingers in our memories for much longer. It would be great if people just went to cities and sniffed their way through it (interview, Capetown, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO-MZgd1RNw>). After mapping and reproducing the city-based scents, Tolaas thinks of ways to relocate them to art museums, preferably both visually and olfactorily.

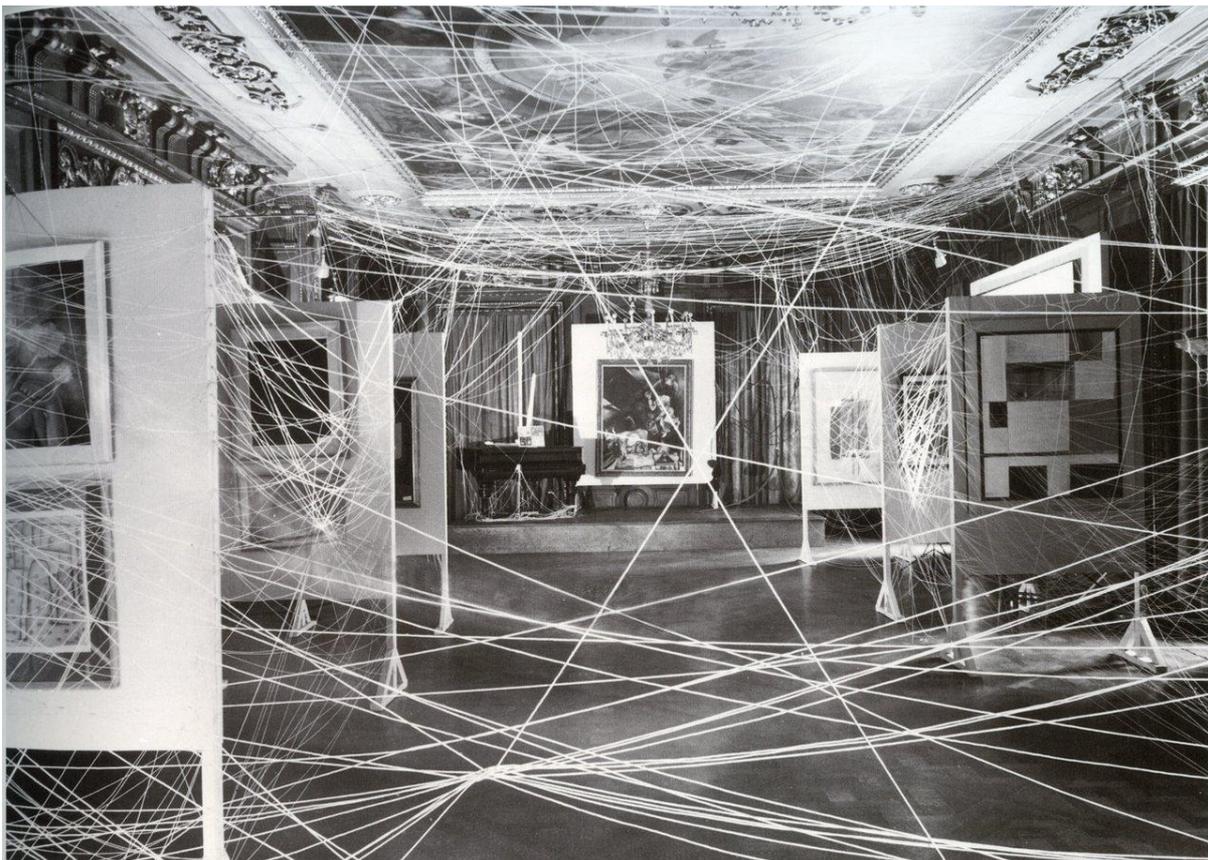
The aroma of Brazilian coffee beans in this multi-sensory exhibition is based on the same principle of recontextualizing location-specific scents. But other than just providing information or creating awareness of the importance of our sense of smell, the Surrealists tried to enhance a sense of 'systematic confusion' and 'essential disorientation' by combining contradictory and surprising sensory information⁶. Whereas some art historians explain the presence of the scent in the line of the dichotomy inside-outside (because coffee was supposedly mostly perceived on terraces), I would like to suggest an addition to this hypothesis. In the thirties (and before and after) the scent of coffee was most intensely and regularly experienced in the cafe, which had several functions at that time. It was the meeting place and substitute home for poor intellectuals and artists, which resided their all day, reading their mail, discussing art and displaying their work⁷. The following olfactory description is of a famous café in another important European town, where Dadaism came to see the light, namely Cafe Voltaire in Zurich: "The principal room... had a glowing coal stove, warm, upholstered seats with a warm musty smell, red plush [...]. This [...]room was crowded and had its own warm smell - special mixture of coffee, mustiness and dense cigarette smoke"⁸.

When Breton and Duchamp organized their first institutionalized show in a major art venue, they olfactorily reproduced and trans-located their common habitat. So even though the exhibition took place in the École des Beaux Arts, it breathed their daily social and artistic environment. The recently developed 'misfit-theory' argues that smells that are unexpected or out of context are more consciously perceived. This might explain why there are several nose witness-reports of this event⁹. It allows us to not just pinpoint the exact smell that was staged, but, to a certain extent, also how it was intended and experienced: essential information for studying volatile heritage.

First Papers of Surrealism, New York 1942: the last nose witness

'Vernissage Consacré aux Enfants Jouant, à l'Odeur du Cèdre'

This sentence was printed on the first page of the catalogue accompanying the 1942 Surrealist exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*. It mentions playing children and the smell of cedar for the opening ceremony of the first Surrealist exhibition across the ocean.



Marcel Duchamp: Sixteen Miles of String (October 1942)

Source: Arturo Schwarz, *The complete works of Marcel Duchamp* (1997), p.411

But there is no proof whatsoever of the presence of a smell and one can only guess why it was selected. Whereas Simone de Beauvoir, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp

himself speak of the smell of coffee (1938) no contemporary art critic, artist, or visitor present ever reported a smell linked to this exhibition or why it was chosen.

During the Second World War many artists had fled Europe in turmoil and left for New York. The title of the exhibition refers to the documents the artists had to arrange in order to make a living on the other side of the Atlantic. In the forties both pencils and paper in the United States were made of cedar wood. It was an important merchandising good. Or could Duchamp have chosen the scents because it reminded him of the many cigar boxes he kept to save both his beloved cigars and his artist books?

What we know for sure is that Breton again asked Duchamp to design an exhibition as an installation with autonomous qualities. Just like in 1938 he tried to frustrate the sense of sight, and to stimulate as many senses as possible, breaking unwritten rules of conditioned and desired behavior. The installation *His Twine*, consisting of hemp rope and stretching through the entire Reid Mansion, partially blocked the view of the paintings, but also forced visitors into gymnastically challenging and embarrassing positions, sometimes having to crawl over the floor belly-down, and by doing this addressing our interoceptive senses of proprioception and kinesthesia. One can only imagine how uncomfortable the ladies in their evening gowns and high heels must have felt. Exactly what Duchamp was after.

Carroll Janis, who was one of the children who took part in the performance announced in the exhibition catalogue, is the last surviving nose-witness of the event. He was the eleven-year-old son of the collector and sponsor Sidney Janis. He was told to gather friends, play ball and not to cease if confronted by grownups. Because he is the last nose-witness alive, I interviewed him in February 2013. He told me he clearly remembered the event, and was happy to talk about it after 70 years. When asked about the presence of any scent, he immediately recalled the 'accident' of a burning string.

Carroll: 'My mother, Harriet Janis, relayed to me Marcel's instructions: "Play ball to your heart's content, but don't talk to anyone". I was delighted to have a chance to throw balls to my friends indoors, in a large mansion, and especially as a performer at an art opening. I understood this was a surrealist event so I dressed myself appropriately – football jersey, baseball pants, and tennis sneakers—my ten year old idea of surrealism.' The following demonstrates that the play took place in an adjacent room, away from the works of art: 'We didn't play ball in the gallery room, as the string was too fragile, so I took my friends into a large neighboring room where we did play'. When I asked him about the cedar, the answer was quite disappointing: 'I don't recall being told anything regarding the "cedar scent" which you say was mentioned on the invitation [...]. I regret I don't remember any special

smell in the room of the string installation, but it could have been there – or perhaps Marcel planned, but never got around to getting the cedar’.

Beside his own, there are several other possible explanations for the fact that Janis doesn’t seem to remember the scent from the catalogue. Olfactory memory – unlike our visual memory – is passive, and incidental. Smell memories, such as described by Marcel Proust, occur when one reencounters a scent from the past, not when we try to imagine a scent from the past. It is much harder to ‘olfactorise’ or recollect a specific scent of ‘lost time’ actively. The ‘misfit-theory’ mentioned earlier could also serve as an elucidation. The smell of cedar was a very common one in houses at that time, because furniture was often made out of this insect-repelling wood. The scent simply might not have defied expectations enough to get noticed. Another possibility is that the scent was already present because it was inherent to the ambient odour of the Reid Mansion (the venue for the show). The walls on the photos show wooden ornaments and structures. In the recent publication ‘The Multisensory Museum’, olfactory art historian Jim Drobnick comments on the question of space-inherent smells in general: ‘Since every space has some kind of scent, to some degree every olfactory artwork has to work with or against such residual odors’¹⁰. This matter may possibly have led Duchamp to include the ‘ready-made-scent’ in his installation.

Exposition Internationale du Surrealism E.R.O.S. : an erotic aroma by Houbigant

The final International Surrealist Exhibition was dedicated to the erotic in art, one of the most important themes within Surrealism. To add to a suitable atmosphere Duchamp constructed a pneumatic breathing ceiling and played recordings of sighing women engaged in the act of love making. The sound and motion of footsteps was softened by a layer of sand on the floor, once again decontextualizing elements one would have expected anywhere else but in a museum, in this case, on a beach and forcing visitors to move in a certain way. In adjacent rooms guests were invited to dine from beautiful naked women, or to at least feast their eyes on other people dining. Robert Rauschenberg created a narrow ‘tunnel of love’, that must have forced those present to involuntarily (or perhaps deliberately) touch each other. There was even an appropriate thermal dimension, as one room in the exhibition was described as ‘warm and comforting’ by an art historian present at the moment. On top of all of this sensual violence one would smell a 1955 perfume by the French classic house of Houbigant¹¹.

Flatterie was known as a so called sex-perfume, for its animalistic heavy ambery base notes and indole-like flowers such as lilies as heart notes. But what

could have been its overall effect and how was the perfume experienced by those present?

One of the last nose-witnesses of this multi-sensory show is the owner of the gallery, Daniel Cordier. But just like Carroll Janis this elusive cultural figure, by now in his nineties, answered me that he was very sorry but he didn't remember any smell or diffusing system. So the original impact on the public will perhaps always remain a mystery.

Fortunately, even though aroma is as volatile and ephemeral as the molecules it is built from, it is still possible to inhale the fragrance of some historical perfumes. Which can truly give us deeper understanding of the choices made by Marcel Duchamp. Only those who have smelt its almost solid exhalations, can possibly understand its very outspoken character.

That is why, during the exhibition *Something in the Air – Scent in Art* (dd. (dd. 22/03 - 02/08/2015), at Villa Rot, visitors were able to smell an olfactory reconstruction of *Flatterie*, alongside the perfume that was once contained by the bottle used by Duchamp for *Belle Haleine* and the smell of cedar, allegedly present at the 1942 event. The exhibited scents were presented as containing historical, non-linguistic, non-intellectual information. It is extremely difficult for Western people to analyze or describe scents, or put them in a chronological frame work, the way they easily can when it comes to a visual work of art. Nonetheless, because the 'audience' (perhaps 'odience' would be a better word?) was able to compare the perfumes and odours to contemporary and older compositions, the scents on display did yield some historical notion of the evolution within perfumery, from soft and floral, to almost obscene and 'loud', like *Flatterie*. Of course the associations have changed over the course of time. Once considered modern, most contemporary perceivers would immediately think of their grandmothers and consequently consider it oldfashioned. Many museumgoers even shied away for its intense quality.

Inhaling history of art?

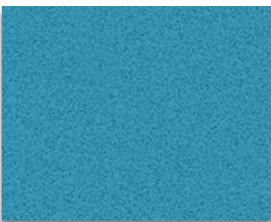
Because of its intimate character inhaling historical scents is known to evoke strong historical sensations. Yet we should always remain aware of the changed context in which we perceive odors from the past as historiographer Mark Smith argues in his famous article on sensory reconstructions¹². Smelling a scent from the past, doesn't mean we undergo the same sensation as the contemporary perceiver. The exact same scents, or in our case replica's, might evoke different memories and associations in new generations and different cultures, as we saw in the previous example. Therefore the odors in the historicizing exhibition *Something in the Air*,

were accompanied by photographs and textual explanations in order to better understand their cultural historical context

Photos, even though only two-dimensional and conveying only one sensory dimension, are rarely questioned as means of documentation of the past. They do not just document, but even shape collective (visual) memory. In the same way, musical scores allow historians, and a wider interested audience, to listen to Bach and Wagner.

There is still a long way to go when it comes to studying and presenting historical smells though. When technology and new ways of registration and documentation allow us to conserve and reproduce smells that once played essential roles in artworks, nothing stands in our way of using our noses to create a more profound insight and understanding of why they were used and what the intention of the artist could have been. (Re)constructing volatile heritage could ideally become part of academic methodology and be implemented for educational purposes, just like images in books and in PowerPoint presentations. The aromatic pages of olfactory history of art may one day transcend its scented aura of electronics, ink and paper.

PLEASE SNIFF HERE



Notes

1. For more elaborate case studies, one could read: Caro Verbeek, 'Air de Marcel', in: *Es liegt was in der Luft - Duft in der Kunst/ Something in the Air - Scent in Art*, exh. cat. Villa Rot, Burgrieden, 2015, pp. 24-41.
2. Richard Howard Stamelman, *Perfume: Joy, Obsession, Scandal, Sin: a Cultural History of Fragrance from 1750 to the Present*, New York, 2006, p. 196-97.
3. Tim Jacob, 'The Science of Taste and Smell', in: *Art & the Senses*, New York, 2011, pp. 194-95.
4. Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous – Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali and Surrealist Exhibition Installations*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 68.
5. Pierre Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*, Paris, 1967, p. 102.
6. Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous – Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali and Surrealist Exhibition Installations*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 69.
7. John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, New York, 1973, p. 197.
8. Chris Jenks, *Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, New York, 2004, p. 381.

9. 'Odors are not there to be named or identified, but to silently link us to the world and to our history of lived situations. When identified, odors lose this function. Most odors that fit our expectations remain unnoticed. Misfits are noted. Although it is also important, intentional smelling and the pleasures and displeasures it may provide is disproportionately overrepresented in olfactory research compared to its role in daily life.' From: E.P. Köster, P. Møller, J. Mojet, 'A "Misfit" Theory of Spontaneous Conscious Odor Perception (MITSCOP): reflections on the role and function of odor memory in everyday life', *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014), pp. 1-12.
10. Jim Drobnick, 'The Museum as Smellscape', in: *The Multisensory Museum*, Lanham, 2014, p. 192.
11. Richard Howard Stamelman, p. 215.
12. Mark Smith, , 'Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History'. *Journal of Social History* 40 (2007), pp. 841-858.