

# Atmospheres, Art, and Aesthetics: A Conversation

Brian Goeltzenleuchter – Elena Mancioppi

Initially conceived as an interview with the hybrid media artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter, this text gradually took the form of a conversation on various issues regarding olfactory art and the aesthetic significance of smell. Framing the artistic uses of odours in the context of contemporary art, the paper discloses some of its foundational traits, variations, and underlying impulses. By commenting on Goeltzenleuchter's olfactory artworks through a philosophical perspective, this contribution covers a number of subjects including the notion of atmosphere, the socio-cultural values and narratives conveyed by scents, the suggestive relationship between spaces and aromas, and the phenomenology of smells as compared to the experience of sounds. Consistent with how smell perception unfolds, the dialogue flows in a form that is not rigidly structured but airy, ephemeral, and fluid, developing a sequence of insights whose aim is, rather than scrutinising a specific topic, to evoke the essence of olfactory poetics as a whole. | *Keywords: Olfactory Art, Atmospheres, Osmospheres, Aesthetics of Smell, Contemporary Art*

*Elena Mancioppi*:<sup>1</sup> In April 1940, Albert Camus (1963, p. 179) entered in his *Notebooks* a short note which is, I believe, an interesting starting point for our conversation. It reads: “I am an olfactive type. And there is no art that addresses itself to the sense of smell. Only life.” We do not know who this olfactive person is, whether the writer himself or not. But we know that, as early as 1940, explicit attention to smell as an artistic medium was emerging, although it was an aside if compared to the role played by the other senses. Not to mention the explicit exclusion of smell from the aesthetic realms which has dominated Western thought until recently. Today, we even talk of ‘olfactory art.’ Does your artistic practice respond to the urgency of bridging the gap between art and life in the olfactory sphere?

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*Brian Goeltzenleuchter:*<sup>2</sup> It does, though I am a bit dubious of associating urgency with the arts. I've often quipped that *if someone is drowning, you're not going to throw them a painting*. My sensibility owes a lot to Allan Kaprow, whose idiosyncratic reading of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* deeply affected contemporary art since the late-1950s. The idea that the art culture of the industrial West had been so marginalised from its roots in human experience signalled to me that bridging this gap would be a slow, multi-faceted project – one which required 'buy-in' from constituents outside of the art world. It is even slower when it comes to the olfactory sphere, due in part to the West's long-standing prejudice toward the sense of smell.

*Elena Mancioffi:* The fact that you studied under Allan Kaprow and that you are one of the most influential olfactory (but not only) artists suggests that your artistic education was not exactly conservative.

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter:* It's worth noting that due to the progressive nature of my art education, I was never discouraged from working with smell as an art material. I went to the University of California San Diego at a time when the Department of Visual Arts appeared to be only nominally interested in 'visual' art. For instance, Jerome Rothenberg was writing, performing, and translating in the domain of ethnopoetics. David Antin was doing improvised talk poems and teaching his infamous course, *The Structure of Art*. Lev Manovich was theorising new media and introducing people to artists working in this domain. And, of course, Allan Kaprow was a mythic figure whose ideas about blurring the boundaries of art and life permeated a lot of the curriculum. This was the education I inherited as a 19-year-old kid. The first artwork I made using olfactory components was a sculpture dating back to 1996. Even though I was still a teenager, it foreshadowed much of the work that I do today. It involved haptics, temperature, olfaction, sound, and vision. It sounds Wagnerian, but the sculpture was submissive in scale – not much bigger than a laptop.

In my early twenties I started using smell to complicate the discourse surrounding the dematerialised art object. At the time I thought of myself as a post-conceptual artist, so I was making work that looked at the legacies of Conceptual Art and Institutional Critique. I thought that perfume notwithstanding, smells – these volatile molecules – challenged commoditisation, collection, and archiving. Smells started to raise questions about art historical olfactory antecedents whose work may have escaped the historical record, which to me further trivialised the visuality in visual art.

Although I consistently used smell as a component in my art, in all honesty I didn't think about the label 'olfactory art' until 2006, which is when I was developing my first European solo show, *Institutional Wellbeing*. The entire

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premise of that project revolved around a smell that I designed, so it finally dawned on me to do some research into whether other people were taking smell seriously. I came across *The Smell Culture Reader* (Drobnick, 2006), and was introduced to the work of Clara Ursitti, Gayil Nalls, and Sissel Tolaas. It's astonishing to think ten years passed before I noticed that other artists were working in this domain, or that such a domain existed in the first place. I guess it says something about how marginalised the field was back then.

*Elena Mancioppi:* Indeed, artistic experimentation with smells, and not just perfumes, has reached its zenith from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Within this framework, Arte Povera, Land Art, Fluxus, Happenings, Junk Art, Performance Art, Body Art and Eat Art are among the most prolific movements or groups, before 'olfactory art' was formalised into a specific, although rather fluid, branch. As artistic movements driven by an innovative or openly subversive spirit, their appeal and attention to odours are fully consistent not only with their underlying intents, but also with their tools, materials and *modus operandi*. In a way, the use of smells encourages us to rethink the traditional idea of the work of art, which transforms from a solid and stable object to an in-flux 'becoming.' Does your art fit into this frame?

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter:* Yes, my work is indebted to so many of these artists. In a way they were like overly permissive parents, which is to say that while I shared their experimental spirit, I had to make my own way because the world I inhabited was a much different place; so I worked through their legacies and I reflected a lot on the conditions – social, political, economic, technological, and otherwise – that influenced artistic production. In the post-WWII milieu, there was a strong existential bent that, as you say, drove experiments of an openly subversive spirit. I was fascinated by this, and it helped me to understand the role of the artist in society, the artist's relationship to personal expression, and the role of scent in contemporary art practice.

For instance, take three very disparate artworks, each of which had an impact on me: Piero Manzoni's *Fiato d'artista* (1960), Hermann Nitsch's *4<sup>th</sup> Action* (1963), and Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975). In spite of their differences in intent, methods, and expression, all use smell in a way that I find indicative of a lot of work from the post-war experimental era, which is to say that smell functioned as an index of an action as performed by the artist. The artworks' implied smells were indexical, if ephemeral, outcomes of an action or series of actions that were themselves the primary aesthetic object. At least it seems obvious to me that all three artworks have been sufficiently archived and continue to be well understood in spite of the fact that their olfactory components have long since dissipated. I wanted to know if smell could be *the primary object*, however in flux it might be. *Could the absence of smell derail the archiving and understanding of the entire work?* And I also had what you might call an 'allergic reaction' to the idea of my art practice relating in any way to personal expression. *Could an artist work with smell without reverting to self-expression?* Hence, my focus on the socio-aesthetic dimensions of olfactory space with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the

materiality and temporality of scent molecules. Left to their own devices, smells do not respect boundaries, which makes them a subversive artistic medium. Due to their invisibility, they can have arresting perceptual effects that can be equally visceral – albeit for different reasons – to those 20<sup>th</sup>-century antecedents you mentioned.

Elena, one of the things that fascinates me about your work in the philosophy of smell is that it seeks to reclaim or reconcile the olfactive's place in several branches of philosophy. And yet, in doing so your research ventures into other fields of knowledge, which seem quite willing to entertain and absorb it. If you agree with any of this, I wonder what you think are the reasons for the relatively sudden popularity of the olfactive as a perceptual modality?

*Elena Mancioppi:* Answering this question first requires a distinction that might seem trivial. The popularity that smell enjoys today is, I would say, a *thematic* popularity, in the sense that, at its *operative* level, it has never played a secondary role in human perception and social life. With respect to philosophy, social sciences, and humanities in general, I find parallels with what some have called the 'affective turn' and its emphasis put on relationships and encounters – not only in emotional terms – rather than on the different entities of the world that are assumed to be distinguishable, measurable, or separate. In fact, from Plato to Kant and beyond, many have noted the multifaceted affectivity of smell from multiple perspectives. All this appears to be connected, on the one hand, to a more ecological, relational, and holistic idea of both the environment and perception (and even of science) and, on the other hand, to a greater academic inclusiveness toward the everyday and the mundane.

Such a thing has also happened with respect to food and, to a certain extent, to the body. Notably, the former has entered the philosophical and cultural disciplines only since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet has always been acknowledged as fundamental in that it is necessary for life and thought. Almost paradoxically, this importance emerges even more strikingly when we consider the thinkers who, throughout history, have warned against overindulging and talking about it too much: they are telling us that food is so influential that it can guide the search for truth or prevent it. The same, in my view, applies to smell. I would also add that olfactory perception, regardless of the nature of its stimuli, seems inherently rooted in food and in the idea of eating, also metaphorically speaking, as it implies the intimate ingestion of an alterity, the resulting risks for the 'identity' as something rigid, and the ongoing blurring of the boundaries between elements and dualisms well established in Western thought.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is because of such a 'mingling' nature that smell embodies the sense of the 'digital age' we are dwelling in. As Michel Serres describes it, the current era is a fluid space-time where knowledge is dematerialised and reorganised, and its transmission as well as

<sup>3</sup> This does not deny the significance of smell, as many scholars have pointed out, with respect to other domains and aspects of life such as, just to name a few, sexuality, death, and intimacy in general. Indeed, I think it is precisely the mechanism just mentioned that makes it so relevant, taking in these cases a figurative form.

fruition takes on new, less rigid, and more airy forms, all being followed – or caused – by new patterns of relationship, contamination, and negotiation. Accordingly, an inquiry on smell in a way requires, rather than an inter-disciplinarity, a sort of *in-discipline*, as anthropologist Tim Ingold would put it.

With respect to contemporary art, I think the use of smell has much to do with the concept of experience as something always situational and evenemential. However, since you have mentioned Dewey and the issue of the first-person narrative, I would like to know whether you agree with him when he observes that “[t]he artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works” (Dewey, 1980, p. 48). In a particularly interesting work of yours, *Scents of Exile*, you create an olfactory reproduction of the odour-related idea of home of the people you interviewed. This artwork is somehow based on your reflected, language-mediated interpretation of the direct, affective, sensuous, and preverbal experience of others’ memories connected to odours, which in turn are going to be perceived by still different people. Paraphrasing what you said earlier, one might ask: *would the absence of the referent derail the understanding of the entire work?*

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter:* Yes, in the case of *Scents of Exile*, I think it would. As Alfred Gell (1977, p. 29) put it, “the incompleteness, the disembodiedness of smells [...] makes them the model for the ideal which hovers on the edge of actualisation.” In this sense, smells are atmospheric: considered alone they produce feelings, moods, affects, etc., but not many thoughts, due to their distance from language, metaphorical and conceptual processes. An artist often needs to direct the context in which the perceived smells are understood. I appreciate how you described artists ‘using’ smells because even if an artist transmits a smell in an empty gallery space, the space itself – its volume, ambient temperature, and airflow – as well as the apparatus transmitting the smell affect the way smell is perceived and ultimately understood. This is the crux of Drobnick’s (2015) argument that olfactory art is in fact a hybrid, multi-sensorial art form.

But your initial question about my working methods vis-à-vis Dewey’s meditation on experience is even more intriguing to me because it intersects with something I think about a lot, which is the relationship between the production and reception of an artwork. Although some of Dewey’s examples are dated, his general empathy toward both the art maker and the art experiencer is quite fresh. While every artist’s working methods are different, it stands to reason that any artist who produces art for public reception thinks in some way about how that art will be perceived.

By way of example, I conceived of *Scents of Exile* in 2014, at the request of Ashraf Osman, a curator who was organising a transnational olfactory art exhibition of the same name. His title started me thinking about how scent memories of home might feel to refugees and other immigrants who, for whatever reason, could no longer go home. Completely separate from this, I began noticing a trend in American popular culture, which had to do with the unselfconscious way that people applied hand sanitiser in public space.

All these hand sanitising units seemed to have suddenly appeared everywhere I went. I was frustrated by their ubiquity and curious about the multi-billion-dollar industry that profited from people's fear of bacteria. It occurred that these banal hand sanitising dispensers could become the site for an artwork. I loved the perversity of this idea: such a marginal object could become both the provisional centre and the apparatus transmitting the olfactory aesthetic experience. But then Osman cancelled the exhibition and I got busy with other projects, so I stopped thinking about *Scents of Exile*.

Five years later I was artist-in-residence at a sculpture centre in New York, when I met staff members of a neighbouring refugee centre who were willing to explore the idea with me. I started interviewing refugees and other immigrants, translating their scent memories of home into fragrances that were then embedded in hand sanitiser. I distilled the interviews into a narrative printed in poster form and displayed above each hand sanitising unit. All the while I was, in Dewey's terms, "embodying the attitude of the perceiver." Every visual element of *Scents of Exile* was designed to normalise or encourage the unselfconscious state of pattern recognition that defined so many people's relationship to consuming hand sanitiser. That way, there would be no turning back; once they smelled something strange on their hands, they had to retrace their steps to find out more about what it was. I say this to circle back on the Gell quotation: expose people to a disembodied smell and then make it possible for them to actualise it by coming to terms with the intimate experience they just stumbled upon. Little did I know that a few weeks later the world would be engulfed by the COVID19 pandemic and the entire project would take on new meaning.

*Elena Mancioppi*: The way the idea of *Scents of Exile* came to be is as interesting as, I think, understanding how the dynamics of a peculiar historical period have changed its very sense and, perhaps, even our relationship with the olfactory dimension of life. Indeed, the COVID19 pandemic has noticeably revealed the deep repercussions of olfactory malfunctioning and, in general, the significance of odours. Among other things, we can think of the sense of anxiety triggered by smelling others, which entailed the risk of viral transmission, something reminiscent of the old connection between olfactory dimension and contagion as in the long-lived miasma theory.

As it is widely known, the most common symptoms of COVID19 concern smell dysfunctions – namely anosmia (smell blindness), and parosmia (smell distortion) – that can even become permanent. Both are usually accompanied by various disorders such as apathy, paranoia, eating disorders, and severe types of depression that can even lead to nothing short of suicide. The loss of smell is coupled with a feeling of loneliness, of disinterest in and disengagement from everything; the relationships with the world get loose and life sheds, as Oliver Sacks (1987, p. 159) put it, "a good deal of its savour [...] as a rich unconscious background to everything else." Do you think the pandemic has changed the way people treat their sense of smell contributing to an awareness toward it? Do you feel that your art has somehow benefited from such a situation?

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter:* I'm hesitant to speculate about how COVID19 affected the way people treat their sense of smell. I can't think of anything more involuntary than breathing. So it is a big deal for a culture to be anxious about that. What makes it worse is that when people are anxious they are told to *breathe deeply* to calm down! That said, for all the anxiety triggered by the fear of smelling others, I wonder if an even greater number of people experienced the converse sort of anxiety that was triggered by the absence of the smell of others, or of foreign smells in general; it's just that the latter form of anxiety did not fit the broader cultural narrative rooted in compliance through fear-mongering.

Life expectancy in the U.S. has been on the decline for nearly a decade due to 'deaths of despair' – suicide, drug and alcohol overdose, and liver failure. The pandemic exacerbated that. I imagine that most of us experienced a pivotal event during the pandemic that caused us to, at least temporarily, question the ubiquity surrounding the 'fear-of-breathing' narrative. For me, it was learning about a student – a beautifully creative, humble, and generous young man – who, six months into the pandemic, wandered into one of California's hottest deserts with scarcely a bottle of water and hiked until he collapsed, and then died of dehydration. I immediately thought of him when I read the above quote by Sacks.

This young man was my student the year before COVID19 shut down universities, and he was my student again when all instruction was online. I think he represented a great number of people who were not prepared for the temporal and sensorial changes that came with self-quarantining. Our relation to time is mediated by the technical means through which time is experienced. Anyone who has suffered from 'Zoom fatigue' knows this very well. So when our interactions became mediated by a few digital platforms our sensorium greatly diminished. What the restriction of smell did to each person individually is hard to say. I'm not even sure the extent to which most people were even aware of it. But I look forward to your latest book, *Osmospheres* (Mancioppi, 2023), because I believe this idea of the 'osmosphere' – the olfactory aura that bestows a vague but undeniable sense of authenticity to people, places, and things – is so key to living well.

*Elena Mancioppi:* I quite agree with you, and I find it really that, when trying to understand the general mood of a community, the perspective adopted can start from assumptions that may sometimes even deny grasping its very peculiar aspects and reasons.

As William James (1981, p. 243) claimed, "the feeling of an absence is *toto caelo* different from the absence of a feeling." This is very relevant (and I think also philosophically promising), especially if we try to understand olfaction not so much as a passive and chemical sensory channel, but rather as a self-tuning system, a general affective colouring of perceiving and dwelling in the world. This is what I have tried to do in *Osmospheres* by disclosing some connections with the notion of 'atmosphere' through the case of food. The intent of this book is neither to celebrate smell as *the* sense of atmospheres nor to prove that

smells are the most atmospheric stimuli. Instead, I want to probe the hypothesis that atmospheric perception is a mode of feeling comparable to an 'olfactive' modality. Hence, the term *osmosphere*: from *ὄσμη*, "smell, odour," and *σφαῖρα*, "sphere, globe;" osmospheres indicate those irradiances which provide anything (persons, commodities, situations, places, etc.) with a vague, all-encompassing, and unique *flavour*.

It comes as no surprise that, for instance, a "city without smell is like a person without character," as Gernot Böhme (1998, p. 51) claimed; however, just as a person without character has a character, namely that of having no character, in the same way an odourless city has its own osmosphere. In other words, olfactory absence is a *deeply affective presence*. Even if not extensively scrutinised – maybe due to our deodorised/deodorising cultural ideal? –, the same transpires by considering the pandemic, specifically when lockdown measures were enforced: the absence of familiar smells conveyed the atmospheric tension of the period. Interestingly enough, it appears that sales of intense personal perfumes increased during that period, perhaps to replace, so to say, the 'felt absent presence' of others.

Olfaction can thus provide a sense of life: smell has been described as that quality of an environment which "most intensely allows us to sense through our disposition (*Befinden*) where we are" (Böhme, 2017, p. 125). Osmospheres can therefore be taken as telltales of the way we live and feel, and here we come to the issue of *living well*. Osmospheres show, we could say, *the way we live how we are feeling*, as well as *the way we feel how we are living*. Again, Böhme provides a fitting example of this. In Darmstadt, where he spent many years, people used to complain about a bad smell lingering in the air. As the city was the headquarters of a big pharmaceutical company, scientists carried out some research, eventually establishing the absence of any chemical substance in the air. Nevertheless, the problem persisted: "the inhabitants of Darmstadt 'did not feel well'" (Böhme, 2017, p. 1). A hovering sense of disquiet took on osmospheric qualities. Osmospheres manifest therefore *the way we feel/live* and, as such, they gravitate towards social aesthetics. This proves particularly useful today, in that 'sensescapescapes' are often the aesthetic outcomes of economic disparities, ghettoisation, and social frictions. More specifically, osmospheres can shed light on environmental injustice, marginalisation, racism, classism, and the narratives around them, becoming a fertile field to develop new ethics and politics. In this respect, I think some of your works are worth mentioning, such as *Sillage* and *The Olfactory Present: By Means of Smoke*.

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter*: Although I've never thought about it so succinctly, I respond to this idea: "Osmospheres show *the way we live how we are feeling*, as well as *the way we feel how we are living*." That is precisely why my work takes a relational or dialogical form, which I think is roughly equivalent to what you refer to as *social aesthetics*.

*Sillage* has been launched at three urban art museums over the years. Each instantiation involves the museum launching a formal survey in which



museum patrons verbally describe what they think their city smells like, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. I take the museum's survey data and try to consolidate it into what you might call an 'osmospheric narrative.' These narratives function as you described above; in an effort to articulate the aesthetic qualities of a scent-scape, the respondents inadvertently comment on injustice, racism, and classism. I use the narratives to inform the design of synthetic versions of neighbourhood smells. I compose the smells at perfume-level concentration. This privileges temporal flexibility, allowing each component of a scent composition to predictably evaporate, thus conveying the olfactory equivalent of the respondents' osmospheric narrative. For instance, when *Sillage* launched in Los Angeles, the narrative description of that city's wealthiest neighbourhood was, "wet lawn gives way to dry air, which gives way to the clean sweat of a trophy wife." I designed a dewy, green smell, using aroma chemicals that, within minutes, evaporated into a classic ozonic perfume accord. Using a heavy dose of an aroma chemical called norlimbanol gave the smell of the air a dryness that actually outlasted the ozonic smell. Hours after the rest of the perfume evaporated, the smell of the remaining norlimbanol took on the clean, dry, amber smell of a woman's armpit.

I mention this because the aesthetic function of the scents provoked wonder in many participants. But I wanted to redirect that wonder into a relational domain. So I introduced a key element to the project, which was a rule: the only way participants can smell neighbourhoods other than their own is to introduce themselves to other patrons and ask if they can smell them. This intimate and often humorous introduction breaks down barriers and allows for frank dialogue to take place. Apparently, the olfactory aura of the osmosphere wasn't so vague that participants were at a loss for what to talk about. Dialogues that began in an aesthetic domain often morphed into political, social, and economic ones. The project took the form of what I call an 'olfactory counter-monument' (Goeltzenleuchter, 2021), a materially volatile, physically unimposing event that uses its ephemeral nature to provoke public memory.

The *Olfactory Present: By Means of Smoke* built on this idea by working *in situ*, dealing in real time with the actual smells that make up the osmosphere. The idea for it came to me as I was walking through this park in San Diego that is flanked on two sides by low-income apartments. The residents of the apartments often have to deal with the smells of their neighbours' cooking. Since many of the residents are immigrants, the smells are diverse and can be quite exotic – even irritating – to others. I had been thinking about the spatiality of smell in these tight domestic settings as I walked through the park, where, at the time, members of many of these communities were grilling food for outdoor picnics. As I breathed, I could smell overlapping cuisines from the various picnics. It made me think of my longstanding research into what I call 'The Olfactory Present': in *that* moment, in *that* space, cultural migration and atmospheric migration brought together a mixture of olfactory traditions, which shook me, and presumably others, awake to the similarities and differences in which cultures experience the present.

With funding from the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, I began a one-year sensory ethnography of home cooking. Through extensive interviews with four home cooks, I researched how knowledge is conveyed through food. The project took the form of a series of ethnographic interviews, a cooking school, four large-scale watercolour paintings, and a forthcoming cookbook. At the *By Means of Smoke Cooking School*, students learned recipes and foodways from members of Eritrean, Filipino, Iraqi, and Mexican communities. The stories told and the recipes shared informed a series of foodways watercolour paintings which begin to articulate the efforts taken by immigrant cultures to maintain culinary traditions in their new environment. Broadly speaking, the project was about how knowledge is conveyed through food, and how recipes are a sort of Duchampian assisted-readymade waiting to be brought into being by the home-cook, who cannot help but hybridise the recipe, renewing its contemporaneity.

*Elena Mancioppi*: Thus, as *The Olfactory Present: By Means of Smoke* suggests, the various problems arising from multi-ethnic co-existence can turn into aesthetic and socio-political potential, as well as sources of artistic inspiration. Specifically, they foster reflection on the value attributed to food and spaces, where perceptual qualities become the bearer of ethical instances and racial prejudices clearly conveyed by the verbal expressions used to describe them. This is somehow even more apparent in *Sillage*, which shows the latent but stubborn olfactory fragmentation operating between the neighbourhoods of a city, where the aesthetic and linguistic connotations can be ascribed to broader socio-economic dynamics embedded by food.

In *Sillage*, for example, the case of Baltimore discloses fruitful insights. In addition to the Northeast being associated with roasted coffee, the East and Southeast are described through food smells in such a way as to reveal socio-economic disparities and how this translates into aesthetic values and lexical choices. Recurring odours for East Baltimore are trash and mildew, and verbal labels include nomenclature such as ‘pit beef,’ a peculiar way of cooking meat connected to low-income African-American communities. Although this dish is widely appreciated and consumed, most people judge negatively the city areas affiliated with it. Southeast Baltimore is instead pervaded by an atmosphere characterised by undertones of gentrified, white or hipster Baltimore, which fully corresponds to its reputation as an old-fashioned but charming neighbourhood. Associated with freshly baked bread because of the presence of a historical bread factory, the survey lists flavours like Old Bay Seasoning (a blend of herbs and spices marketed throughout the U.S. but originally from Baltimore), beer, ice cream, pizza, cinnamon, raisin, fish, coffee, and tacos. As it is clear, the osmosphere of ethnic popular gastronomy is persistently coloured by a hostile pitch, whereas local dishes (or ethnic ones, but assimilated and adapted to North American taste) contribute to the positive idea of a clean and quiet place.

As Georg Simmel (2009, p. 577) put it, the “social question is not only an ethical one, but also a nasal question.” Ethnic and class tensions embodied or caused by food smells are one of my main research interests. Since it is

evident that food flavours partake in socio-political dynamics by forging and negotiating social identities, I would say that osmospheric gastronomies can be seen as forces which model human geographies, either igniting frictions or promoting a sense of community. My question is: Do you think food scents play a key role in this kind of social aesthetics? Or, in other words, do they hold, according to you, a preferential relationship with the affective characters of spaces and times, and with how humans relate to other people?

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter:* Food scents hold a special kind of equivocality within the broader domain of scents. A food scent can represent the food itself. It can be a symbol for something else. It can speak to regionality, seasonality, scarcity, and abundance by suggesting methods of preparation, as well as the quality and availability of ingredients. It can, as we have discussed, separate 'us' from 'them.' But it can also distinguish 'host' from 'guest,' which brings up the wildly different ways cultures define and practise the concept of hospitality. So, yes, I think food scents are profoundly important to social aesthetics.

As you well know, there are a lot of tensions caused by food smells. And some are undeniably legitimate and pervasive. But I am sensitive to how easily this topic can be weaponised, simply because it is more complex than many care to understand. Take, for instance, disgust. Disgust can take a physical *and* a moral character. The former is a biological reaction while the latter is a learned response. But neurologically speaking, the way the brain processes both forms of disgust is basically the same. To further complicate the matter, both forms of disgust look and sound the same, in terms of our facial and lexical expressions. If physical disgust can be forgiven – since even newborn babies express disgust to some tastes – we ought to be sensitive to the nuances of each case before we label it 'racist,' 'classist,' etc.

If we want to move culture forward it may be productive to note that the Western modernist project that birthed nationalism often leaves the very people who inherited this project with a feeling of absence when it comes to osmospheres. Imagine a Westerner's discontent with the deodorised culture they have inherited. And from this feeling of absence (of smell) comes a sense of desire, which gives rise to seeking out other ways of living with scent. In their pursuit, let's imagine they come upon a foreign smell that triggers disgust. But they recognise that response was linked to fear, and they push past that fear. By recognising the fear and working through it, a new relationship with smell develops. That relationship may start as something superficial – seduction, fetishisation, orientalisation. But let's say it doesn't end there. Let's say that the relationship evolves into something more substantive. Let's say that by embracing alterity, that fictional Westerner more than fills the absence that has been plaguing them. These days that person will likely get accused of cultural appropriation. And if they actually modify the tradition and fuse it with other, more traditional aspects of their pre-existing identity, they are equally liable to experience accusations of cultural imperialism. When in fact, what I just described is and has been the lifecycle of culture – how it grows, advances into new areas, stimulates, antagonises (and is stimulated and

antagonised in due course), adapts, grows stronger, and emerges as something different.

That fictional Westerner was actually me as a kid. Had I been conditioned to feel shame about my catholic taste of smells I would never have felt comfortable engaging people from all walks of life about their intimate relationships to olfaction. Nor would I have developed an artistic methodology which uses relational systems that allow for collaborative authorship and participatory engagement. It makes me think about how I felt when I interviewed a man named Amir, whose personal story and corresponding osmosphere was featured in a German edition of *Scents of Exile*. When I asked him to tell me about a scent-memory of home – Yugoslavia – this is what he said:

The first smell that comes out of my memory is the smell of the hot asphalt. A wonderful childhood in a beautiful country where, in my memory, it was always sunny and warm in summer. This becomes all the more important if, in retrospect, one knows the course of the recent history of the Balkans.

The first independent way, with less than five years to the ice cream shop with his own dinars in the pressed five-year-old hand, along the country road with no pedestrian area... just don't get too close to the trucks and don't let anything fall out of your hand. The freshly made asphalt, strongly heated by the sun, and many eyes directed at me who found refuge in some shade at 40 degrees did not make the way easier for me.

The days with temperatures around 40 degrees were not uncommon in Yugoslavia... accordingly, the ways to the ice cream shop were not either. With every further walk, the self-confidence grew and thus the smell of the hot asphalt burned itself into my memory as a good one.

At this point, these childhood memories mix with the stories and the family biography and longings of a completely different kind.

Before I was born, after months of drudgery as a road construction worker, my father set off from the same hot asphalt, a few kilometres further, on the way to a better future, to Germany. This story, which is often told to me, and the fact that my parents' marriage didn't last long after I was born, brought the two stories together. The two stayed in Germany and the same hot asphalt became a stretch of longing.

As I was listening to Amir, I was not thinking about whether I had the cultural credentials to interview this man. Rather, I was transfixed by the thought of this 5-year-old kid walking alone in the incredible heat with a melting ice cream cone in his hand. His absent father could have paved the very road on which Amir walked, the very road that represented the distance separating the two. I was also intrigued by the way in which he crafted his story: the poetic juxtaposition of the hot temperatures and the cold ice cream, and the function of the road as a reachable path to the ice cream shop yet an unreachable path to his father. But even more touching was the way that Amir, the storyteller, crafted the narrative in a way that shifts from first-person to third-person back to first-person. It is as if he is standing outside himself when looking at his boy-self coming to terms with independence and loss.

*Elena Mancioppi*: I think these “osmobiographies,” as Mădălina Diaconu (2021, p. 62) has called them, fully support the hypothesis put forward by Hubertus Tellenbach (1981, p. 221) that the experiences of our oral sense clearly reveal the “state of being (*Befinden*) of man as a category which comprises and characterises a certain human condition.” In other words, *what* we smell and *how* we feel coincide thanks to a kind of metonymic relationship. But these examples concurrently epitomise the cross-sensory nature of atmospheric perceiving. For Amir, the smell of asphalt is the mnemonic condensation of his childhood *and* adulthood but it cannot be distinguished by the haptic dimension – the coins held tightly in the small hand – and especially by the ‘thermal quality’ of the overall situation, which is also *bittersweet*. Paradoxically, the flavour of ice-cream – the actual reason for such frequent trips – here fades and is absorbed by everything else.

In a sense, the opposite occurs in another story of *Scent of Exile* that has moved me greatly, that of Azira, aged 52, an immigrant working in a refugee centre. It reads:

When we fled Bosnia, my cousins took their cow and hid it in the woods. Every morning they gave me a bowl of boiled milk, straight from the cow. Even now, if someone says, ‘I am refugee,’ I smell boiled milk.

Here, the very word ended up absorbing the osmosphere, radiating the specific smell whenever its sound was heard. I would like to take this aspect of Azira’s story, namely *sound*, to ask you something with respect to the relationship between smells and music, which I know is part of your artistic experimentation.

To cut a long story short, the analogy between odours and sounds or music recurs from multiple perspectives. Anthropologists have shown us that they are interchangeable in the cosmologies of certain populations,<sup>4</sup> and the jargon of perfumery is particularly indebted to a musical lexicon; philosophers, for their part, have racked their brains to justify the aesthetic legitimacy of sounds as opposed to smells, foremost among them Hegel. Once we turn to art, the panorama becomes even wider.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, various artists have experimented with creating scent concerts, from Sadakichi Hartmann’s *A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes* (1902), where smells mingle with the reading of a text, to some exhibitions of Aleksandr Skrjabin’s *Prometheus*, with far from intuitive associations between perceptual elements. Such an idea finds specific discussion in *The Art of Odours: A Futurist Manifesto* by Ennio Valentinelli, presumably written in 1914 – 1915, where he insists on the need to “create a new music of odours, the sister of the music of sounds and noises” (Valentinelli, 1996, pp. 133–134). Not to mention all the ‘scent organs’ that, from the dystopian imagination of Aldous Huxley, are the prototype of all the disparate olfactory technologies developed since the late 1970s. An example is Wolfgang Georgsdorf’s *Smeller*

<sup>4</sup> Among others, the Dogon of Mali ‘hear’ smells: the auditory and verbal sphere overlaps seamlessly with the olfactory one, so much so that, as an example, they perfume their breath when they want to make sure they give a good speech (cf. Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994, p. 119).

2.0, an enormous and complex hi-tech machine designed to be very sensitive to the keyboard and to avoid any mingling of odours. Other examples are M Dougherty's *Odor Organ* and the scent organ used for Christophe Laudamiel and Stewart Matthew's *Green Aria: A Scent Opera* (2009).

Not least, this affinity is actually the basis of the theory set forth by 19<sup>th</sup>-century chemist and perfumer Septimus Piesse who invented an olfactory categorisation system on a musical cast. As said, such a cross-sensory alliance is not foreign to your work. *Odophonics* plays precisely on Piesse's scale, placing itself in the context of olfactory art understood as a multisensory art form. In your opinion, what does it reveal about the phenomenology of smell as an aerial sense as well as the auditive one?

*Brian Goeltzenleuchter: Odophonics* came out of a deep collaboration with Sean Francis Conway, who is an experimental musician and composer. *Odophonics* began as our way to mine an anachronism. As you remarked, Piesse theorised the *Odophone* as a scale of smells that corresponded to different auditory pitches. By his logic, 'chords' could be formed. This is obvious in music: two notes equal three things – each note plus their aural relationship to one another. As one adds notes, the relationship becomes more complex. Figuratively speaking, this can be true with smells. Piesse used that analogy to explain these relationships. The building block of perfume is the accord; individual scent 'notes' may reveal themselves as the odorant molecule evaporates, but the appeal of most perfumes is the way in which combinations of notes modify one another to create an idiosyncratic accord. What makes all of this anachronistic is that if you *logically* follow Piesse's analogy, it falls apart before it even starts.

Scents, like sounds, appear to influence the olfactory nerve in certain degrees. There is, as it were, an octave of colours like an octave in music; certain odours coincide, like the keys of an instrument. Such as almond, vanilla and orange blossom blend together, each producing different degrees of a nearly similar expression. (Piesse, 1862, p. 25)

Piesse's logic somewhat corresponded to the scientific understanding of smell in his day, which posited that smell, like sound, influenced "the olfactory nerve" (*ibidem*) by means of frequency and vibration. That logic, however, has since been debunked, rendering the *Odophone* an anachronism. That is, if one treats it as a sort of logos-based proposition, which is easy to do given the way Piesse mapped smells onto a diatonic scale – a quasi-mathematical convention with a history that arguably dates back to Pythagoras. Nevertheless, Sean and I love anachronisms, and we share a special kind of contempt for academic hubris; you know, the kind that often begins with, 'Whereas we *used to* think...we now *know*...'

Rather than get hung up on the science of olfaction, we thought about Piesse's *Odophone* as a mythos-based proposition. We saw his scale as an embodied understanding of an almost savant-like experience of sound and smell. Sean has often remarked, "When I think too much about it, it doesn't make sense," which makes perfect sense to me. Recently, during a post-performance Q&A, Sean made the following observation:

Piesse's *Odophone* is arranged in a diatonic C scale. This is interesting, but I don't think the key of C is vital. It can be thought of as transposable. Also the smells are not superimposed on a chromatic scale, which simplifies things and gives us a smaller amount of intervals with which to be concerned. In and of itself, it is not very interesting that *New Mown Hay* is an A note. But what becomes very interesting, at least to me, is how it interacts with, for instance, Orange Flower, a G note. This creates a major 2<sup>nd</sup> interval, which is dissonant but still somewhat open and shimmering or bouncing. Think of smelling fresh cut hay and sweet, floral, citrus all together, creating its own new smell. To me, cut hay and orange flower are somewhat dissonant, but still *bounce off* one another in a pleasing, major 2<sup>nd</sup> kind way. Okay, now take Orange Flower, a G note, and Almond, the D note above, which creates a Perfect 5<sup>th</sup>. Sweet, floral, citrus and sweet, nutty, cherry are similar enough and create this hollow consonance of a big Perfect 5<sup>th</sup>. Even with just these two examples, this is an expert level of mapping from Piesse. It works so well and is very mysterious to me. The interplay of all of these intervals, chords, and smell relationships in Piesse's *Odophone* is becoming endlessly interesting to explore. (Conway, 2023)

What does this reveal about the phenomenology of smell as *both* an aerial and auditive sense? *Odophonics* offers audiences an environment in which smells entangle themselves with sounds in a fairly predictable way, in terms of quality and duration. The performance, which is over 30 minutes long, grows in complexity, using drones, polyrhythms, and 13 airborne smells to test or complicate Piesse's *Odophone*. If I were to distil audience feedback into one prevailing comment, it would be this: *When one is exposed to a sensation – a sound, a smell – long enough, it changes. It becomes weird.* Or maybe one becomes weird. Although each performance of *Odophonics* has taken place in a museum, against the backdrop of whatever exhibition happens to be on view, audience members often close their eyes, which speaks to the intuitive desire to subjugate vision in order to more intimately 'tune into' the smell/sound environment.

*Elena Mancioppi*: Indeed, in poetry, but also iconography and everyday experience, the theme of the aerial – hence olfactory and aural – space as opposed to the optic one often recurs. In a way, it appears that to dive into the *weirdness* of odours (and sounds) one has to close their eyes. Something similar is present in the poetics of Baudelaire, who equals Proust in the importance attributed to smells. Sartre explains Baudelaire's being fond of scents not because of his refined olfaction, but because of the very nature of smells, in that Baudelaire seems to have a taste "for those strange objects which resemble the outcropping of being and whose spirituality consists of absence" (Sartre, 1950, p. 174). The famous poem *Le Flacon (The Flask)* by Baudelaire reads:

[...]  
 Or poking through a house, in closets shut for years,  
 Full of the smell of time – acrid, musty, dank,  
 One comes, perhaps, upon a flask of memories  
 In whose escaping scent a soul returns to life.  
 [...]  
 Fluttering to the brain through the unsettled air,  
 Rapturous memory pervades the atmosphere;

*The eyes are forced to close; Vertigo grasps the soul,  
And thrusts her with his hands into the mists of mind.*  
(Baudelaire, 1993, pp. 97–99 [my italics, Elena Mancioppi])

Brian Goeltzenleuchter: Yes, this tuning is dependent on air, as is breathing, and life in general, which is actually *weird*. In this respect, somewhat along the lines of Timothy Morton’s dark ecology, a whole inquiry into the *weirdness* of the aesthetics of smells should be developed. But this is something far beyond the scope of this conversation. Maybe that’s a fitting place to end.

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