

The Essence of Perception - An Artist's View

Helga Griffiths



Photo: Niels Patrick Geisselbrecht

Helga Griffiths is a Germany-based Multi-Sense-Artist working at the intersection of art, science and technology. From 1986 to 1992, she lived in the United States. She has a BFA Degree from Mason Gross School of the Arts/Rutgers University (1991). From 1992–1994 she completed her Postgraduate Studies at Kunstakademie Stuttgart in Germany. In 1994 she continued with further studies in New Media at Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe. She received several awards such as the First Prize at *Kunst auf Zeit* in Graz, an *Honorable Mention* at the International Paper Biennial in Düren and the *Lichtenberg-Award*, in Darmstadt (all in 1998), the *First Prize* at the Lightroutes - Festival in Lüdenscheid in 2003. She received grants for artist residencies at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2001 an NEA grant for a guest professorship at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas in Puerto Rico in 2004, *AIR* in Krems, Austria in 2009, and Schöppingen in 2016. In 2019, she was awarded a fellowship at Sacatar Foundation, Brazil.

Her work is in permanent collections such as at TBS TV Station in Tokyo, Deutsches Hygienemuseum, Dresden, Musée International de la Parfumerie in Grasse, France, Kunstmuseum Mülheim/Ruhr Leopold-Hoesch-Museum in Düren, Germany as well as Upper Austria Cultural Centre, Linz. She has exhibited her multi-sense-installations at the intersection of science and art in several international biennials such as Cairo Biennial, Curitiba Biennial in Brazil, Echigo Tsumari Art Triennial in Japan, Havana Biennial, Ljubljana Biennial and Seoul Media Art Biennial.

Her multi-sensory installations were featured in international museum exhibitions e.g. Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, Haus der Kunst Munich, Nevada Museum of Art, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Moderne Galerie, Saarlandmuseum Saarbrücken and Musée International de la Parfumerie in Grasse, MOCA in Shanghai and ZKM Karlsruhe. The survey exhibition *Crossing* was on view at Municipal Gallery Saarbrücken in 2017. The extensive one-person exhibition *C18 Memory of an Evanescent Landscape* was shown at Kunstmuseum Mülheim/Ruhr as part of the

project *Art and Coal* under the patronage of the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. In 2021 the first introduction of her works to China took place at Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai. In 2022, an extensive monographic exhibition was on view at Moderne Galerie, Saarländermuseum Saarbrücken. Her work is on view at the exhibition *Light, Sound and Senses* at Heidi Horten, Collection Vienna. An interview with Christian Huther was published in *Kunstforum International Magazine*. Her work is featured in the publication *Lightart in Germany in 21st Century* by Kunstmuseum Celle. She was part of the encyclopedic show on *LightArt from Artificial Light* at ZKM Karlsruhe. Several of her light installations are featured in the publication *Women Light Artists Collected Light Volume I* published in London. In 2022 the monograph *Expanding Perceptual Horizons* discussing works from more than 20 years was published.

Anatomically speaking, our sense of smell is more directly connected to those parts of the brain that govern memory and emotion rather than vision, hearing, or any other sense. Even just a few molecules of some volatile substances, specific to each individual, can trigger an instinctive reaction – either positive or negative – or transport us in our imagination to some other time or place, which our memory cells happen to associate with that particular combination of olfactory stimuli.

For an artist like myself, this opens up many new areas for possible experimentation. By that, I do not mean just adding a scent to make an artwork more “realistic” – like a painting of a rose, that smells of roses, to use a trivial example – but by utilising the unique properties of the olfactory sense to communicate the intention of the artist in ways, and with a directness, that would not otherwise be possible.

A key point here is the individuality and subjectivity of the experience. Philosophers and physiologists may argue about whether the colour of a rose, that one person describes as “red”, induces exactly the same physiological response when viewed by a second observer, but scientists can measure the wavelength of the reflected light and determine the exact hue in an objective manner. Smell is different. There is no established method of measuring or defining the nature of a smell (as opposed to the intensity) with any kind of precision, despite the best efforts of chemists, with their gas chromatographs and mass spectrometers, and perfumers, with their long training and specialized vocabulary. Smell is essentially subjective.

But what may seem like a drawback can be turned into an advantage. It is the individual experience, which I, as an artist, am trying to convey, and the use of the sense of smell enables me – imperfectly, of course – to communicate my feelings and emotions about things that I cannot share physically with my “audience”,¹ such as events that happened long ago (if at all) or an imaginary journey to the planets of the solar system.

In the following, I will present some examples of my work in rough chronological order, in the hope that some of these ideas – despite the absence of olfactory assistance for the reader – will become somewhat clearer.

¹ Regrettably, there is no olfactory equivalent for the Latin *audientia*.

My first encounter with the power of smell in a work of art was as a student, in connection with my thesis exhibition at Rutgers University, New Jersey, in 1991. This was a room installation, consisting of life-sized concrete figures coated with metallic powders and treated with various chemicals, including vinegar, to create a distinctive patina. My intention was simply to enhance the sculptures visually, but the completed installation had a somewhat musty, earthy smell – not objectionably so, but clearly discernible – which intensified the experience for the visitors and quite definitely influenced the way the work was perceived and remembered. The olfactory enhancement contributed to the good reception of the show and encouraged me to experiment further.

In the years that followed, I worked with many different art forms, but returned again and again to room installations, especially what I call “multi-sense” installations, which stimulate more than one human sense, and I often focussed on works which translate technical data of various kinds, as well as other information, into experience spaces. This also led to works in which information, which is normally perceived by one particular sense, was transformed and presented in a way that allowed it to be experienced with a different sense, my intention being to expand perceptual horizons and offer new ways of viewing things.



Out-SIGHT-In, olfactory objects, steel, light, pumps, perfume cartridges, 40 x 40 x 10 cm, 2002. Photo: Christophe Schneider

My installation *Observatorium* for the CYNETart Festival in Dresden (2000, Deutsches Hygienemuseum), used an innovative device called a Sniffman (a name which obviously harks back to Sony's "Walkman" and "Discman"). This was a cooperation with the creative perfumer Karl-Heinz Bork and the company Ruetz Technology. The Sniffman was worn around the neck of the visitors, who were able to move freely around the exhibition space, and was capable of storing dozens of scents on a tiny chip, each of which could be released remotely by a signal from a computer. In this case, the release of the odours was programmed to coincide with specific scenes in a video. My conclusion from this experiment was that it was very hard for participants to smell, hear and see in a natural way, simultaneously, in an art installation and I observed that people were not really accustomed to this manner of perception. They often concentrated too hard in anticipation of a surge of smell when, in fact, the scents were very subtle and were supposed to work subliminally.

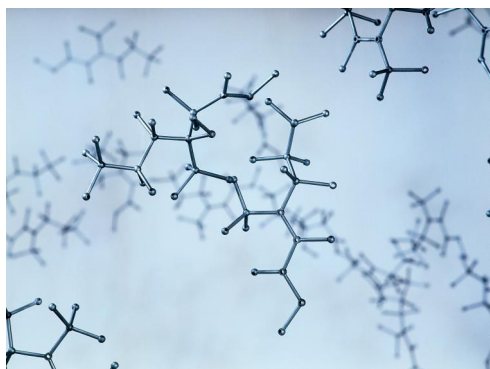
The art historian Dr. Annick Le Gu  rer may have been thinking of *Observatorium*, when she stated in a recent lecture at the Sorbonne University, that: "Helga Griffiths' multi-sense installations at the intersection of art, science, technology and smell are pioneering works".

In 2001, I used a six-month residency at the Cit   Internationale des Arts to create a smell map of Paris, which was presented at an exhibition (titled *Out-Sight-In*) at the Palais de Tokyo the following year. This was an early opportunity for me to investigate the relationship between smell and location which led me, in later works, to explore the use of smell in defining the identity of a place. During the same period, I worked with a blind Parisian women called Laurence Jamet, who accompanied me on some of my walks, taking photographs of things and places that she could smell, but not see.



Out-SIGHT-In - blind walk, 2002, documentation *Out-SIGHT* excursion in Paris. Photo: Christophe Schneider

Smell, as an expression of personal identity, was the subject of *Olfactory Analysis* (2004). A sample of my own sweat was analyzed and five of the most prominent molecules selected for this installation, which consisted of a cloud of many hundreds of suspended model molecules, which the visitor could walk through and touch. At the time, I was fascinated by the concept of sharing my own identity in the most intimate way possible, and concluded that my body odour is one of my most “authentic” attributes, which extends beyond the boundaries of my own body to interact with my social environment. Our dogs and cats are much more aware of this cloud that surrounds us at all times, than we are ourselves.



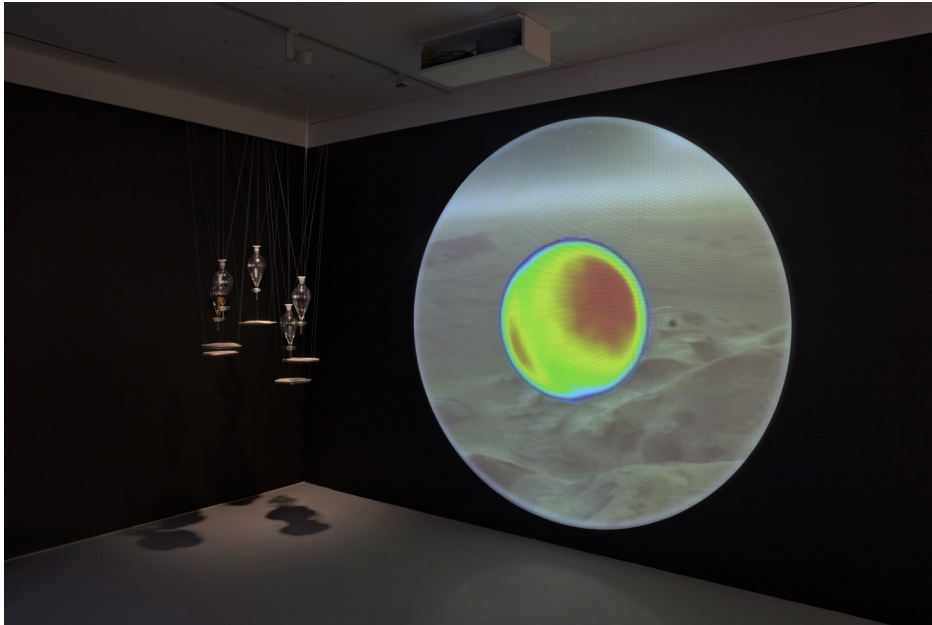
Olfactory Analysis, molecules and metallic paint 2004. Photo: Ute Döring



Olfactory Analysis, polymer molecules and silver paint 2012. Photo: Helga Griffiths

Odours can transport one instantaneously to different times and worlds. For the multi-sense-installation *Space Souvenirs* (2006, Museum of Applied Art, Frankfurt/Main), I created a futuristic souvenir – a set of olfactory samples from an imaginary expedition into space. The “essences” of different planets were created together with the perfumer Karl-Heinz Bork, my collaborator on so many projects, on the basis of interviews with experts from the Institute for Planetary Research in Berlin. The physical and chemical conditions on the planets were taken into consideration in creating these scents, but the critical aspect here was the interaction between perfumer and artist, testing different compositions to find one that represented the artist’s intention. The dry volcanic desert scent of Mars, the atmospheric, immaterial scent of lightning and extreme wind on Venus are contrasted with the arctic snow and ice smell of Uranus, with its 40-year winter. In the exhibition, the planetary scents are

deposited from glass dropping funnels onto circles of absorbent filter paper, which visitors are invited to take with them as mementos of their imaginary journey through the solar system. The synaesthetic experience of *Space Souvenirs* is complemented by video images which provide views of the planets, as they pass by the round portholes of a space ship.



Space Souvenirs, video: glass dropping funnels, acrylic glass discs, filter paper, scents, 2018.
Photo: Hannes Woidich



For the installation *Dark Gravity* (2017, Kunsthalle Darmstadt), the scent *Trust* was created for a dark space with a video back-projection filling one wall, showing an animated flight over the landscape of my own brain. The space is provided with a specially-designed floor, which slopes gently towards the

middle, subconsciously guiding the feet of the visitors towards the center. The idea for the scent came from the hormone and neurotransmitter called oxytocin, which is sometimes known as *Liquid Trust* and has no perceptible odour. Once again, I worked with Karl-Heinz Bork to create a scent with similar properties to oxytocin – influencing in a very subtle, subconscious manner the social behaviour and empathy level of the percipients. Visitors to the installation (or, at least, those of them who took the trouble to read the printed hand-outs) were made aware of this attempt to take control of their feelings, and were hopefully provoked into considering which of their senses they trusted most (or least).

My most recent olfactory installation was created on the occasion of a large exhibition project organized by seventeen art museums in the Ruhr district of Germany to mark the occasion of the end of underground coal production in Germany. The solo exhibition titled *¹⁸C Essence of Coal* was shown at the Kunstmuseum Mülheim/Ruhr. The title of this project refers to the element carbon combined with the year of the exhibition, 2018.



Dark Gravity, specially constructed space consisting of wooden floor, carpet, rear video projection, scent diffuser 2018. Photo: Gregor Schuster

Carbon atoms – the essential components of all life on earth – are created exclusively in supernovae, far away from our solar system, and reach the earth as cosmic dust.

Coal is the result of an incredible process of transformation, which began with the long, long journey of carbon atoms from the exploding star to the earth,

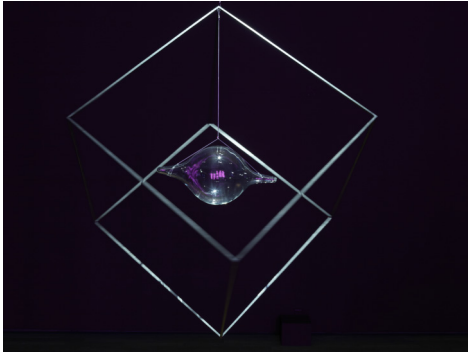
continued with their reaction with oxygen to form gaseous carbon dioxide, followed by photosynthesis and incorporation into the primal forests of the carboniferous age. Then came the long phase of heat and compression deep under the earth and finally the harvesting of coal in the mine – and its combustion to create heat and produce steel, accompanied by re-formation of CO₂. This transformational process (from the perspective of landscape as well as material) is – besides time and memory – a central aspect of this artwork.



¹⁸C - Memory of an Evanescent Landscape, video projection, still sculpture, diamond grown from coal, scent, coal, 2018. Photo: Hannes Woidich

The exhibition was preceded by a performance (documented in a video), in which an “essence” of a sample of the last coal to be mined in Germany was extracted by a process of steam distillation, in a laboratory environment. This essence was then used as the basis and inspiration for the creation of a scent, called ¹⁸C, which was presented at Mülheim as an evanescent memory of a past age, which visitors could take home with them. Conceptually, coal is strongly bound up with the elements of time and life and symbolizes energy, warmth and the life force. The notion of coal as a spirit, or ephemeral memory of an altered and transformed landscape, which was once a primeval forest, is central to the concept behind the perfume.

Distillation is a process with historical connotations of magical and alchemical transformation, with the aim of extracting a few droplets – the essence – of a substance through two-fold transformation of the physical state (solid – gas – liquid). This transformation of a tangible solid to a volatile liquid symbolizes in this case the double transformation of the local landscape – through the harvesting of coal itself, but also through the following re-naturation processes and creation of new living spaces.



L' Air du Charbon, glass object filled under vacuum with ambient air from the underground mine inside steel cube, 2022.
Photo: Tom Gundelwein



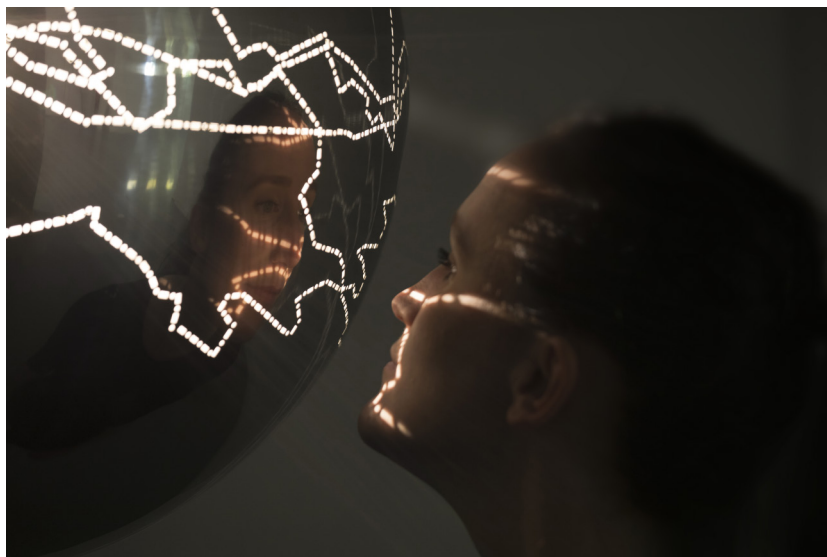
Hand blown glass flacon, coal, containing the perfume *L' Air du Charbon*, 2022. Photo: Ronny Koch

Another recent work, *Migratory Scent* (2017, Municipal Gallery Saarbrücken and 2018, Kunstmuseum Mülheim/Ruhr), also focusses on this idea of creating an olfactory essence of a place or a landscape. It was developed in cooperation with the Syrian refugee Mohammad Ghassan Arksousi who, in an interview, was asked to describe the smell of his home in Damaskus which had been destroyed by a bomb. With the help, once again, of Karl-Heinz Bork, I tried to recreate his remembered smell of home as a volatile essence which, besides being a precious souvenir for Mohammad, would also allow visitors of the exhibition to go on a mental journey into a landscape destroyed by the Syrian war.

Many people are forced to leave their homes for political, economic or climatic reasons. This also means that they lose the familiar smell of their homeland. They are not only confronted with a foreign landscape, strange food and a new language, but by an unfamiliar spectrum of odours. Migrants, even if they cannot carry anything physical with them from their homes, have still a vivid memory of smells of the landscape and the climate from which they originally came.

Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Starnberg recently published their findings that birds find their way on their long migration routes by using their sense of smell, which can play an even more important role in their navigation than the sun or the Earth's magnetic field. Also, for humans, the smell of the landscape in which we grew up (the sea, the desert, the jungle or the megacity) has a strong influence on us and has been deeply engraved in our memories. Although modern technical tools (maps, satellite navigation) have partly replaced the ancient skill of orientation by using one's own senses, sensory perception is still an essential part of comprehending our environment and finding our place in it, and our sense of smell is an important element of this process.

These examples of my work illustrate many different aspects of using the sense of smell in the field of art. One of these is the application of odours to trigger memories or associations. This can be used to evoke emotion and influence behaviour at a subconscious level. Then, there is the concept of an olfactory “essence”, which can represent anything from a planet to a landscape, whether real or imaginary. A third aspect is the use of smell as a means of directly communicating my own feelings or emotions and, fourthly, there is the role of odour as an expression of identity.



Migratory Sense, polished stainless steel sphere, lasercut borders, halogen light, scent, 2017. Photo: Hannes Woidich



Migratory Sense, polished stainless steel sphere, lasercut borders, halogen light, scent, 2017. Photo: Anton Minajev

It also strikes me that odours, which – unlike visual and auditory information – have so far resisted the digitalization wave with its pixels and bits, possess an authenticity lacked by the other sensory inputs. Our brains do not “filter”, or “interpret”, or “censor” olfactory signals before we react to them, in the same way that they process visual images or sounds. There is nothing corresponding to an optical illusion in the olfactory world, as far as I know. I recently read an article claiming that when people meet for the first time, they make a subconscious judgement about each other (friend or foe?), even before they are aware of it, and I suspect that the sense of smell is involved in that process, too. In the early days of computing, the expression WYSIWYG (“What You See Is What You Get”) was coined to describe a true visual image. With the sense of smell, What You Smell Is (always) What You Get.



Turbulent Souvenirs, 30.000 perfume test strips, ultraviolet light, historic scent of „L'Heure Bleue“ created in 1912 by Jacques Guerlain, sound: interviews smell memories 2017. Photo: Anton Minajev

I will conclude with another quote from Dr. Annick le Gu  rer (2017):

She [Helga Griffiths] uses the power of smell to transport us in time and translate scientific knowledge and information into olfactory experience. She opens up emotional and imaginary worlds and expands our perception of time, allowing us to experience the intangible.

References:

Le Gu  rer, A., 2017, *Art et Olfaction* [Speech]. Presentation given at the Kunsthalle Darmstadt, July 14.

Helga Griffiths
www.helgagriffiths.de
helga@helgagriffiths.de

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.12734814