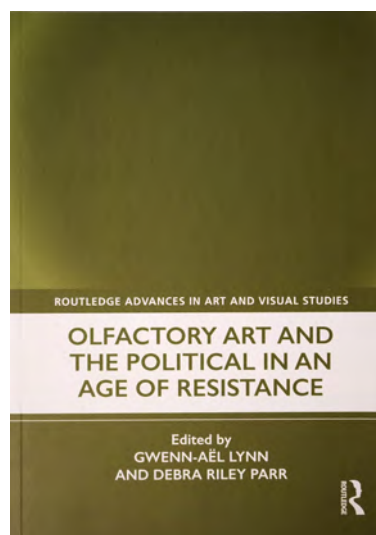


Review of *Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance*

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Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance, edited by Gwenn-Aël Lynn and Debra Riley Parr, is an insightful, interdisciplinary, and comprehensive journey in the diversified landscape of olfactory art (Lynn and Parr, 2021). This volume – which collects essays from artists, philosophers, psychologists, curators, critics, and educators – grounds on the central tenet that the sense of smell and its objects have unique potential to address and raise socio-political issues. The thematic discourse throughout the book underscores the transformative potential of olfactory art in the realms of identity, resistance, and representation.

One of the central themes of this volume is the political potential inherent in olfactory art. Lynn and Parr aptly distinguish between “politics” and “the political,” defining the former as the strategies deployed by individuals and institutions to obtain power, and the latter as a passionate, philosophical

inquiry into coexistence and communal life. They argue that olfactory art's unique characteristic lies in its ability to engage with the political through its embodied and unmediated nature. As the editors note (Lynn & Parr, 2021, p. 4), "the most compelling unique characteristic of olfactory art lies in its political potential".

This leads to the second foundational theme of the volume, namely that smell is one of the best candidates, if not the only candidate, for resistance to the hegemony of vision in Western cultures. Smelling, unlike visual representation, is a direct and intimate experience that enters the body and engages the mind, creating a profound sensory impact that can be harnessed for political expression and resistance. As observed by Lynn and Parr (2021, p. 4): "When one smells something, the scent enters the body through the nose and lungs and limbic system of the brain, becoming a body–mind experience. Smelling is, thus, an unmediated sensation, an embodied experience". Such a position resonates with the phenomenological tradition, and especially with Merleau-Ponty's embodied account of human perception, in which odours, at the interface between memory and emotions, contribute to shaping our lived experience in the pre-reflective and bodily engagement with the environment.

At the same time, the nature of olfactory objects has attracted a growing body of interest from scholars working in the field of the philosophy of perception (e.g., Barwich, 2019; Millar, 2019). One general question typically raised in the current debate deals with the puzzling nature of those entities that are referred to when people talk about "odours". Compared to visual objects, odours would appear to lack key properties that should constitute perceptual objecthood, such as figure-ground segregation and perceptual constancies (e.g., Barwich, 2019, though see Millar, 2019). Speakers normally identify odours indirectly, that is, by referring to their source, saying, for example, the smell of a rose. This would appear to reveal some fundamental properties of olfactory objects, given that we can perceive the scent of the rose or jasmine in the absence of the source object, as happens normally in the case of fragrances. In contrast, the visual perception of a rose is not veridical if the object 'rose' is absent.

The idea that olfaction is unique among the senses has been fuelled by additional evidence from the broad field of cognitive science. Scholars have drawn attention to the poverty of language when it comes to describing odours (Yeshurun and Sobel, 2010). Focusing on the way language is used to refer to odours, Dubois (1997) pointed out that in most languages (e.g., English, French), there are no names specifically for odours, and instead the naming of odours is often achieved by naming the source instead (e.g., think only of the smell of lavender; though there are, of course, many fragrances, or smells, that most people struggle to attach a source object to, see e.g., Croijmans and Majid (2016). The impact of language on odour perception has been empirically proven in speakers from the same culture and, separately, by comparing those from different cultures (and languages) (e.g., Herz and Von Clef, 2001; De Valk et al., 2017).

Scholars have also evidenced the neurophysiological basis of the lack of a developed lexicon for describing olfaction in humans. Olfactory stimuli are mainly processed in the limbic system, mostly concerned with the organisation of visceral body functions and the processing of emotional states. The limbic system, however, is not concerned with the abstract symbolic activity of language processing. Due to the relatively poor neural connections between those areas devoted to language processing and the sub-cortical limbic structures, scholars have argued that it is apparently impossible to adequately synchronise the cerebral organisation of olfactory perception with the language processing areas of the brain so to have a stable lexicon of olfaction (see Olofsson and Gottfried, 2015, for a neurocognitive framework for olfactory language).

The ephemeral nature of the sense of smell is a popular topic in the history of Western philosophy, with clear implications for how smelling is assumed to contribute to knowledge and cognition. For Aristotle and Kant, for example, smell is a less precise and informative way of acquiring information about the world. For Kant, in particular, the transitory and subjective nature of olfactory experiences contrasts with the more stable and intersubjective experiences provided by vision and hearing. That being said, however, the idea that the human sense of smell is underdeveloped and weak compared to animals' and humans' other senses remains controversial (see McGann, 2017). Like other mammals, humans can distinguish among an incredible number of odors and can even follow outdoor scent trails. Human behaviours and affective states are also strongly influenced by the olfactory environment, which can evoke strong emotional and behavioural reactions as well as prompting distinct memories. Odour-mediated communication between individuals, once thought to be limited to animals, is now understood to carry information about familial relationships, stress and anxiety levels, and reproductive status in humans as well, although this information is not always consciously accessible.

The hegemony of vision has profoundly influenced the conception of the arts, resulting in the dominance of visual and spatial arts such as painting, sculpture, and music as the most important forms of artistic expression. For over two millennia, the chemical senses have not been considered a significant part of artistic production, raising long-standing questions about how they should be integrated into the arts. Many of the contributors of this volume offer a positive answer to this question, by providing clear examples of how olfactory art disrupts the conventional sensory hierarchy and inviting a reevaluation of how art can be experienced and understood. The olfactory resistance to visual dominance emerges as both a philosophical and a political stance, opening up new avenues for social critique through the reshaping of sensory engagement. Following Deleuze, the editors assert that "olfactory art is also an act of resistance, with a difference, or an intensity, since it already operates within the sphere of art, but at the margins" (Lynn and Parr, 2021, p. 6).

The perceived superiority of vision is mirrored in the perceived superiority of visual cultures over non-Western cultures and, more broadly, of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) individuals. As Lynn

(2021, p. 52) put it: “A scent is never ‘just a scent.’ It is not only an olfactory sensation; it comes with deep cultural meanings and significance”. This makes olfaction and smell a social issue, with the theme of race naturally emerging. Pitchaya Ngamcharoen’s chapter focuses on how scents orient individuals within social and spatial contexts. Smells can delineate territory and social boundaries, acting as invisible – though still perceptible – markers of identity and difference. This sociological perspective on olfactory art underscores its role in shaping social interactions and community dynamics, highlighting the power of scent in creating and dissolving social boundaries. As Ngamcharoen (2021, p. 32) explains, deodorisation is used as a method of colonisation: “Smells act as invisible boundaries that can both create and dissolve territories, influencing social dynamics and community interactions”. In a similar vein, Dorothée King explores whether shared olfactory experiences can foster empathy and understanding among diverse groups of people.

Hsuan L. Hsu’s chapter on Black diasporic olfactory art explores how scents are used to evoke memories and histories of displacement, resistance, and identity. Olfactory interventions by Black artists highlight the political stakes involved in everyday encounters with smells, drawing attention to issues of environmental health and racial atmospheres. Hsu (2021, p. 10) explains, “Recognizing the olfactory experiments of Black artists requires reframing olfactory aesthetics not only as a conceptual practice whose interventions target the deodorised Western art world but also as a struggle over everyday encounters with smells that have profound cultural and biochemical consequences”. Viveka Kjellmer looks at how perfuming the body can be an act of resistance and a way to assert subversive identities, while Alanna Lynch discusses the use of unpleasant smells in art to provoke political and social commentary.

The inherent discriminatory nature of odours is evident in the role that gender plays in discussions about olfactory art and odours in general. Debra Riley Parr’s chapter delves into the gendered nature of scents, highlighting how the perfume industry and marketing strategies perpetuate binary conceptions of gender through olfactory products: “The perfume industry continues to designate most of its products as feminine or masculine” (Parr, 2021, p. 22). Parr discusses how scents associated with femininity or masculinity influence perceptions and experiences of gender, often reinforcing traditional roles and stereotypes. The contributions by Sandra Barré and Dorothy Abram delve deeper into the feminine world of scents, by examining how female artists use scent to represent their bodies and challenge traditional gender norms (Barré) and exploring themes of seduction and power in the literature of Katherine Mansfield (Abram).

Queer theory is another important framework within the volume. Matt Morris’s exploration of perfume and drag highlights how olfactory art can be a site of queer resistance. By reinterpreting and reclaiming scents, queer artists challenge capitalist and heteronormative structures, creating spaces for alternative identities and expressions. This theme of queer resistance through scent illustrates the intersectionality of olfactory art, where issues of gender,

sexuality, and politics converge. By embracing and reinterpreting scents, queer artists challenge dominant norms and create spaces for alternative identities and expressions.

Olfactory art proves challenging for scholars in aesthetics and philosophy of art, due to the ephemeral nature of perfumes and scents as artworks that challenge the norms and practices of traditional art institutions and artistic objects. By incorporating scent, artists question the visual-centric nature of galleries and museums, advocating for more inclusive and multisensory approaches to art. This critique extends to broader cultural institutions, as olfactory art invites audiences to reconsider how sensory experiences are mediated and controlled. In this line, Brian Goeltzenleuchter introduces the concept of the olfactory counter-monument, where scent is used to engage museum visitors in active smelling and critical reflection. Lauryn Mannigel invites us to rethink the aesthetics of smell moving beyond Kantian passive contemplation to active, sensory engagement. In his *Enteric Aesthetics*, Arnaud Gerspacher explores the relationship between smell and the gut, considering how olfactory experiences can influence our understanding of bodily processes and health.

An additional issue that emerges with olfactory art regards the criteria that artists use to create their olfactory artworks. These criteria seemingly oscillate between idiosyncratic, individual choices and the search for perceptually meaningful and more consensual criteria to establish broader agreement. The latter can be based on shared meanings associated with odours, which might mediate crossmodal associations between odours and other sensory stimuli (see Deroy et al., 2013; Spence, 2011). It might be worth mentioning here the early attempts to use odours in artistic performances, often deliberately combined with other sensory stimuli, such as music. For instance, in 1891, a pioneering adaptation of the *Cantique des cantiques* of Solomon by Paul-Napoleon Roinard was performed in Paris at the Theatre d'Art, to present the novel idea of theatre as multisensory art by engaging the audience's senses of sight, hearing, and smell. Inspired by symbolist aesthetics, Roinard conceived a synaesthetic multisensory work in which original music, words, vowel sounds, colours, and scents were to be harmonised (Halperin, 1988, p. 199; Stokes, 1972, p. 167). For each poetic section, Roinard provided the details for the exact combination of music (e.g., 'in C'), colour (e.g., 'pale purple'), and scents (e.g., 'frankincense') (Roinard et al., 1976). A total of nine scents (namely, frankincense, white violets, hyacinth, lilies, acacia, lily of the valley, syringa, orange blossom, and jasmine) were released into the theatre, while the audience simultaneously listened to words and music (see, also, Spence and Di Stefano, 2022; and Di Stefano, Murari and Spence, 2022, on odours, poetry and music).

The volume also expands on environmental themes, particularly in chapters that discuss eco-olfactory art. Eleonora Edreva and Clara Muller focus on how artists use scent to highlight environmental issues, such as air pollution and climate change. By making these invisible threats perceptible, olfactory art mobilises public awareness and action. This ecological dimension of olfactory

art emphasises its potential to engage with urgent environmental crises and advocate for sustainability. Olfactory art has the capacity to make the invisible visible, bringing attention to the environmental crises that often go unnoticed. In a similar way goes the concept of olfactivism, introduced by Jim Drobnick, to refer to artists' use of scent in urban environments to provoke thought and action on social and environmental issues. D. Rosen explores rituals that involve scents shared between humans and other species, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings and opening to the mysterious role of chemosignals in interactional dynamics. Finally, Lindsey French discusses various artworks incorporating natural and artificial scents to draw attention to environmental degradation, climate change, and the human impact on ecosystems. She argues that olfactory art can create a more visceral and immediate awareness of environmental issues, encouraging viewers to consider their own sensory experiences and their relationship with the environment. By using scents to evoke natural landscapes, pollution, or the loss of biodiversity, artists can provoke a sensory response that complements visual and auditory elements, making environmental art more impactful and engaging.

In conclusion, *Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance* presents a compelling case for the political and transformative potential of olfactory art. The thematic exploration across gender, race, environment, and institutional critique highlights how scents can serve as powerful tools for social critique and resistance. By proposing a radical alternative to the dominance of visual culture and engaging with the embodied nature of smell, this volume opens up new possibilities for understanding and experiencing art. It is an essential read for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersections of art, politics, and sensory studies, offering valuable insights into the often-overlooked world of olfactory art.

After reading the book, however, one might be left with an additional, fundamental question. The volume emphasises art, particularly olfactory art, as an activity fundamentally aimed at political and social resistance, such as against social stereotypes, pollution, and ultimately the circulation of powers that impede free self-expression and mutual relations. However, such an apparently Foucaultian thesis, if driven by a commitment to opposition for its own sake, might be exposed to the risk of circularity. Don't we need criteria for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of power, and thus those in need of resistance? Or, paradoxically, is any form of power worth resisting?

Recognising the power of art to dismantle traditional certainties and prejudices, one might wonder whether these forms of resistance also call for an explicit theoretical or anthropological foundation—an underlying idea on which to base the critique of the present. Novel forms of art, integrating the so-called lower senses, hold the promise of shedding light on these questions as well, helping us understand, at the end of the day, who we are and how we integrate with one another in societies.

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