

RHIZOME

Olfactory Suggestion: On Sean Raspet's smell-based work

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Image: Sean Raspet, Fruit Intersection Average: (Apple () Pear), 2013 - 2014.

Scent is confoundingly protean. With the exception of extreme instances—Proust with his fabled madeleine, the unexpected stench of burning plastic—its everyday effects are markedly dynamic, drifting: just outside the purview of cognitive recognition, much less considered analysis. G.W.F. Hegel suggested in his lectures from 1835–38 on aesthetics that the olfactory dimension functions as a constantly moving system: “As for smell, it cannot be an organ of artistic enjoyment ... because things are only available to smell in so far as they are in process.” Scent is an avatar, too, for contemporary experiences of molecular unease, manifested in widespread anxiety about the body’s violability by dangerous microbiota.

Whole Foods and InfoWars sell endless tinctures catering to this fear, and while their example is easy to dismiss, the biochemical realm is indeed hotly contested by political actors in corporate and governmental spheres. Considering the the recent acquisition of Monsanto by the pharmaceutical and chemical multinational Beyer, as well as the history of population management, biometrics, and necropolitical control, theorist Margarida Mendes describes the ongoing process of “molecular colonialism,” where dominant power structures fine-tune their scope to target the gene and the molecule alongside the individual and the geographic. In the case of this remarkable corporate merger, “it discloses an interrelated ecosystem of products that both create and offer remedies for contamination under the arch of the same company: quality control and environmental fitness assessment of food production, prevention, and healing of diseases, and research into future therapeutics.”

In the exhibition text for his recent show at Bridget Donahue, *Receptor-Binding Variations*, Sean Raspet notes that the pharmaceutical industry, the medical industry, and the fragrance industry all have a common practice: the design of molecules or mixtures to target specific receptors and induce physiological responses. The exhibition features ten discrete scents designed by the artist, who has worked as a flavorist, wafting out from whirring little diffusers hung along the gallery walls like sculptures. Each has a unique fragrance profile, carefully crafted at the molecular level, but the most memorable smell in the room is their combined mixture. It smells like a gaggle of teens just finished hotboxing a bathroom with Juul smoke, blending sugary nicotine clouds with noxiously “fresh”-smelling sanitation sprays. The olfactory suggestion of bathroom odor eliminators brings with it a conditioned visceral memory of bathroom odors themselves; on some irreducible level, the exhibition evokes a high-tech lavatory.



Installation view of “Sean Raspet: *Receptor-Binding Variations*” at Bridget Donahue. Photo by Gregory Carideo.

Once scents begin moving through the air, they are bound to intermingle, and this is especially so in a smaller, almost completely enclosed space like a gallery. The sensation of taking in all these chemicals at once is immediately affecting. The brain feels clogged, or alternatively, like its cognitive faculties have been subtly stunned, temporarily replaced with an enticingly banal screensaver. The gallery visitor’s headspace is over-activated, and there isn’t much mental bandwidth left for thinking. The olfactory sense starts to feel stretched out, like it’s weight training, as all the different scents impinge upon one another and crowd the sensory space. The inside of the nose tingles, and the mind goes haywire a little bit.

Treading along the room’s perimeter, the viewer sticks their face at each work, inspecting, processing, and reflecting. Not all of the diffusers spew their scent at once—one is compelled to let their sense of hearing lead the way to active machines, and scurry over. This guiding sonic component is compounded with the slightly disorienting drone of a loud air filtration device, which is billed as an artwork entitled *Negative Air* (2018). In the back of the gallery, visitors can try out and purchase a series of consumer goods including lotion, shampoo, and detergent that Raspet also produced for the exhibition. Their scents were created with the help of genetically modified yeast.



Sean Raspet, *Negative Air* (2018), installation view at Bridget Donahue, NYC. Photo by Gregory Carideo.

The olfactory designs in the main room all smell at least a little familiar; some immediately reveal themselves as old friends, while others feel like more specialized ingredients only previously smelled as part of a greater mixture. OR: 2V2, 2V1 has the unmistakable scent of Taco Bell meat, and OR: 1A2 suggests cherry chapstick. Another scent formation is savory, like glue, while one in the corner most evokes body odor. The gallery text tells us that none of these smells are organic, and that many of them are still under patent; googling “scent piracy” does not yield many informative results.

According to Raspet, *Receptor-Binding Variations* was designed as a selection of synthetic “primary scents”—intended to be an olfactory version of sight’s primary colors—originally created by the flavor and fragrance industries. The fact, then, that the show’s most overwhelming odor is a generalized haze is interesting given the fact that each of its component scents was crafted with such specificity. They were all designed to activate—or, in Raspet’s words, “target”—individual human olfactory receptors (ORs), which are part of the olfactory epithelium inside the nasal cavity and additionally located throughout the body. Each OR is sensitive to a specific range of chemical stimuli, while individual odorant molecules can activate multiple ORs and individual ORs can be activated by multiple odorants.

In the midst of the ongoing Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal, the word “targeting” carries extremely loaded connotations. Data scientists claim to have found effective ways to taxonomize consumers’ polyvalent desires so as to target them ever-more accurately. The former CEO of Cambridge Analytica, Alexander Nix, once famously said that he possessed “somewhere close to four or five thousand data points on every adult in the US.” Here, as in the case of Mendes’ notion of molecular colonialism, the exact contours of the person as such are called into question—who or what is a fluid-yet-contained collection of five thousand data points, exactly? Anxiety regarding these contours’ permeability becomes a dominant affect. Raspet’s 2013 work *Phantom Ringtone* comes to mind: a fragrance that sets out to evoke a simulation of its eponymous sensory experience.

This notion of targeting is the connective tissue between Raspet’s olfactory concerns and the processes understood as “molecular colonialism.” In present day iterations of population monitorization, bodies are no longer “finite unities,” but instead distributed networks of corporate agency. Mendes writes: “As patented GMO genes are absorbed into our bodies in a proprietary relationship of biological subjugation, the body itself becomes an expanded, multiple-infrastructure, where intervention can happen at many different scales. Moving bodies become fluid cartographies that cross different juridical regimes.” It should go without saying that the effects of molecular colonialism are not equally distributed. Working

with a pointedly invisible medium, Receptor-Binding Variations offers spectators the occasion to measure the subtle influence of proprietary molecules on mood and thought patterns, prompting reflection on more severe biochemical processes by virtue of the scents' relative harmlessness.

In Post-Fordist capitalism, as we know, consumers are increasingly drawn to the sphere of the so-called "immaterial"—thoughts, feelings, notifications—as opposed to concrete objects. Generally speaking, it is clear how our faculties of sight, hearing, taste, and touch are catered to, and monitored - and by which apps. For these, there are dedicated platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, Yelp, Tinder, the central hub of Google search, and so on. Smell is significantly harder to quantitatively pin down as a trackable sensation in the computational sphere than the other four senses—because smell is harder to study than vision, for example, there is much more available data what a given person likes to see.

Molecular colonialism, data mining, and the overall receptor-targeting industry all highlight the ways in which personhood contains multitudes of territories, actively contested and fought over outside the boundaries of traditional geopolitical notions of nation-state and individual sovereignty. It is helpful understand the self as containing a plethora of what Metahaven has called "withinscapes." "Identity is no longer assigned to the whole person," writes the collective. "Instead it addresses a potentially vast amount of layers—hence, consumer markets—within the person. It addresses the Napalm Death fan inside the investment banker alongside her penchant for art nouveau pottery ... In the indefinite 'withinscapes' of the post-singular individual resides a folded mental topology; its inconsistencies are only reunited by the physical integrity of the body that brings them together." For now, smell evades widespread quantification so as to produce gaps in the withinscape cartography, amplifying a certain shade of opacity—however minor—in the process. Indeed, it is still very possible to create new molecules in order to produce new odors; Raspert recently exhibited some of these, produced in collaboration with chemists at Hunter College, at The Artist's Institute.



Sean Raspert and Christoph Salzmann, Water (Ice v Residue) (2017-2018). Installation view, the The Artist's Institute.

Raspert argued in a 2016 essay for the necessity of an English language system specifically designed for describing the unique characteristics of smell. This system would be attuned to the abstract qualities of

odor in itself, and decisively break from the Western legacy of discussing scent in mimetic terms by referencing fixed objects in the world ("this scent smells like a rose.") Raspet raises an interesting point: of the five senses, it is remarkable that smell is the only one that does not have its own substantive, abstract sense-specific terminology. While fragrance experts will speak of a scent's "low notes" and "high notes," and a sommelier can skillfully describe a wine's "body" based on a quick whiff, the language they use is still premised on an operation of simile; the olfactory dimension has no strict equivalent of a glissando, gradient, or rhyme.

It is not easy to explain the absence of a language system specifically dedicated to smell, but it can be traced back in part to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Western thinkers decided that sight was the most "civilized" sense and scent the least. Another likely contributing factor is the fact that scent is the least scientifically understood of the five senses: 1% of human genes code for olfaction, and it is not known why. It is possible to know in advance how a color or sound will be perceived by able-bodied people based on its underlying wavelength or frequency, but the same is not true of scent. Put simply, scientists do not know with certainty why things smell the way they do; scents waft across and between withinscapes.

The olfactory dimension's figurative inconsistency is intensified by the classificatory problems it poses. A chemical structure's scent cannot be deduced purely from a graphic delineation of its internal makeup: something must be smelled to actually be smelled. Furthermore, while humans have 400 olfactory receptors, it is not clear that all of them are necessarily functional. "For more than 85 percent of [ORs] we don't even know a single molecule that activates the receptor," said Joel Mainland, an olfactory neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine, in a phone interview. "Then, for the ones we do know the molecule activates, we have a handful of odors that activate it. We don't usually have more than 20 or 30 odors that activate a given receptor. Why is it that we can do everything in color vision with three receptors but we need 400 in olfaction? That still is very unclear." To make matters even more complicated, the operations of the olfactory system exceed smell alone: they include pheromones and olfactory receptors in other parts of the body besides the nose.

Personal computing devices are highly effective at directly targeting the other senses, but smell generally does not receive the same treatment. "There is data on smell, but it's not nearly as fine-grained as the other senses," said Mainland. "It's much harder to capture and turn into a number. It's easy for me to buy a computer monitor that does extremely accurate visual stimulus, but there are very few off-the-shelf olfactometers that will deliver whatever odor stimulus you want reliably." Mainland is nonetheless confident that olfaction will be effectively dataminated before long. Researching this space, one learns about the Palo Alto-based Aromyx Corporation, which claims to have "built a solution for the digital capture of scent and taste – the EssenceChip™"; Aromyx's early technology was funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), and their media relations representative did not return a request for comment.

The most compelling of the ten Receptor-Binding Variations elude conventional description along the lines Raspet describes in his essay. In any instance of smelling, the sensation of odor is never a singular, cohesive event—it is always in motion. Because there is no expansive, specialized language to describe the function of odor, the internal bodily effects of these ambiguously defined scents have an additional dimension of slipperiness. Once they are smelled, sensations come and go according to unpredictable morphological patterns, ungrounded by viscerally felt vagueness that operates beyond the reach of everyday cognitive processes; something similar happens with works involving scent by Anicka Yi, Amalia Ulman, Raja'a Khalid, and others. The knowability of scent is not only thrown into question, but also—when we consider the molecular realm traversing, modifying, and interfacing with the inside of the body—the knowability of the "self," on however small a scale. This provides an occasion to consider the ways in which the constitution of a person is always already imbricated with other people, the physical environment, and other species.

If smell is compelling because of its position outside of foregrounded awareness, navigating and activating internal space according to procedures that defy easy explanation, then it's of particular interest that Raspet figures Receptor-Binding Variations as a selection of highly-focused "primary scents." While Mainland found this premise of Raspet's dubious on a technical level—as one can imagine, these are not literally the primary scents, as those are not yet conclusively known—the notion of a basic synthetic olfactory typology is still a compelling concept. The move resonates with his insistence on the benefits of effective olfactory taxonomization, and faintly echoes the business plan of an odd, inescapable pop-cultural phenomenon whose scent this exhibition immediately recalls: the Juul vaporizer. For a long time, e-cigarette culture was defined by an emphasis on long tail marketing: endless flavor options, intensive vape modding culture (still popular in 2014, at the time of Rhizome's "This is the ENDD: The E-Cigarette in Context" program), and an intensely niche status overall. It was only with the Juul that vaping truly went mainstream, and as of the time of posting, the company only sells eight flavors that form something of a "primary flavor" cross-section in their own field.

Part of the appeal of a synthetic primary scent model is its capacity to be re-engineered through an anti-naturalist paradigm. It is easy to speculate that the same thing holds true for Juul consumers. The campfire-tinged "Classic Tobacco" tastes nothing like its namesake, and more like disconcertingly refreshing poison mist—a car air freshener redesigned for the lungs. Likewise, "Fruit Medley" tastes like food coloring and "Mango" tastes like caprese salad, and teens love it. Contrary to standards of scientific rigor, the structure of feeling that animates Receptor-Binding Variations is intertwined with the fact that the exhibition does not present the definitive scent palate. Making their way through the gallery, the visitor gets the sense that there could be a couple more, or a couple less. There's something strangely pleasant—albeit, nothing like relief—about knowing that whatever inductive process one uses to discern the defining parameters of either typology, the process of putting it into motion will inevitably be hazy, vaporous.