

Media Review

On Smell and Olfaction: Three Coordinated Exhibitions in Lausanne, Switzerland

We live in the era of sensory turn. From the early 1980s onwards, senses are gaining a lot of interest from social and human sciences scholars.¹ Already a rapid examination of the non-exhaustive Concordia University Centre of Sensory Studies Research Directory makes one realise the extensiveness of investigations ongoing all over the globe and lets one estimate the spectrum of disciplines involved.²

Museology and museography are no exceptions here and after more than a century of sight hegemony other senses either enter or make their way back into showrooms.³ Interactivity, immersive design and multisensory spaces become new standards. All the senses are being involved in order to let visitors experience more, to give them a better understanding of subjects in question, to engage rather than to allow contemplation. Senses as such are also repeatedly granted exclusive attention.

Among the five traditional senses, due to its ephemerality, smell is probably the most challenging in expographic terms and yet is not deterrent. There are multiple examples of exhibitions organised in past decades exploring various aspects of smell. Let me mention those of most relevance to the medical area: *reminiSCENT* (2003; FADO Performance Art Centre, Toronto, Canada) on the relationship between smell and memory and *Metascent: An Exhibition on Human Odor* (2014; Medical Museion, Copenhagen, Denmark) on metabolic scent.

Currently, smell is in the spotlight in Lausanne, Switzerland. In concert with one another, three institutions invite the public to dwell in the realm of olfaction from three different viewpoints. A particularity to be noted is the double affiliation of the latter two institutions dependent both from the University Hospital and the University of Lausanne. The different order in which these bodies are cited, along with the establishments' names, is not haphazard. It designates the strength of the existent bonds.

Nez à nez. Contemporary Perfumers, at MUDAC (Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design) from 15 February until 16 June 2019, curated by Claire Favre Maxwell and Amélie Bennwart in cooperation with experts at *Nez, the olfactory magazine*, introduces thirty-nine fragrances composed by thirteen creators. Precisely, despite the exhibition's title, the perfumes are what we discover first, before eventually encountering the people behind them, before hearing and reading them confide their creative processes, inspirations, the paths of their careers and the impulses at the origin of their vocation. Even before catching a glimpse of them in multi-faceted photographic portraits by Olivier Culmann. Effective, elegant and discreet, the style of expography employed by the London based Studio Glithero could be described as non-violent by analogy to what Claude Régy names a non-violent theatre. The one that does not reach out for the spectator, but allows him or her to approach the artwork. Designed in neutral colour tones, from off-white via

¹ David Howes, 'The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies', *Sensory Studies*, 2013 (online <http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/>).

² Sensory Studies. Research Directory. <http://www.sensorystudies.org/about/>.

³ David Howes, 'Introduction to Sensory Museology', *The Senses and Society*, 9, 3 (2014), 259–67.

beige to graphite, it amazes, every show room entered, with yet another artefact imagined to contain and to diffuse scents. A very interesting contribution by the *Nez magazine* team is a perfume genealogy diagram where the thirty-nine perfumes exposed are placed among other historically significant fragrances. This visualisation is an attempt to depict hypothetical currents or families in the scent universe – a memorable museum experience through and through.

What a Nose! Scents and Feelings at Musée de la main UNIL-CHUV (Lausanne University-University Hospital), from 15 February 2019 until 23 February 2020, was developed in collaboration with the Geneva University Swiss Center of Affective Sciences. It intends to embark the visitors on an itinerary meandering between feelings aroused by or attitudes taken towards olfaction throughout history, and emotions provoked by scents. In fact, true to their mission of scientific mediation, the curators, Roxanne Currat, Olivier Glassey, Carolina Liebling and Martine Meyer, share even more with their broad audiences. They confront them with olfactive art, they narrate anecdotes and direct them through an olfactory maze. They present theories, particularities, pathologies, as well as possible practical usages of smell. The passage via the exhibition halls is dotted by multiple interactive installations enabling one to explore his or her own olfactory perception and sensibility. Those are set up by the scientists from the Swiss Center of Affective Sciences. The results of the tests completed by the visitors and registered electronically, will contribute to their research. Rich and instructive, yet not failing to provoke self-reflection and, perhaps even more importantly, emotions.

In connection with their exhibits, each institution programmed several workshops addressing various audiences. They have also collectively edited an excellent bilingual French and English catalogue: *Sentir, ressentir: parfumeurs, odeurs et émotions*.⁴

The third show, *Nose: Sources and Artefacts from the Institute of Humanities in Medicine Collections CHUV-UNIL* (University Hospital-Lausanne University), from 21 February 2019 until 21 February 2020, curated by its library team, presents historical material on nose anatomy and pathology as well as some of the ways the smell organ might have and may still participate in illness diagnostics and therapy. It looks into the manner nose forms used to be interpreted by the pseudoscience physiognomy and displays book collections of two eminent medical doctors preserved by the library: Belgian rhinologist and medical historian, Jacques Willemot, and Swiss plastic and aesthetic surgery pioneer, author of innovative nose reconstruction methods, Rodolphe Meyer. The whole contained in seven display cabinets and explained in ten brief texts enhanced by powerful graphic design by Chris Gautschi.

Here is the account of the three manifestations. As a conclusion, I would like to share some additional observations while also revealing the conflict of interest I have writing this text; I am the author of the third exhibition reviewed.

The most modest one cannot and is not trying to compete with the other two. It is not intended as a pure museographic act either. The primary mission of the Institute of Humanities in Medicine (formerly University Institute for History of Medicine and Public Health) is obviously research. Yet, a vast and interesting book and medical artefacts collection was developed there since its creation some thirty years ago. It deserves to be known to wider public and we are working to highlight it. Organising exhibitions remains one of the most common ways of collection mediation. However, the profound change the curatorial practice methods underwent recently, with extensive usage of more or

⁴ Collectif Nez, *Sentir, ressentir: parfumeurs, odeurs et émotions* (Paris: Nez éditions/Lausanne: Mudac : Musée de la main UNIL-CHUV, DL, 2019).

less sophisticated technology, transforms audiences' expectations. It thus compels cultural heritage institutions other than museums to rethink and reinvent their collection mediation methods too. Virtual exposition curation seems to be a possible lead. Presenting some challenges and difficulties as it does (coding literacy gap, high digital tools development costs), it may result in longer lasting outputs.

Another related issue that raises some questions is the phenomenon of cultural events echoing each other, just as in the case of the exhibitions discussed here. This phenomenon is recurrent here in Lausanne and is becoming almost a kind of tradition. Already last year, a similar synergy was brought on around the theme of conscience. Two exhibitions, a conference cycle and an annual cultural agenda of a library, were organised. As of now, a new collaborative inter-institutional project is discussed for 2021. This working pattern surely gives the events a bigger impact and a better visibility. Both would improve even more if the institutions involved built common, centralised promotion campaigns.

Moreover, Lausanne is a city with a rich cultural offering and more than a dozen museums. Still, is it more interesting for local exhibition goers to have a wider choice of themes presented? Or rather fewer themes, but some of them approached from different angles by different institutions? Would the duration of shows influence the answers? Would the frequency in occurrence of such collaborative projects have a bearing on their attractiveness? The 2021 project should probably include an audience survey to help solve the dilemma.

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