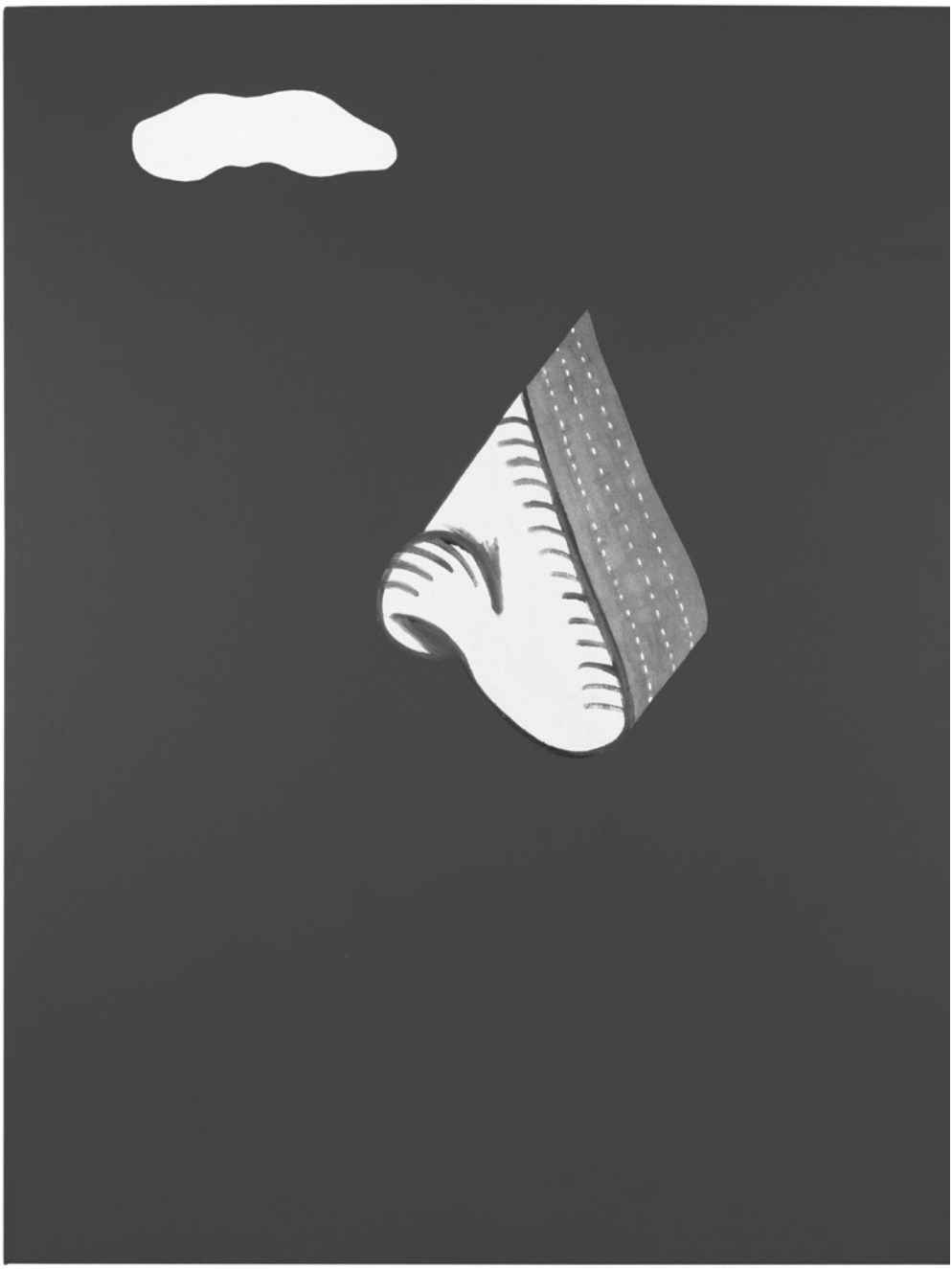

The author of this bulletin would have liked to acknowledge all the writings, influences and reflections that led her to linger at the fragrance counter, but has settled on one article quoted from *The New Yorker* ("The Scent of the Nile" by Chandler Burr, March 14, 2005), and a nod to The Bible.

Front cover: John Baldessari, *God Nose,* 1965, Oil on canvas 172,7 x 144,8 cm / 68 x 57 in., Courtesy Sprueth Magers Berlin London

We all smell. As in, we all emit a smell. We may cover it up, enhance it, or ignore it. Most often, we don't notice it. When we do, we know others have probably noticed, too. Usually, there are few steps we can take to remedy the problem right away. Reducing the range and frequency of gestures or widening the physical distance from one's cohort may help, but no matter how rigidly the bodies in a summer subway car stand, they still do their thing.

Most of us smell. That is, we perceive smell. We smell and cannot *not* smell. Closing our nostrils or filtering out the particles that cause stench are simply not options. There is no earplug or eye mask equivalent to censor undesired odorants. There may be sprays and scented candles, but these are merely band-aids where a body cast is required. As of yet, no one has come up with an effective blockade. On the flipside of this impotence, we can't remedy our *not smelling,* and it seems we're not even particularly invested in trying. Newborns and infants are tested for hearing and vision development, but few worry about a child's olfactory faculties. We don't periodically measure the accuracy or sensitivity of our sense of smell as we mature. Only radical changes—say, from a relatively normally perceptive nose to partial anosmia (the inability to smell the coconut in the Banana Boat, for example)—call for medical attention. It seems the battle of the senses has been forfeited: Febreeze and Axe are medieval next to LASIK and Bose.

On the other hand, Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior brought gold, myrrh, and frankincense to the newborn wunderkind, introducing him early-on to what would later become known as the luxury goods section of the market. Though we may be inept at training and prosthetisizing our sense of smell, today a multi-billion dollar industry thrives on the sale of scented alcohol. The fragrance sector's annual profit is around $30 billion. According to some reports, an "average" woman owns six different fragrances, and though a man tends to be more secretive about it, chances are his bathroom cabinet stores at least two different perfumes, in addition to a strong deodorant and an aftershave. A large fragrance house invests as much as $350 million a year in R&D. A new ad campaign can cost tens of millions. Chanel is willing to pay $17 million for Brad Pitt's endorsement in order to keep moving their invisible, intangible product off the shelves at a rate of one bottle every 30 seconds, and that number doesn't reflect

the knockoffs that parasitically cash in on Pitt's image every millisecond.

Celebrity perfumes kill a flock of birds with one stone. If Pitt's or Catherine Deneuve's presence conjures a fantasy situation and sets the projection apparatus whirring, a star-BRANDED fragrance takes evocation further. Here, the idea is simple. With a swipe of the credit card, you are buying a crucial element of Sarah Jessica Parker- or Beyoncé-ness. The two of you will smell the same, feel the same, and, in all likelihood have a similar effect on your surroundings—or so the pitch would lead you to believe. For that is what the fragrance industry promises: not only an impact on your own mood and sense of self-esteem (think of the alleged benefits of aromatherapy), but more importantly, the ability to spread an invisible blanket of influence over your surroundings in a flavor and a dose you control. Without their consent, your entourage will be subject to the molecules you transport and emit.

The way you smell at a job interview is supposedly key. Not to mention that first date. Yet, whether human beings have pheromones, like insects or certain flowers, is a point of contention among scientists. Some gravitate more to the nature than to the nurture side of the argument. We certainly have a vomeronasal organ (VMO) at the base of our nasal passageways that connects smell, or the nasal reception of molecules, with hormonal reaction, but experiments intended to trigger the VMO distinctly have proven extremely difficult. For now, it's safe to conclude that there is an infrastructure in place, but we don't really know how or when it actually works. Those who claim we do emit and act on pheromones are quick to add that ours don't work the same way as the unfiltered animal kingdom's. Skeptics focus on the placebo effect of scent: people wearing the promise of fragrance will behave more confidently, hence they will have better success attaining their desires. Smell, the skeptics suggest, impacts the reality we perceive through the channel of vision, which, in turn, impacts social behavior. Pavlovians would surely underwrite this thinking with the argument that we salivate because we are visually trained to salivate. But paleontologists would interject that this was not always the case. At humanity's dawn, they'd say, our sense of smell was far more astute. As we fine-tuned our color vision, we became less apt at perceiving scent. The surviving fittest traded a multi-fragrant world for a ROYGBIV universe.

A contemporary nose has around five to six million receptors for detecting odor. A non-human nose may have twenty times as many. A rabbit, for instance, has close to 100 million of these patches. Still peanuts in comparison to a dog's 300 million. Whether human, dog, or rabbit, the cells are located where the nasal pathway meets the deep grey matter of brain. As such, the distance and time between surface input and cerebral reception is short. Smell has us quite literally on the edge. It results from deep, mostly unwanted intrusions. Scent molecules, sometimes aided by ethereal alcohol, jolt certain sensors while leaving others indifferent. Some molecules also linger longer than others—coffee, often used as palate cleanser, is intense but fast. Perfume, which may blend up to 70 or 80 ingredients, acts on multiple sensors at once. Compare the effect to a hundred keys on an expanded piano, all struck simultaneously, with different tones gradually ebbing away at different times. Particular listeners will hear particular notes and not others. One thing science confirms is that we are all *anosomic*—that's the technical term for being unable to perceive odor—in our own, individual ways.

Some noses just know. They are used as testers. Apparently, there's an army of professionally sensitive smellers in former Eastern European countries such as Poland, which begs the question: Did communism augment olfactory sensitivity? Or did capitalism and social democracy numb nasal precision? Or is it the simple inversion of the *translatio imperii* story—an unbridled pursuit of low wages leading eastward? Who knows. It is, however, a fact that these noses are predominantly female, sexually active, and don't take contraceptives or other hormonal treatments. When they arrive for a smelling session, they wear zero fragrance, and have not eaten anything that could be heavy on the breath. They are über-sensitive potential consumers, typically called in for up to four hours. A blend of augur and guinea pig, the nose sniffs on demand then tells fragrance developers which directions to pursue. She is like an editor exposed to a rough cut. Her work falls between sketch and final product, invention and marketing. The nose is exposed to the potential smell of the near future, and her job is to distinguish, associate, forecast, all while neutralizing her own smell(s) as much as possible.

Imagine, for a moment, Marcel, a character in an early 20th-century French novel. Almost mechanistically, he imbibes a spoonful of chamomile

tea with madeleine crumbs, and suddenly arrives at another place and time, a past he had entirely forgotten. While taste plays a principal role in this time-capsuling, smell catalyzes the experience. Even Starbucks knows taste buds can only go four ways (sweet, bitter, sour, or salty), but that smell can stimulate or prevent taste and its satisfactions. While Marcel may be consciously looking to rediscover that same kick, it won't happen as he pleases. Smell's time and place is mostly involuntary. Conversely, other French literary protagonists go to extremes to cancel out the smell of baked goods. Consider des Esseintes, hedonistic heir of bygone luxury, whose homegrown experiments with exquisite aromatherapy are driven by his desire to eliminate the haunting smell of a harmless, though apparently vulgar, frangipane.

Another class of noses is mostly male, though science maintains that women tend to have a finer sense of smell. These noses are hardly ever youngsters. Like any decent cheese, they require age to ripen. In this context, ripeness stands not only for accumulated experience and exposure, but also for an altogether athletic mechanization of olfactory recognition and regurgitation. Someone who wants to become Somebody in the fragrance business must learn to distinguish and remember 3,000 ingredients. Marketing videos advertising the high sophistication of premium perfumery schools feature students in hygienic white lab coats, smelling, concentrating, taking notes. Their libraries are lined with uniform flacons, their principles of arrangement unbeknownst to outsiders —alphabetical, top notes, families…? The upkeep and rules of use in these aromathèques are surely more time- and climate-sensitive than in any other, regular library.

But memorization is mere mechanics. Technique comes afterwards, when the nose turns organic chemist, learning about distillation, fixation, compounds, and captives. This stage marks a passage from molecule identification to observation and conditioning of molecular behavior.

Even that, still, is only technique. It's after this stage, which amounts to 15 or 20 years, that the chaff finally separates from the grain, and the truly gifted stand out from the clever copyists. Despite the decades-long training, a nose is, after all, a natural talent. Or so the story goes. Look at Grenouille, Parisian protagonist of a popular German murder

novel of the mid 1980s. Untrained, orphaned, outcast and repulsive, he has an inborn precision for smelling, analyzing and recreating. The first time he appears in the novel, he opens his nostrils. His eyes follow a few sentences later. Born a nasal genius, rescued from among fish entrails, he is also a conceptualist *par excellence*. The idea of a smell is enough to cause him to smell it. No need to detour via material reality. Following a retributive logic, this heightened sense of smell comes at the cost of something else: Grenouille can capture smells but can't emit any himself. This lack is the root of his social exile, but not his motive to possess scents. His proclivity for smelling and his pleasure in producing innovative potions is stimulated by the unusual capability of being able to focus on scent and scent alone. Among regular earthlings stuck in correspondence and synaesthetic perception, he is a unique specimen, a nasal purist.

While other stories don't directly associate an acute sense of smell with an inability to inspire empathy, they often insist on an innate sense, something unchangeable and inalienable. An aura surrounds legendary families of noses. And they are now a breed that—menaced by the speed and power of contemporary commerce—must face its expiration and its inability to unconditionally rule, not unlike European royalty. Even equipped with the best heating and mixing plates, distillers, and hi-fi drop counters, the perfumier nose remains an archetype of the 19th century, a time of organic chemistry, steel and steam engines. *Le nez* clings to the cachet of a Francophile yesteryear. His private office features a wooden secrétaire desk and art objects that could have decorated a bourgeois Balzac-ian salon, an imagined haven from the heft and heat of industrialization.

A professional nose's work is solitary and slow. He can't simply whip something together (even an obsessed and unkempt Grenouille admits as much). But his lengthy trial and error process pays off in a magical a-ha! moment of alchemic wonder, when numbers and drops achieve an identity of their own, transforming into olfactory pleasure beyond the real—the bittersweet of blood and rose dew on the blade of a sword, for example, as one Spanish-actress-inspired French perfume has been described. The true nose, though he may present himself as a lofty illusionist, designs for skins, for perdurance and sillage, whereas the *parvenu* increasingly designs for the paper tester. All in all, it's a "maximum effort, minimum result" enterprise, where the cost of making the perfume is often

outrageous (with some ingredients fetching as much as $20,000 per pound) especially considering the high risk of failure. Apparently, one shouldn't be surprised to hear a (French) perfumer say, "My perfumes are wonderful, they lost five million dollars, but who cares, they're objects of art that will live forever and conform to my immortal, pure aesthetic."

A genealogist would probably trace nose lineages back to the city of Grasse, located in the French Alpes Maritimes district. Until the late 16th century, Grasse was a tanner's town that, thanks to a certain Galimard, re-invented itself as capital of scented leather goods and perfumes tout court. A neat teleology traces the way out of putrefaction and stench into fine fragrance. A flower for color turns into a flower for smell, and with the help of a pair of scented gloves, gains the endorsement of none other than Catherine de Medici herself. Close enough to wealthy Italian noblemen in Genoa and Pisa; to the breeze and commerce of the Mediterranean, and the port of Nice; and blessed with a microclimate suited for growing flowers all year round (picture fields of rose, jasmine, orange blossom, lavender, myrtle, wild mimosa), Grasse became the world's number-one producer of raw materials for the fragrance industry. A city found its destiny, and the houses of Galimard, Fragonard, and Molinard, a Provençal home.

Even if the flowers bloom for the greatest part of the year and are picked at the crack of dawn, it takes more than petals, oils, a nose, and alcohol to make a perfume. Givaudan started patenting scent molecules in 1902, and since then, high-end fragrance houses have been developing their own captives (synthetically produced, patented molecules not sold on the open market, hence smells that are the sole property of their inventors, at least until the patent expires). While raw ingredients are still widely used, even the most traditionalist nose will reach for synthetics. Accordingly, there has been a change on the user's end, as well. Whereas consumers once focused on a singular ingredient and took that part for the whole —evident in names such as "rose water" or "orange essence"—, they've become more molecularly conscious over the last few decades. Small perfume boutiques in the trendiest parts of town, near restaurants serving foams and flash-frozen dishes, contribute to this sensitivity and the demand for molecular olfaction. A singular wave has gradually made way for

Brownian molecules. Thanks to such cadre as well as brands that literally celebrate the eccentricity of the molecule, we now know that a scent is not just one thing, but is, in actual fact, a bunch of moving particles that may not always produce the same effect. My own particles (a.k.a. "skin") play a role, as do my gestures (I haphazardly crash molecules together with my carelessness), and the specific receptors in my surroundings. In short, no two smells smell alike. Unless, of course, you find yourself at 898 Madison Avenue. Here, cylindrical glass structures equipped with vacuums allow select fragrances to fully express without competing or blending with others. These smelling columns are perfume's white cubes.

A nose commonly lends his services to a larger fashion house, becoming a mercenary at the mercy of designers and executives, the latter eagerly seeking a blockbuster scent. Since the 1960s, when Eau de Parfum was firmly established among luxury goods, perfume has proven the one "haute" item that Joe Smith will be most willing and able to acquire for himself. While he may be comfortable purchasing a knockoff bag or scarf, he's less adventurous when it comes to fragrance. Perfume and piracy are awkward bedfellows. Perhaps that's because one imagines there is truly a touch of magic in the real thing. A bootleg fragrance may suddenly sour, citrus may turn to urine.

The master perfumer will most likely report to the head of the perfume division, a well-heeled executive whose judgments are harsh and unforgiving. ("Merde! This is shit! Get out, Monsieur Ellena!") Only Chanel boasts a fully incorporated in-house fragrance line, with its own episodes of harshness—Coco denouncing Jews to the Vichy regime in order to regain full control over Parfums Chanel, a company she had founded with the Wertheim brothers in 1924. The smell of success may be sweet, but it is neither selfless nor just.

Time-wise, fragrance is about catching up. Smell doesn't approach you from a distance like a bright red dress. You only perceive it when you are close to the source, or when the source wafts by you. I walk up the staircase, and I know someone has been there. Streaks of ambergris linger in the air. It's the drug-sniffing dog versus the sacrificial canary. If the sense of smell doesn't predict, it does *suggest.* A flowery presence may hint at romance, whereas a darker cloud, erotism; citrus's non-

threatening yet clean sharpness is probably a right pick for a mid-level job interview. That is, if we take the fragrance sales person for her word. Her counterpart at a clothing boutique would rarely be as forthcoming about whether a dress will bring a desired outcome—an "Ooh, sexy!" being the most he might dare. Fragrance, however, progeny of spell-binding elixirs that once promised to circumvent rational action, can enter this territory.

But despite the mystique attached to scents and their potential to influence future events, fragrance shopping advice is typically generic when it isn't propounding standard recipes for success. The salesperson will simply and even without inspiration follow your lead as for what you like and don't like. Shopping for scent is a process closer to wine tasting than to total make-over. You rarely leave a perfumerie feeling like a new person ready for a novel future, rather like a person whose tastes have been reinforced, accentuated, strengthened. (Try, for example, convincing the salesperson to suggest something that you'd never come up with yourself. Though you're going in for the proverbial flats, you want to be swayed to leave with go-go boots. While such conversions may be much appreciated in other settings, they don't go over at the fragrance counter.) And while we rarely go back to the same tie or gloves, we will repeat perfumes for years, even decades. The return is not seen as a sign of stagnation. My mother's steadfast use of YSL's *Opium*, for instance, doesn't mean she never left the 1970s. Though some fragrances are promoted as part of seasonal collections, the truth of the matter is such cyclicality matters little. Even the uncommon permanence of fragrance ads suggests as much. Since 1994, Comme des Garçons' perfume has been steadily consumed, rain or shine. Its packaging has also changed very little. Allegedly, *No.5* has only made insignificant tweaks to the recipe and the flacon during its over 90-year lifespan. Given such fidelity and relative longevity, it's nearly oxymoronic to speak of "fragrance fashion." If fashion's present is always already past, then fragrance is that part of fashion that hovers, suspended in a passé simple.

Perfumes are more about creating situations than crafting a distinct identity. Fragrances cause circumstances to reappear like memories or to stick around *in absentia*. They are placeholders for promises—ideas transmitted by an intangible, invisible, and fleeting medium. And the nose

corresponds to this medium as a type—one who stands for a process or the myth of a process that embodies the contradictions found in our generally clumsy manner of assessing and consuming smell.

So, this is where we are today. We've left the putrid aroma of the Middle Ages, refined our skills at capturing floral essences, had a love-hate affair with the smell of patisserie, and nobly enjoyed provocative musk and voluptuously exotic flavors. At present, we embrace raw molecules that accentuate our individual uniqueness. Meanwhile, we shop in subtly scented environments and infuse our bedrooms with fragrances promising relaxing dreams of happiness while the love industry purports the skillful matching of body odors as its golden apple—everlasting dates built on solid matching of even more solid data.

It is said that each perfume that sees the light of day adds novelty to the world. Whereas no unknown colors and shapes shall ever be discovered, the unbridled combinations of fragrance molecules can present us with *the shock of the new.* But even that olfactory newness gets old. We are wired to associate what we smell with a personal past and imagine the future based on those very inputs. Fragrance is always already a retro future. When it comes to smells, a good forecast loops back to a past that, at best, we had forgotten.

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