

No. 7

WAYS OF SENSING.

OLFACTORY CULTURE(S) AND CONTEMPLATION

Stop and smell the roses, they say. The truth is we seldom stop and smell anything, yet there is so much to feel and explore when volatile molecules come in contact with our olfactory receptors! In this section dedicated to the aesthetic and cultural value of scents, the objects on display invite us to discover what it's like to really smell, deliberately and thoughtfully. They prompt unusual gestures and behaviors, allow for a focused attention, a nuanced perception which highlights the remarkable capacities of our nose and olfactory brain. This kind of refined attention has long been part of some cultures with age-old beliefs and practices associated with smell, either profane—such as the Japanese art of *Kōdō* which involves a form of olfactory contemplation—or eminently spiritual. Since ancient times most religions have indeed had a spiritual relation to perfume—from the Latin *per fumum*, “through the smoke”—and it is still customary in numerous cultures to burn aromatic substances as part of religious rituals. Over the centuries, many objects of high mechanical and aesthetic value have been designed to this effect. Today, designers are referencing these cultures, reinventing traditions, reinterpreting legends, and repurposing ritual shapes to turn them into original smelling objects and forge a contemporary olfactory culture.

No. 2

NOSE MEET THE EYE.

THE POWER AND BEAUTY OF NATURE

This second section is an exploration of the aesthetics of uniquely designed scent diffusers in which there is more than meets the nose. Contrary to scent diffusion engineers, designers care about the look of things as much as about their technicality. They are thus challenged to create objects situated between beauty and efficiency, looks and functionality, while dealing with an invisible and intangible matter. Working with a range of low-tech diffusing techniques—capillary action, dispersion, vaporization, heating, etc.—they are putting an emphasis on materials, shapes, textures, and motions inspired by natural resources, forms, and phenomena. Additionally, as smells are kinetic by nature, some designers have created objects that facilitate both motion and its visualization, often by appealing to the power of the four elements. When are we more blissfully aware of smells than when a warm breeze carries a whiff to our nose? Than when the rain starts to fall, or when we crumple a leaf between our fingers? These are some of the sensations designers are striving to reproduce at a reduced scale while also capturing the timeless beauty of nature. Some of the diffusers presented here thus come to resemble ornamental, sculptural works of art, giving prominence to physicality and organicity over technology.

No. 3

THE SCENT OF CARE.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Perfumes used to be deeply associated with pharmacopoeia. Since ancient times until the 19th century, they have been used, more or less adequately, to prevent and treat a vast array of disorders. Despite the boom of modern medicine and pharmaceuticals, the sense of smell is still diversely employed to improve health. While it can be a powerful diagnostic tool, capable of detecting volatile compounds that indicate illness, its loss can also signal infections, neurodegenerative diseases, or even depression. Furthermore, because volatile molecules penetrate bodies through the nose where olfactory neurons are in direct contact with the outer-world, they can influence both our physiological and psychological state. But scents need interfaces to be properly used within this realm. One might think of the peculiar masks worn by plague doctors in the late Middle Ages in Europe, designed with long beaks to hold protective aromatic plants. The designers presented in this section have created objects that allow scents and fragrances to interact with and act on the body in beneficial ways, either for olfactory diagnosis, or in more performative ways inspired by aromatherapy and aromacology. These objects are designed to mediate smells so as to positively affect mental health, well-being, and day to day life, from emotional regulation, sleep management, or accommodation training, to elderly care. Some are even intended to help patients cope with other pathologies such as sensory impairment or allergies, widening the horizons for olfactory design within the realm of healthcare.



A SCENTED ART OF LIVING.

A NEW SENSE OF PRESENCE AND PLEASURE

Whether naturally emanating from construction materials and objects, or deliberately added to the atmospheres, scents contribute to building an atmosphere and a sense of place. They ground us in specific spaces, shape the way we feel in them, and anchor them in our mind. After three centuries of a western deodorizing crusade which yearned for olfactory-silent spaces, ambient scenting has become a common hedonistic practice in homes, offices, stores, and other communal spaces. At home especially, people now seek a distinct, familiar, pleasurable scent. The designers in this section have found innovative ways of introducing smells in our day-to-day environment to create a form of scented art of living. Some of them have created practical and decorative objects designed to perfume the domestic sphere in an atypical manner, moving away from the traditional room spray, incense holder, or scented candle. Others challenge the way we perceive and interact with mundane objects by giving them an unexpected redolent dimension. By doing so, they also challenge the way we consider and accomplish daily actions and routines such as eating, drinking, showering, telling the time, or even playing. Altogether, what all of these designers have at heart, is to physically ground us in space and time, and, through smells, excite a new sense of engagement, presence and pleasure.

No. 5

SPRAY IT DON'T SAY IT.

COMMUNICATION, EMOTION, AND MEMORY

Sometimes scents speak louder than words. This section explores alternative and speculative modalities of communication and remembering through olfaction. From an evolutionary standpoint, the sense of smell shapes our social behaviors. But when the first humans started to walk on two legs, their nose got farther from their fellow humans: sight, hearing, and, to a lesser extent, touch, then became the main modalities of interpersonal communication. Smell however, kept a more or less unconscious yet important role in our relationships, attractions and rejections. Designers in this section have tried to imagine how we could create meaningful interactions by deliberately communicating and engaging with one another—but also with non-humans—through this innate sense. In many ways, olfaction is a way to get in touch with others, to revive closeness and abolish distances. Who hasn't felt suddenly deeply connected to a loved one upon smelling their perfume, whether they were really close or extremely far away? Because of its proximity with the limbic system, smell perception have a strong affective component and constitutes the most potent and poignant way of creating and reactivating memories. Some objects and wearables in this section enable us to capture the present moment, to revive the past, and reconnect to distant times, people or places. Both memory and souvenir, a smell, mediated through these designs, can act as an emotional photograph. They say an image is worth a thousand words. Might a scent be worth a thousand images?