

A multi-sensorial perception of space - 'Olfactoscape' by Maki Ueda

Written by Caro Verbeek

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'Because we have two nostrils and because we can move, we are able to perceive smells in stereo and navigate through a space by inhaling'



Eyes closed, hands on the circularly arranged cloth hanging from the ceiling, concentrated on the olfactory clues sprayed on the textile in front of me, I slowly make my way through Maki Ueda's 'Olfactoscape'. 'Chanel no. 5 deconstructed' it said in the announcement. Suddenly an obtrusive smells hits me like a brick wall. I knew this was coming, but still it's incredibly overwhelming; pure animalistic and deeply penetrating musk! Without hesitating I take one step back. It's still there. Recovering from the first shock I am turning slightly to the left as it disappears. Nothing now. I move closer to the smooth flexible wall counter-clockwise. This brings me back to the more pleasant less pungent aroma I perceived one minute earlier. This one is less volatile, has less volume so to speak. By shifting my weight from one foot to another I try to find the exact border between the two. And there it is! Sharp like a knife. Apparently movement facilitates a spatial perception of odour to such a level that it becomes a floating and clearly defined shape.

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stereo and navigate through a space by inhaling', Maki Ueda tells the audience before inviting them to visit 'Olfactoscape' during the V2 'Smell this' event on the 15th of March. 'Remember to keep your eyes closed and to move slowly', she adds with a serious expression on her face. 'Olfacto' referring to the sense of smell and 'scape' to a landscape, this circular installation containing the most important components of the famous Chanel no. 5, enables visitors to experience space by one of our most underrated senses. 'Why did you choose this type of construction' one curious bystander remarks. Ueda: 'When you stand in the middle, you perceive the harmony, that's why this installation is organized as a circle, although a labyrinth or a rectangular narrow space would have been interesting as well'.

'This was the first modern perfume', she continues. 'All perfumers educated now have to be able to reproduce it'. Chanel no. 5 is a so-called signature perfume. Its origins are surrounded by myths. One of the stories is that of a perfume mixer that somehow overdosed on aldehydes and 'boom': the birth of the first modern perfume, which - supposedly by mistake - has an extremely characteristic aroma. When isolated, these aldehydes are somewhat unpleasant and 'fatty' as Maki describes them.

Most of us are familiar with the fact that odours that are perceived as foul or hideous when secluded, turn out to be pleasant and (wildly) attractive when covered with floral or fruity top notes. Musk and indole (to be found in human feces and associated with prostitutes at that time) are suddenly acceptable by upper class women when combined with vanilla or citrus. Chanel no. 5 is one of these layered almost schizophrenic perfumes. By deconstructing and grouping the most important ingredients, the artist presents to us a three-dimensional version of the most famous perfumes of all times. She allows us to smell the less agreeable odorants separately, exposing the bare naked femme fatale (base notes) underneath the civilized dressed up lady at the surface (top and middle notes). This makes it a bit like watching a scary movie. You know something is about to happen, but you can't predict when. But your body knows before your mind.

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Beside this more conceptual layer, there is a poetic and purely sensual aspect to the work which one can exclusively become aware of while experiencing this aromatic landscape. It forces you to combine several of your senses as if they were one: touch, smell and proprioception or kinaesthesia. A kinaesthetic experience is usually conceived by sight and even sound in combination with movement. This less well known sense tells us what our position is in a defined space. The unique circumstances provided by Olfactoscape, hand us the possibility to navigate through space with our hands, nose and body. The knowledge of the presence of certain ingredients, such as indole, aldehydes and musk, offers an extra dimension. Once you perceive them, being aware of the fact that your body almost described 360 degrees by this point, they function as a grand finale.

After exchanging the darkness and consolation of the installation for 'neutral' air and sharp electric light I am in a complete different state of mind. The mindful and multi-sensorial journey through Chanel no. 5 definitely left its mark on me.