

Dorothee King & Matt Morris in Conversation

Copycat Killer or Smelling a Sense of Home

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For a long time, I have been fascinated by the artistic and participatory possibilities of ephemeral materials in exhibition contexts. I have been researching the social and aesthetic implications of sensory experiences in various museum projects, classrooms, and publications. In my dissertation *Kunst Riechen (Smell Art)* I investigated the potentials of aesthetic experiences of smell in contemporary art projects and their application in educational contexts.¹ *Smell Art* discusses odor in contemporary fine arts and examines how olfactory art can be used in educational settings. The artistic strategies and exemplary works by artists who consciously use smell are at the heart of my study. My investigation focused on possible changes in reception habits and aesthetic experiences through odor-based art. I used my findings to develop ideas on how to exhibit and mediate contemporary olfactory arts.

In 2018, I met the artist Matt Morris at the 106th *College Art Association* conference in Los Angeles, for which our smell-art-loving colleagues Debra Parr and Gwen-Aël Lynn organized a panel on *Olfactory Art and the Political*.² In this panel, researchers and artists working on smell uncovered and examined the various dispositions of olfactory artworks, the role that odor takes in contemporary and historical practices, and how olfaction not only challenges the visual, but also negotiates social demands for deodorized bourgeois (exhibition) spaces. Here, the question of how activists deploy olfactory tactics to achieve their goals was posed.³

1 Dorothee King, *Kunst Riechen*, Dissertation at the Universität der Künste Berlin 2015, Oberhausen 2016.
2 Gwen-Aël Lynn/Debra Parr, "Call for Proposals: Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance," CAA 106th Annual Conference, Los Angeles, 21–24 February 2018, available at: <https://scentartnews.wordpress.com/2018/08/25/call-for-proposals-olfactory-art-and-the-political-in-an-age-of-resistance/> (last accessed: 1.7.2020).

3 The results will be published in 2021: Gwen-Aël Lynn/Debra Parr (eds.), *Olfactory Art and The Political in an Age of Resistance*, London 2021.

In Los Angeles, Matt Morris presented his vast smell-based oeuvre and perfume production. Immediately, I was intrigued by his deep understanding of the history of perfumes in connection to current smell-based politics which is displayed in his complex perfume-based settings and installations. Matt Morris graduated with a BFA at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and an MFA in Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University. Currently, he teaches as a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Matt Morris' interest in the subtle and subjective qualities of smell already arose in his studies. Since 2005, he is exhibiting projects related to smell in solo and group shows. Now his artistic work is widely shown in exhibitions internationally.⁴ Matt Morris' perfumes and smell-based shows are discussed largely in newspapers and online magazines.⁵ The artist's own writing as a perfume critic appears regularly on *Fragrantica*, and on *Artforum*, *Art Papers*, *ARTnews*, *Flash Art*, *Pelican Bomb*, and *Sculpture*.⁶ In spite of this, his oeuvre has not been scholarly appreciated and analyzed; the exception to this being the philosopher and art historian Larry E. Shiner who mentioned Matt Morris' perfume-based art works in *Art Scents: Exploring the Aesthetics of Smell and the Olfactory Arts*.⁷ He refers briefly to Matt Morris' work when speaking about artist's use of smells or perfumes to create atmospheres.⁸

At the 2019 conference *Atem. Gestalterische, ökologische und soziopolitische Dimensionen (Breath. Design, Ecology, and Sociopolitics)* at the Institute for Art History and Visual Studies at Humboldt University Berlin, I chose to talk on the topic of *Gerochene Heimat – Von olfaktorischen Zugehörigkeitserfahrungen in der zeitgenössischen bildenden Kunst (Fragrant Homeland – On Olfactory Experiences of Belonging in Contemporary Visual Art)*. I knew immediately that besides presenting works by smell artists Carrie Paterson⁹ and Robert Jelinek¹⁰ who deal with questions on feeling at home via smell, I needed to present Matt Morris' olfactory art to the European art historical community. Matt Morris' work raised my interest because he discusses the borderlines of fragrance-free public spaces in connection to xenophobic tendencies in Western cultures.

4 E.g. Katy Kirnbach and Matt Morris, Ruschman Berlin Gallery, Berlin 2019; *Past Tense*, Ralph Arnold Gallery, Chicago 2019.

5 E.g. Aimee Levitt, "A 'Dinner Party' with no Food, Only Smells," in: *The Chicago Reader*, available at: <https://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2017/04/10/a-dinner-party-with-no-food-only-smells>, 4.10.2017 (last accessed: 1.7.2020).

6 <http://www.mattmorrisworks.com/writing> (last accessed: 29.3.2020).

7 Larry E. Shiner, *Art Scents: Exploring the Aesthetics of Smell and the Olfactory Arts*, Oxford 2020.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

9 Carrie Paterson, *Homesickness Kit*, 2013, see: <http://carrie-paterson.squarespace.com/page-1> (last accessed: 20.3.2020); King 2016 (note 1), pp. 99–100.

10 Robert Jelinek, *Sabotage Communications: de Toilette*, 2001; "Old Spice on New Banknotes," in: *BBC News*, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1481078.stm>, 8.8.2001 (last accessed: 20.3.2020); King 2016 (note 1), pp. 97–98.

After the conference, I had the chance to talk to Matt Morris in depth via e-mail about his unique approach and interests in working with olfactory materials, the concept of smellable beauty, the role of space and the body, and his project *Copycat Killer* (2017) in particular. I am happy to share our conversation.

Dorothee King (DK): Why are you working with smells and particularly perfumes in your artistic projects? What makes inhalation the proposed perception of your choice when it comes to designing your smell-based art projects?

Matt Morris (MM): I think it is key to establish that, as of yet, my use of smell in my art practice has nearly always been realized through perfume specifically, and beauty rituals in a more expanded sense. Perfume as a form, historical category, and possible tool for self-determination directs my inquiries into smell. Perfume's interaction with the body smells of its wearer, its capacity to project off the body into a space, its lingering effects, and the qualities of intimacy – between bodies, or between a body and a space, or between a body and the material of the fragrance – are all of interest to me. Typically, my perfume-based works are worn on bodies as their mode of presentation. The awkward social dance of audiences who are often strangers to those wearing the artworks, and the ways that, say, a stranger's nose draws close to the wearer's skin, propose pleasure in circumstances where it might not have been expected. I am also compelled by the potential for disorientation that smell in particular offers; the ways that sensory experiences build into or contradict epistemologies is key for me.

DK: Our brain usually builds every new smell perception on previous smell experiences. Information stored about past inhalations is augmented and modified by new olfactory perceptions.¹¹ Smell, like other sensory perceptions, is combined with our prior knowledge. Is prior olfactory memory of importance in your projects? How do you address the previous subjective smell experience of your artwork's audience?

MM: I more or less expect a degree of scent literacy among audiences who have a bodily, visceral relationship to the developments of

¹¹ Tomas Worms, "Mehr als nur Passion in der Nase – Ein Wissenschaftsessay über den Geruchssinn," in: Autostadt Wolfsburg (ed.), *Olafur Eliasson – Dufttunnel*, Ostfildern 2005, pp. 48–63.

trends and fashions in fragrance, even if they aren't consciously versed in the history of 20th and 21st century perfumery. I deliberately involve myself in tropes that are commonly gendered and situated as, for instance, 'old fashioned', or 'feminine', in the ways I develop a profile for a perfume that will be exhibited in art institutional spaces. I've found that most people have some relationship to the ways specific smells have been branded to them and culturally positioned. How they relate to those smells is much more open-ended, however. One of the primary sites of my practice is articulated through experiments with desire, how it collects or diverges, what individuals believe they know about what they want, and ultimately how desire's link to the unconscious works against popular or accepted notions of subjecthood and the interpellations by which a subject is constituted.

DK: Another important feature of olfactory perception via inhalation is the combination of smell perception and emotions. The sense of smell is strongly associated with brain structures called the limbic system. One of these structures is the amygdala, an ancient area of the brain considered to be one of the regions responsible for emotional reactions.¹² What role do emotional responses play in your artistic oeuvre?

MM: I am flamboyantly melancholic in my life and in my studio practice – the shimmering qualities with which perfume overwhelms, recedes, dissipates, and then, hours later, seems to become sensible again, match my emotional temperament. I stay keenly attuned to loss as it interacts with the other material and psychological dimensions of our lived experiences. Precisely for the biological reasons you bring up, perfume operates powerfully in its capacity to stir memory and becomes demonstrative of a sort of simultaneity of being in different times at once that are described by, say, Virginia Woolf or Marcel Proust.

DK: The perception of aromas changes frequently over time. "Smell can bother us, but it does not scare us anymore" – in 1992 the historian Annick Le Guéner implied that the days when epidemics could still be smelled and stinking actually meant danger to life are over.¹³ How is smell declared as something bothering today? How do you reflect on current tendencies of olfactory phobia as a way of discrimination? Are

12 Richard L. Stevenson, "The Forgotten Sense. Using Olfaction in a Museum Context: A Neuroscience Perspective," in: Nina Levent/Alvaro Pascual-Leone (eds.), *The Multisensory Museum. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space*, Plymouth 2014, p. 157.

13 Annick Le Guéner, *Scent: The Mysterious and Essential Powers of Smell*, New York 1992, pp. 27–34.

you using extreme varieties of olfactory sensations in your artwork to create a sense of existentialist danger?

MM: The developing phenomenon of the so-called ‘scent free workplace’ movement is complicated in many ways. While it professes to care for individuals with particular scent sensitivities and disabilities, the implementation of such policies is not neutral politically and often disadvantages workers whose cultural backgrounds are characterized by fragrant cuisines, religious practices, and home lives that are not easily appreciated or assimilated into mainstream (read: white) American social space. Indeed, the use of the concept of ‘freedom’ from scent here is especially charged, enacted as it is alongside mounting xenophobia in the United States and abroad.

I am not sure about what extremities I employ in the scents I develop, but I am certainly sometimes working with fragrance notes that are very ‘perfumey’ or anachronistic aesthetically, such as big florals like iris, carnation, narcissus, and tuberose. Most of the blends I make also anticipate being worn on a body, so I develop dimensions of sweat, musk, and milky-creamy skin notes that are situated into more complex compositions. A number of projects I have made are scent-based abstractions of sexual experiences I have had, and they can be found fairly provocative for some audiences – although generally, I find more people enjoy them than I would have expected.

DK: Smelling creates proximity and distance, depending on the knowledge and evaluation of the inhaled odor. The experience of smell in different cultural contexts characterizes the sense of belonging and leads to ‘Othering’ through smell. For my current research on smell, I revisit a recent work by Jonathan Reinartz which occupies itself with the historical qualities of smell as a delimiter and identifier of communities.¹⁴ He claims that we can read human smells through breathing, and use the olfactory information to smell individuals or groups. Culturally, the ‘Good’ or the ‘Familiar’ smells pleasant while the ‘Other’ stinks.¹⁵ These perceived olfactory differences are morally grounded or caused by economic, political circumstances. Is there a defined line between good smells and bad smells in your olfactory art projects? Would you agree to Jonathan Reinartz’ thesis? Which role does inclusion and exclusion through smell play in your works?

¹⁴ Jonathan Reinartz, *Historical Perspectives on Smell*, Champaign 2013.

¹⁵ Cf. Becky Millar, “Smelling Objects,” in: *Synthese* 196 (10), 2019, pp. 4279–4303.

MM: This question makes me think of the writings I did in 2013 for an essay titled “a set of hips set in clouds”, in which I ask: “What kind of knowing is possible when the infrastructure exudes a faggy, floral fragrance that tells you it is coming and where it has been?”¹⁶ In my own creative practice, I examine how scent might be used to attribute nascent particulars to an encounter with abstract, social bodies – an institutional critical analysis not only of organizations that support the presentation, circulation, and historicization of artworks, but also those institutions of family, gender, sexuality, and the production of subjectivity.

Following on that, I might say that the disorientation I referred to earlier is a kind of calculated treachery, where the scent of an art experience betrays something otherwise belied in the visual components of my exhibitions. There’s also great potential in role play and a kind of scent-based drag performance in using smell and perfume specifically as a means of fragmenting a monolithic idea of self.

Relatedly, I am currently developing several projects that are based in research around shifts in 19th-century social politics and cultural economies, particularly the ways that black Americans came to be marketed to as a new demographic of consumers after abolition and during the climax of the Industrial Revolution. I’m curious about the ways beauty products in particular were and are marketed in different ways based on the racial makeup of the target audience, and the effects of this system of advertisements, products, and consumers in producing specters of race and gender.

DK: Jim Drobnick, the godfather of curating smell-based art projects, said: “Two fundamental motives drive artists to work with smell. On the one hand, scent provides raw, primal sensation that is new to the visual arts context. Instead of representing an object or experience, odor provides a seemingly direct and unmediated access to the real. On the other hand, the second motive recognizes that smells are redolent with personal and social significance. Smells are indelibly linked to notions of identity, place, memory, lived experience, and cultural sensibility – in other words, scents have meaning.”¹⁷ What meanings are applied or transported through smell in your artwork *Copycat Killer* (Fig. 1)? What is the history and the set-up of the work?

16 Matt Morris, *Clownflâneur*, exh. cat. Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Evanston 2013, p. 94.

17 Jim Drobnick, “The Museum as Smellscape,” in: Nina Levent/Alvaro Pascual-Leone (eds.), *The Multisensory Museum. Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space*, Plymouth 2014, pp. 182f.

MM: In 2017 I developed a work entitled *Copycat Killer*, which comprised four hand blended *eau de parfum* based on the fragrances worn by me, both my parents, and my twin sibling. Julius Caesar, the Chicago gallery that hosted the project, is operated by four directors, who all agreed to sit in the space and wear the four perfumes during the opening reception and all gallery hours, making themselves available to be smelled by visitors. The perfumes are approximations not only of the perfumes that my family has worn throughout my life, but also attempts to account for the smells of our bodies wearing the scents.

In so conjuring these references, there are deeply personal as well as sociological frames held in the gesture. For instance, my father wore *Joop! Homme* throughout my childhood. This is a fragrance released by its German parent company in 1989, designed by Michel Almairac. As Lizzie Ostrom describes in her 2015 book *Perfume: A Century of Scents*, *Joop! Homme* was remarkable for its crossover appeal among a kind of macho heterosexual consumer and also gay men involved in nightlife culture. Its pink packaging and related marketing (“Real Men Wear Pink”) plays both as potently homoerotic and also hyper-masculine. The scent followed on a decade of “big” fragrances for women, and so also finds itself imitating the huge florally and vanilla based notes of women’s fragrances popular at the time. In reconstructing aspects of this scent, I’m excavating not only the ways gender, sexuality, and other facets of identity were performed in my family and household, but also looking to the culture more broadly to consider these historical touchstones worn by each of my family members in relation to one another.

DK: Most of the exhibition visitors will not know the Morris family members, and, hence, will not recognize their individual smells which you perceived in the time when you lived at home as a child (even though they might remember *Joop! Homme*). Nevertheless, we all know the familiarity of close family members’ scents and remember their smells very well, even if we have not seen them for a long time. This is how so-called olfactory spirits arise: suddenly, the smell of a person wafts into our noses, someone who we know but who has already died.¹⁸ However, if a familiar smell is carried by a person unknown to us, a feeling of irritation arises. The smells of *Copycat Killer* not only

18 Judith Guggenheim/William Guggenheim, “Olfactory After-Death Communications,” in: Jim Drobnick (ed.), *The Smell Culture Reader*, New York 2006, pp. 427–430.

come from family members we do not know, they are furthermore carried by strangers who are not related to one another as members of a family, but are instead bound to each other by their employment. This is a very complex setting. What response did you get by exhibition visitors? And your family?

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MM: Thank you for this extraordinary reading of the work! Indeed, there are a series of complex relationships being staged in this project. The kind of excess that results – too many bodies being carried on the skin of those folks who wore the scent in the gallery – probes into a kind of psychoanalytic potential for the ways remembering, transference, and what Sigmund Freud calls “the reproduction of certain scenes” might qualify our interactions with a broader public and ideas of otherness. It is in these staged transferences that an analysis of art institutional structures (their staff, hours, policies, spaces) blends into a similar analysis of the “phantasmatic constructions” (a turn of phrase from Judith Butler) of selfhood that demonstrates how identities, orientations, gender, family influence, beliefs, and the times in which we live conspire into modes of performativity that are incommensurate or involved in the process José Esteban Muñoz called “disidentification.”

I found that while some audiences were content to enjoy the novelty of a room of smells being called art, there were many people willing to have intensely emotional experiences with the smelling, their physical interactions with the gallery staff, and the associations that came up for them, which layered over those that I’d built into the work. Sometimes, someone would say something to me that was seemingly psychic – so particular and precise was their reading of the affect in the work from their sensory experience. It was tender and humbling, to be honest.

Less than a year after I first exhibited *Copycat Killer*, my father passed away unexpectedly. This was before he had gotten to smell the components of the project, but he had heard a lot about the work. Of course, I retain the formulae for the four fragrances, but at the moment, I’ve left the vials of perfume with my mom in Baton Rouge. I imagine all of us would have had more in-depth experiences and



Fig. 1: Installation view of John Knight's *Identity Value* and Matt Morris' *Copycat Killer, Julius Caesar*, Chicago, IL, 2017

conversations about the piece, but for now I find it too overwhelming within a longer grieving process to revisit the smells in the work.

DK: Michel Foucault speaks of a *rupture d'évidence*, a break with self-evidence, that can shake our environmental knowledge.¹⁹ This means a break or a split from a previously existing state. In *Copycat Killer* this fissure is brought about by a shift in perception caused by breathing. What is already known is seen in a different light. In *Copycat Killer* you also question how private and public are supposed to smell and deliberately mix the boundaries between the known and the unknown. What are you hoping for? What outcome or impact are you hoping to achieve?

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MM: Beautiful question. It strikes at some of my own intellectual vulnerabilities or shortcomings. For instance, I find that I have deep ambivalence and not a lot of knowledge around the political dimensions of private and public spheres. My twin and I were conjoined when we were born, and surgically separated four days later. Questions of attachment and intimacy pervade both of our practices (Michael is a dancer and scholar), and I believe that the closeness of sharing a body and a womb, the closeness of our breath on each other's faces, is a quality of experience that I'm always revisiting or at least fantasizing about.

I believe we live in a culture of repression and very deliberate regulations that would maneuver us toward states of 'un-thinking', where even the option of formulating some thoughts is rendered as an impossibility. I hope that in my work, I cultivate space for remembering – both when I'm in my studio – and as a collective activity in art spaces. My artworks, particularly those based in perfume, anticipate tenderness and connection, navigations through desire and pleasure, and an appreciation of the complicated ways that the traces that are marked out as 'selfhood' are in fact always interdependent, always mutually constituted.

¹⁹ Barry Smart (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments*, Volume 2, London 1994, p. 227.