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Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities

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HSUAN L. HSU

Perhaps the most widely publicized work of airborne, trans-corporeal art was an unintentional one. In 2010 Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*—a vast expanse of almost 100 million hand-painted ceramic sunflower seeds ironically commissioned by the hygienic product corporation Unilever—was deemed too toxic for visitors to touch. Although it was designed to be an interactive installation, curators at the Tate Modern soon noticed that *Sunflower Seeds* was *too* interactive, threatening to permeate the gallery's air and visitors' bodies with airborne ceramic dust. Soon after the piece was installed, the museum prohibited visitors from interacting physically with the seeds in order to prevent the proliferation of dust particles that could endanger respiratory health.

The unforeseen risk of ceramic dust inhalation gives a new spin to the Tate Modern's interpretative text for *Sunflower Seeds*: "What you see is not what you see, and what you see is not what it means."¹ While this interpretation refers to the fact that what look like millions of sunflower seeds are actually individually hand-painted ceramic artworks, it also echoes the sociologist Ulrich Beck's discussion of the disqualification of vision as an adequate means of interpreting our increasingly toxic world. In contemporary risk society, Beck writes, "Everything must be viewed with a double gaze, and can only be correctly understood and judged through this doubling. The world of the visible must be investigated, relativized, and evaluated with respect to a second reality, only existent in thought and yet concealed in the world. The standards of evaluation lie only in the second, not in the visible world."² The muse-

um's response to the possibility that Ai's artworks could materially penetrate and harm visitors' bodies was to curtail interaction—to restore the exclusively visual relation between visitors and artworks that has played a profound role in the design, curatorial logics, and conservation practices of modern museums and galleries. If visual apprehension tends to frame bodies as separate from the art objects they view, the ceramic dust scare precipitated by *Sunflower Seeds* illustrates the potentially unruly, trans-corporeal nature of all matter—what Stacy Alaimo describes as “the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world.”³ By foregrounding our bodily exchanges with the air, *Sunflower Seeds* unwittingly transformed the gallery from a spectatorial space into “a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors.”⁴

Whereas the airborne, trans-corporeal qualities of Ai's installation were unintended, this essay will focus on contemporary olfactory artworks that intentionally draw attention to one of the most invisible, unnoticed, yet carefully controlled materials in the museum environment: air. In doing so, these works push visitors not only to experience the conceptual, erotic, affective, and ideological implications of smell but also to reconceptualize museums as spaces of environmental enmeshment. As an inherently trans-corporeal medium, olfactory art defies the spectatorial logic that organizes both art galleries and commonsense perceptions of nature as a space that is distinct from the human.⁵ Insofar as it activates museum air as an aesthetic medium and highlights the manifold ways in which our bodies literally incorporate that air, olfactory art is especially effective in dramatizing airborne environmental risks. Unlike Ai Weiwei's unintentionally risky installation, however, artists working in this medium employ “safe” and controlled concentrations of chemicals to simulate the smells and corporeal responses associated with environmental toxins.⁶

This essay contextualizes the environmental significance of contemporary olfactory art by underscoring how it intervenes in the visual order of museum galleries. To bring into focus what is at stake in olfactory art, I will begin by discussing how the careful regulation of air functions to establish modern museums as spaces of conservation and visual consumption. I argue that there is a conceptual relay between the conservation of artworks and conservationist approaches to nonhuman

nature that frame the environment as a space that should be preserved from human interaction. Next, I discuss how Western philosophers and artists have engaged with scent as an aesthetic medium, before concluding with a more focused consideration of three olfactory artists—Sean Raspet, Anicka Yi, and Peter de Cupere—whose works challenge conservationist assumptions concerning the safety and stability of bodies and artworks by staging trans-corporeal predicaments of environmental risk within gallery spaces.

I. Conservation Environments

In his ethnographic study of conservation practices at New York's Museum of Modern Art, sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio describes the museum as "an 'objectification machine' that endeavors to transform and stabilize artworks as meaningful 'objects' that can be exhibited, classified, and circulated."⁷ By emphasizing the unstable materiality of artworks and the quandaries that multimedia installations pose to conservationists, Rubio details an "ongoing effort to control the unrelenting process of physical degradation that threatens to undermine the specific relationship between material form and intention that defines artworks as meaningful and valuable objects."⁸ Whereas art historians typically approach artworks as fixed objects presenting themselves for interpretation, Rubio's materialist perspective draws attention to both the volatility of artworks and their continual interfaces with the museum environment. Such a materialist reassessment of exhibition spaces is crucial in a moment when artists are experimenting with installations, materials, and concepts that challenge the modernist ideal of the art gallery as an inert white cube.⁹

Because air threatens to contaminate, deteriorate, or otherwise destabilize artworks, it is a crucial element in museums' conservation efforts. Although the air in museums generally goes unnoticed by visitors, its temperature, humidity, and particulates have been carefully monitored and controlled by conservationists for over a century. Explicit standards were established in the mid-twentieth century, when the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and the International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects (IIC, founded in 1950) led efforts to research and improve conditions for the preservation of

museum collections.¹⁰ In the years following World War II, conservators adopted “a uniform climate control mantra: Keep everything in the museum at approximately 70 degrees Fahrenheit and 55 percent relative humidity.”¹¹ As Rubio writes, “The development of HVAC systems over the last century has enabled museums to engineer highly controlled environments specifically designed to create the particular climactic conditions that [oil] paintings require for their display and stabilization.”¹² A contemporary advertisement for the DustBug—a dust-monitoring technology used by many museums—elaborates the risks of cumulative damage that airborne dust could pose to art objects:

On a microscopic scale, dust includes tiny, possibly acidic or sharp mineral particles which can be damaging to materials. Consequent cleaning erodes fragile surfaces, such as textiles and gilding. [D]ust attracts moisture during periods of high humidity, contributing to staining, corrosion and biological growth. Accumulating dust also provides food for insect pests and bacteria, and high humidity can encourage the growth of moulds.¹³

Climate control through heating, ventilation, air-conditioning, and monitoring devices such as the DustBug helps stabilize artworks as apparently fixed objects of visual perception. Viewers are prohibited from interacting too closely with these objects: for mixing with human breath, touch, or dust particles could undermine the artwork’s objecthood and jeopardize the gallery’s conservation mission.

There are striking parallels between the priorities of art conservation and those of environmental conservation. Efforts to stabilize art objects developed alongside Western environmentalists’ endeavors to stabilize wild environments untainted by human activity, and these two processes of conservation share key assumptions about the need to keep environments pure of contamination. Thus, the proximity of chimneys, “the problem of solid dirt in the air of cities,” and “the acid vapours which belched out of furnaces with the smoke” of London present significant problems for museum conservators as well as for environmentalists; in his classic manual *The Museum Environment*, Garry Thomson draws on research about how air pollution affects plants, explaining, “The attack on plants by air pollution, including ozone, is not the concern of antiquities conservators, but the misfortunes of lichens and mosses can be made use of as sulphur dioxide pollution indicators.”¹⁴ In addition

to shared concerns about preserving purity, museum environments—along with the oil paintings and visual consumption practices they are designed to sustain—have influenced the governance of environments *outside* the museum by helping to forge an ideology that opposes the natural to the social. From landscape paintings to the dioramas in natural history museums, the exhibition of nineteenth-century visual artworks played a pivotal role in establishing the ideology of wilderness that has fueled efforts to imagine and preserve nature as a space purified of human inhabitation and interaction.¹⁵ Thus, the sublime landscape paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, Thomas Cole, and Frederic Edwin Church reduce humans to cosmic insignificance, while the museum habitat dioramas of Carl Akeley blend taxidermy, staged landscapes, and painted backgrounds with the explicit aims of conveying ecological knowledge and inspiring conservationist values. Donna Haraway's groundbreaking commentary on the dioramas in the Museum of Natural History's Akeley African Hall highlights the fundamental separation of humans and animals that links these displays to conservationist ideals: "The glass front of the diorama forbids the body's entry, but the gaze invites his visual penetration. The animal is frozen in a moment of supreme life, and man is transfixed. No merely living organism could accomplish this act. . . . The animals in the dioramas have transcended mortal life, and hold their pose forever."¹⁶

The problems with such a conservationist view of the environment are well documented. In his classic essay "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," the historian Ramachandra Guha explains not only how American environmentalism's emphasis on nature conservation avoids addressing the environmental effects of overconsumption and militarization but also how conservationism exacerbates environmental and economic injustice in the global South. Guha explains that "Because India is a long settled and densely populated country in which agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature, the setting aside of wilderness areas has resulted in a direct transfer of resources from the poor to the rich."¹⁷ Within a US context, the ecocritic Sarah Jacquette Ray argues that environmentalism's idealization of a pure, uncontaminated wilderness has relied on the "ecological-othering" of bodies constructed as environmentally alienated—not only forms of "racial, sexual, class, and gendered othering" but, more fundamentally, the figuration of "the dis-

abled body [as] the quintessential symbol of humanity's alienation from nature."¹⁸ In addition to reinforcing a range of geographical and social inequities, the conceptual separation of humans from nature obscures the central environmental problems of the Anthropocene: the proliferation of trans-corporeal entanglements, hybrid "nature-cultures," and anthropogenic risks such as climate change and radiation.¹⁹

II. Olfactory Aesthetics

Conceptual artists have produced a range of works that engage the air in gallery spaces as a medium rather than a vacuum. The earliest of these, Marcel Duchamp's *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919), is a glass ampoule whose title points not to the glass object but to the air it contains. The light sculptures of the British artist Anthony McCall depend on airborne particles for their effect: beautiful beams of light that appear solid in the gallery's atmosphere. In 1974 McCall explained in a set of projection instructions that "the light of the beam is visible through contact with particles in the air, be they from dust, humidity, or cigarette smoke. Smoking should not be prohibited."²⁰ The Dutch artist Berndt Smilde's *Nimbus* series (2010–12) employs fog machines, lighting, and HVAC systems to produce temporary clouds in gallery spaces. If they inspire "incredible wonder . . . as temporary atmospheric events," Smilde's indoor clouds also dramatize how the weather is no longer a pure force of nature but a phenomenon inextricably entangled with human activity.²¹ But as much as these works experiment with air as medium, they nevertheless emphasize visual apprehension: *Paris Air* allows only a visual relationship to the air on display; the works of McCall and Smilde aestheticize the air without requiring physical proximity or trans-corporeal interaction on the part of viewers.²²

Olfactory art, by contrast, can only be apprehended trans-corporeally. The intimate and involuntary aspects of olfactory perception led Immanuel Kant to identify smell as the sense with the least aesthetic potential. Whereas vision, hearing, and touch perceive the surface of objects, taste and smell involve "the most intimate taking into ourselves"—an intimacy that, he adds, "can be dangerous to the animal."²³ For Kant, smell is both "contrary to freedom" and "even more intimate" than taste. As the olfactory-art curator and critic Jim Drobnick explains, smell threatens two of Kant's "central aesthetic te-

nets: disinterestedness (smells are highly subjective and directly implicate the beholder's body) and autonomy (olfactory artworks most often utilize evaporating objects, ethereal atmospheres, and performative experiences).²⁴ Whereas we can voluntarily shut our eyes or ears, life's dependence on breath makes it impossible to shut out smells for more than the span of a breath; as Kant explains, "The man who pulls his perfumed handkerchief from his pocket treats all around to it whether they like it or not, and compels them, if they want to breathe at all, to be parties to the enjoyment."²⁵ The architecture and climate-control characteristic of white-cube gallery spaces give material form to Kant's ocularcentric hierarchy of the senses.

Before the 1960s, artists and critics tended to follow Kant's lead in marginalizing smell as a medium of little aesthetic value. More recently, however, the very characteristics that Kant deplored have made smell an intriguing medium for experimental artists. Artists and critics are drawn to smell not only for its immersive qualities but also for its capacity to evoke memories and affects by acting on the brain's limbic system.²⁶ As the anthropologist Mark Graham explains, smell has striking affinities with postmodern aesthetic values:

Sight has been described as the modernist sense par excellence (Levin 1993). It is the sense that discriminates, divides and orders the world into mutually exclusive categories. Smell, by contrast, has been dubbed the sense of the postmodern (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 203–5), the sense that confuses categories and challenges boundaries. It is difficult to localize, hard to contain and has the character of flux and transitoriness.²⁷

Transitory, mobile, and trans-corporeal in nature, air cannot function as a "pure" aesthetic medium—to be perceived, smells must enter and interact with our bodies and surroundings in ways we cannot fully control. Air can be a medium of toxicity as well as a medium of sensation. Moreover, airborne particles with the capacity to interact with our bodies and minds may be imperceptible, and their intoxicating capacities may not be fully understood. Insofar as its transmission involves such uncertain trans-corporeal exchanges, smell transgresses the ideal of purity that governs both visual perception and conventional environmental values.

In his curatorial overview of "Olfactory Art," Ashraf Osman, the curator and cofounder of the Scent Culture Institute, traces the medium to

Duchamp's use of coffee and perfume aromas in the 1938 and 1959 International Surrealist Exhibitions in Paris. In the 1960s and 1970s, Fluxus, arte povera, land art, and feminist artists incorporated scent into their works.²⁸ These works explored themes such as our visceral responses to food smells, corporeal scents, and environmental pollutants.²⁹ Among the most striking of these early works are Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972), which counteracts the social repression of menstruation by introducing the smell of blood into an otherwise deodorized bathroom installation, and Richard Wilson's *20:50* (1987), which viscerally conveys Western modernity's dependence on petroleum by exhibiting a pungent reservoir of sump oil.³⁰ More recently, Drobnick has tracked an "olfactory turn" in the art world as artists experiment with "aromatic artworks [to] strategically counteract the increasing virtualization of experience and the hegemony of visual media, as well as concentrate on everyday experiences and the actuality of materials."³¹ Food, rot, pollution, and sexuality have continued to play prominent roles in these recent works. For example, Damien Hirst's *Black Sun* (1997) consists of thousands of dead, rotting bluebottle flies stuck together into a dark circle; Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik applies curry powder directly to gallery walls in several pieces, such as *MCDXCII* (2010) and *To Curry Favor* (2011); and Peter de Cupere's *The Deflowering* (2014) presents a statue of the Madonna made of a frozen liquid that releases a scent synthesized from real women's vaginas as it melts.³²

While twenty-first-century olfactory artists continue to explore smell's intimate ties to memory, food, corporeality, and environment, they are distinguished by a growing interest in technological tools for analyzing and synthesizing scents such as the gas chromatograph and mass spectrometer.³³ Collaborating with geneticists, perfumers, and other scent experts, contemporary artists have moved beyond the smells of food and rotting substances to explore the possibilities of synthetic scents.³⁴ In 2000, for example, Helgard Haug "collaborated with Karl-Heinz Burk, a professional from the industrial aroma-producing factory H and R in Braunschweig," to produce *U-deur*—a perfume based on the scents of Berlin Alexanderplatz.³⁵ In 2006 Sissel Tolaas produced a scratch-and-sniff wall installation by using headspace technology at an International Flavors and Fragrances (IFF) outpost laboratory to analyze sweat samples donated by nine men.³⁶ The high cost of scent technologies has led to questionable collaborations between olfactory artists and

corporations endeavoring to commodify the trans-corporeal capacities of scent. For example, IFF—the world’s leading scent-engineering corporation, which was recently sued for exposing workers to diacetyl in microwave popcorn—regularly partners with artists and designers “to expose our perfumers to new and uncharted creative territories, to stretch their minds and fuel their creative energy.”³⁷ However, the increasing visibility and prestige of olfactory art has given rise to institutions that aim to provide artists access to technologies and scent science without having to collaborate with corporations like IFF. Since 2013 the Institute for Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles has fostered interdisciplinary art projects “by building an archive of contemporary perfume releases, by creating an accessible laboratory for scent experimentation and—most importantly, by inciting cross-genre collaboration between perfumers and folks on the cutting edge of other fields.”³⁸ Air Variable, a company founded by the artist Sean Raspet (whom I’ll discuss below), has provided scent fabrication services to artists and designers since 2014.³⁹ The increasing availability of scent-fabrication technologies has laid the groundwork for a range of artworks that explore synthetic scents as anthropogenic and potentially risky phenomena.

III. The Smell of Risk

While critics have begun to consider the potential of scent as an aesthetic medium linked to food, memory, corporeality, and place, few have commented on scent’s capacities for staging the trans-corporeal environmental predicaments presented by contemporary risk society. Jim Drobnick has coined the term *toposmia*, a compound of the Greek words for “place” and “smell,” to describe a new field of inquiry concerned with “the spatial location of odours and their relation to particular notions of place.”⁴⁰ As he explains in a seminal study of olfactory art, “Contemporary artists are at the forefront of exploring the dynamics of toposmia, which implicate a number of disciplines, namely geography, cultural history, sociology, and urban studies, as well as aesthetics.”⁴¹ Whereas Drobnick provides a lucid account of the ways in which olfactory art can convey and destabilize place-based memories, my focus is on the trans-corporeal dimensions of toposmia: how place literally enters and affects our bodies through the medium of scent.

Drawing attention to the fact that air is a necessity of life as well as

a vehicle for scent, olfactory art frequently explores the theme of environmental risk. As Drobnick notes in a discussion of his experiences as an olfactory art curator, “Olfactory artworks are . . . visceral, since the act of breathing compels the absorption of airborne particles into one’s inner being, where some scents will interact with a person’s body chemistry and perhaps even influence their emotional state, heart rate, and other physiological functions.”⁴² As an aesthetic medium, scent is inherently biopolitical insofar as it is inextricable from air as a medium of life itself. Under the conditions of risk society, air—a vehicle of both scent and life—has become a vital site of political struggle: the distribution of airborne pollutants produces uneven and highly contested geographies of health, productivity, and power. The breathtakingly long lines of Juliana Spahr’s *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs* (2003) underscore both the necessity of air and its potential for materializing political connections between bodies and nations:

This burning, this dirty air we breathe together, our dependence on this air, our inability to stop breathing, our desire to just get out of this world and yet there we are taking the burning of the world into our lungs every day where it rests inside us, haunting us, making us twitch and turn in our bed at night despite the comfort we take from each others’ bodies.⁴³

The “burning of the world”—Spahr’s shorthand for the regular outbursts of political violence described in the daily news—literally poisons the air we breathe, providing a material as well as an affective basis for attending to apparently far-flung catastrophes.

Recent olfactory artworks draw attention to air as a heterogeneous and frequently risky material, presenting olfactors (a term I contrast with the sight- and hearing-based terms “viewer” and “audience”) with the scents of cigarettes, chemical deodorants, city streets, air pollution, decomposition, and garbage. Such works draw on the nineteenth-century understanding of airborne miasmas as agents of disease spread.⁴⁴ Although miasma theory was supplanted by the germ theory of disease in the late nineteenth century, its focus on polluted or unhealthy air as a causative agent in disease spread provides an antecedent for understanding the harmful effects of hazardous airborne materials such as smog, radiation, mold, dust, and chemicals vapors. Whereas the visual relationships presumed by museums and art galleries have

contributed to a preservationist ethos that frequently frames nature as a pure landscape remote from anthropogenic change, olfactory art explores a range of postnatural ecologies in which human activity is inextricably intermeshed with environmental processes. Insofar as it engages in the synthetic modification of air, olfactory art is an ideal medium for provoking olfactors to reflect on what, if anything, environmental risk smells like. The works considered below demonstrate a range of approaches to the scent of risk: Sean Raspet and Anicka Yi disrupt the putatively “pure” atmospheres of gallery spaces in order to sensitize olfactors to the intoxicating possibilities of aesthetic experience; recent pieces by Peter de Cupere intimately yet critically stage geographically uneven flows of airborne risk. While Raspet, Yi, and de Cupere deploy olfaction in strikingly different ways, they share a fascination with smell as a visceral yet uncertain index of environmental toxicity.

Sean Raspet’s *Micro-encapsulated Surface Coating* (2014–15), part of his *Residuals* exhibition at the Jessica Silverman Gallery, employs a carefully orchestrated series of technological mediations to render perceptible the air of the gallery space itself. As the gallery notes explain, *Micro-encapsulated Surface Coating*

invites the viewer to scratch and sniff a custom-made emulsion. The work starts with a process in which the air of Jessica Silverman Gallery is analyzed using a “SUMMA canister.” The stainless steel vessel initially contains a vacuum and collects air from the surrounding environment over the course of a week. Raspet then sends the accumulated air to a lab to determine its molecular composition and then creates a liquid mixture that is a many thousand-fold condensation of the chemical signature of the gallery’s air. The artist then sends this liquid to be “micro-encapsulated” into a “scratch-and-sniff” emulsion that is spray coated on the gallery’s surfaces. The background smell of most interior environments often comes from their construction and cleaning materials. This chemical signature corresponds to the gallery’s ambient scent profile, a kind of condensed olfactory background noise.⁴⁵

Instead of being exhibited “in” the gallery, Raspet’s work exhibits the gallery’s environment itself—the chemical signature produced by its particular blend of architecture, bodies, objects, and cleaning materials. By exaggerating and thus making perceptible the artificial nature of the



Fig. 1. Sean Raspet, *Atmospheric Reformulation (Reconstituted Atmosphere with 4-Point Resolution)*, from *Residuals* (2014). Image Courtesy of the artist and the Jessica Silverman Gallery.

gallery air, Raspet provokes questions about how that air might affect or even harm visitors. Complementing *Micro-encapsulated Surface Coating*, other components of the *Residuals* show filter out odor compounds that do not belong to the gallery's chemical signature, while continually reproducing the gallery's background atmosphere by pumping in its idiosyncratic ratio of nitrogen, oxygen, argon, and carbon dioxide.

By foregrounding the continuous inputs and outputs necessary to reproducing the gallery's air, Raspet provokes critical questions about the considerable environmental externalities imposed by carefully controlled gallery environments: Whose labors in proximity with cleaning and construction particulates have produced and maintained the spaces in which we encounter works of art? What is the cost of the "pure" gases with which Raspet's exhibition continually renews the air's chemical signature, and how are they sourced? What happens to the impurities filtered out of gallery spaces? These questions resonate with an emerging discussion among museum conservators, who are revisiting

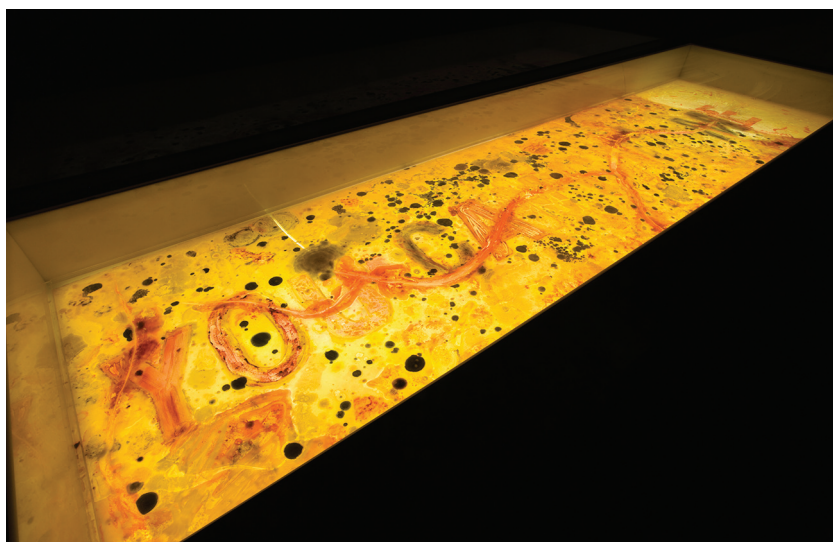


Fig. 2. Anicka Yi, *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables* (2015). Photograph by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of The Kitchen, New York.

expensive climate-control standards that require environmentally unsustainable emissions.⁴⁶ By staging an elaborate apparatus for maintaining a gallery's "original" atmosphere while simultaneously exposing the extent to which that air is already suffused with cleaning and construction chemicals, *Residuals* challenges the purity and environmental ethics underlying all gallery environments.

Anicka Yi's solo exhibition, *You Can Call Me F* (2015), contrasts the manufactured sterility of gallery spaces with olfactory and visual pieces grounded in processes of lively fermentation. Displayed near the gallery entrance, a glowing Plexiglas vitrine displays the title of Yi's exhibition inscribed on a living-bacteria culture. Yi collaborated on this bacterial artwork with the MIT synthetic biologist Tal Dannino, cultivating microorganisms from cheek swabs donated by one hundred women in Yi's social network. The exhibition blends the "nutty and musky" scent of this collective bacterial culture with the "antiseptic" scent of the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue, which Yi analyzed and reproduced with assistance from Sean Raspet's scent fabrication company, Air Variable.⁴⁷ In addition to providing an olfactory response "to a phallogocen-

tric privileging of the eye as the organ responsible for knowledge and domination,” *You Can Call Me F* contrasts modernity’s eradication of undesirable smells in the name of hygiene with the irrepressible productivity of women’s bodies and social networks.⁴⁸ As Yi’s press materials explain, three rotating diffusers capped with motorcycle helmets “release a scent that synthesizes the all-female network of the collective bacteria with the almost imperceptible odor of the ultimate patriarchal-model network in the art world—Gagosian Gallery.”⁴⁹ The result is what Drobnick would call a “dialectical odour”—a complex odor that dramatizes the frictions between two ideologically opposed atmospheres as the scent of female networks invades the art world’s purified, patriarchal gallery space.

You Can Call Me F invokes and repurposes the visual iconography of quarantine and contagion: “The Kitchen’s gallery will function as a forensic site in which the artist aligns society’s growing paranoia around contagion and hygiene (both public and private) with the enduring patriarchal fear of feminism and potency of female networks. . . . In the gallery, viewers will enter an environment evoking the anxious isolation in the aftermath of a pandemic.”⁵⁰ Yi’s inscription of the exhibit’s title in an illuminated bacterial culture in a piece called *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables* is borrowed from a publicity gimmick for Steven Soderbergh’s outbreak film, *Contagion* (2011), in which the film’s title was spelled out by bioluminescent fungi on two billboards in Toronto; elsewhere in the gallery, transparent quarantine tents display objects ranging from socks and mouthwash to dried shrimp and seaweed.⁵¹ Instead of either fleeing or containing risk factors, however, Yi’s critical depiction of “anxious isolation” urges visitors to dwell in trans-corporeal exchanges; after all, visitors have already inhaled and incorporated the scent and “culture” of female networks. Yi’s nuanced engagement with airborne risk recalls Priscilla Wald’s profound analysis of communicable-disease narratives: “Communicable disease compels attention . . . not only because of the devastation it can cause but also because the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas. The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community. Disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic of human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact.”⁵² While musky scents and lively miasmas are conventionally associated with the risk of disease, Yi repurposes the language of “virality” and contagion as indices of com-

municable feminine potential.⁵³ Rather than viewing trans-corporeality solely in terms of toxicity and disease, *You Can Call Me F* aestheticizes bacteria, mold, and feminine ferment while gesturing toward the unpredictable and potentially positive possibilities of olfactory intoxication.⁵⁴ Thus, while Yi's work shares Raspet's interest in bringing the atmosphere of art galleries into the realm of perceptibility, she questions our tendency to stigmatize environmental risk factors (along with at-risk populations) by emphasizing the vital links between bacterial proliferation and human "culture."

Whereas Raspet and Yi mobilize smell to critically challenge our assumptions about the rarified air of art galleries, the prominent Belgian olfactory artist Peter de Cupere explores how the aesthetics of scent can critically engage with problems of environmental risk at geographic scales far beyond the gallery environment. Since the 1990s de Cupere has produced a remarkable range of olfactory artworks that experiment with the scents of sweat, genitals, candy, toothpaste, urine, garbage, pollution, grass, cardamom, peppermint, and other substances; he is currently organizing the Art Sense(s) Lab (<http://www.artsenseslab.be>)—the first master of arts program focusing on the lower senses (smell, taste, and touch)—at PXL MAD in Hasselt, Belgium. According to the critics Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets, de Cupere "has created an artistic identity that is a cross between artist and olfactory chemist that may become a model for other olfactory artists in the future."⁵⁵ Two works that de Cupere recently exhibited in Havana exemplify how olfactory art can viscerally convey the environmental distinctions propagated by geographically uneven development. *Smoke Cloud* (2014), which appeared in the 2015 exhibition *The Importance of Being* in Havana, consists of a ladder placed beneath a white cloud suspended from the gallery ceiling.⁵⁶ Visitors ascend the ladder one at a time, placing their heads in the cloud and smelling the scent of air pollution. This installation interacts with visitors both visually (by presenting to others the incongruous spectacle of a body with its head in a cloud) and trans-corporeally (by introducing the scent of air pollution into the olfactor's lungs). While the idiom *having one's head in the clouds* generally refers to a tendency toward fantasy or idealism, de Cupere's cloud of smog immerses visitors in the materiality of air; through either chemical or psychosomatic channels, the scent of smog could physically affect a visitor's mood or health. The resulting frictions between the vi-



Fig. 3. *Smoke Cloud* (2014) © Peter de Cupere www.peterdecupere.net.

sual and olfactory dimensions of *Smoke Cloud*—contemplation versus smog inhalation, ascent versus intoxication, visible beauty versus invisible harm—interrupt the visual order of the art gallery. One at a time, visitors’ heads disappear into the sculpture; for those who ascend, the gallery space itself disappears as the smell of smog sets in. According to de Cupere, the decision to fill the cloud with the scent of air pollution was inspired in part by his encounter with Havana’s poor air quality and specifically “the powerful scent of gasoline that the old Chevys and Buicks spit out.”⁵⁷ The polluted air presented by *Smoke Cloud* thus references not only Cuba’s urban air pollution but also its origins in Cold War trade embargoes.

De Cupere’s contribution to the Havana Biennial, *The Smell of a Stranger* (2015), was exhibited outdoors at the High Institute of Technology and Applied Sciences at the University of Havana. Blending scent engineering, bioengineering, and the ethos of speculative fiction, *The Smell of a Stranger* offers a cautionary allegory about both bioengineering and the opening of Cuba to US commerce and diplomacy. Draw-



Fig. 4. *The Smell of a Stranger* (2015) © Peter de Cupere www.peterdecupere.net. Photograph by Frederick Buyckx.

ing on scents provided by International Flavors and Fragrances, de Cupere genetically modified nine local Cuban flowers and plants. While the results appear identical to natural specimens, de Cupere's flora emit a range of incongruous odors including the scents of "American New Dollars, Blood, Sperm, Vagina, Dead Body, Gun Powder, Sweat (smell of fear), Air Pollution, and Geraniums."⁵⁸ By contrasting the beauty of local plants with smells associated with sex tourism, labor exploitation, military violence, pollution, industrial food production (the artist intended to include the smells of hamburgers and Belgian fries, but these were omitted for technical reasons), and death, de Cupere suggests that the opening of US-Cuban trade and diplomacy under the Obama administration may have devastating effects on Cuba's population and environment.⁵⁹ As the artist explains, "Western culture is slowly creeping [into Cuba] and the capital automatically follows. . . . Cuba has a lot of nature and a lot of cultural aspects which can be exploited with bad intentions."⁶⁰ The postnatural status of bioengineered flowers indexes the broader vulnerability of Cuba's environment to capitalist incursions. *The Smell of a Stranger* violates the expectation that flowers and plants

will offer up refreshing, “natural” scents, leaving olfactors disturbed—if not disgusted—by a range of visceral or unnatural scents. Different olfactors could find the scent of sperm, sweat, money, and food physically arousing or repulsive; as with *Smoke Cloud*, the scent of air pollution may be literally toxic for environmentally sensitive visitors. Such physical responses viscerally convey how the environments we produce affect our bodies, minds, and feelings through trans-corporeal exchanges. Siting this work outdoors at once underscores the plants’ visual continuities with Cuba’s “natural” environment and sidesteps the curatorial problems—such as unwanted exposures and scent mixing—that would be more likely to occur in an indoor gallery.

The title of de Cupere’s installation alludes to the cultural specificity of scent, or the way in which our perceptions of attractive and repulsive scents vary across cultural boundaries.⁶¹ If smell demarcates cultural and social boundaries, “the smell of a stranger” invokes the idea of an ethical encounter with the other—a cross-cultural scenario in which Cubans and foreigners could become more comfortable with each other. But rather than delivering on this promise of cross-cultural olfaction, de Cupere presents visitors with another sort of stranger altogether: postnatural plants that exude anthropogenic odors. Many of these scents—sperm, money, dead bodies, gunpowder, and air pollution—would not be “strange” to either Cubans or Americans; instead, their strangeness lies in their juxtaposition with each other and with the installation’s apparently natural plants. Although the scents of American and Belgian food may be interpreted as a “funny reference to our Western culture with the scent of hamburgers,” the references to hamburgers and fries take on darker connotations when juxtaposed with the scents of money and dead bodies.⁶² If hamburgers and Belgian fries symbolize US and Belgian cultures, they are also foods that, when eaten or smelled, have trans-corporeal effects on people’s bodies.⁶³ Industrially produced fast food is a vehicle of malnutrition, obesity, and what Lauren Berlant calls “slow death” on a global scale; the circulation of hamburgers can be mapped as an exchange of money for premature death across unevenly developed terrains.⁶⁴ Whether conveyed through fast food, sex tourism, capitalist exploitation, or militarization, uneven development and economic imperialism threaten to bring new health risks to Cuba’s citizens and more-than-human life forms.⁶⁵ The stranger here is not American culture but the kind of place that Cuba is in dan-

ger of becoming. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence—a widespread form of environmental violence whose “temporal dispersion” presents challenges to representation and political engagement—clarifies the stakes of de Cupere's dystopian scents.⁶⁶ Because the health effects of fast food, militarization, and rampant capitalism could take decades to emerge, de Cupere turns to a speculative—yet still material and viscerally trans-corporeal—form of temporal condensation as a means of manifesting future threats. *The Smell of a Stranger* thus offers a powerful cautionary allegory of the stark possibilities opened up by the intensified neoliberalization of Cuba's economy. Where Raspet's *Residuals* highlights the chemicals already present in the gallery's air, *The Smell of a Stranger* proleptically dramatizes Cuba's vulnerability to uneven transnational flows of desire, risk, and exploitation. Like the literary genre of magical realism, de Cupere's bioengineered Cuban plants register the dislocating effects of transnational contacts and capital circulation on local reality; yet the more-than-real aspects of *The Smell of a Stranger* actually exist as material products of genetics, biotechnology, and the science of scent.

Despite the innovative, trans-corporeal engagements with risky substances that I have discussed here, even olfactory art is a limited medium for engaging with the ethics of environmental toxicity. As the fate of Ai Weiwei's *Sunflowers* installation demonstrates, galleries are obligated to protect visitors from hazardous levels of exposure delineated by institutions such as the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). And while the establishment of “acceptable levels” of exposure is shot through with problems and contradictions, olfactory art is unlikely to present scents that incorporate harmful concentrations of toxic substances. For most visitors, even these trans-corporeal installations *represent* toxicity without posing significant health risks. Yet to the extent that olfactory art engages with questions of toxicity, it raises vital questions about how acceptable levels are determined, what it means to agree to a “*permissible extent* of poisoning,” and for whom these acceptable levels are valid (not, presumably, for people afflicted with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity or Idiopathic Environmental Intolerances).⁶⁷ The tensions between visible forms and invisible scents—or the broader tensions between the perceptible and the imperceptible—at play in olfactory artworks also draw attention to the politics of risk perception: Who has access to the technological tools of risk analysis? Who decides

which risk factors should be researched and which neglected? What populations are regularly exposed to more concentrated and toxic particulates than visitors voluntarily sample in museum exhibits? By introducing even low levels of potentially toxic substances into olfactors' bodies, olfactory art activates—and opens to political consideration—the rarefied air of conventional art galleries as well as the air outside those galleries. In doing so, it opens up the white cubes and conservationist values of gallery spaces to other, trans-corporeal modes of environmental engagement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

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1. "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds: Interpretation Text," Tate, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>.

2. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: SAGE, 1992), 72.

3. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

4. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

5. On Western ocularcentrism and its detractors, see David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

6. Although they are frequently contested, official acceptable levels for chemical exposures are determined and published by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

7. Fernando Domínguez Rubio, "Preserving the Unpreservable: Docile and Unruly Objects at MOMA," *Theory and Society* 43, no. 6 (2014): 617.

8. Rubio, "Preserving the Unpreservable," 620.

9. For a critique of the "white cube" as the standard gallery space of the twentieth century, see Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

10. Stephen Rees-Jones and Derek Linstrum, series editors' preface, in Garry Thomson, *The Museum Environment*, 2nd ed. (London: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1986).
11. Carol Kino, "Keeping Art, and Climate, Controlled," *New York Times*, April 3, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/arts/design/05kino.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&. According to Kino, climate-control standards were first laid out in Harold Plenderleith, *The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art: Treatment, Repair, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956) and subsequently expanded in Thomson, *Museum Environment* (first published in 1978).
12. Rubio, "Preserving the Unpreservable," 625.
13. "Museum Dust Monitoring for Internal Dust Accumulation," Intelligent Monitoring and Control Solutions Group, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.the-imcgroup.com/heritage-monitoring-services/museums/dust> (site discontinued).
14. Thomson, *Museum Environment*, 130, 148.
15. For a classic critique of wilderness ideology, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996), 69–90.
16. Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text* 11 (Winter 1984–85): 25.
17. Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 1 (1989): 75. For a more recent discussion of the production of conservation refugees in postapartheid South Africa, see Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 175–98.
18. Sarah Jacquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 6.
19. See Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11; Beck, *Risk Society*.
20. Anthony McCall, quoted in Colby Chamberlain, "Something in the Air," *Cabinet* 35 (Fall 2009): 91.
21. Peter Adey, *Air: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 170.
22. Like Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*, however, *Paris Air* became an unintended trans-corporeal artwork when the ampoule was accidentally broken in 1949, releasing the air it contained into the viewer's space ("50 cc of Paris Air," Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51617.html>). Similarly, when Duchamp created the first work of dust art—*Large Glass* (1920)—he transformed the glass pane's interactions with air into a stable object; as Colby Chamberlain puts it, "Duchamp's dust is safely quarantined, sandwiched between panes of glass" (Chamberlain, "Something in the Air," 91).
23. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert Louden (New York: Cambridge, 2006), 49.
24. Jim Drobnick, "Toposmia: Art, Scent, and Interrogations of Spatiality," *Angelaki* 7, no. 1 (2002): 32.
25. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 158. For a more extensive account of prejudices against smell and olfac-

tory art in the Western philosophical tradition, see Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets, "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 3 (2007): 275–79. For a recent objection to tastes and smells as aesthetic media, see A. T. Winterbourne, "Is Oral and Olfactory Art Possible?," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 15, no. 2 (1981): 95–102.

26. For neuroscience perspectives on the aesthetics of scent, see Richard Stevenson, "The Forgotten Sense: Using Olfaction in a Museum Context; A Neuroscience Perspective," in *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space*, ed. Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 151–66; Andreas Keller, "The Scented Museum," in Levent and Pascual-Leone, *Multisensory Museum*, 167–76.

27. Mark Graham, "Queer Smells: Fragrances of Late Capitalism or Scents of Subversion?," in *The Smell Culture Reader*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 305.

28. Ashraf Osman, "Olfactory Art" (seminar paper, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, June 14, 2013), 6–12.

29. On food and olfactory art, see Jim Drobnick, "Eating Nothing: Cooking Aromas in Art and Culture," in Drobnick, *Smell Culture Reader*, 342–56.

30. For a more detailed analysis of Chicago's piece, see Drobnick, "Toposmia," 42–43.

31. Drobnick, "Toposmia," 32.

32. Hirst has produced numerous works incorporating an olfactory element, including *Black Sun, A Thousand Years*, and a series of ashtray sculptures (1995–97).

33. For another account of artists who have used these devices, see Shiner and Kriskovets, "Aesthetics of Smelly Art," 278–79.

34. For example, Shiner and Kriskovets assert that "creating olfactory artwork may require chemical training to enable the artists to work with aromatic substances." ("Aesthetics of Smelly Art," 274).

35. Shiner and Kriskovets, "Aesthetics of Smelly Art," 274.

36. Developed in the 1980s, headspace uses a vacuum to capture odors emanated by an environment or object. Susie Rushton, "The Sweat Hog," *New York Times*, August 27, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/27/style/tmagazine/t_w_1530_1531_face_smells_.html?pagewanted=all&r=0.

37. "IFF Fragrances: Fine Fragrances," International Flavors and Fragrances, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.iff.com/Fragrances/Fine-Fragrances>.

38. Saskia Wilson-Brown, "Founding Statement," Institute of Art and Olfaction, Los Angeles, September 2012, <http://artandolfaction.com/about/a-note-from-the-founder/>.

39. See Air Variable's homepage at <http://air-variable.org>.

40. Drobnick, "Toposmia," 33.

41. Drobnick, "Toposmia," 33.

42. Jim Drobnick, "The Museum as Smellscape," in Levent and Pascual-Leone, *Multisensory Museum*, 190.

43. Juliana Spahr, "Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003," in *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 57.

44. On miasmas, see Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); in their influential textbook *The New Public Health*, Tulchinsky and Varavikova suggest that in spite of the biomedical

advances brought about by germ theory, “environmental factors of the physical, social, economic, and cultural environment have emerged as important modern applications of the miasma theory” (Theodore Tulchinsky and Elena Varavikova, *The New Public Health: An Introduction for the 21st Century*, 3rd ed. [London: Elsevier Academic Press, 2014], 237).

45. “Sean Raspet: Residuals, November 14, 2014–January 3, 2015,” Jessica Silverman Gallery, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://jessicasilvermangallery.com/exhibitions/solo-exhibition-6/>.

46. See Kino, “Keeping Art, and Climate, Controlled”; Vanessa Thorpe, “Tate Director Sir Nicholas Serote Urges Art Galleries to Turn Down the Heating,” *Guardian*, November 12, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/nov/13/nicholas-serota-art-gallery-heating>.

47. Anicka Yi, quoted in Wendy Vogel, “What’s That Smell in the Kitchen? Art’s Olfactory Turn,” *Art in America*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/whats-that-smell-in-the-kitchen-arts-olfactory-turn/>.

48. Vogel, “What’s That Smell in the Kitchen?”

49. “The Kitchen Presents Anicka Yi: You Can Call Me F,” The Kitchen, accessed December 8, 2016, <http://www.emailmenot.com/emails/kitchen/3024892/anicka-yi-f>.

50. “Kitchen Presents Anicka Yi.”

51. “Kitchen Presents Anicka Yi.”

52. Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

53. On Anicka Yi and miasma theory, see Jane Yong Kim, “Feminist Fumes: Anicka Yi’s Miasmatic Art,” *Paris Review*, April 6, 2105, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/06/feminist-fumes/>. On “virality,” see “Kitchen Presents Anicka Yi.”

54. For a consideration that “prioritizes a queer reach for toxicity’s ‘worlding,’” see Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 189–222.

55. Shiner and Kriskovets, “Aesthetics of Smelly Art,” 274.

56. Prior to being exhibited in Havana, *Smoke Cloud* was first shown in de Cupere’s solo exhibition *The Art of Smelling, an Olfactory Art Research* (2014), in the Netherlands. The artist has noted, however, that the smell of air pollution in Havana inspired this piece (see n57 below).

57. Sam Steverlynck, “A Major Exhibition of Belgian Art Opens in Havana,” Havana Live, February 23, 2015, <http://havana-live.com/news/a-major-exhibition-of-belgian-art-opens-in-havana/>.

58. Peter de Cupere, personal communication with author, March 20, 2016.

59. Although published accounts of the exhibit based on early interviews report that de Cupere would use “the scents of sperm, sweat, dead bodies, money, gun powder, air pollution, a hamburger, and Belgian fries,” the smells of hamburger and Belgian fries (the latter intended to implicate the artist’s own nation of origin) were ultimately omitted for technical reasons (Katherine Brooks, “Artist ‘Scent Engineers’ Plants to Smell Like Dead Bodies, Sperm, and Air Pollution,” *Huffington Post*, May 13, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/13/peter-de-cupere-scent_n_7274034.html; Peter de Cupere, personal communication with author, March 20, 2016).

60. Quoted in Brooks, "Artist 'Scent Engineers' Plants."

61. See, for example, Gale Largey and Rod Watson, "The Sociology of Odors," in Drobnick, *Smell Culture Reader*, 29–40; Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Immigrant Lives and the Politics of Olfaction in the Global City," in Drobnick, *Smell Culture Reader*, 41–52; Alan Hyde, "Offensive Bodies," in Drobnick, *Smell Culture Reader*, 53–58.

62. Sara Alonso Gómez, "Exhibition 'The Smell of a Stranger' by Peter de Cupere," Facebook event, May 23, 2015, accessed September 1, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1595498134023675>.

63. De Cupere explains that Belgian fries refer to his own complicity as a Belgian and European, so as "not to blame or focus only on the American eating culture. It's in a way questioning the fact that people should first see what they do wrong before blaming others. The world is not my place, it's ours. It's a pity I couldn't use these two fragrances" (Peter de Cupere, personal communication with author, March 20, 2016).

64. Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007), 754–80.

65. The smell of gunpowder here echoes several pieces that juxtaposed bullets and army helmets with the scents of dead bodies and blood that de Cupere included in his curated exhibition *The Smell of War*, earlier in 2015.

66. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 3.

67. Beck, *Risk Society*, 65.