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EXHALATIONS

A Survey of Olfactory Art

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SERIES ON THE HISTORY OF ART



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About the author

Sandra Barré is an art historian, aesthetician, art critic, and independent curator specializing in olfactory art and the non-visual dimensions of modern and contemporary art. Her research focuses on the relationship between smell and the body, embodied aesthetic experience, and the politics of the senses.

Trained in art history and aesthetics at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, she has completed a doctoral thesis entitled 'Fusion with the World: Smell as Artistic Experience' under the supervision of Professor Jacinto Lageira. She is the author of the exhibition catalogue 'Odore. L'art, l'odeur et le sacré' ['Odore: Art, Smell, and the Sacred'] (Pauline Pavéc, 2020) and the editor of 'Worlds of the Senses: A Sensory History of the Total Work of Art' (Faton, 2024).

She is currently developing two new initiatives. FORIA (Fund for Olfactory Research, Institutions and Artistic Archives) aims to establish the first neutral registry of contemporary olfactory artworks, alongside legal frameworks and institutional training to support the conservation, exhibition, and circulation of olfactory art. Editions Sensibles is a bilingual French-English publishing house dedicated to contemporary writing that explores embodied sensory experience (smell, taste, and touch) as situated forms of knowledge.

Summary

What if art history were written through the nose? 'Exhalations: A Survey of Olfactory Art' is the first comprehensive English-language book to trace a century of olfactory practices in art, from the Futurists' early experiments with scent to the bacterial installations of Anicka Yi, from Marcel Duchamp's sealed vial of Parisian air to the ecological interventions of Peter de Cupere. Through the analysis of more than one hundred works, Sandra Barré demonstrates the extent to which smell has shaped modern and contemporary artistic practice, despite its persistent marginalization within criticism and institutions. Neither a medium nor a unified movement, olfactory art spans from Dada, Arte Povera, Fluxus, body art, Land Art, feminist practices, to postcolonial critique. Its concerns are equally wide-ranging: memory, desire, decay, gender, and ecological crisis. In doing so, it unsettles the ocularcentrism that has dominated Western art history since the Enlightenment, the assumption that vision constitutes the primary mode of aesthetic knowledge. Smell operates differently. It enters the body immediately, resisting stable interpretation and singular meaning. Two individuals may encounter the same smell and experience entirely different realities, neither of which can be fully privileged over the other. Drawing on archival research, conversations with artists, and years of curatorial practice, 'Exhalations: A Survey of Olfactory Art' is both a historical survey and a history of encounters. The book advances a compelling and overdue argument: that smell has always been present within artistic practice, that it has always carried meaning, and that attending to it transforms our understanding of art history itself.

Originally published in French in 2021 by 'Les Éditions de la Lettre Volée', 'Exhalations: A Survey of Olfactory Art' is translated into English by artist Emilie McDermott.

January 2027 | Hardback 236x160mm | 249 Pages | ISBN: 979-8-2616-0107-4

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