

# *Volatile!*

SCENT AND POETRY

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*Volatile!* was offset printed on the Heidelberg GTO at the Center for Book, Paper & Print, Columbia College Chicago during the Fall of 2015 by Print Production Fellows Mary Clare Butler, Ruby Figueroa, Woody Leslie, and Isaac Fosl-van Wyke under the mentorship of Brad Freeman. *Volatile!* was designed by Mary Clare Butler and the binding was completed by Woody Leslie. The paper is Mohawk Superfine.

## *Acknowledgments*

DEBRA PARR

This little book owes its materiality to many friends and colleagues: Brad Freeman, Mary Clare Butler, and Woody Leslie of the Center for Book, Paper, & Print at Columbia College Chicago; Annika Marie, Associate Professor in Columbia's Art & Art History Department; and Elizabeth Burke-Dain of the Poetry Foundation. I'd like to thank the artists, poets, and perfumers who wrote about their work for this book: David Moltz of D.S. & Durga, Brian Goeltzenleuchter, Seth Bogart, Amy Radcliffe, and Eduardo Kac. Most of all, I'd like to acknowledge the work of my research assistant, Meg Santisi, who kept it all together, including me.

## *What Does a Poem Smell Like?*

DEBRA PARR

Smelling a poem is not usually something encouraged, unless one happens to be interested in the olfactory experience of paper and ink. If, while reading a book of poems, one sniffs the page, one will inhale hundreds of volatile organic compounds, certainly a pleasurable smell to those who love books as evidenced in the publication of *Paper Passion Perfume* (2012), a collaboration between perfumer Geza Schoen, Gerhard Steidl, Karl Lagerfeld, and *Wallpaper* magazine. What though, if every poem had its own fragrance, beyond the literal smell of the materiality of the page? What if one could smell the poet's imaginative, conceptual, intellectual world, the text unfurling into an aroma?

Poets have been evoking smells for centuries: from Lady Macbeth's lament that "all the perfumes of Arabia, could not wash her hands of the blood of the murdered King Duncan," to the bowers of bliss in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* or Delila's erotically powerful "amber-scent of odorous perfume" in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. More recently, since the 1980s, with the publication of French historian Alain Corbin's *The Fragrant and the Foul* (a study of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries smells of Paris) and Patrick Süskind's disturbing novel *Perfume*, scent and olfactory experience have received wider considerations in both scholarly and general publications. In a decidedly sensorial turn, *The Book of Scented Things* (Literary House Press, 2014) presents a collection of contemporary poems "about" perfume, the result of the editors sending vials of perfume to poets and inviting them to write a poem inspired by the scent.

Jim Drobnick's introduction to *The Smell Culture Reader* (Berg Press, 2006) outlines three ideas that inform the experience of *VOLATILE!*:

1. "The contradictory status of smell as one of 'semiological ambiguity'—in which odors uniquely engage the characteristics of both a stimulus and a sign or symbol."
2. "The personal affectivity of smells."
3. "The innovativeness required to articulate olfactory matters."

These thoughts about smell's ambiguous meaning and its connections to feeling, as well as the difficulties of capturing odor in writing, suggest provocative connections to the practice of writing and the experience of reading poetry. *VOLATILE!* doesn't use scent

to illustrate poems, but rather to create a kind of conceptual portmanteau in which something volatile might happen in the mix, extending the experience of and audience for poetry.

*VOLATILE!* is a multifaceted project and exhibition that presents a collaboration between poetry and scent, including work by David Moltz of D.S. & Durga, Brian Goeltzenleuchter, Eduardo Kac, Amy Radcliffe, and Seth Bogart—all featured in this little book printed on the occasion of the exhibition at the Poetry Foundation in Chicago, December 11, 2015 through February 19, 2016.



AROMAPOETRY

## *Aromapoetry*

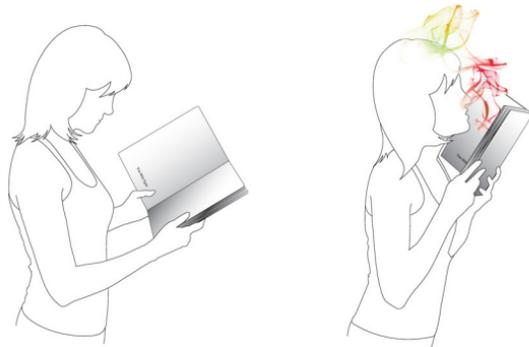
EDUARDO KAC

*Aromapoetry* is a new kind of poetry in which the compositional unit (the poem) is made up of smells. The poet “writes” the smells by conceiving the poem as an olfactory experience and then employing multiple chemical procedures to achieve the poetic goals. As in any kind of poetry, the reader is an active participant who interprets and thus ascribes his or her own meanings to the poem beyond the writer’s original motivations.

In my book *Aromapoetry*, the first book ever written exclusively with smells, readers find twelve aromapoems that range widely in their material

structure and semantic resonance. While I composed some of my aromapoems with only one or two molecules, most of them are composed of dozens of molecules. In some cases, a single poem has distinct olfactory zones on the page—each comprised of dozens of molecules. In other words, the level of molecular intricacy of the works in *Aromapoetry* varies from the very simple to the extremely complex.

I composed the twelve poems in *Aromapoetry* so as to provide the reader with a broad field of aromatic



experiences. The titles simultaneously delineate and open up the semantic sphere of each work. Each poem is a distinct and self-contained composition. At the same time, the book has a dynamic internal rhythm produced through the alternation of different or contrasting smells.

Every poem in the book *Aromapoetry* employs nanotechnology by binding an extremely thin layer of porous glass (200 nanometers thick) to every page, trapping the odorants (i.e., the volatile molecules) and releasing them very slowly. Without this nanotechnology, the fragrances would quickly dissipate and the smells would no longer be experienced after a few days. To ensure even greater longevity, a set of small bottles is integrated into the book, allowing the reader to recharge every individual page. With an eye to the distant future, the book's summary presents key molecules used in the production of each poem.

*Aromapoetry* is a book to be read with the nose.



## *D.S. & Durga Inspiration*

DAVID MOLTZ

My inspiration comes from many sources—record jackets, liner notes, literature, outdated manuscripts, Native American herbal guides. I love descriptive and uncommon words that conjure images. I like working on a small scale, invoking elements of a story that are specific to a particular region, place, or time. I love the idea that something small can imply something much grander.

### **Aromatic Cues**

Once I have a basic idea for a scent, I begin to research the world of it. I pour through books, manuscripts, and websites. I look to pull out aromatic cues, that is any element of the story that implies a scent. It could be a river, a gem, a plant, anything. I then make realistic accords that mimic these objects

or concepts. These are like musical leitmotifs—a small phrase that represents a person or object, especially like those found in Wagner’s kaleidoscopic operas. I then bring the accords together into a finished narrative. This may take months or years, but I sculpt and round the perfume until it is wearable while still retaining its statement. The story does not have to be authentic, but the perfume must be authentic to its story. With the descriptions that accompany the perfume in the packaging, I want you to be able to smell the elements of the story for real. I want you to understand why I made it, some of the materials I used, and what I’m trying to conjure.

### **Armchair Travel**

Perfume is like armchair travel. You surround yourself with an invisible layer and carry the story on your skin and clothes. I am a big believer in creating the world that you desire. Small choices and habits help to create the life that you want. Perhaps it’s taking time for tea or waking up to a specific song. This is

something like transcendentalism—an inner ability to transcend the world around you, not a rejection of reality and its difficulties, but an integration of how you want to live within the world that surrounds us all. Scent is such an easy way to influence the spaces you inhabit.

### **Keyholes**

It is readily accepted that perfume has the power to transport you to places you remember, supposedly because memory and the part of the brain that reacts to smell are next to each other. Perfume can call up a whole array of imaginary realms as well. I like to think that great perfumes (like all great art) are keyholes to other worlds; worlds that are real in their own right but may not be readily perceptible. Perhaps these keyholes access a certain collective unconscious. When I hear great symphonic works I know, I often return to particular images or spaces in my mind as they unfold. If I can read *War & Peace* and enter the world the novel describes, and so can you, then doesn’t

that world exist? If you sniff our perfume Bowmakers and are wafted away to an old violinmaker's shop I “built” and your friends sniff the same scent, are they not brought to the same place that you are going to in your mind? Maybe.

### **Magic of raw materials**

Working with aromatic materials is a joyous endeavor. It is magical that a dross brown liquid contains the idea of a creamy white jasmine petal in the sun. I always seek out new and rare materials: fossilized amber extract, beeswax absolute, hybrid citrus oils, and new specialties from companies that extract traditional materials in new ways (molecular distillation, fractional distillation, sco2 extracts). Sniffing something new for the first time is like discovering a new color, especially a new molecule that was synthesized in a lab. No one has ever smelled the molecule just made, at least in its pure form in human history! You can't say that about too many things. It takes time to unlock a new material's secrets and see how it works with other materials. Imagine playing flute and being given a new note!



SCENT VIALS

## *Scent-ography: A Post-Visual Past Time*

AMY RADCLIFFE

Our sense of smell is believed to have a direct link to our emotional memory. It is the sense that we react to most instinctually and also the furthest away from being stored or replicated digitally. From ambient smell-scapes to the utterly unique scent of an individual, our scent memory is a valuable resource yet to be systematically captured and archived.

If an analogue, amateur-friendly system of odor capture and synthesis could be developed, we would be able to see a profound change in the use and effect of smells in our daily lives. From manipulating our emotional well-being through prescribed nostalgia, to the functional use of conditioned scent memory, our olfactory sense could take on a much more conscious role in the way we consume and record the world.

*Madeleine* is, to all intents and purposes, an analogue odor camera. Based on current perfumery technology, Headspace Capture, *Madeleine* works in much the same way as a 35mm camera. Just as the camera records the light information of a visual experience in order to create a replica, *Madeleine* records the molecular information of a smell.



THE MADELEINE



SILLAGE

## *Toward a Poetics of Olfactory Art*

BRIAN GOELTZENLEUCHTER

*Sillage* is an olfactory artwork I exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2014. The project began as a collection of eleven fragrances, each representing the major regions of Los Angeles. I designed these fragrances based on a survey I conducted of hundreds of Los Angeles residents, in which I asked them to describe the smells they associate with various neighborhoods in the city. At the museum, patrons were invited into the *Sillage* booth and asked to identify their neighborhood. The museum staff logged the data, and then sprayed the corresponding regional scent onto the patron's wrist. Over the course of the day, the collective scent of the visitors filled the gallery space. At the end of the project, I used the data collected from the event to formulate a bespoke perfume—essentially, a demographic scent portrait of the Museum's patron base.



Each of the eleven fragrances that grew out of this research can be thought of as a *scent-scape*: a fragrance in which a distinctive background smell creates a foundation, on top of which episodic smells are revealed. The temporal design of a fragrance, such as those I developed for *Sillage*, is intended to unfold over time, in story form. These fragrances are a sequence of events that follow a classic narrative structure: the top note is an orientation to the story, the middle note is the complicating action, and the base note is a resolution. It's worth noting that when one's sense of smell is isolated from the other senses, people have difficulty *naming* what they smell. This could obviously jeopardize the comprehension of a scent-story like *Sillage*. However, the difficulty that arises is usually not about confusing a rose-smell with a fish-smell, as much as it is about generalizing a rose-smell as smelling generally floral.

The way in which smell is temporally identified and understood often relies on figurative devices such as metonymy and synecdoche for their respective, inferential identification. A scent-story in which cumin odor is followed by the smoky odor of charred meat enlists a metonymic chain of personal and

cultural associations that calls to mind distinct events—altogether different than if cumin odor was followed by the soapy odor of laundry detergent. In this example, the scent-story serves as cognitive model-building experienced in real time, as a way of making sense of the sensorium. In short, olfaction as problem-solving.

Olfactory art occupies a unique position in narrative media, in that the olfactory membrane is the only place in the body where the central nervous system directly interfaces with the environment; smell is processed in the limbic lobe, while all other senses are processed in the thalamus. The experience of olfactory art leads one to identify with narrative subjectivity in a profoundly different manner than reading does. In the case of *Sillage*, participants found themselves relying on physical and collaborative models of understanding, possibly realizing that the ephemeral nature of smell called for public dialog now. By literally ingesting a smell, the experiencer directly implicates himself in the narrative, not so much through mimetic identification, as by diegetic immersion. This is a distinguishing characteristic of smell: the body *feels* it before the mind *knows* it.



## Perfumania

SETH BOGART

My best friend Peggy Noland and I shared a studio for a while that we decided to paint like a mall. My first task was to convert our bathroom into a Perfumania store.

I had always been oddly attracted to the perfume world—the packaging, the presentation, the aesthetics, the advertisements, and (sometimes) the smell.

As I began painting on our wall my favorite bottles (Le Male by Gaultier, Miss Dior Cherie, Designer Imposters, etc.), I became more and more obsessed. Around this time I signed up for a ceramics class and totally gave up on trying to learn the wheel (don't care about that) and focused on what I was there for in the first place—making perfume bottles!



CERAMIC PERFUME BOTTLES



MISS DIOR CHERIE

