Nose on!

STRAWBERRY AND CARDAMOM

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PETER DE CUPERE
Contemporary artist working with fragrances
Lives in Belgium
www.peterdecupere.net

Having already introduced you to a smell artist from Norway Sissel Tolaas (November 2001, No. 6), this time I'd like to present Peter de Cupere, contemporary artist from Belgium. Let it be another step into the world of smells. Considering how many people are creating scents these days, how many are writing about them, and how many are interested in them, I believe that not only beginners, but also those who have stepped deep into the world of smells must know and study this artist.

Peter and I met for the first time at the railway station. We agreed that I would smell like cardamom, and he like strawberries. This was the only way for us to recognize each other during our first rendezvous. It's easy to guess it happened just like that. The two scents met each other.

Interview with Peter De Cupere by Kornelija Cesonyte

View the whole interview on page 86 on the online magazine www.lamuslenis.lt

Or click on the photo

- Peter, your art studio has the feel of an ordinary home: a bedroom, a kitchen... How much time do you spend in the studio and is it difficult for you to stay in there for a long time with so many smells around?

- Most of the time I work late at nights, so I thought it was a good idea to have a bedroom and a kitchen and not have to drive home. I love the silence of the night. The air is fresher and cleaner, less pollution in the environment. No sounds of cars passing by. Just me and my work. My office is also in my studio. I need to manage a lot of things. These days an artist is also a manager of sorts. Since I'm not working with a gallery anymore, it's also important to keep in touch with my collectors, the press, and others. I design my own website, Peterdecupere.net, my project websites, I create catalogues and publications. Besides being an artist, I also teach New Media at the Mad-faculty in Hasselt, and I've just begun writing a doctorate about smell activation and smell duration in exhibition models.

Working with smells might look difficult, but my work is not just the smelly stuff. I'm a visual artist working with scents, that's not the same thing as a perfumer. I look for concepts with the right context and use the appropriate fragrance in combination with the visual aspect. Most of my works are made specially for exhibition projects. So there's also the environment of the exhibition place that I must keep in mind, as well as the concept of the exhibition program. Some of my works can only be shown in that specific place. I say "some" because most of the smell-installations can be recreated given the right occasion. For some installations I work together with labs, for others I create the fragrance myself.

My 400 sq. m. studio is divided into separate rooms. A project room, a creation room, 200 sq. m. of storage space, and my lab which also has a separate storage room for the fragrances to be held in the right temperature. I prefer to call my lab my VIBE because it's actually more than a lab. I work with fragrances not just in liquid form, but also in combination with materials, or with materials that incorporate a smell.

In my VIBE I do a lot of research with different materials in combination with fragrances. To experiment is necessary. I also need to write condition reports on using the work, activating the fragrance, and making sure that it will keep as long as the exhibition takes. It's more than just adding a scent to a work. You must tend to so many different details like temperature, humidity, material and smell reactions through time, oxidation. Is the scent water based, oil based, synthetic? How much of the fragrance(s) do I need and how much will it cost? Most of the time an exhibition lasts at least 6 weeks, and depending on the location the fragrances I need to use can be huge in volume. I'm not talking milliliters, like perfumers do, but liters. For example, in just one month an installation like peppermintduplicateballs PDTB Tree-Virus uses 23 liters of a mix of peppermint, black pepper, and a smell activator to make the fragrance stronger. And this is just when the temperature and humidity are at a good level.

So working with scents in my studio might look chaotic, but actually it's more than mixing the fragrances, it is about doing research on different levels because it's not like things are already laid out for you. You must make your own discoveries. It can be nastily smelly sometimes, but then I just close my nose, or go take some fresh air in my garden and have a cup of coffee, or a glass of nice red wine. I lay back and relax. An artist may be lazy...

- You mentioned that you are not merely a smell artist, but a visual arts performer who uses scents. Why is it that you choose not to work only in the olfactory world? What does visual artwork add for you?

- You can call it visual stimulation or olfactory stimulation through the use of the visual. I prefer both because it's more than just stimulation alone.

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I love to smell, but I love also to see. Actually, I started to play with fragrances when I was a little boy, because I was scared that I would lose my vision. In short, I would say: "Look at those smells". That's also why I'm so crazy about the combination of the smell and the visual.

The older you get, the more advantages you see to the use of fragrances. And in visual work, this is what makes it even more interesting to me. For me, perfume can be an art, just like music can, just like some visuals, or a movie, but to be an artwork it has to be more than just the technical approach. There must be a context, a good concept, a uniqueness. You must be saying something with it. It must be relatable. Beauty can also be a context, but only when it's more than just the sum of the technical knowledge used to create it.

Creating smell-installations, scent sculptures, and scent paintings has nothing to do with saying more or less. It's another way of communicating. As an artist you can play with the combination. It's not easy, but when you've found what you want to say and how you want to say it, it brings you satisfaction. I've made over 250 artworks with smell and I still love it. Most of my ideas are artistic smell-installations and scent sculptures.

I often get offers to make commercial perfumes. I would love to do that, and I actually have created several perfumes, but they are not commercial. Although some may really smell great, when it's a concept perfume it stays that way and I'm not interested in commercializing it just for the money. My love for smell is more than just smelling, it's context, vision, ideas, thoughts, and memory. If I weren't an artist, I would probably be a mad perfumer with a crazy approach to the use of perfumes.

- Do you wear any perfumes yourself, and do you like it when others wear perfume?

- I love everything that has to do with the olfactory and visual aspect of the body. So I love perfumes. I'm not the person to ask which perfume you're wearing, because I don't spend my days sniffing perfumes and little pots of fragrances. I must concentrate on the fragrances I want to use in my experiments and my visual work. So it's a totally different way of working, but I love perfumes. I have more than 500 bottles of perfumes. Most of the time I love to mix them and see how people react. I love to give people 1 or 3 kisses when I meet them, not for the sake of it, but to take a secret sniff of their body smell or perfumed skin. It's interesting how a smell can change a person, depending how they smell before dinner and after a dinner, coming home. It's interesting how some people use perfume to hide themselves. It all has to do with society, culture and nature. This is why it is interesting.

People want to be attractive, want others to like them. There is an underlying idea that perfume can make them more attractive. This idea alone is already interesting. These days it is not about hiding bad body odors anymore, but more about creating an identity and wanting to be remembered by a specific perfume or smell. Perfume is an interesting issue.

- In your artworks there is a kind of fantasy world featuring various alchemical, futuristic symbols. Does that mean current life does not interest you that much?

- Actually it is all about modern life. When I refer to the future, I am telling people that if they don't change, the future might not be so great as we want it to be. My work is about nature, society, culture and of course senses. As an artist I stand with one foot in the world and the other outside it. I look, I experience and I reflect and react with my work.

- You are an artist, but also a researcher. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

- I have to be a researcher because there is so little readily available knowledge about the use of the smell in art or the visual approach of the smell. As an artist, you are always kind of a researcher. You study the field you're working in. On the one hand it's a pity that there is so little research about smell in combination with visuals. But on the other hand you can experiment a lot, sometimes giving a response that people are not used to. Actually most of my works have great success purely because of their dual aspect. This and the relationship of fragrance to society, the use of it in different cultures. That is also why I'm doing a doctorate.

I'm always researching. My latest sculpture was 9 m high and made of epoxy. The first scratch & sniff sculpture in the world. Normal scratch & sniff paint would evaporate very quickly off fixed materials like metal and epoxy. I researched ways to change that. Now the fragrance will stay on the sculpture at least 10 years. It only smells when you touch it.

In my next solo exhibition in C-Mine Genk, Belgium, I show the Cultural Odor Generator, a 9 meter long smell-installation. I selected 40 fragrances, based on the 81 different cultures living in the city of Genk. People can activate them, make selections they like and take the smell home in a balloon. It's about the way we like the scents of cultures. Scents make us different, but also show some common aspects we all have.

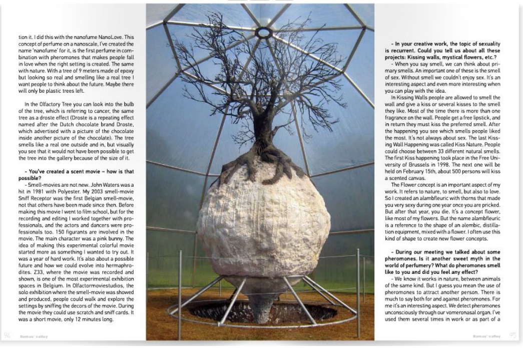
- You often collaborate with a distinguished producer of molecules. Why, in your opinion, is this collaboration so important for them? And what does it mean for you?

- I think it's because I think differently about the use of the smell. I often get questions related to smell problems. For me it means that they find me an interesting person. I don't know if they really care about art. I don't think so. I don't always agree to collaborate. Only when it's interesting for my research, for my art, or if they pay well.

- Many of your projects are about cleanness, ecology, and dirt. Could you tell us a bit about these projects and the reasons why you turn your nose and eyes to these topics?

- The more we clean the more dirty the society will become. It's a contradiction, but soap is not so good and we know it. With my work I can give alternatives or show the possible effects. Nature is an important context in my work because it's our lung to the future. We must be careful.

With all the technology we know and what's coming up, we really must be careful about what we do and especially what we decide to do. Let's take nanotechnology. What we can do with it sounds great, but actually to the better informed it might seem like the next invention of gunpowder. There's the danger of nanodust which we can't see, it will just happen to us. As an artist I can't stop the possible danger, and I'm also not skeptical. But I find it my duty to let people communicate about it and question it. I did this with the nanofume NanoLove. This concept of perfume on a nanoscale, I've created the name 'nanofume' for it, is the first perfume in combination with pheromones that makes people fall in love when the right setting is created. The same with nature. With a tree of 9 meters made of epoxy but looking so real and smelling like a real tree I want people to think about the future. Maybe there will only be plastic trees left.



In the Olfactory Tree you can look into the bulb of the tree, which is referring to cancer, the same tree as a droste effect (Droste is a repeating effect named after the Dutch chocolate brand Droste, which advertised with a picture of the chocolate inside another picture of the chocolate). The tree smells like a real one outside and in, but visually you see that it would not have been possible to get the tree into the gallery because of the size of it.

- You've created a scent movie – how is that possible?

- Smell-movies are not new. John Waters was a hit in 1981 with Polyester. My 2003 smell-movie Sniff Receptor was the first Belgian smell-movie, not that others have been made since then. Before making this movie I went to film school, but for the recording and editing I worked together with professionals, and the actors and dancers were professionals too. 150 figurants are involved in the movie. The main character was a pink bunny. The idea of making this experimental colorful movie started more as something I wanted to try out. It was a year of hard work. It's also about a possible future and how we could evolve into hermaphrodites. Z33, where the movie was recorded and shown, is one of the most experimental exhibition spaces in Belgium. In Olfactormoviestudios, the solo exhibition where the smell-movie was showed and produced, people could walk and explore the settings by sniffing the decors of the movie. During the movie they could use scratch and sniff cards. It was a short movie, only 12 minutes long.

- In your creative work, the topic of sexuality is recurrent. Could you tell us about all these projects: Kissing walls, mystical flowers, etc.?

- When you say smell, we can think about primary smells. An important one of these is the smell of sex. Without smell we couldn't enjoy sex. It's an interesting aspect and even more interesting when you can play with the idea.

In Kissing Walls people are allowed to smell the wall and give a kiss or several kisses to the smell they like. Most of the time there is more than one fragrance on the wall. People get a free lipstick, and in return they must kiss the preferred smell. After the happening you see which smells people liked the most. It's not always about sex. The last Kissing Wall Happening was called Kiss Nature. People could choose between 33 different natural smells. The first Kiss happening took place in the Free University of Brussels in 1998. The next one will be held on February 15th, about 500 persons will kiss a scented canvas.

The Flower concept is an important aspect of my work. It refers to nature, to smell, but also to love. So I created an alambfleuric with thorns that made you very sexy during one year once you are pricked. But after that year, you die. It's a concept flower, like most of my flowers. But the name alambfleuric is a reference to the shape of an alembic, distillation equipment, mixed with a flower. I often use this kind of shape to create new flower concepts.

- During our meeting we talked about some pheromones. Is it another sweet myth in the world of perfumery? What do pheromones smell like to you and did you feel any effect?

- We know it works in nature, between animals of the same kind. But I guess you mean the use of pheromones to attract another person. There is much to say both for and against pheromones. For me it's an interesting aspect. We detect pheromones unconsciously through our vomeronasal organ. I've used them several times in work or as part of a concept. Here are a few examples. The kind of Alambfleuric Flower I mentioned before in this interview uses pheromones for attraction, like some other Alambfleurics. I want people to feel attracted to my work and I can even affect which gender will prefer it: males, females, or both. It's a kind of child effect to the artwork. People love the work as if it were their own child or partner. They feel attracted to it, and because it's not human, in a way they also feel responsible for the work's well-being. All the collectors who bought artwork with pheromones love those pieces more than they love their other art. They also see the reaction of visitors, so they feel unconsciously at ease. As the symbolic father of the artwork, I want the owner of the piece to care about it. The best way is to let it give as much "love" as possible.

At the moment I'm working on an entire series of new pheromone flowers. In my work NanoLove, The NanoFumes are also pheromones. In a way this work is doubly unconscious, being made on nano scale and using pheromones. The nanofume worked in the exhibition place: on the first day we saw two people who didn't know each other fall in love. One of them didn't want their photos published because she was still in a relationship. Actually they didn't understand that it might have been the NanoLove NanoFume that did the trick. But the main question of this love concept was "Can nano create love?" It was to let people reflect on the future aspect of nanotechnology and to start dialogues.

So for me the idea behind pheromones is very interesting. It is unclear whether this chemical attraction really works, and that is something that the future will answer. I personally think you must create the right settings. We think that we humans have little to do with pheromones, but in fact they are quite present in our lives. A mother can recognize her newborn by scent because of a signal pheromone that gives out a genetic odor print. Maybe pheromones are all about instinct? They can trigger many types of behaviors: besides the aforementioned mother-baby relationship, they are involved in territory marking, cause sexual arousal and behaviour, and can also warn against danger. The world of pheromones is an interesting one, and it gets even more interesting when you read about pheromones in the world of animals and even plants, so why not use it in an artwork? It's love, real love made in Belgium! But I wouldn't buy a commercial perfume based on pheromones, I prefer to make my own.

- Tell me about your other impressive projects: Olfactory Lab, Scent Piano (Olfactiano), Sweat... How did you come to these ideas?

- Olfactiano is the first scent piano in the world, I created 7 versions of it. The first concert with the seventh Olfactiano was sponsored by IFF. It was also the first time that I played for an audience. They were all fascinated and amazed with it. So I did several concerts though the years following. I'm now working on the eighth version. When will it be finished? I don't know because it has no immediacy.

SWEAT is a smell performance. Jan Fabre, a good friend of mine, asked me to do a smell installation in his dance lab Troubleyn. Every year he invites several artists. I created special plastic suits for the performance, which I called SWEAT. During the performance the dancers connect to each other by plastic tubes. The sweat of the dancers is distilled and put up on a wall in a glass box with a hole in it. A video of the performance is projected next to the box. The sweat is remade synthetically so we can always put it back on the wall if it might evaporate. Before the act I cook a special 5 course dinner for each dancer separately. On my website you can see photos of the dishes. I'm a good cook.

- I am standing here in front of you. What is more important: visual representation or the fragrance?

- Both, in combination with character, attitude, intelligence. ◆