

PHILLIPS Anna

From the Foul to the Fragrant: Olfactory Recollections of Paris

Abstract

Come along on a sniffle stop tour of my odorous recollections in the city of Lights, where I smelt trails and tracked down full-throttle pongs and divine and heady olfactory delights during a 4 month residency at the Rosamond McCulloch studio at the Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris. Learn, how I unashamedly sniffed the back of complete strangers necks in the Metro unobserved, (I hoped) and fearlessly leapt over slippery subterranean crevices in the dank maze of disorientating tunnels called the Parisian Sewer System. Over the deafening roar of gushing sewer water spewing out of rusty pipes and down narrow trajectories, hear how the history of the Paris sewers and sanitation is closely associated with the history and public perception of smells in our culture today. And, observe examples of my recent art making as a result of my sensory synaesthetic experience in Paris. See how I stole the odorous identities of 180 anonymous Parisians and brought them home to Tasmania, in the shape of lost gloves and mittens. See how the perfume extraction techniques studied at the Perfume Musee, Paris, mainly the processes of enfleurage and maceration, lead to the development of sculptural pieces made with a combination of transformative liquids, namely Hobart gutter water and my own used bathwater.

Biography

Anna Phillips has lived and worked in Hobart for the last 12 years. She has worked and studied in the Visual arts since the early 1990s. Previously she worked as a nurse and midwife, women's shelter worker and a theatre usherette. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Art with first class Honours and Masters by Research Degree at the Tasmanian School of Art, majoring in Sculpture. In 1999 Anna returned to Tasmania from a self-initiated art project with Schwarzkopf, Ltd., Germany. During an intensive 7-week residency with the shampoo manufacturing company, Anna worked along side industrial chemists in chemical laboratories, advertising and marketing specialists and witnessed the pouring of the odourously divine, satin liquid, shampoo, into plastic amphoras at one of the biggest detergent factories in Europe. For the last 3 years, Anna has been engaged in a Ph.D project titled, 'From Liquid to Solid sculptures- Visualising the Imaginary Body'. She has developed a solidified substance that is made from a combination of abject and desirable fluids, in this case, her own used bathwater and liquid shampoo. With this mix she is making a series of sculptures that refer to an imaginary body that she believes exists beyond the limitations of the real physical body. She is making a series of skins and fleshy blobs that act as metaphors for this imaginary body, containing both the collected waste and leftovers from her own body, and also the dissolved properties of the shampoo bottle contents and its semiotically loaded properties of goodness and virtuosity. Anna has just returned from a 4-month residency at the Rosamond McCulloch Studio, Cite Internationale Des Arts, Paris, where she researched the influence of odour on social imagination and perceptions. She has exhibited her sculptures in Hamburg, Germany, Melbourne, Victoria, and at the major regional gallery spaces in Tasmania, including the Tasmanian Museum and Art gallery, Contemporary Art Services Tasmania, North Hobart, the Academy Gallery, Launceston and the Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart.

From the Foul to the Fragrant: Olfactory Recollections of Paris

In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of mouldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchen of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat: the unaired parlours stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber pots. The stench of sulphur rose from the chimneys, the stench of caustic lye from the tanneries, and from the slaughterhouses came the stench of congealed blood.

People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes: from their mouth came the stench of rotting teeth, from their bellies that of onions, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the stench of rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease. The rivers stank, the market place stank, the churches stank, it stank beneath the bridges and in the palaces. The peasant stank as did the priest, the apprentice as did his master's wife, the whole of aristocracy stank, even the King himself stank, stank like a rank lion, and the Queen like an old goat, summer and winter.

For in the eighteenth century there was nothing to hinder bacteria busy at decomposition, and so there was no human activity, either constructive or destructive, no manifestation of germinating or decaying life, that was not accompanied by stench.

And of course the stench was foulest in Paris.....

Project Outline

Before I commence my odorous recollections of Paris I would just like to take a few moments to outline some of my artistic concerns and my Ph.D project here at the Tasmanian School of Art.

The main purpose of my residency was to expand my understanding of odour, and how it relates to feminine representation.

As part of my Ph. D project I was investigating ways in which odour, has been manipulated as a device to control and limit representations of the feminine. My methodology has included identifying some of the controlling disciplines that are used by patriarchal culture in relation to odour.

For instance, certain odours are considered desirable and others disgusting in our popular culture. Female body odour considered unattractive, unclean and animal-like, altogether undesirable qualities, and yet, paradoxically, all commercial perfumes and body sprays contain base notes, some which are fecal in origin.

In my art-making practice, I work with transformative, imaginary substances, that dissolve their feminized properties through the layers of the skin. I am particularly interested in shampoo and make-up, which have flowery odours and are capable of transforming from a liquid into a solid state.

As part of my research into social perceptions and attitudes towards body odour I came across a fascinating book entitled *From the Foul to the Fragrant* by Alain Corbain. In his text, Corbain recounts the history of Paris and its relationship to the river Seine. Corbain recounts the story of the 1790 expedition of the French Microbiologist, Halle and his assistant M. Boncerf who survived a ten-kilometer walk up and down the banks of the river documenting the reeking and fettered odors that they encountered on their journey. The microbiologist proved that a undeniable relationship existed between public health, and the state of the river.

I found this story quite intriguing. I really wanted to go to Paris and retrace Halles, footsteps along the Seine. So, I applied for the residency, and most fortunately, got my wish. Over the four-month residency, I did retrace the footsteps of Halle and his assistant many times. I even managed to track down his dusty marble bust at the fascinating Medical Musee and Bibliotechque in the Sorbonne District.

I visited many other historical, geographical and cultural “landmarks” in Paris, metaphorical or otherwise, that determined or helped shape western perceptions and attitudes towards hygiene and odours up to the present day. At Fine Art institutions, public, private and specialist art object and painting collections I made furious notes, scribbly drawings and took big snorts of different smells up my nose. I walked miles up and down the banks of the Seine, mapping odours that I could identify. My investigations led me down some fascinating olfactory paths.

I researched the historical and social evolution of hygiene and odour from the middle ages onwards, gaining insights from the Musee De L'Assitance Publique Hopitaux De Paris (History of the Paris Hospital) the Pasteur Musee, where I visited Louis Pasteur's laboratory and personal living quarters, which included his blue bathroom. The Catacombs, where six million rotting corpses bones lay stacked in decorative patterns, and the place where strange sticky yellow mud oozed under my boots. I touched the dead cold smooth marble surfaces at the Roman Baths at the musty smelling Musee Cluny, and felt a thousand years ago beneath my fingertips. I researched how cultural and historical situations impacted on the River Seine, such as the French Revolution and the capital's growing population during the 1700-1800's.

I sped read classic French literature such as Victor Hugo's, *Les Miserables*, especially the chapter, History of the Parisian Sewers and *The Hunch back of Notre Dame*, to Patrick Suskind's, *Perfume*, which was very exciting, and which also gave the street outside the McCulloch studio, Rue Geoffrey l'Asnier, a mention. At the Carnavalet Musee (the History Museum of France)

I visited the elegant Perfume Musee in the Opera quarter, researching the history of perfume from different cultures, drawing perfume bottle designs, creating my own perfume recipes and gaining an overview into the methods of creating perfume and its main processes, maceration and effleurage. This was invaluable experience since I later applied these processes to my own art making work back in Tasmania.

I learnt how attitudes towards body odour and fluids grew out strong religious teachings such as; distrust of the natural body and fear of physical decomposition and personal disfigurement.

Every day I worked in Paris.

I could not stop making or reading the whole time I was there.

I brought home three jam packed visual journals, took many hundreds of photographs and made a video of my walk around the Seine re-tracing Halle's footsteps.

My arrival in Paris was unforgettable. I arrived in a muddle from being whizzed along under the channel from London too fast. The streets were blocked for hours because of a No War manifestation. (protest) The sound of car horns, diesel fumes and snippets of French conversations, floating past my stationary cab was exhilarating. The cab fare was up past 40 Euros and we were still not moving, except for my head, which was moving very fast, looking up at charming wrought iron balustrades, and then down across a moving jumbles of heads and bodies climbing over wedged together car bonnets. I was instantly captivated by the sensory chaos of Paris.

Paris was all looking, tasting and smelling. I felt constantly giddy from the insistent bombardment of visual, tactile, odorous and audible sensations as soon as one left the sanctuary like stillness of the McCulloch studio.

I was up and out every day, not wasting a single second. I was greedy for odours. Walking and sniffing everywhere, I navigated myself along a familiar daily path, remembering places en route by identifying odours.

I marked out "smell zones" on an old Parisian tourist map.

Every day I walked past the same shop windows and market stalls that sold vegetables individually wrapped in purple tissue paper. Whilst round the back, I noticed rotting vegetables lying in polystyrene boxes stacked in flaccid compositions, accompanied by sweating plastic bags with bulging unknown contents. I would hold my breathe past these mounds of discarded consumption, to avoid gagging at the acrid rottenness and the sweet heaviness of decomposing odors.

Because of my initial fears of getting lost in Paris, my senses seemed raw. I noticed flapping plastic bags in vivid blues impersonating racing clouds above and remember being dazzled by light reflections from the rippling surface of the tea colored Seine. I became, like Suskind's protagonist, in *Perfume*, an olfactory thief, greedily breathing in new olfactory experiences and recording their smell.

I could discern the smell of cooking flesh from skewered birds tumbling over and over in a stained yellow glass oven down the Rue de Rivoli, dancing their strange revolving dance of death layered over the smells of cut flowers and the blasts of compressed human body odour coming up on the escalators from the metro below. As I walked over Pont Marie I had my hand gently kissed every morning by an unshaven accordion player whose rough checked jacket smelt of burnt onions I loved feeling enclosed in the floury white warmth of the place I bought the baguettes every day.

Every morning I followed the single file commuter queues heading like insects down along the greasy subterranean white tiled passages into the Metro. I impersonated the locals by keeping my mouth shut. I was like an eavesdropper, but their words were not my interest, which I could not understand anyway, but rather, it was their smell I secretly inhaled. I breathed in the warm human smell of people sitting next to me on the train, especially interesting was the smell of children's necks. I could ascertain sickly sweet confectionary, minty toothpastes and fruity shampoos. The acrid whiff of stagnant urine was overpowering on some people. But then, body fluids and emissions were very visible in Paris. Sticky urine trailed down steps, forming in pools, only to break free again in urgent streams, as gravity pulled the flow towards the trackside abyss. French and Anglias noses twitched alike behind inconsequential tissue paper barriers. These softly crumpled and abandoned white sheets were like Tasmanian river oysters strewn over rocks. Unapologetically left behind on train seats so that entering commuters wanting to sit would have to engage with these abject end products of body fluids. Stylish French hands would flick aside these left over reminders of the previous occupants leaking respiratory system.

I returned to the Sewer Museum three times, retracing the steps of one of Paris's famous inhabitants Jean Valjean from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. The noise in the sewer tunnels was deafening. I held tightly onto the provided guide rails as greasy grey water rushed past, dangerously close under grill walkways. It was very exhilarating experience, and not as smelly as one might imagine. The history of the sewers was very well presented to the public complete with a fascinating compilation of objects

recovered from the sewers, such as, knives, necklaces, and money, as well as objects used to clean the sewer tunnels, huge wooden balls, that took up all the existing space in the tunnel and looked very similar to the ones used in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Leaving Paris was as difficult as arriving. I simply did not want to go. I was not ready to leave the wobbly grey cobbles on the banks of the Seine, or give up smelling the damp leaf litter piles in the Jardin de Luxemburg. The 4 months had gone too fast.

As soon as I arrived home I was immediately engaged in art making from my Paris experiences and research. I was involved in three exhibitions as a result of the residency. The first, *Lost Baggage* was with another Tasmania School of Art Residency recipient of the McCulloch studio from the previous year Jessica Ball. We showed some of our art research results together at the Fine Arts Gallery, Union Building, Hobart.

At the Costume Musee in the Louvre I discovered how the French perfume trade grew out of the glove industry (fascinating) Catherine Medeci used perfumed gloves to knock off her enemies. As I walked home to the studio that night, as the evening light was fading, I saw under the flash of yellow head light my first lost glove, or rather my first found glove. As I bent down to retrieve it off the footpath, my heart was beating ten to the dozen with excitement, firstly, with the fear of being caught with somebody else's personal possession but also, the thrilling feeling of capture. The unwashed gloves were poignant, some limp, others gesturally defiant, others a bit sad. Once sorted and suspended in a line, they were an intimate, if not consented olfactory capture of part of Paris and some of its absent anonymous owners.

Next, I was included in an exhibition curated by Kevin Murray, entitled *Haven*, I made a red wine and blood cape for the convict King Jorgen Jorgenson. From my Paris experience I had learnt effleurage extraction techniques, process which I adapted to imbue substances and surfaces with subjective meaning.

The next work that I made was a piece made from a latex impression of an iron river depth marker from the banks of the Seine. I had lots of interesting experiences trying to obtain this river depth marker, including being nearly arrested by the French Police; language difficulties resulted in misunderstandings of intent, when the police thought I was a vandal defacing the Seine! After seven weeks of long and protracted involvements with the Town Hall, the Hotel de Ville, I finally obtained permission to complete the work. The whole experience of getting official permission and meeting lots of people involved in the process along the way was hysterical and one I never forget.

I wrapped the dry four-metre length of embossed latex around my waist when I returned home to Tasmania. It was not an illegal act that I was engaged, rather, I did not want to let the latex impression out of my sight. It had already been mislaid once by *EasyJet* airlines, when my luggage had been lost, including the four months worth of art research material from Paris when I had arrived in London. Fortunately, my cases were finally recovered, but I decided it was too much of a risk to leave any of my artwork in my suitcases ever again.

As soon as possible I cast the latex river depth marker with 12 litres of solidified urine. I added pineapple essence to the mix and it smelled delicious! I wanted to combine the oppositional substances of body odor, used bathwater and urine and then, merge them with synthetic naturalized odours and fluids contained in commercial shampoo brands.

My overall experience in Paris was a wonderful delight. I am forever truly grateful for those responsible for offering a Tasmanian artist the chance to have such a great art and soul enriching opportunity as what I experienced, during my residency at the studio.

In conclusion, the best odour that I did experience, and which I would now like to confess to you now at the summation of my Parisian recollection talk, was the smell of expectation and excitement wafting out of my new empty suitcase open on my bed before I packed to go, and the delicious whiffs of Paris impregnated in its lining, when I lifted its lid when I returned home.