

horizons



What's the smell of trust?

The 'creativity researcher' Claus Noppene investigates how new luxury perfumes are developed. He has been observing scent designers who create concepts called 'Rage', 'Euphoria' and 'Trust'.

Perfumes never really interested me. I did not imagine that I would ever research the production of scents. Today, however, I'm pretty much part of the scenery at perfume industry events. I visit trendy scent-concept stores in Los Angeles, and our research is discussed in well-known perfume blogs. Together with my colleague Nada Endrissat, I'm working on an ethnography of scent design.

How did this come about? Four years ago, I had a visit from a group of former fellow students from my time at the University of St. Gallen (HSG), where I studied economics and management. They were hunting for business projects, and I told them about a designer of 'emotion-based' scents in Zurich who had just entered the niche market of high-class perfumes. 'Rage' and 'Euphoria' were the scent names of his luxury unisex brands. Later, at a party, my friends told me excitedly about a visit they had made to his agency, and of the pictures and scents to be experienced there.

That hooked me, and thus the idea came about for 'Wissensduft': 'the scent of knowledge'. Together, my research colleague and I followed the creation of the scents 'Trust' and 'Reencounter', starting with the conceptual work in the Zurich design agency, then moving on to its olfactory implementation by perfumiers in Berlin and New York and finally through to the last stage, the branding of the product.

Our first meeting was set up so that we could observe how our Zurich designer was going to draft the concept for the scent

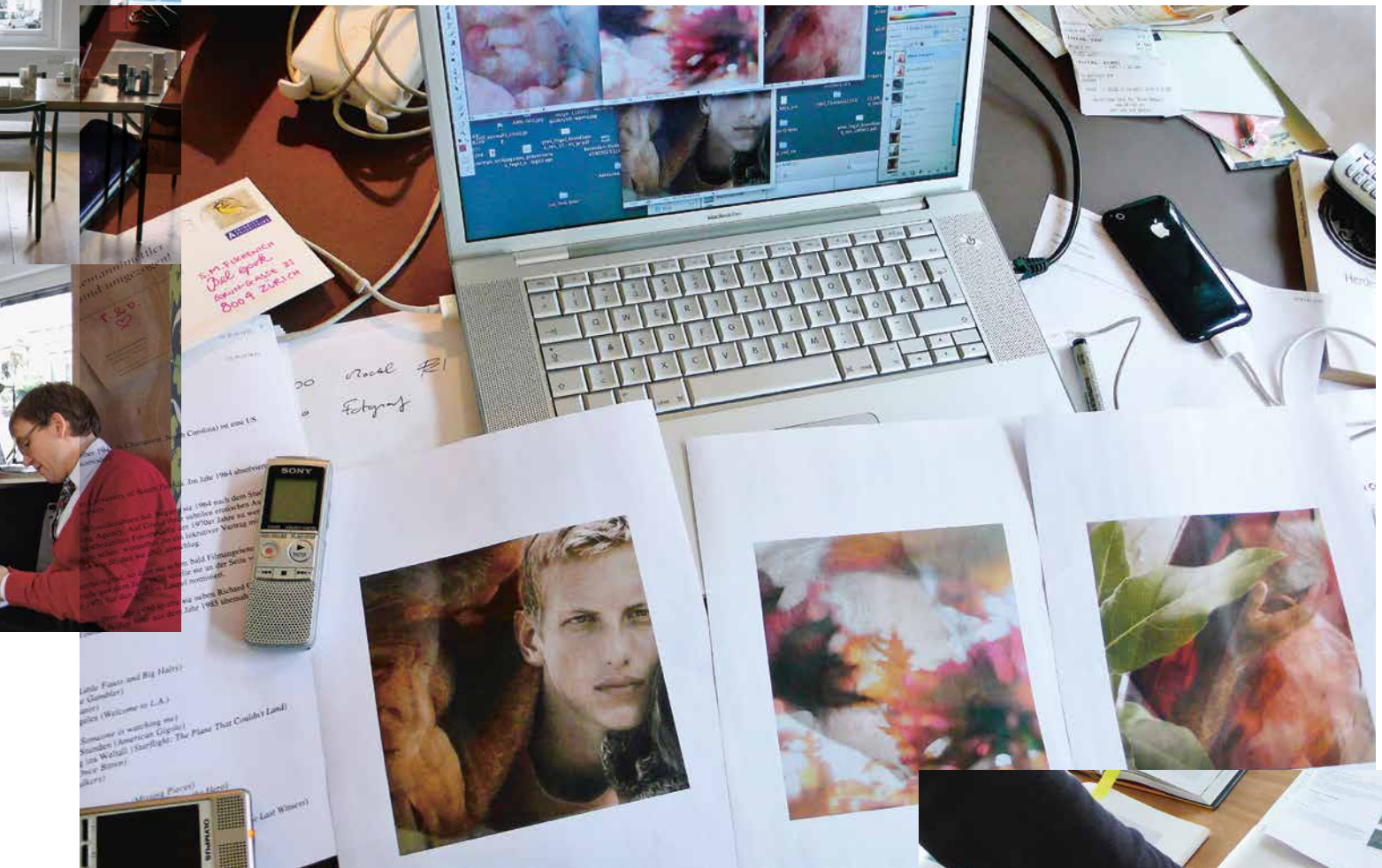
'Trust' - but he failed to arrive at the agreed time. "Just popped to the main station" he texted us. A little later he arrived at the agency with a pile of fashion and lifestyle magazines that he had just bought. Now the first stage of work began. He flicked through a torrent of pictures at breakneck speed, jotting down notes here and there, making copies, cutting out, scanning, trawling through Google's image archives using ever new search terms, and reaching into the bookshelves beside his desk - always looking for yet more pictures.

In the meantime, we had set ourselves up as observers. At the start, I felt invasive when I set up my tripod, drew out the cable and pointed my camera at the designer. I was worried that our presence would disturb his work. But soon our arrangement became completely normal. I was impressed with the endurance that the designer showed when skimming through thousands of images, creating ever new arrangements and collages on his worktop, only to jettison them all again.

His picture compilations were dominated by pastel colours. The embrace of two lovers - a young man, his head resting on the breast of his older partner - was intended to represent the topic of trust and a sense of security. The images chosen showed vine leaves and wood fibres and were intended to point towards how the future perfume was going to smell.

The topic was initially abstract, but gradually grew more and more tangible. By digitally manipulating the images, he





Multisensorial: the collages created by the agency bestow character upon a fragrance (above). Claus Noppene (in the red sweater) is a Professor at Berne University of the Arts. Here he gets to watch parfumièrs at work. Photos: Claus Noppene, Nada Endrissat

finally came up with three emotionally charged, passionate, interrelated compositions. Despite this digital process, it was actually his hands-on work with the material that was important. What was striking was how calm and continual the flow of work was, despite the innumerable phone calls, e-mails and meetings. The interruptions seemed just to flow into the creative process.

Luxury brands work with images, photos, associative texts and colours in order to guide the development of a scent. The affective, emotional and visual content of the concept images created by the designer are used as orientation points both by the parfumièrs and by the advertising agency at the final stage when the product is branded. Here they decide on the name of the product, the design of the packaging and bottle, plus the campaign that will be set in motion to promote the scent.

Meanwhile, I often wear the scent whose development we observed at first hand. Time and again, I am surprised by how others react to my new fragrant aura.
As recorded by Susanne Leuenberger

