

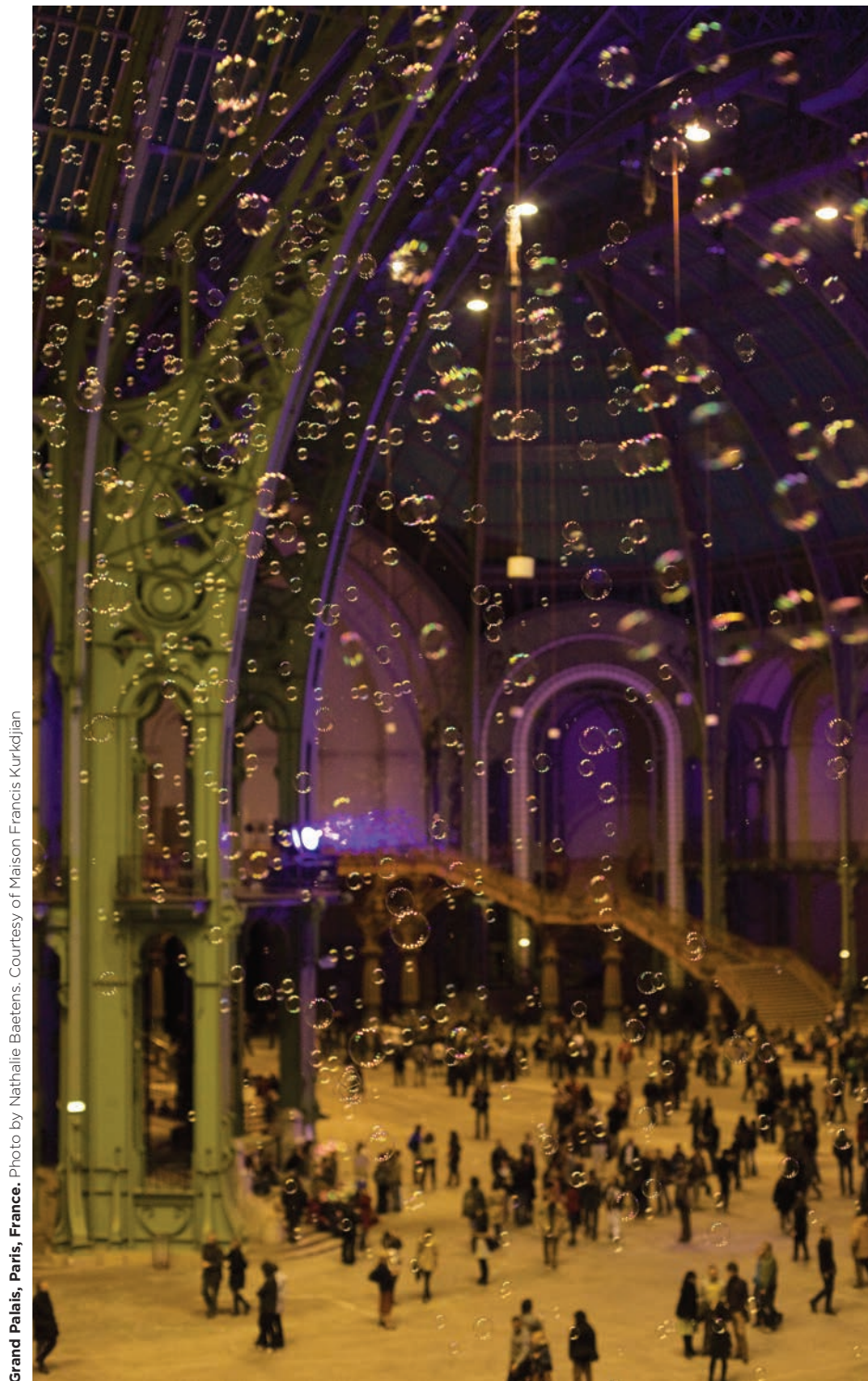


THE ART OF SCENT

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THE SCENT CULTURE INSTITUTE;
MAISON FRANCIS KURKDJIAN & NATHALIE BAETENS

The sense of smell is integral to human perception, linked to desire as well as survival. The artificial creation of scent involves both science and artistry. Some of the most redolent fragrance formulations have moved into the rarefied zone of fine art. Epicurean collectors have vaulted the value of the most coveted blends to stratospheric heights as they perfume the culture-scape of Los Angeles. The Institute for Art and Olfaction, located in LA's Chinatown, uses scent in new ways to draw a somewhat fringe art form into a more robust, contemporary niche. Institute founder and director, Saskia Wilson-Brown, elaborates with an edgy, incandescent wit. "For most of its history, perfumes have tried to interpret sexual attraction. Mainstream scents are made to get you laid. Experimental scents don't service seduction because artists care more about *disturbing* than seducing."



Grand Palais, Paris, France. Photo by Nathalie Baetens. Courtesy of Maison Francis Kurkjian

Wilson-Brown is taking fragrances out from the counters of department stores and moving them into museums, galleries and public spaces. She wants to thrust experimental scent installations into the laps of artists and curators. “People have a complex relationship with scents. Some worship, while others abhor them. Our Institute celebrates scent innovation and sponsors the Art and Olfaction Awards, a yearly juried show that honors creativity in global, independent, artisan, and experimental perfumery.”

Experimental scent narratives have been emerging across the world. Last year, artists and scientists from the Netherlands’ Avans University curated *Famous Deaths*, featuring scents from John F. Kennedy’s final motorcade, Whitney Houston’s last bath, Princess Diana’s fatal ride and Muammar Gaddafi’s violent end, installing them in macabre, coffin-like enclosures at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York.

As have we all, I’ve experienced accidental dalliances into rare olfactory zones that have stunned me with profound episodes of déjà vu. Once, in Santa Maria Novella, a perfumery on Melrose Place known for its ancient, Dominican Monk-inspired fragrances, a strange bouquet filled my consciousness as I inhaled from an odd-looking tester bottle. An old aromatic that I only vaguely recalled seemed suddenly familiar. Instantly—and in the way that only fragrances can—I was transported to childhood, when I would tag along with my grandfather to his favorite barbershop, where I sat in his lap while he had his shave and haircut. Here, now, decades later, were the same warm and masculine scents, tangs from another time and place, retrieving the visceral memory of the pheromones of my grandfather, now long dead.

Please Do Not Enter, an atypical DTLA non-white-cube contemporary art gallery run by two Parisian expats, also functions as a boutique presenting unique fashions and jewelry as objets d’art. The gallery features the exclusive perfumes of scent artist, Francis Kurkdjian, the legendary French nez (*nose*). An elegant, bearded man, Kurkdjian, awarded the Prix François Coty for lifetime achievement, created his first men’s fragrance, *Le Mâle*, from an erotic brief of sun and ocean saltwater for Jean Paul Gaultier, when he was only 24 years old. Starting from a memory, he conjures a fragrance intended to evoke the recollection directly in those who experience the scent. When Kurkdjian presents his exhibition *juice*, his showmanship emerges in highly visual ways. He uses mammoth orbs of soap bubbles and mists spun from playful pinwheels to roll brilliant, whimsical visual components into his olfactory mix.



Photo Courtesy of Dr. Claus Noppene, The Scent Culture Institute, Bern, Switzerland.



Hammer Museum, January 2014. The Institute of Art and Olfaction staged *A Trip to Japan in Sixteen Minutes*, a reimagined presentation of Sadakichi Hartmen’s ill-fated scent concert of 1902, composed of six multisensory experiences.



Grand Palais Installation, Paris, France. Photo by Nathalie Baetens. Courtesy of Maison Francis Kurkdjian

Nicolas Libert, who along with his partner, Emmanuel Renoird, owns *Please Do Not Enter*, demonstrates a delightful curatorial wit. Adorning an exhibition case in his gallery is a selection of French men's briefs, called *Ça Sent Bon* (it smells good). Encapsulated in their fabric is a fresh-clean fragrance that is activated as the wearer moves and perspires. An exclusive line of scented leathers by Kurkdjian, yet to be released in Los Angeles, draws on historical perspective by taking inspiration from the origin of the perfumer's craft: the creation of fragrances to mask odors associated with leather tanning. Libert referred to the 1981 John Waters film, *Polyester*, shot in Odorama, featuring a scratch-and-sniff card given to each audience member. When the number seven or eight flashed on-screen, viewers would scratch-and-sniff the corresponding odor to smell anything from bubble gum to pizza to baby vomit.

Odorama-enhanced films bring the practice of scent perception back into the public domain of scent marketing and popular culture. How fragrances are merchandised and promulgated in our modern world, whether in laundry detergents or the most opulent perfumes, is the purview of Dr. Claus Noppeney, the director of the Scent Culture Institute at the Bern (Switzerland) University of the Arts. Noppeney, a German-inflected social scientist in his 30s, lectured at the Institute for Art and Olfaction one afternoon. Smartly-artily dressed, tall and bespectacled, Dr. Noppeney views the *scentscape* as would a sociologist or cultural anthropologist. "We are at the intersection of art and technology, and we promote and reflect on the sense of smell in culture, business and society," Noppeney explained. "Smellscapes, smell-cultures, olfactory criticism and scholarship where analysis, contextualization and the design and communication of smells—along with the *juice* and its creator—become the object of our studies. Critics are the guardians of aesthetic values."

Innovative discourse is opening access to artistic and artisanal scents outside of museums and public spaces. *Scent Bar* on Beverly Boulevard, a cozy, niche-driven, den of Los Angeles perfumery, is but one example.

Perhaps, someday soon, the art of scent will give rise to the art of the totally sensual, utilizing all five of our sensory receptors, through virtual reality. We can hardly wait.



Scent Bar, Los Angeles