

THE ARCHIVE
AS A PRODUCTIVE SPACE
OF CONFLICT

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and I am interested in the way in which you critically reflect and produce new work? ... M. M.: How does your local geographic context influence the way in which you critically reflect and produce new work? ... A. R.: Write for an international readership which, as I have already explained, imposes certain constraints on my writing, particularly in terms of the choice of language, references, and humor. I have spent most of my career working for international newspapers, first the *Financial Times* and now the *International Herald Tribune*, which has, hopefully, broadened my sensibility. I also travel extensively to research my columns and try to reflect developments in design internationally but, inevitably, the fact that I am British, born in Manchester, and based in London, defines every editorial decision I make. If it didn't, my writing would be bland and characterless. Many of what I consider to be my most successful columns are based on coincidental observations of my surroundings. For example, I was once cycling along Oxford Street in London and noticed the corporate logo hanging above a branch of Ann Summers, Britain's biggest chain of sex shops. It consists of an illustration of an apple, which has been bitten in one side, accompanied by the company's name. In other words, it's components were identical to those of Apple's logo, but the stylistic details—the choice of colors,

EPHEMERALITY & THE ARCHIVE: SEMIOTICS & SENSATION

by Beau Rhee

Duration & Replay

By default, ephemerality is defined as something that does not last and cannot be reproduced. Therefore, the duration of an experience and also its re-playability quantifies ephemerality; for example, one can watch a film for two hours and the original video can be replayed at any time, yet if one watches the same film in the park on a projection screen on a balmy summer day with a pink lemonade, that very specific experience can be deemed ephemeral, as that specific event cannot be reconstructed just as before.

Archiving, generally speaking, is an action that attempts to counter transience. The archive attempts to stabilize or materialize bygone events or knowledge with

various types of recording technology that helps one to remember. The history of image-making in modern society, especially photography, has enabled various types of documents that can recreate experiences. In contemporary society, the methods of recording seem to grow exponentially, yet the modes of representation become increasingly more digital, abstract, and immaterial.

Human sensation and action are especially interesting in terms of the idea of replay. Increasingly, as technology accommodates the human touch, voice, motion as a means of usage (such as the mouse, interactive 3D installations, etc.), it also dictates and formulates repetitive human gestures and creates increasingly ephemeral interactions with abstract archives and databases (the proverbial *Cloud*).

Thus, the ways in which we access our digitized archives of text, images, data are also increasingly less manual and more “gestural”—for example, the touch screens, the touch mouse, voice activation, interactive 3D media. The relationship between human being and machine is also increasingly constant, available, and prevalent. We live during a time where the ma-

chine conditions the human being more and more. While most of our interactions with digitized archives place text/image/sound/data at the forefront and human touch, voice, sensation as a method of utilization, what would happen if this relationship were reversed? This would mean that an archive could easily

classify various ephemeral sensations into lasting text or graphics.

Olfaction, the most abstract of human sensations, and its archival system of scents and perfumes, opens up a pedagogy and industry based upon a visual and textual codification of ephemeral sensations and experiences.

HUMAN SENSATION

— Vision

Organ: Eye

How: Lens, retina, and cerebral visual cortex

— Sound

Organ: Ear

How: Sound waves, eardrum vibrations (sensitive from 20 Hz to 20,000 Hz), cerebral auditory cortex

— Touch

Organ: Skin/Epidermis

How: Somatosensory system, point-to-point body mapping system called homunculus, cerebral somatosensory cortex

— Taste

Organ: Mouth

How: Taste buds, or gustatory calyculi (also aided by the olfactory epithelium), primary gustatory region in the cerebellum, just behind the temporal lobe

— Smell

Organ: Nose

Genes: Forty genes determine the human ability to identify and differentiate smells

How: Olfactory epithelium, specialized tissue inside the nose canal, measures about 1 cm square on each side

Unlike the other senses, olfaction does not travel through the thalamus or cerebral cortex to be processed. The limbic system, located near the olfactory bulb and nerve, aides in the process of smells and memories.

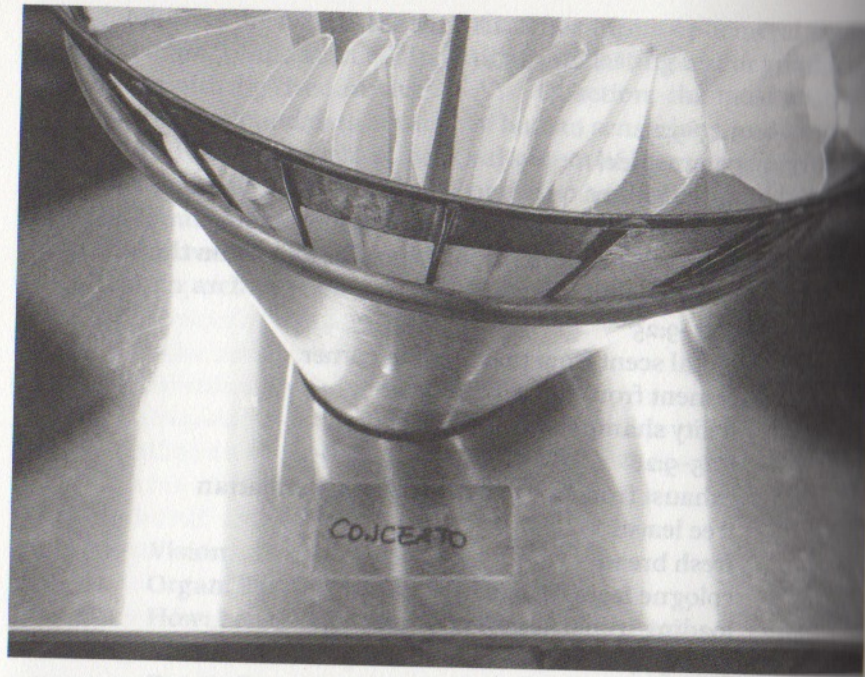
5 MINUTES IN SMELLS

- 9:23–9:24
banana peel
milky lotion
fresh wet sidewalk from morning hose-down
fresh ground coffee from the coffee factory on the block
hot newly set asphalt
- 9:24–9:25
metal scent from taxi turning corner
cement from construction site
fruity shampoo from girl on bike
- 9:25–9:26
exhaust from taxi driving in from Manhattan
tree leaves
fresh bread
cologne from man in blue shirt
loading truck diesel
- 9:26–9:27
swimming pool
hair smell from hair dryer
locker room
- 9:27–9:28
cigarette smoke
sweat

Tu m'

Olfactory sensation is linked to the limbic area of the brain, the oldest and most primal part of our neurological system. This area of the brain is associated with emotional and spatial memory, which explains why scents leave such strong imprints on our memories.

This is also the reason why scents can reactivate hidden memories in such a powerful way. Not only is the process of olfaction in our body incredibly profound and complex, but it also is an important subject of current research in neuroscience and behavioral sciences. The linguistic description of a scent is also a complex signification game. Unlike seeing, tasting or touching, which are



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senses that involve an interaction with tangible objects, hearing and smelling are senses that involve the abstraction and codification of ephemeral or intangible experiences. While auditory devices help to visualize sound waves and the form of sonority, there is no real technological visualization yet devised to convey an olfactory experience. To convey to another person an olfactory experience, one has no other choice but to use language; it is on this basis that archives or classifications concerning odor or perfume are built.

In some ways, perfume names are the perfect example of the simul-

taneous effectiveness and the inaccuracy of language. How is this fragrance in this filtration tank in any way related to a "Concerto?" Yet, at the same time, the word suggests a semiotic possibility, the combination of the perfume and the imagination of the user enable a fusion of name and product. This process and relationship is reminiscent of the semiotic force of Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918), his last oil painting. This painting acts quite like a future-spective inventory of readymades that Duchamp was to work on for many years after completing this painting. The two most prominent visuals are the color

I Perfume filtration machine and filter for the scent "Concerto" © Beau Rhee

swatch cascading from the uppermost left corner to the center, and the centrally placed hand with an index finger pointing to the right. The title, a French grammatical expression that implies a subject and direct object *You-me*, seems to mirror the image of the pointing index finger. Thus, the hand points, like a linguistic signifier, to its signified. A vast space for possibility is potentially opened up by the premanufactured selection of colors, and other readymade objects floating in the image. Likewise, a carefully envisioned ensemble of industrial objects, language, and circulation within the tableau also seems to point to the relationships between artist and viewer, producer and consumer, production and signification.

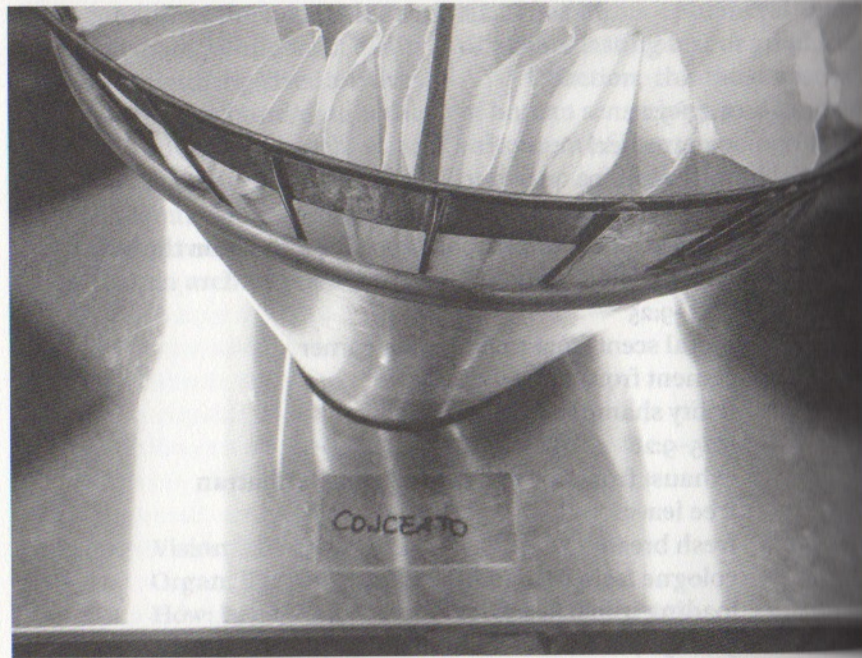
This painting is a compelling metaphor to discuss the object of perfume, or for that matter, any objects that have both commercial and aesthetic functions. The titles of many mainstream fragrances—Obsession, Idylle, Concerto, Chance, Angel—are really linguistic signs that hold open spaces left to be filled or given meaning by the consumer. The actual perfume, constructed through the combination of prefabricated "notes" (similar to color swatches), acts as a sensory index, open to the imagination, application, and action of the user. Thus, the perfume and its title serve as an open tactile and linguistic space open for use, exchange. Yet, this relationship is very clearly produced,

manufactured and, indeed, pointed in its efforts and effects.

Pedagogy

The pedagogy or training in perfumery is especially interesting in terms of a "productive archive" because this is really a crux, an intersection, a hinge where raw material becomes active, usable, productive as an ingredient. Through a predetermined classification system of language that allows one ingredient to be differentiated from another one, and that also allows ingredients to be divided into various functions. Thus, in this field, activity is mapped and determined by the act of naming.

An average *nez* (perfumer) must be able to recognize and classify between 3,000 to 5,000 scents, and goes through a rigorous training process of two to three years at perfumery schools such as the Givaudan Perfumery School, ISIPCA-Versailles, or GIP-Grasse. Mainly, training is accomplished through smell tests and there are very little tools other than words and a few classification systems that aid trainees to memorize or recall scents. Much of the classification and training techniques were developed by a famous *nez*, Jean Carles, who founded the Roure Perfumery School (now Givaudan) in 1946. Classifications serve as general guiding principles that or-



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ganize certain types of scents into recognizable families or categories.

Going back to the idea of replayability, the classification of a scent is what makes it reusable, accessible. Once it is labeled, the ephemeral experience of smelling, for example cardamon, becomes identifiable and thus a usable ingredient. The idea of "naming" or "identifying," semiotically, gives an experience a readable form. Thus, putting a name to a scent eliminates the headache of having to discover it over and over each time, and makes it a "note" as opposed to just an abstract scent. Like the technology of a website address, a phone number, or a .jpeg, a name fundamentally gives an object or experience a form which makes it replayable. Like a music sample that can be looped, a label to a scent makes it an ingredient.

In general, each perfume is composed of three durations or layers, and is constructed from the bottom up:

- The *tête* or "head" is the first impression, lasting between fifteen to thirty minutes.
- The *coeur* or "heart" forms the personality of the fragrance, lasting two to four hours.
- The *fond* or "base" is the structure of the fragrance, lasting up to two days.

The three different shelf levels on the perfumer's desk correspond to these three durations: the base

notes are on the bottom shelf, the medium notes are on the middle shelf, and the top notes are on the top shelf.

Perfumers, or *le nez*, use durational graphs to illustrate the intensity of each layer over time, using the terms "volatility" and "tenacity." For example, a strong citrus peaks and opens up the scent for the first fifteen minutes, then mel-low flower tones resonate mildly for the next two hours, and afterward deep woods ground the fragrance throughout the remainder of the day. Each scent has a general lifetime due to its chemical composition. Thus, the duration of a note plays an important role in the construction of a scent experience. Or, in other words, duration and time are ingredients just as much as the scent itself. Constructing a perfume could be thought of as designing a controlled experience over time, unfolding at a micro scale, of course, with the maximum duration of two days.

The archive or the classification system of perfumery transforms a vast collection of raw scents into a useable productive sampling palette. Productivity is determined by certain naming, classes, tags—language produces a system of usage. Differentiation allows for a useable system of production.

VOLATILITY CHART

A Method of Creation & Perfumery,
a pedagogical manual by Jean Carles, founder of Roure
(now Givaudan) Perfumery School in 1946

Very volatile products lacking tenacity	Intermediate volatility and tenacity	Low volatility and high tenacity
TOP NOTES	MIDDLE NOTES	BASE NOTES
Amyl acetate	Basil	Methyl Ionone
Bois de Rose	Terpineol	Absolute Orange flower
Linalool	Petitgran (Paraguay)	Clary sage
Phenylethyl acetate	Galbanum	Amyl salicylate
Lemon	Verbena	Absolute Jasmin
Lavender	Thyme	Benzyl salicylate
Bergamot	Geranyl acetate	Cedarwood
Orange	Juniper	Aldehyde C16
Coriander	Tansy	Aldehyde C18
Tarragon	Phenylethyl alcohol	Sandalwood
Laurel nobilis	Geraniot	Artificial Musks
Petitgrain from the lemon tree <i>Etc.</i>	Absolute Lavender	Absolute Oakmoss
	Citronella	Vetiver and derivatives
	Neroli	Patchouli
	Rose Bulgarian	Celery <i>Etc.</i>
	Ylang	
	Geranium	
	Aldehydes C8 C9 C11 C12	
	Cloves <i>Etc.</i>	

CLASSIC CLASSIFICATIONS OF PERFUME NOTES

from a factory established in 1747
in Grasse, France

FEMININE		MASCULINE
Floral Flowers	Cyprus Fruits	Fern Fresh
Floral Fruits	Oriental Sweet	Fern Lavander
Floral Fresh	Oriental Woods	Cyprus Fresh
Floral Sweet	Oriental Spice	Fern Spice
Cyprus Flowers		Amber Leathers

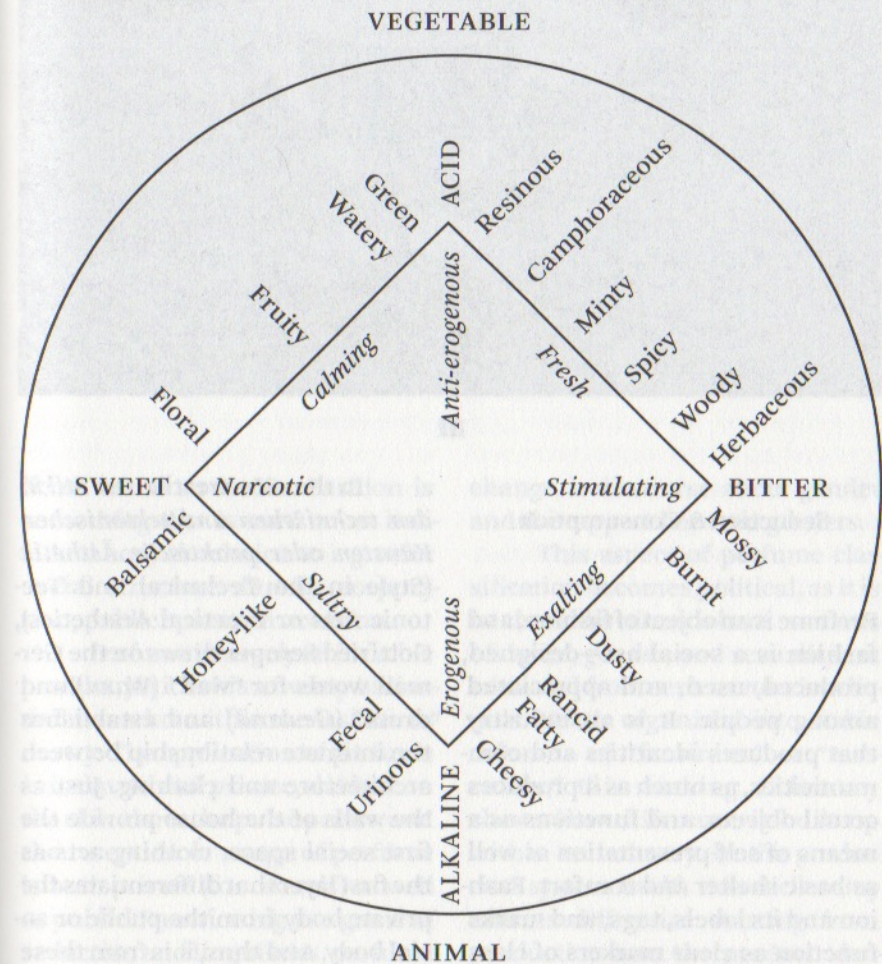
PIESSE'S SMELL ORGAN

G. W. Septimus Piesse, Piesse's Smell Organ Clefs, 1857

BASS CLEF	TREBLE CLEF
Patchouli — C	C — Rose
Vanilla — D	D — Violet
Clove Bark — E	E — Cassia
Benzoin — F	F — Tuberose
Frangipane — G	G — Orange Flower
Storax — A	A — New Mown Hay
Clove — B	B — Arome
Sandalwood — C	C — Camphor
Clematis — D	D — Almond
Rattan — E	E — Portugal
Castorium — F	F — Jonquil
Pergulaire — G	G — Syringa
Balsam of Peru — A	A — Tonka Bean
Carnations and Pinks — B	B — Mint
Geranium — C	C — Jasmine
Heliotrope — D	D — Bergamot
Iris — E	E — Citron
Musk — F	F — Amber Gris
Pois de Senteur — G	G — Magnoli
Balsam of Tolu — A	A — Lavender
Cinnamon — B	B — Peppermint
Rose — C	C — Pineapple
	D — Citronel
	E — Vervain
	F — Civet

THE MODERN PERFUME

Paul Jellinek, Odor Effects Diagram, 1951





II

Seduction & Consumption

Perfume is an object of fashion, and fashion is a social art—designed, produced, used, and appreciated among people. It is an industry that produces identities and communities, as much as it produces actual objects, and functions as a means of self-presentation as well as basic shelter and comfort. Fashion and its labels, tags, and marks function as clear markers of class and gender, and operate within society as a fluid alphabet of signs denoting identity.

In the 1860 treatise *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik* (Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics), Gottfried Semper draws on the German words for “wall” (*Wand*) and “dress” (*Gewand*) and establishes the intimate relationship between architecture and clothing. Just as the walls of the house provide the first social space, clothing acts as the first layer that differentiates the private body from the public or social body. And thus, it is from these basic mediums of architecture and clothing that one forms one’s sense of identity in the context of a pub-

II The desk of *le nez* (the nose), often called *l'orgue* (the organ) © Atelier de Geste/Beau Rhee



III

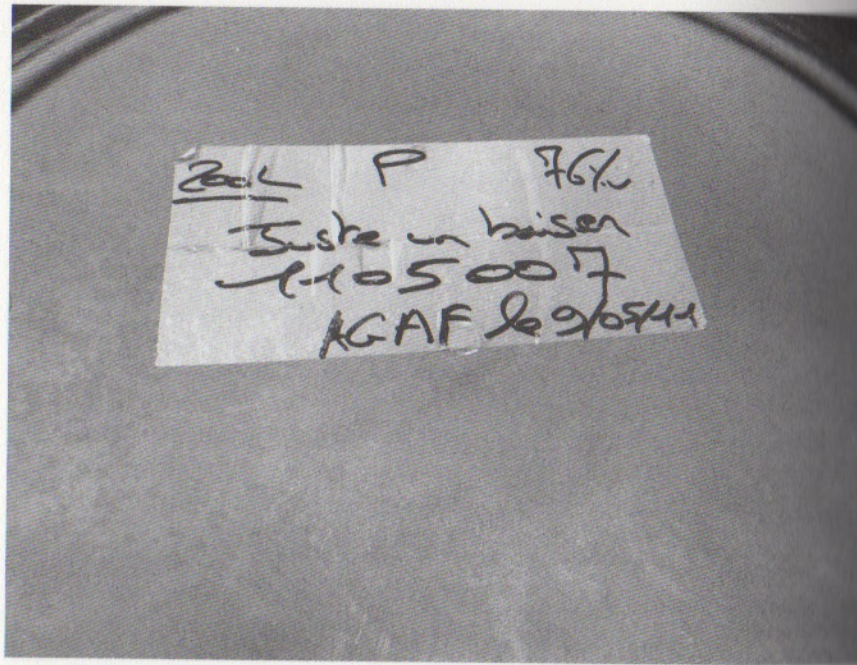
lic or social structure. Fashion is something that is used on an individual body in relation to a greater social structure: family, corporation, public space, an occasion...

Perfume is largely an invisible product, yet it holds a twenty-billion-dollar market within the fashion industry. The application of perfume is intimate and private, dabbed on the skin above the pulse points, and the reception or usage of perfume is both private (for oneself) as well as public. Functioning as a game of seduction and linguistics, perfume is a statement, especially in relation to gender and desire. Thus, the use of perfume opens up a space of ex-

change, a discourse about gender and the rapport between genders.

This aspect of perfume classification becomes political, as it is in these divisions where notions of desire, gender, and sexuality are extracted from sexless colorless liquids. Neatly organized into stable columns of “feminine” or “masculine,” this working dichotomy shows how difference is built up within an industry. In the production system itself, this dichotomy affirms difference starting from production into the product identity. The gender differentiations seem often completely arbitrary; lavender is a masculine note while

III Purification tank of *Juste un baiser* © Atelier de Geste/Beau Rhee



IV

light sandalwood is feminine. However, rather than being considered arbitrary, these differentiation-sacculumate to produce a heavily gendered industry. One finds many perfumes where the scent is abstracted into an idea or image of gender (feminine or masculine) that completely overpowers the idea of the scent itself. Of course, with more experimental scents by houses such as Comme des Garçons or Maison Martin Margiela, or with Sissel Tolaas's prolific scent library, these dichotomous charts are being questioned and actively remod-

eled within a clearly gender divided industry. Oftentimes, the hidden mechanisms of archives or production systems reveal themselves in the consumption and usage of objects. Thus, as producers and designers, the politics of production in the back-end must constantly be questioned and reimagined.

The semiotic language of olfactory sensation is a platform and technique that actively constructs used systems and products. In this context, where language can actively produce and frame an ephemeral experience, one can see how various

IV Vat of *Juste un baiser* (*baiser* means "to kiss" or, in colloquial slang, "to fuck/make love"), found in a perfume manufacturer's factory in Grasse, France © Atelier de Geste/Beau Rhee

"languages" or "grammars" frame and also politicize various types of experiences, visuals, sounds, and texts. Furthermore, as the technologies that enable us to replay, remember, and reexperience become more abstracted and invisible, we ourselves are conditioned to read, see, think, and experience in different ways. The technologies create not only an archive system, but also an existential condition.

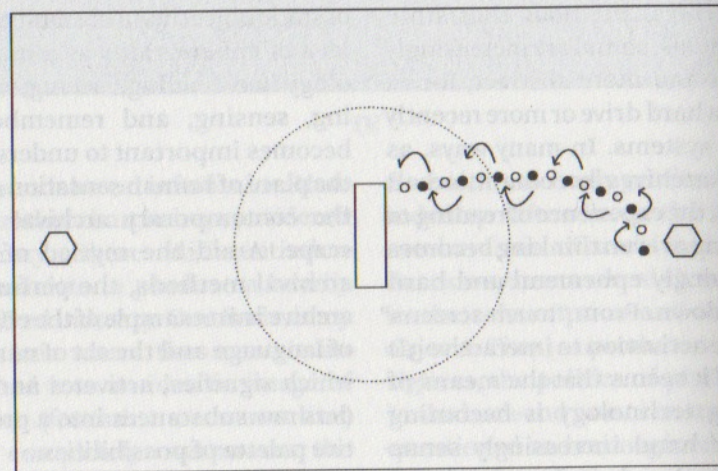
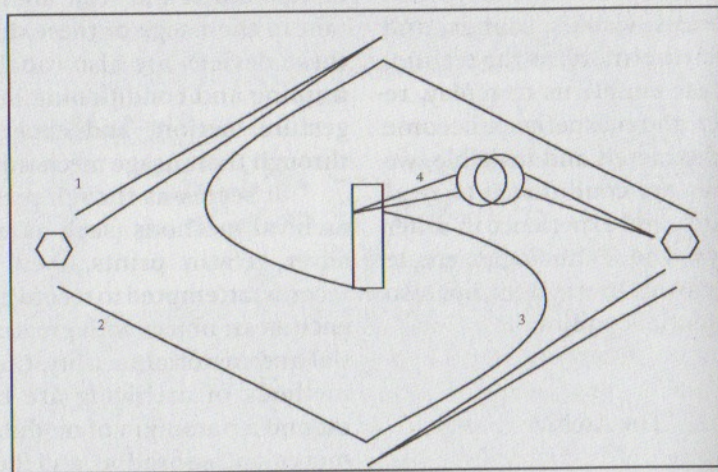
The Archive

The archival methods that store text, visuals, sound are increasingly smaller and more abstract, for example a hard drive or more recently "cloud" systems. In many ways, as digital archives become more advanced, the experience of reading or watching or even thinking becomes increasingly ephemeral and hard to pin down. From "touch screens" to voice activation to interactive 3D media, it seems that the means of reading technology is becoming on one hand increasingly sensation-based and on the other hand

increasingly abstracted. While the human touch and scale are important to the usage of these devices, these devices are also capable of training and conditioning human gesture, action, and experience through their usage mechanisms.

It seems as though previous archival methods (such as books, silver gelatin prints, even vinyl records) attempted to record experience as an object with greater spatial and material tactility. Current methods of archiving are based around a paradigm of modulation, movement, sensation, and flicker.

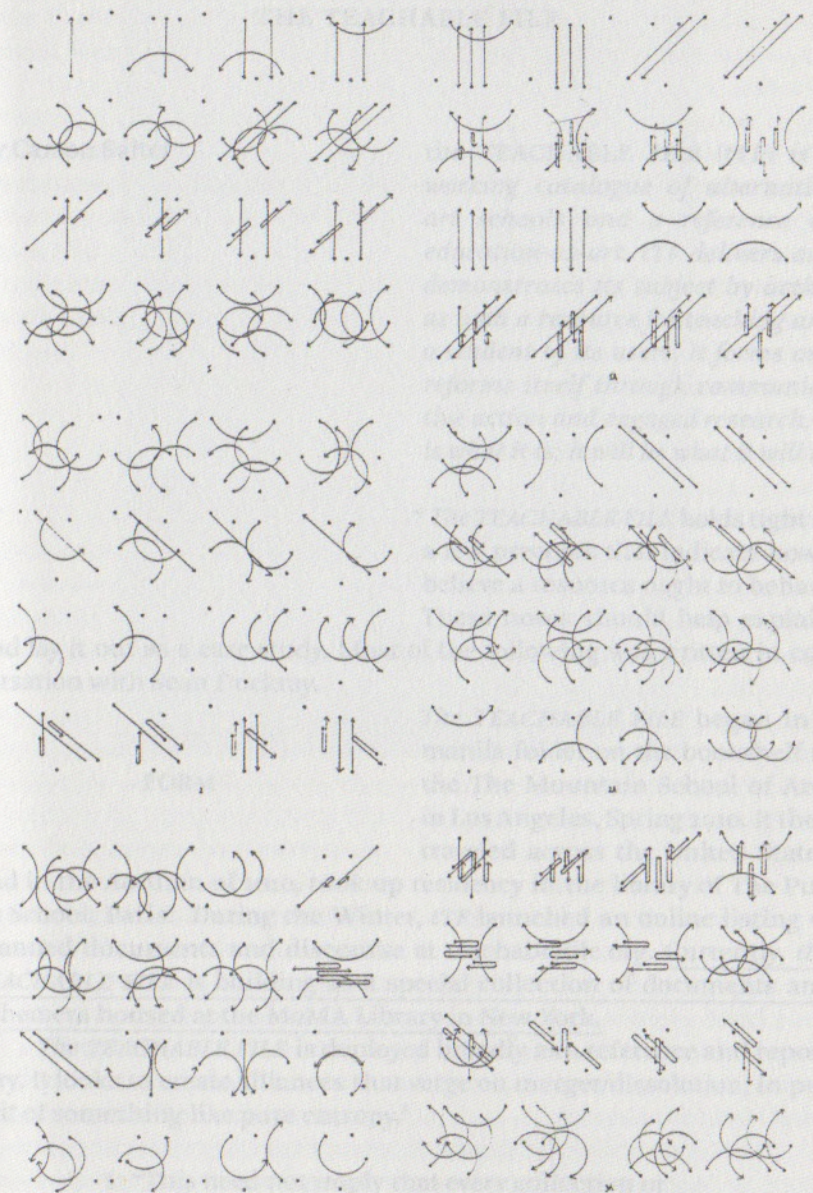
Thus, as archives lose a sense of static objecthood or stability, the idea of ephemerality as a methodology for reading, seeing, thinking, sensing, and remembering becomes important to understand the place of human sensation amid the contemporary archival landscape. Amid the myriad of new archival methods, the perfumery archive is an example of the efficacy of language and the act of naming, which signifies, activates and renders raw substances into a productive palette of possibilities.



V

Note from the author: The research on scent notation and codification systems stemmed from my ongoing research of notation systems for choreography and movement. I found the links and disparities between the two mediums fascinating. The movement scores that serve as a reference to the relationship between the two art forms of dance and scent.

V Beau Rhee, *The Ball of Living Matter*,
movement score, 2012



VI

VI Lucinda Childs, *Melody Excerpt*,
movement score, 1977

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