

The Phenomenology of Olfactory Perception: **An Interview with Clara Ursitti**

Questioned on the role of ‘the science of the hidden’ in his methodology in an interview, Jacques Rancière states: ‘The visibility of a form of expression as an artistic form depends on a historically constituted regime of perception and intelligibility [...] Statements or forms of expression undoubtedly depend on historically constituted systems of possibilities that determine forms of visibility or criteria of evaluation [...] In this way, the aesthetic regime of art... is a system of possibilities that is historically constituted...’¹ Rancière’s comments here seem to chime with the problematic relationship your work on smell has to traditional ‘visualist’ aesthetics, of a formal tension between the visible and the invisible in art, an aspect of your work which Jim Drobnick has written about for example, and you have talked in the past about ‘non-visual aesthetics’. Could you expand on this a little in terms of how did your work develop in this way, what do you perceive to be the value or contribution of non-visual aesthetics? Are there any contradictions you see developing in this context?

I think Rancière echoes what a lot of thinkers and artists have been saying in different ways for the past 30 – 40 years, with his own slant. What we can categorize or value as art is historically and socially determined. I would argue our cultural context also has a strong influence on how we perceive. There is a really interesting anecdote in a radio interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss, where he talks about how he found it problematic to discover that a tribe he was studying claimed to be able to see the planet Venus in broad daylight. He thought it must be a myth. He went to astronomers to see if this was possible, and they assured him that it was actually possible that some people could, given the amount of light Venus emits. He then went on to look at old treatises on navigation belonging to Western explorers, and found that sailors were able to see Venus in daylight. So he concluded, we could see Venus if we had a trained eye. So, in his case as a European social anthropologist, he needed the affirmation of Western astronomers and then the treatises in order to believe the tribe’s claims were true. I think this is really interesting to consider. There are things in front of us that we can only perceive if we have the framework.

Non-visual aesthetics is a bit clunky, but I can’t really think of any other way to describe it. Aesthetics is a very loaded word that is bandied around meaning a plethora of different things. By non-visual aesthetics, I suppose I am trying to describe a way of making and reading that does not privilege the visual, or that takes into consideration aspects of a work that are sensory in general. I am not thinking of taste or beauty. In the wake of conceptual art, perhaps even before arguably, for some artists and theorists aesthetics went out of fashion, and is perhaps coming back into fashion again. For example, all the Venice Biennale literature had the phrase ‘think

with the senses, feel with the mind'. What I like about the idea of aesthetics, as I see it, is that it tries to make a place for the primacy of experience in knowledge production. That is, it values the senses as a form of knowledge. This is why some feminists try to reclaim aesthetics, minus the notion of 'universal' experience. I think the different, subjective ways we individually perceive things is invaluable.

Technology has given us an extended eye. We can see events unfold live across the globe and in outer space, we can see what is invisible to the naked eye through medical technology and so on. I think the value of the non-visual is that it puts the body back into the visual – it has the *potential* to make the gaze less distancing, colonising and voyeuristic – the touching eye, hearing eye, maybe this is the contribution. It grounds you in the here and now, in three dimensions plus time. It compliments the visual. Given the way we are constantly visually bombarded by the media at home and in public space, this is really important. It's too easy to consume and be detached.

Drobnick writes about artists who use scent in their art practice. He has been a great supporter of what I do and has written about my work as a challenge to the norm in art *and* culture, which he (and many other contemporary thinkers) see as visually dominant. He argues that practices that use scent challenge and critique this. I quote him as I don't wish to make grand claims for my work, but would rather talk about how others read and or experience it. Perhaps it is challenging for some, as you suggest, because there is no visual element in some of the work to focus you. He thinks of scent as something that contaminates the pristine white cube with evidence of the body social – the visceral. I choose very specific scents that touch on the social and psychological. This is perhaps challenging for some, as the content of what you are smelling might make you uncomfortable. They are often intimate and sexual. So, it's not just that I am using scent in a gallery. If it smelled of roses, for example, I wouldn't get the same reaction. It could be an air freshener. The residue of the sanitation of public space with the rise of the middle classes still stays with us in the gallery today. A natural body smell is associated with the unhygienic - dirty. In one of Drobnick's papers, he talks about how the social evolution of the museum and now the 'white cube' is one of a space that is empty of distractions from the primary act of experiencing the visual. They are anaesthetic and fear the corporeal. He cites an interesting example from the National Gallery, London, where in the late 19th Century:

The 'empyrian air' that one was alleged to breathe in the museum was....subject to corruption by the exudations of less privileged individuals....some claimed that the alleged malodours of the working class, 'falling like vapour upon the pictures' even threatened to destroy the artworks.²

I can vividly remember a director of a gallery actually putting an onion in front of the scent dispenser when she had experienced the work, because she felt the smell would be too strong for the public, and that the onion would somehow solve this problem! You would never do that with a painting or sculpture you found challenging. It would be censorship – a fig leaf! She could accept it as an idea, and was enthusiastic about it, but the physical reality of it was another matter.

So, in relation to another part of your question regarding the problematic relationship of the non-visual to art, if you consider that the main tool to promote and disseminate art in our culture is images in magazines, then anything that is not visual is in danger of being marginal or invisible – literally. Scent has a shelf life, it is time based and ‘performs.’ It cannot be easily captured in a visual image. Maybe a perfume can be, but a room with a scent is trickier. Magazines and institutions are the gatekeepers of the activity that we call art, and perhaps the internet subverts this slightly. There is often nothing to see in my earlier installations, just an empty room or the architecture of the gallery with a smell, and a title. However, consider this: how many times have you gone to an exhibition after reading about it in a magazine and seeing glossy promotional photos, only to find it disappointing in the flesh? Or to find it very different from what you imagined? There is no replacement for living and being with the work, in the space, place, time or situation. I really believe art is a multi-sensory rather than mono-sensory experience. Even if you don’t actually touch a sculpture or a painting in a gallery, the potential is there to do so, and that potential is not there in a photograph. The art and audience perform together in space and time.

Certain practices play with this. Tino Sehgal is interesting in this respect. Strategically, he never documents his work (constructed situations), but also makes a point of using the systems that exist to frame it – magazine reviews, press releases, advertising and so on. You can only experience his work in the flesh, or through second hand accounts of what happened. A kind of myth making. I sympathize with his drive not to document the work in order to enable direct experience. There are of course contradictions in what he does, as you suggest there may be with what I do, or the word I prefer to use, is paradox. It is a paradox in a sense to make work that is invisible within the context of art which in our culture is focused on the visual. But I am not the first person to attempt to do so.

I attended a lecture a couple of years ago, where the social anthropologist David Howes suggested that Western aesthetics separates the senses as it is unable to cope with the body, and that the whole history of the museum is about the sanitation of aesthetic experience, through this separation of the senses.³ We can’t touch works of art, for example, and they are in this pristine space where we are supposed to not be distracted by the ‘other’ senses in order to contemplate them at a distance. He went on to suggest that Eastern aesthetics, by contrast, is synaesthetic or cross modal, and he feels that this is a better model for understanding the senses. I probably agree with him on that.

It is taboo to smell human. The perfume industry capitalizes on this through producing the perfumes and deodorants we wear to mask our human odour. We mask our odour with the sexuality of animals, plants and chemicals that simulate this. I want the audience to feel or experience something that might be difficult to articulate in words, or that escapes language. Scent has the power to do this. It is thought to be the only sense to have direct links to the brain, and to that part where memories and emotions are believed to be stored and processed. I want the audience to be effected on an emotional level, before they intellectualize something. Sometimes I am more successful at this than others. Tino Sehgal is perhaps more directed at challenging institutions. My work can and has been read that way. I think about it when making, but I would not say it is my only focus.

Last year you were the Arts Council England Helen Chadwick Fellow for a project which involved periods of research at the Crossmodal Research Laboratory in the Department of Experimental Psychology at University of Oxford and at the British School in Rome. Can you tell me about how this research and work developed?

In Oxford, my goal was to observe the observers. The multidisciplinary laboratory, led by Charles Spence, is currently a leader in the field and conducting ground breaking research on how the senses intermingle, and how one sensory modality (vision, for example) is influenced by another (touch or hearing). An easier way to explain it is as follows: Do you sneeze when you see sunlight? Around 35% of the population does, and in this case the visual is affecting your smell receptors. This is cross modal sensory information. It's why pilots wear sunglasses, and the phenomena is called the photic sneeze reflex. Apparently we don't understand the spoken word solely through sound, we also read lips to help us, without being conscious of it. And when we are listening to sound, even if we are visually impaired, the visual receptors in our brains are triggered.

Traditionally, it was thought that each sense modality (vision, taste, hearing, etc.) was processed separately in the brain, and consequently they were studied separately. However, with recent technical advances in the neurological sciences, it is no longer considered the case. So, what they are basically saying now is that we are all synaesthetes. Just some more acutely than others.

The research in the lab has had profound effects not only in their own discipline and in general neurological science, but it has challenged various philosophical discourses, particularly aesthetics, knowledge, perception and causality. It has questioned the assumption that there is a physiological basis to visual dominance in the senses and in how we perceive and understand the world. This is particularly of interest for me as I have a practice which does not prioritize the visual, and often instead prioritizes the fallen angel of the senses - smell. Philosophers and art historians writing on the senses and perception often quote Spence's laboratory findings from the past few years.

A good portion of artists now create spaces or situations that involve more than one of the senses. It's often labeled as installation. I would argue a version of installation art has always been around. If you look at the image of the Renaissance Villa Falconieri, in Frascati, Italy [Fig. 1] for example, you can clearly see that the space of display was considered beyond the canvas / plinth / autonomous object, to even include the view from the windows which, were they open, would reveal a lush landscape that would incorporate the depicted interior. The fresco also displays a fountain, that visually plays with the actual fountain in the room, The fountain would have been working at the time. So, a laboratory researching the psychology of the senses seemed a perfect place for me to hang out to try and understand this more.



Fig. 1. Villa Falconieri, Frascati, Italy (courtesy Clara Ursitti).

In art school you learn how to look, or perhaps what to look for. This you could argue is the case whether the art school only teaches social realist painting, or a course that is non-media specific. It's almost like learning to read. You learn this in relation to what that institution and the culture it is a part of values. This is an aesthetic judgment, and this aesthetic carries social and political ideologies. It is not separate from it, as Rancière points out. You fine tune your eye in relation to the expression of ideas. In a way, being in the cross modal research lab allowed me the opportunity to consider how to take into account the other senses in the act of looking and making. It also made me question and test my thinking/making which can only be a positive thing. It really is, as Paul Virilio suggests, a case that we are losing the ability to engage with the aesthetic because of technology, and this in turn has made us lose the ability to engage full stop with what we are looking at in front of us in the real world. Its like a form of blindness.

To try and understand what they were doing in the lab, I volunteered to be part of their test group and physically took part in their experiments. I was a subject, and I got free book tokens to do so.

- Where do I sign?

They are desperate for volunteers - I'll send you the details later. As part of my own research I attended the weekly laboratory research meetings where the researchers presented and discussed their work in progress, I interviewed the lab members, and read any experiments or literature they suggested. I think I am still digesting a lot of this material. It was very stimulating and challenging for me, and I would like to go back at some point. One experiment described an olfactometer, an instrument that would disperse smells to the subject at different intervals for experiments. This sounded very exciting and I imagined what this wonderful piece of equipment might look like and what it could do. One of my first questions when I arrived at the lab was: Can I see the olfactometer? [Fig. 2.]

In Rome, I took a lot of what I learned about the senses, applied it to what I was looking at and tried to filter it into my thinking/making. I tried to be really conscious of how they made me feel, how a work, something that I was making in the studio, or a situation engages me through the senses. How something visual can suggest taste or touch. Rome is a candy store of art and artifacts, layer upon layer of history

everywhere you turn your head. Oddly enough, being in a lab for that amount of time made me want to trust the intelligence of my senses more, it made me go back to my intuitions. I still think about what I learned at Oxford when I am in the studio. I think I'm finally digesting it now. It strongly influenced a video I made while I was in Rome, *E.C.C.O.* I suppose it made me more conscious of how the senses don't work in isolation, but cross over and work in tandem. This challenged me, and helped me think about what to do next. How to push the scent work, or work with objects again in a more informed, or experimental way. These are all very formal concerns, to an extent, which is not my primary interest, but if you consider that the senses are thought to be too 'subjective' in philosophical discourse, and therefore often inferior to 'rational' thought, then I think these concerns become more melded with the social and psychological, which is what I am more interested in. They also can become political when you take them seriously.

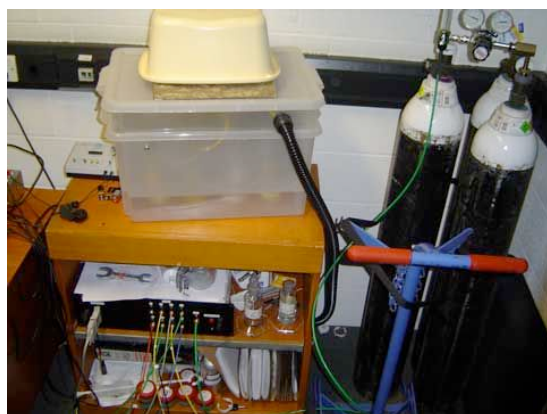


Fig. 2 Olfactometer, Cross Modal Research Laboratory, University of Oxford (courtesy Clara Ursitti).

Many commentators feel that language is insufficient to capture olfactory experience, and that the entire language and scientific classificatory systems brought to bear on smell are largely a system of 'nonknowledge,' and that when confronted with the phenomenon of olfactory perception, 'language must at least' as Bataille puts it (in the context of a discussion on the sacred) 'submit to a moment of suspension'.⁴ Your recent work, *Cohabitation in a Flooded House* and your work for *Peter* [Fig. 3], for the exhibition *Communication Suite* (Wolfson Medical Building, Glasgow University, 8 July – 1 Aug 2008) - based on research into interspecies communication with Dolphins - seems to articulate an aporia in the face of the insufficiency of language which seems to characterize much of your early work on smell also. What are the links for you between your work on smell and your work on dolphin-human intercommunication?

You can argue all communication is like this - we often misunderstand in daily conversation even within the same language, and trying to understand each other is a constant process of negotiation. Things are always lost in translation. The possibility is there, in this interview for example, that we misunderstand each other!

There is a joke scratched into a wall in Pompeii, about a barber and a client. The barber asks the client 'How would you like your haircut?' The client responds 'In silence.' Sometimes that's how I feel about interviews, artist statements, words in

general. It limits and defines things too much. There are always things that escape language. Scent is a concrete example of this. There are no words for the sensations we smell. Only metaphors and crude dichotomies of good and bad. If I were to give you a red ball, we would both probably say it was a red ball. If I were to give you a scent, we probably would not agree on what it was, and if we did, we could not find a word for it. We would say it smells *like* orange or coffee. Perfumers have to grapple with this all the time when they make a new formula for a client.

In the scent work, the experience of it directly depends on you being able to smell what is in the room. Then, another layer happens when (or if) you can identify what that smell is. It smells like semen, for example. Many people can smell it, and find it offensive, some find it funny, many strangers at openings have felt it necessary to recount intimate details of their sex life. Some have said that the scent stuck with them for days, and that sometimes they can still smell it. It haunts them. They actually perceived it as entering their body somehow. A small percentage cannot smell it at all. They are anosmic, a kind of olfactory blindness, like colour blindness.

The gaps are what I find most interesting. The way something feels is often a cauldron of emotions and very difficult to articulate in words. The difference between words spoken, and what body language communicates in conversation. That gap. Chemical communication through the sense of smell, this for me is much richer than words. Metaphor and poetry in language get close to this.

I have a very tortured relationship to language. I am never confident writing. My interest in the non-verbal and the gaps comes from direct experience. My first language is Italian, but I was born and raised in Canada. My parents were learning English at the same time that I was when I started kindergarten. They spoke a dialect that is only spoken in the village by elderly people. After the second world war, with progressive increases in literacy, standard Italian became gradually accepted as the national language. Those who spoke dialects were stigmatized. Now this has changed, and people are trying to recover dialects. For me knowing the dialect is a blessing as well as a curse. My cousins, for example, who live in Italy, often cannot understand some dialect words that I can understand in old films, simply because I heard them at home. They went through the school system in Rome that would have been trying to standardize the way Italian was spoken. To complicate things even further, many immigrant communities start to mix words from the culturally dominant language of their new home, with their own language to make new words, or non-words – they call it *Italianese*. So, again, we would be speaking this very subjective, marginal language at home and with other members of the Italian immigrant community, all of whom have different dialects, using words that sometimes weren't English or Italian, or dialect for that matter! (A good example is the verb to paint. In Italian it is 'verniciare', but in Italianese it is 'pintare')

I have a close friend who is a Swedish speaking Finn. When I was doing an IASPIS residency and working in Sweden, I made a feeble attempt to learn some Swedish, and I have some basics. When we meet, we often make up words that are neither language, and she has even taught me some Swedish Finnish sayings that are spoken probably only on the archipelago where she is from. It's a community. Vive la difference!

It's these marginal spaces that interest me, in terms of what they can shed on the 'dominant' and how it gets subverted. It's not through some liberal guilt that I am interested in it, but through empathy with a situation that is not my own, but similar. And also a celebration of these spaces. You have to have a sense of humour to negotiate these spaces.

So the connections you make between the earlier scent-based work, and the more recent work are probably there in relation to this.

The work at the Communications Suite is more difficult for me to write about because it's recent, yesterday was the last performance in fact. Both it, and the more recent work has been developed through reading about different uses of dolphins in military experiments, especially those in dolphin communication. and working very intuitively and laterally with the material I was coming across. When I was invited to make new work for a series of rooms where medical students learn communication skills, my immediate feeling when I visited the space and saw how it was used, was that the whole situation was dreamlike and surreal. It felt like a surgery and a stage set all at once. The actors were behaving as patients in a very convincing manner, and the medical students were being tested on how they responded to their medical complaints, or how they broke bad news and so on. They seemed nervous and wanted to perform well for their marks, and there was a strange tension in the air. The work I made was very much in response to this environment, taking advantage of the architecture of the space, its atmosphere and what it is used for. A doctor's surgery is not the most relaxing place, and certainly not when there are live feeds of videos between rooms so that students can watch each other performing as doctors, in order to judge each other's verbal and non-verbal communication skills. The students become subjects and observers at the same time.

I decided to continue with the subject of interspecies communication for the performance in *Communication Suite*, as I thought it might work with the general theme of the group show. The sound recording installed in the room next to the performance was taken from an actual experiment in the 60s where a dolphin lived with a woman in a flooded house for a few months. The intention of the US government funded experiment was to teach the dolphin to speak English. It was one of the first occasions where dolphins were used in military experiments, very much as they are today as missile hunters. I found the recording deeply disturbing. At points the dolphin sounds like a baby, at others like an animal, and I deliberately left no information as to what the sound was, leaving it up to the viewer to interpret or misinterpret. Peter could repeat the rhythm and pitch of English, but it was impossible with its anatomy to pronounce the words that are repeated to him. Why not try and understand what the dolphin (Peter) was saying rather than try and teach it English? At some points in the recording, it sounds like Peter is having the last laugh - and he often rebels by gurgling notes from a musical scale. It's absurd. The sounds can be interpreted in many different ways, but they communicate volumes despite their being non-verbal. The best response I got in the comments book was 'I felt like I went to the shrink and forgot to take my pills'. I thought, great, this person gets it. It was a feeling or situation I was trying to create or communicate through the performance rather than it being 'about something' that you can name easily.



Fig. 3. *Peter*, 'Communication Suite', University of Glasgow, 2008. (courtesy Clara Ursitti).

How did you develop an interest in smell as a possibility for material in art? How does your work with smell engage in the temporal aspect of scent? Do you see a correspondence between the time-based and performative aspect of smell-as-event and your performances, installations and video work? How has your previous work with smell affected recent developments in your more object-based work, in your series *The Dolphin Girl Porcelain Collection*?

I became interested in scent in the best possible way, by accident. The work has its own momentum, I just follow.

In many ways the scent work comes directly from undergraduate studies in Toronto, where I studied Interdisciplinary and Sculpture. Interdisciplinary was extremely experimental. The focus was on ideas, and craft came second. I dabbled in performance at this stage. In Sculpture, craft was very important. I thought both approaches were equally valid. Somehow, at some point, I didn't want to be in the work anymore. It was starting to move too much into theatre. I wanted the work to 'perform.' Accidentally working with scent was a good seam for my interests both in terms of content and the form it took, and the scent, for me, was like a performance but also sculptural. It was time based and there was no object at the end. It also did other things that were a surprise for me. This was exciting.

Regarding the second question, scent is by nature temporal as you suggest. The fragrances I use have to be 'topped' up and they sometimes change throughout the course of an exhibition. In some installations, the scent is triggered by body movement, so it is only released when someone walks in front of it. I have also used scent in performances, which only last the duration of the work, and are worn or in the space for a brief period of time. Even more recently, for an exhibition in London, I made a sound script for three laptops. The work is called *I BO OK* [Fig. 4]. The laptops have a conversation, using some of the texts I found on this chatroom about the problem of a laptop smelling of body odour. The work stinks. As the day

progresses, because of the heat from the battery, the smell becomes stronger. The laptops complain of smelling human and offer each other sympathy and possible solutions. They're synchronized, and don't talk all the time, just every 10 minutes or so, and are placed very casually in the gallery so that you might not notice them, until they start talking to one another.

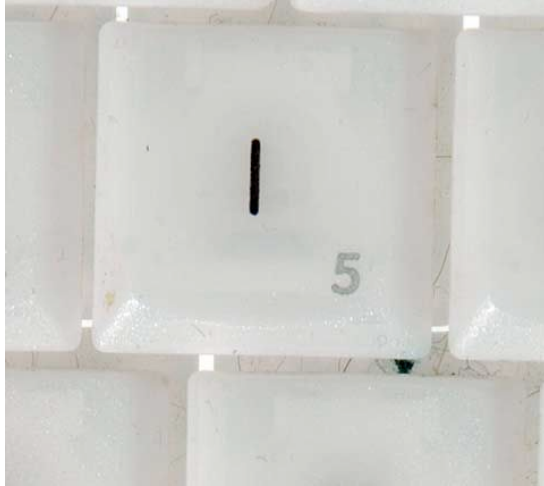


Fig. 4, *I BO OK* (detail) 2008 (courtesy Clara Ursitti)

I think the scent-based work affects what I make now, when I make 'objects', situations, videos or whatever you want to call them, because I think about the general atmosphere, and the other senses in relation to what I am making, and not just about how it 'appears'. They feed each other. In the *Dolphin Girl Porcelain Collection: Make Love* I was really hoping that people would touch the objects, or want to touch them. I've had some stolen, and I've also noticed when they have been moved, so people do touch them when no one is looking.

In Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* a dialectic emerges between the youthful and fanatical Grenouille - a virtuoso, all instinct and inspiration, impetuosity and free-form improvisation - and Baldini, the elder craftsman - methodical, measured, documented and controlled (see Chapters 15-17; p. 95). This seems to me an allegory of the dialectic of artistic researcher (the craftsman/laboratory scientist vs free spontaneity and improvisation but in truth each needing the other). In this respect, Jim Drobnick claims your artistic process 'resembles a do-it-yourself science experiment' (Drobnick, *Tessera*, 87). Do you agree with him? How does your research methods compare with those of the scientists and perfumiers with whom you collaborate?

I think Drobnick was referring to a specific early piece of work. A work made just after undergrad, that had the look of science, almost like some of the stuff I have seen in labs, – but when you read the experiment cards the language was subjective, and discussed the way things felt. Lists of ingredients for this distillation (it was one of the first perfumes I ever tried to make) included unorthodox things such as my dad's home made grappa which was used to distil peppermint. However, you could argue that if framed differently, some of the later scent installations could also become an experiment for someone.

My process differs from some scientists, I suppose, because I don't think pure objectivity is possible. Can love be reduced to science? The scent-based dating agency *Pheromone Link*TM playfully asks the question 'Is love a matter of chemistry?' This was inspired by reading experiments on human pheromones, and following their method to a certain extent, but the outcome and method are completely different.

I am really inspired by writers who question this, such as Bruno Latour, Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, and Alfonso Lingis, all of whom in their different ways try to assert that science is not free from ideology, and try to point out the subjective in it, that it's gendered and cultural and so on. Similar to Rancière, they argue that the way we look/study a subject scientifically, and what we are able to see, is very much socially constructed. I am very hands on, and sometimes that means I have to dabble in chemistry, spend time learning about something in a laboratory as I did in Oxford, or electronics - anything for that matter, as part of my process. I don't aim to prove anything or reach a conclusion in the manner expected in some scientific communities. My goals are different. I really admire Jane Goodall, and how she handed in her PhD and had it handed back incomplete because it assigned names, rather than numbers, to each of the primates she was studying. She handed it back with the names as they were, unchanged, to assert the emotional attachment we all have, even those involved in science, to what we study. It's what makes us study things, pay attention and find out more.

What does the nose know?

Blindfolded mothers can recognize their babies through sniffing the heads of their own and comparison infants, as early as 6 hours postpartum.

The nose can sense fear.

The nose can recognize the scent of a lover amongst a pile of identical shirts worn by strangers.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 50.

² Jim Drobnick, 'Reveries, Assaults and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art' *Parachute* 89, Winter 1998, p 12.

³ Lecture presented at 'Making Sense of Art, Making Art of Sense,' Science Oxford, 27 – 29 October, 2006. http://ah.brookes.ac.uk/event/making_sense_of_art_making_art_of_sense/

⁴ Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, edited by Stuart Kendall, translated by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 115.