

Scents of Buildings

Céline Ellena

Renowned fragrant perfumer Celine Ellena speaks to Farshid Moussavi about buildings and their smells, and writes about the smells of the Paris Metro and Ikea.



FM: The philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that the sense of sight is superior to all the other senses. You have walked through different architectural spaces, such as an Ikea store, a metro station, a doctor's waiting room, a teenager's room, a toilet in a department store, a lift, and written about their smells. Do you agree with Kant?

CE: I am not an expert in the philosophy of Kant, yet his description of the notion of "beautiful" and art is resolutely lacking in space! According to Kant, the notion of beauty is governed by rules and evaluations that correspond to Western notions and a single type of humanism (white race). But Kant ignores the notion of emotion, the cultural baggage transmitted from generation to generation, proper to smell.

FM: You have captured different smells into candles designed for homes. When you have walked through buildings to write about their smells, smell has been an 'as-found' experience, not as something that has been designed. Do you think smell can be used as an active ingredient in the design of architectural spaces?

CE: I do not "fall" by chance on an odour as I walk between the buildings! The streets, architecture inspires an olfactory image that I will then translate by mixing odours. As a writer describes a city by using words, adjectives ... Obviously building materials have an odour of their own. Moisture, drought, changing seasons change the smell. Added to this is the perfume of the restaurants' kitchens. One can imagine an architecture that takes into account the food habits of peoples and the climate in order to impregnate woods, porous stones, or to decide to let the air pass to clean strong smells of kitchen (for example, olive oil cuisine is very fragrant)

FM: Architecture is expected to last over a long period of time. Could smell bring a sense of transience and change to them through materials that intentionally change smell over time? what could those materials be?

CE: Wood, earth and porous stones are naturally good "living" materials to conserve odours. To keep the odours in the long term it is necessary to work with porous / living materials! The metal, the glass, even if they have an odour of their own, it does not impregnate at all ... they are "dead" materials.

FM: In 1992, Gerhard Schulze. Published a text titled The Experience Society and identified a fundamental change in society which has transformed life into an experience project. In the business field, the term Experience Economy has been used to argue that memorable events, or the "experience" should today be the product. This concept has crossed into other fields such as tourism, as well as architecture. In my opinion, smell could be a very important sense in our experience society as it eliminates the object- subject duality. Do you agree?

CE: Smell is a sense that we have long ignored because it is not noble enough. It's the animals that sniff, not the humans. Moreover, religions have denigrated, and always denigrate the sense of smell, for it is a sensual sexual sense. Using your nose in architecture is perhaps a way to bring a sensual, intimate and lasting experience between humans and their habitat. The smell of your house is a living memory ...

FM: As a fragrance perfumer, or as it is said in France, *un nez*, you are trained to convey abstract concepts and moods with fragrance compositions and to know how each ingredient reveals itself through time with other ingredients. On the other hand, you have said that perfume creators create scents in their minds first. The process of designing buildings is long and exposed to unforeseen changes. Architects need to be able to adjust and even evolve their design through the process. Do you think as a "nose expert" you could enter the architectural design process? How would you adjust your concept over time?

CE: I am indeed a *nez*, but when I look around with my nose, I am an anthropologist, a psychologist, a linguist, a historian,

a philosopher and a sociologist ... Anyhow, I study the human sciences in order to understand our private history (odours of clean through the ages for example), to understand the smells of today in order to imagine the smells of tomorrow.

FM: Sight, touch and smell can be experienced in and through buildings with which of these is smell best combined with?

CE: Touch is undoubtedly the easiest sense to use to evoke odours in architecture. From birth, the baby carries the objects to its mouth to understand the world around it. It tastes and develops its senses: hard, smooth, raspy, soft, liquid, sweet, salty and odours thanks to the retro-nasal phenomenon.

I think a blind person can visualize the architecture by touching and sniffing :)

We are already so much solicited by the sight: why not "feel" the architecture to change a little?

FM: Do you think that smell can be used as a political device within our environments? I remember being very surprised when visiting the Herzog de Meuron and Ai Wei Wei Serpentine Gallery Pavilion a few years ago. The pavilion was partially sunken to the ground and it was clad inside with cork which brought a distinct smell to the pavilion and instantly made you aware of the air you were breathing...Can we be subversive or provocative with the way we use smell to critique the value judgements that the regime of vision has imposed on society? For example, can we give social housing a sense of luxury through smell?

CE: Indeed, we live in a world of highly regulated image, but on the other hand, there is no olfactory dictionary. The smell is an emotion whose feeling can vary according to cultures, age, and eras. An odour is not defined, it is not gendered, it does not belong to an olfactory family. As a word has a definition, a gender (feminine, masculine,

neutral) and a function.

From there we can talk about trend, imagine the smells of an era, manipulate crowds by olfaction, but it remains very ephemeral!

Here are some examples :

- a fragrance with the smell of Lily of the Valley does not smell the same odour in 1912, 1925, 1947 or 2016, yet the Lily of the Valley that we find in the woods in spring still has the same smell over generations. Perfume, like fashion, like architecture, represents its time.

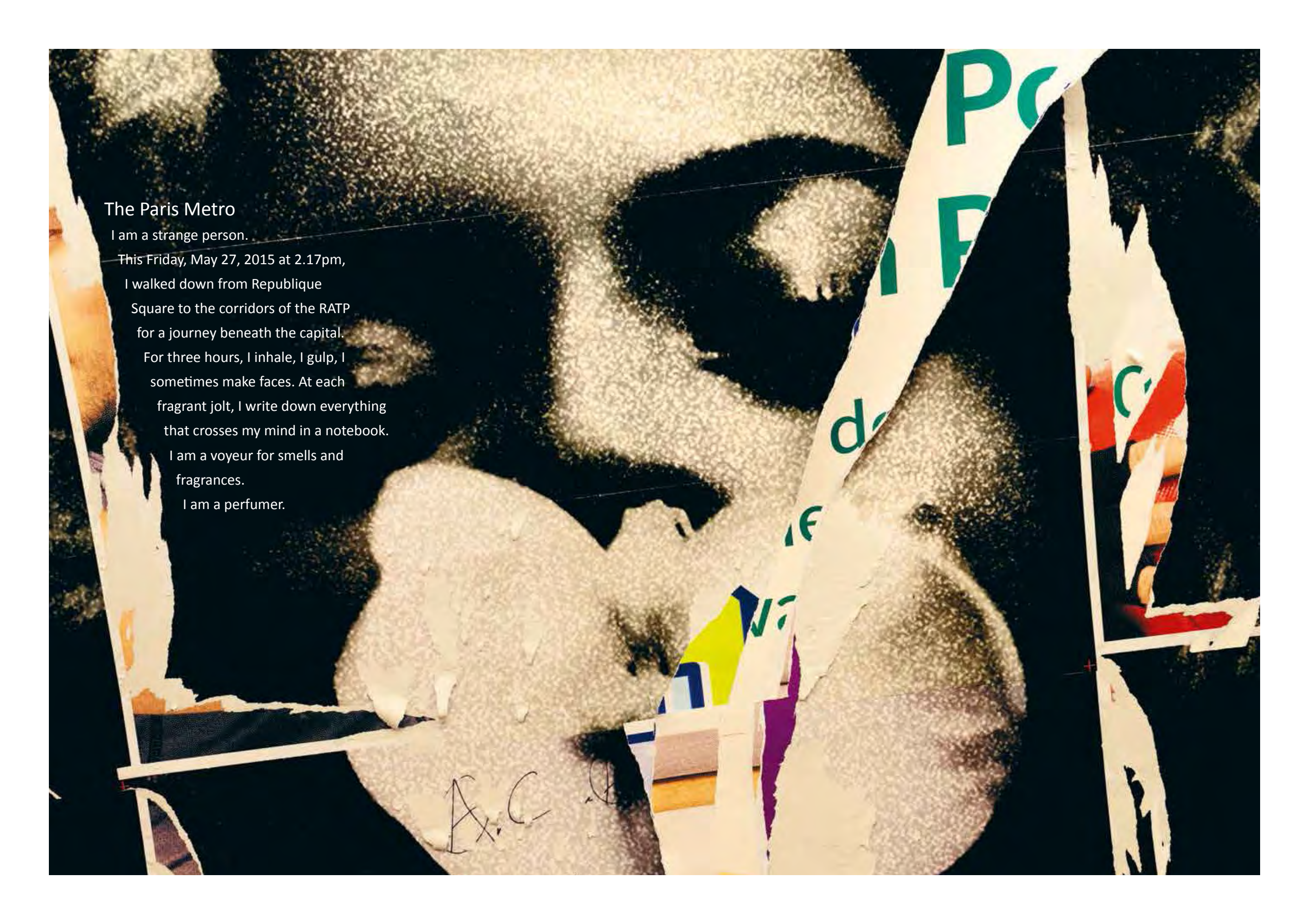
- the smell of clean is not the same today as before the Second World War. The smell of laundry has changed a lot!

- the notion of luxury is very dependent on its time and the visual message it must convey. However, a luxurious perfume is not the same in the USA, China, or the Middle East. Although the people pages of magazines show us rich people from all over the world dressed in the same way, their perfumes will not be identical!

FM: Can smell be thought of as a kind of indirect speech? It spreads out from surfaces that surround us prior to people who experience them putting them into words. It can therefore be interpreted differently by different people. I find this openness of smell fascinating in the plural societies in which there is an absence of shared understanding. As a designer, do you work with smell as symbolic or as that which is not yet experienced?

CE: A difficult question ... for a *nez* who work with immaterial, abstract and ephemeral materials!

Like all artists, I am the heir of my predecessors, of whom I have necessarily copied the works to understand and learn, and then I did my own research. I continue my reflection on my job every day and I try experiments, associations of molecules, from smells dreamed ("symbolic" perhaps?). Like all artists, I throw 98% of my research, 1.5% is put aside for later because the idea is too far ahead of its time, and 0.5% end up in a bottle!



The Paris Metro

I am a strange person.

This Friday, May 27, 2015 at 2.17pm,

I walked down from Republique
Square to the corridors of the RATP
for a journey beneath the capital.

For three hours, I inhale, I gulp, I
sometimes make faces. At each
fragrant jolt, I write down everything
that crosses my mind in a notebook.

I am a voyeur for smells and
fragrances.

I am a perfumer.



A perfumer, a photographer, and the same journey explored in turn, each capturing the essence of a place, with his favourite tool. A sharpened nose and a sharp eye for an olfactory and visual portfolio of an underground place in Paris: the subway.

Republique

Looking for the line 8 towards Balard, I untangle the scent of bleach and disinfectant on the seats and floors, the lingering odour of machinery, the miasma of the rodents' urine, the grubby sweetish aroma and the one of detergent. Apple or vanilla shampoo. The Phenol perfumed with the ink of a fountain pen. Viandox and dried shrimp. Cooking oil and hazelnut butter...



Strasbourg-Saint-Denis

I get off and change for the line 4 towards Porte-de Clignancourt. I smell the people who live in a small apartment and whose jackets are probably hung on a hook near the stoves, and those who have the possibility of hanging them in a cupboard, scented or not, away

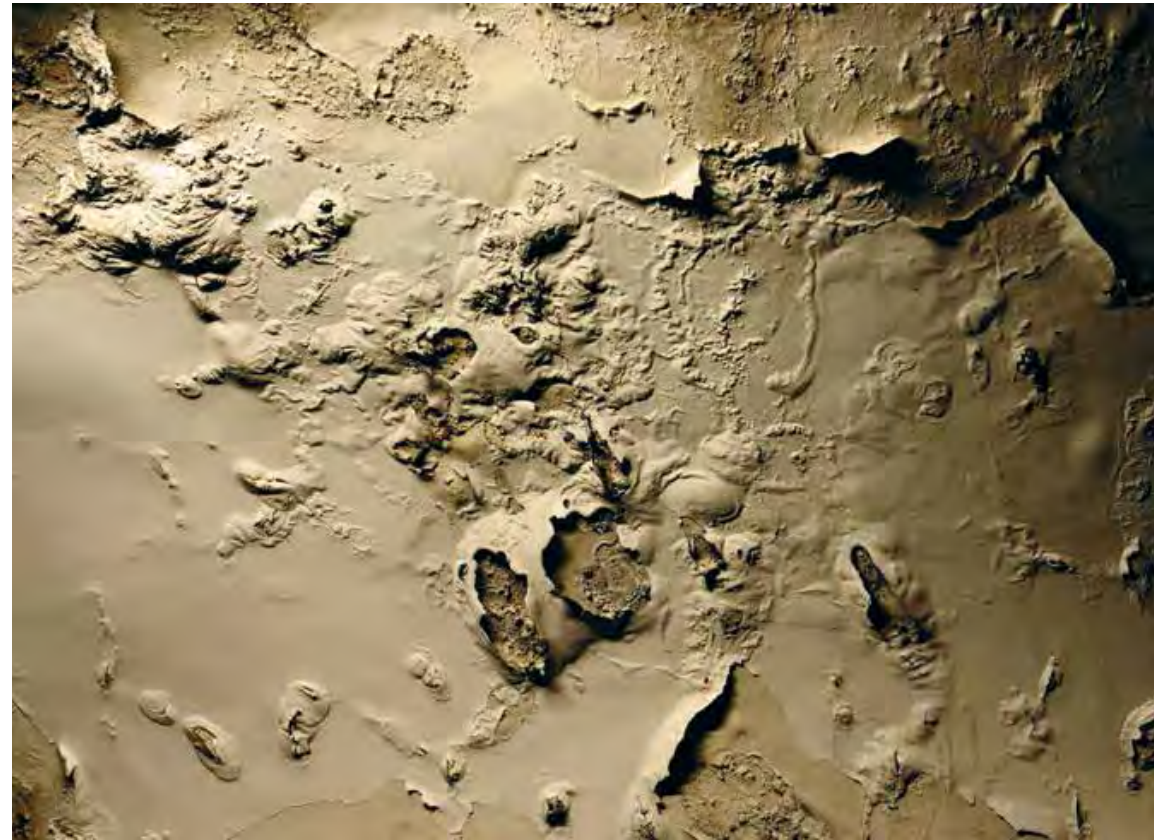
from the greedy miasma. I ephemerally sense the Asian specialties, the honeyed North African sweets, the Mafe's peanut flavour, the one of the crispy plantains, the sweet blandness of onions, the musky exhalation of melted cheese. I manage to distinguish the cooking with butter from the one using oil. I also notice the tobacco addicts who do not feel the need to aerate.

Barbès-Rochecouart

The station consists of one stop and a short walk on the platform. From the latter, an escalator takes you directly to the surface. A powerful breeze shuffles the outside air, which blends with the one trapped inside. The macedoine of aroma is confusing: pigeons' droppings and the lingering odour of sludge, dried human urine, and the lavender and patchouli fragrances are sometimes supplanted by the smell of the RATP detergent, with a lemony thrush flavour. I hop back on the subway and continue my journey on line 4.

Marcadet-Poissonniers

Here, I get off and I leave the platform to change for the line 12 towards Mairie-d'Issy. Barely out of the carriage, I'm surprised by a brief discharge of cauliflower or broccoli: a platform fart, why not! I head down the long narrow corridor that leads to the other line and find myself in the middle of a greedy, fruity and spicy wake. An interminable scent of fragrances surely fed by many women. The sweet smell caramelizes upon arrival of the train, which drains a powerful scent of scorched paper.



Lamarck-Caulaincourt

I must get down to smell the elevator; this interesting box of odours. It opens and closes, swallows and spits out an olfactory garland. In front of the landing, a strange odour of lavender bubble gum sprinkled with pee flutters under the nostrils. I enter. The doors close and a sweltering heat falls on my shoulders. I feel trapped in a giant bird cage, feet in the dirty straw and head under the feathers! Once on top, I go back down to the line 12.

Madeleine

I get out and choose to change for the line 14 towards Olympiades. I stand still on the platform overlooking the tracks, as if attending a suffocating and confusing fanfare. All my olfactory senses are alerted and yell at my primitive little brain "do not move forward - danger!", yet nothing happens. Pedestrians walk at the same fast pace, staring at their telephone's keypad.

Everyone will tell you it stinks! But the Parisian stoically continues its path without wrinkling their nose between the organic aromas of rotten eggs, awful jam, sewage, mould, burnt matchsticks and wet chalk.

Opera

One station is enough. I leave the line to go test the RER A. Well, the smell of laundry...paraffin wax and iron, immaculate steam and stained walls. This is not the first time my nose contradicts my eyes! Early in the red corridor leading to the RER, a small outdated chorus- lilac and lavender – walks with me to the end of the traveller. Romantic flowers in a case of mad passion. On the platform, I am taken by a strong smell of burning tyres and a strange scent of green banana...while no peel is in sight!



Charles de Gaulle Etoile
No, I will not go west anymore! I stay here and wonder around this vast station. The detergent smells vary from one platform to another. Chance, no doubt. The cleaners certainly have concerns other than choosing the signature scent of the day. Imagine: Monday, thrush; Wednesday, lilac; Saturday lavender... Here and now, fate has selected tuberose. A posh and beautiful flower, up on her high heels, she parades in sexy and fruity curls, crossbred with peach and naphthalene American chewing gum.

I run into a snack shop. The smells are nourishing and nauseam: the warm butter croissants mingle with the ones of seasonal fruits- at the moment, a melon that smells watery and of warm honey. I feel like going to smell the platforms of the line 1.

A small white and neat flower, with a kind neutrality, overhauls the olfactory sense. No matter the state of degradation of the place, the characteristic scent of the generously used industrial soap indicates that dirtiness is restricted. She probably has not disappeared, but the synthetic fragrance lingers stronger than dirt. I leave the platform for the line 6 towards Nation.



Bir-Hakeim

Five stations later, I get off onto an outdoor platform where a vague smell of photocopier floats, which perhaps comes from the tracks that are less protected from oxidation here. Before I could get back on, the train started and left behind a long greedy burnt tire smell- toasted bread and popcorn. I watch it go and wait for the next train.

Montparnasse

Line 6 leads me to this large station, where I get off. A pleasant old library smell is left on the platform. The cloves-benzoin duo, characteristic of aging paper, is slowly consumed by the reflux from the corridors. First by the glittering solvent scent, then by the raw and smoky accents of "hyacinth factories' soap".

I walked along the corridors when, at an intersection, a strawberry and sebum scent suddenly appears: the stall of a four-seasons merchant meets the hot bodies of many tourists carrying heavy luggage. This is a very uncertain olfactory melody. I head for the line 4 towards Porte de Clignancourt.

Cité

Brief break on the platform. Damn! In my student's memory, it smelled of Paris mushroom when it dries up during cooking. The wet smell has disappeared in favour of a dry wax mixture worthy of the best antique dealers... I get back on the train.



Châtelet

I leave the line 4, and progress to a wide intersection of corridors, overwhelmed by an olfactory and sound hullabaloo. A tam-tam player plays his instrument so rapidly that we cannot see his hands moving. His skin, shining from moisture, liberates a healthy smell

of perspiration, warm and sexy, which happily pushes away the one of the sweaty travellers hurrying home. I venture towards the platforms of the line 11. Beyond the usual grease scents, I track a sell of caramelized carrot seeds. It is here, somewhere on the platform. But where does it come from?

I cannot, unfortunately, go search the bag for every commuter... Eventually, I take the line 7. In one of these old carriages, a familiar atmosphere keeps me company until the Pont Marie station: worn cloth, cork, clean mould as the one found in a healthy cellar. The smell of grandpa and grandma's home.

Jussieu

I get out of the train and stay in the centre of the tiny hallway that connects the lines 10 and 7. Here, I play at separately capturing the emanations of each platform. My right nostril identifies the aroma of fresh mushroom from the line 7's platforms; the left detects a miasma of roasted butter or milk skin. It's funny, but I end up rubbing my confused nose, like a rodent.

Place d'Italie

I get off to change direction. It will be the line 5 towards Bobigny. While walking, I can barely distinguish a discrete organic and bitter smell of plaster. The platform suddenly seems cold and wet.

Quai de la Rapée

With the station being outdoors, I have a little break. Immediately, the illicit smell of a cigarette escapes spreading its volutes. These are soon covered by the metallic, acrid and dark fumes from the exhaust pipes of the cars passing nearby. I get back on the line 5.

Republique

Back to the starting point! I take the exit No. 10, which kept the name of the square Henri Christiné, who died during the redevelopment of Republic Square. On the stairs, I have a feeling of déjà-smell at every step. It is a string of absurd and out of sync scents, human and alive.

Eventually, outside, I permanently leave this smell of chewing gum, small industrial flowers, fruits, detergents, more or less humid stones and more or less rancid urine. It is 17 h 12. I head to a bar for a refreshing drink.



A Sunday at IKEA

It's raining this morning. What can we do? Let's take the car and drive to Ikea.

The children will be able to run safely and we, we can squabble on a colourful sofa!



Rolled. Roll, and plug on the road. Rolled. Rolling and turns round in the parking lot. Silent motor, slamming door, we finally reach the marked entrance. As soon as the huge glass doors close behind me, the sweaty smell claws at my nostrils. Some chain stores have a characteristic olfactory signature that causes various attitudes.

At Ikea, the vast majority of people, men or women, raise their noses with a smile, their bodies on the look-out, but more rarely, shrinking or sketching a recoiling movement, emptying their lungs with an endless and sonorous sigh. The children squawk and scatter as if they were pouring into an amusement park. Meticulously, like everyone else, we take the path of transhumance of the perfect Ikea guest visiting the country of the furnished, filled with this silly, beatific feeling.

Happy perfumes, fresh people, sprinkled in good-mood families. Crisp, sour, fruity and spicy crumbs sparkle like electrons stunned around my nose, then, imperceptibly, with the approach of the first elements of the decoration, gives way to the serious rumour of the heavy and serious substances which escape from the small and large furniture.



Scene 1. Knick knacks and bargains. Succession of alcoves adroitly decorated with a lot of things that we can put in a huge yellow bag that exhales a breath of dirty washcloth forgotten on the edge of the bathtub. We pass through a large, warm cloud of cloves and oatmeal, and chance allows us to discover the latest collections still impregnated with the odours of packing boxes.

Scene 2. The sections offer practical examples, from the student's studio to the reconstituted family. Cushions and sofas. Dust and voluptuousness. Everything begins with a cold, mineral and greasy cotton perfume and ends in apotheosis on a leatherette arpeggio. The odours are oddly identical, but the impact of faux leather replaces the natural fibre of cotton, to a lower rank.

Scene 3. The dining room. Wood glue and resplendent lacquers. Fine odours of fish bones, terebinth, forest honey, lime zest and camphor. I sometimes suspect industrialists of flavouring varnishes to make us believe that the furniture is solid wood, rather than chipboard powder.

Scene 4. The offices. Plastic and metal. Popcorn and canned crushed tomatoes. Few people and little air moving, therefore little significant odour. Otherwise, this perfume is typical of the places where families of all ages end up being too hot in their clothes. Sweaty sweat of the little ones, and salty adults. If I caricature, I will describe the perfume of the infant as that of a brioche with milk, and that of an old person like handmade country bread. But then, everything is in the dosage of the amount of yeast ...



Scene 5. Libraries, storage and other shelves. A place of convergence of human odours- the number of people per square meter increases and concentrates on a primordial stake: materialized Tetris in its house. The brains are in- boiling, evaporation and tension. Strata mixed with eau de toilette and capillary sweat. I no longer perceive the sweet perfume of Billy- the emblematic library.

Scene 6. Kitchen furniture. Fusion and explosion. Increasing nervousness of clients, irritation of children. Fatigue and edges of nerve. The sporadic celeriac vapours of tormented customers mingle with the bland and cluttered odours of household appliances and stainless steel. A painful and astringent mixture, I pass my way.

Scene 7. The beds. Do not hesitate to lie down to test them. Bouquet of bulk of feet, even if nobody removes their shoes. To the warm rubber, to the worn leather, to the socks badly rinsed or forgotten in the drum of the washing machine. Boiled endive effluvium, mouldy liver, a cheese platter, faded rose, overcooked Brussels sprouts exploded at the bottom of the pan and, above all, peppery, pungent, complex, and a technical remedy of Latex mattresses. Attractive. Repugnant. Fun, in short.

Scene 8. The cafeteria and the famous meatballs: the apotheosis of our walk. Canteen smoke. Sweet and sour sauce and wet meat. Glutamate, cold room with a characteristic frosty grassy smell, crispy fat, caramelized juices and a very elongated coffee smell. Enjoy your meal?



Scene 9. At the bottom of the stairs, self-service. One quickly disengages, eyes riveted to the ground to avoid as far as possible to fill his caddy with almost useless tricks. The best time: the passage in front of the carpets: perfumes of horsehair, chestnut flour, rancid butter, dust from elsewhere. Savant mixture that evokes English pickles and Mitosyl balm for baby's bums.

Scene 10. The stock. High numbered rows. Concrete floor and long metal beams. Wooden pallets and large boxes. Where is that? Blank stare. Humour grunts and curiosity fades. I note: nutmeg stale for the ground. Porridge for cartons. Coca-Cola rough for the boards. Would you? Well, it is not very original, all that. I draw my nose. I am tired and finally I close the hatches. To the checkout.

On the road that leads to the exit, a sudden movement of the chin: my nose unfolds its nostrils, panic of the papillae! My eyes glide towards the ultimate olfactory universe: the refreshment bar and its procession of Swedish products. Very sweet. Very salty. Wonderfully spicy. Without looking at the pyramids of chocolate biscuits, the stretches of herring with dill, coriander or cinnamon mayonnaise, we leave Ikea, no-it-end-it-no-buys-nothing, exhausted.

Invariably, by opening the trunk of the car, I wonder how all of these things with unpronounceable names failed in the huge blue bag- all brand new, but with the perfume of flip-flops and broccoli. The mysteries of overconsumption...

720 #15 / Summer 2017/ Smell

Celine Ellena is a fragrance perfumer who works for The Different Company. Born in Grasse, France she worked for 10 years at Harmann & Reimer (now Symrise), then at Charabot, and in 2004 joined The Different Company.

The Paris Metro
Article originally published in NEZ, the Olfactory Magazine, # 1
<http://www.nez-larevue.fr>

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A Sunday at Ikea
Article originally published 10th of May 2016 in the blog
<http://chroniquesolfactives.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=ikea>

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720 is the subject reference number given to architecture in the Dewey Decimal System. The DDS is the proprietary system of library classification developed by Melvil Dewey in 1876.

720 is the occasional pamphlet of FunctionLab, the think tank of Farshid Moussavi Architecture.

www.functionlab.org

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