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Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions

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Citation

Hoffman, T. K. (2020, October 13). *Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/137748>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Guava: A conceptual platform for art-actions

Issue date: 2020-10-13



Photo of a scent extraction, 2017

Enriching flaws of Scent

עטר עטרה A Guava Scent Collection

Introduction

This chapter is written around the *Guava Platform's* scent collection. It connects the decision-making process, the motivations and manifestations of the scent collection to dominant convictions in Western philosophy. According to these convictions, the sense of smell and scent have no relevance to rational thinking and/or scientific knowledge, for three reasons: scent is volatile, the sense of smell is non-verbal, and the sense of smell is too subjective to rely on. By contrast, I argue that these supposed 'flaws' of scent and the sense of smell, might, in fact, contribute in a constructive and productive way to a socio-political debate, as will be demonstrated by the art installation of the *Guava scent collection*. The volatile, non-verbal and subjective nature of scent and the sense of smell inspired the realization of the exhibition of the *Guava scent collection*. Through this exhibition, I found new ways of entering the conversation around locality and inhabiting land that the *Guava Platform* promotes. The *Guava scent collection* therefore adds the sense of smell to the exploration of embodying politically constructive imagination, which is the main goal of the art-actions that are gathered on the platform. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the bodily sensations that are induced by scent contribute to the awareness and re-positioning of oneself in the complexity of the territorial conflict east of the Mediterranean.

One of the main issues of conflict the state of Israel is involved in is the right to reside in or inhabit land in the region. One major example of the common line of thinking is the Jewish settlers' ongoing movement into the West Bank. Political scientist Oded Haklai states: "Settler projects in contested territories are often accompanied by national homeland claims that can have far-reaching implications for the trajectory of the territorial conflict".⁹⁶ There are several competing considerations for the constitution and localization of the borders of the Jewish homeland, and these issues can often be

⁹⁶ Haklai, Oded. 2015. 20.

recognized in the arguments around the settlers' actions in Palestinian territories. The settlers movement envisions the state of Israel in the borders of *The Greater Israel*, that includes the Palestinian Territories of today.⁹⁷ The settlers' belief of how to gain ownership over this territory prevents any possibility of establishing a Palestinian State in the area. Furthermore, their belief excludes any other way of inhabiting land, and as a result includes only people of Jewish origin.

As a response to this territorial conflict, the *Guava Platform* art-actions provoke the idea of movement through the region east of the Mediterranean by imagining the elimination of national borders. The platform practices embodiment of constructive political imagination with the participation of inhabitants of the area, by means of film, video, performance and participatory art. The scent collection art-action suggests to set aside national collectivism and aspires to create new connections between people and the land they inhabit. These connections go beyond the current national boundaries in the region and are the outcome of its inhabitants' diversity. This chapter aims to show how the particular characteristics of the sense of smell and scent as mentioned earlier, that affected the extraction process and installation of the collection, enable the possibility of new associations and correspondences with this conflicted land.

Traditionally, scent was closely identified with the body and with the animal nature of humans. Therefore scent was not considered as a sense that can be associated with rational thinking, and/or scientific discoveries, and it has not been considered worthy of any philosophical discussion.⁹⁸ From ancient Greek philosophy until recently, scent and the sense of smell were mentioned merely by their faults and flaws, and as a result dismissed and neglected. According to art historian Adam Jasper and designer Nadia Wagner, smell in philosophical history is "deeply connected with the unconscious, divorced from representation, and consequently in some respects more primal than the other senses. It indicates our animal and emotional being, offering a way of thinking, or at least of drawing conclusions, that is not conceptual but intuitive."⁹⁹ Sigmund Freud for

⁹⁷ Historically this term had different interpretations of the territory it covered, but in all of its' versions the territory is larger than the state of Israel today.

⁹⁸ Korsmeyer, Carolyn. 1999. 11.

⁹⁹ Jasper Adam & Wagner Nadia. 2008-2009. Retrieved October 2019.

example relates the decline of the sense of smell to man's decision to adopt an upright manner of walking.¹⁰⁰ Since then, he argues, sexual stimuli were no longer dominated by the olfactory system, but rather dominated by sight. This change, Freud claims, was the entrance of humans into civilization.¹⁰¹ The issues around the sense of smell and scent that were raised historically in Western philosophy add up into three main points that this chapter addresses. Firstly, scent is volatile and non-persistent, and as a result, difficult to categorize. Secondly, there is no descriptive vocabulary of the sense of smell; therefore it is challenging to communicate about the sense of smell and scent, and consider them as part of discussions from which knowledge emerges. Thirdly, the physical challenge of recognizing scents¹⁰² alongside the lack of a shared vocabulary made the sense of smell to be regarded as subjective and therefore untrustworthy in philosophical arguments. This chapter reflects on these three supposed shortcomings. It explores how each of them contributed to the manifestation of the *Guava scent collection*. Together they reveal how the sense of smell might take part in embodying a socio-politically constructive imagination regarding the territorial conflicts in the area east of the Mediterranean. Even more, it will argue that the so-called flaws are the positive characteristics that make this contribution possible.

As said, the supposed flaws of the sense of smell dominated discussions about scent and the sense of smell in Western culture. Because of this prejudice, olfactory artworks are very rare in the history of art and the sense of smell has not been a common object of study in the field of aesthetics. However, in recent decades, this had changed. Efforts are being made in the philosophical and aesthetic fields to attend to scent and its contribution to knowledge. These efforts try to redefine knowledge in such a way that it will include, and not dismiss, the sense of smell. For example, philosopher Frank Sibley examines if and how smell can be an object of aesthetic interest, value and appreciation,

¹⁰⁰ Freud, Sigmund. 2004. 134.

¹⁰¹ I will come back to Freud's claim about smell and civilization in the third sub-chapter of this chapter.

¹⁰² There are physically tens of thousands of odor receptors in our body and each scent is sensed as a combination of a few of them. As for that there is a constant chance of error in identifying the smelled scent, therefore many times it feels as though one is guessing the what is smell. For further reading: For further reading: Jennifer C. Brookes, 2010, 3491-3502.

by comparing it to the other, more dominant senses in the field.¹⁰³ He claims that the so-called flawed sense is not different in character than the much appreciated senses of sight and sound. Theatre director and researcher Erin B. Mee suggests a sustainable aesthetic theory that refers to the Sanskrit term and theory of Rasa. In Sanskrit Drama, Rasa is translated into the flavor and essence that are experienced during a performance. Rasa, Mee claims, is a way to consider the senses of taste, scent and touch not just as part of the aesthetic realm, but as a way to engage and connect through them: “The central metaphor of catharsis (sight) distances us from the world around us; that of rasa (taste) connects us to it”.¹⁰⁴

However, the focus of this chapter is not the incorporation of scent and the sense of smell into philosophical or aesthetic fields. Rather, I argue that the very flaws and shortcomings that have been attributed to the sense of smell and scent may in fact contribute to manifesting an art installation that enriches a socio-political debate about a conflicted land. By relating the shortcomings to the metaphorical and symbolic aspects of the scent collection exhibition, and by shifting the focus of the socio-political conversations from matters of national identity to personal perspectives and observations, the scent collection and its installation serve as a case study to explain and support this argument.

In the three subchapters below I will explore how each one of these traditionally unfavorable aspects of scent and the sense of smell – that is its volatility, its non-linguistic character and its subjectivity - affected and inspired the scent collection installation and shifted the conflicted conversation the exhibition promoted from the everyday, common local debate. The first subchapter, *I wanted it all to disappear*, unfolds the non-persistent character of scent. It proposes to discuss the feeling of locality without connecting it directly to the materiality of soil and land. It suggests to metaphorically focus on what remains from this materiality in scent, and in the process of smelling in order to find new ways to relate to a piece of land. The second subchapter, *To represent what is not there*, correlates the non-descriptive vocabulary of scent to the endeavors of realizing the scent collection installation. As a result of the challenging relation between words and scent, it

¹⁰³ Sibley, Frank. 2006. 207-255.

¹⁰⁴ Mee, Erin. 2019. Retrieved October 2019.

presents how the shortage of language regarding the sense of smell is actually an opportunity to find new words and ways of conversing about inhabiting this conflicted landscape. Finally, the subchapter *Talking through scents* emphasizes how the subjectivity that is associated with the sense of smell in fact adds to the discussion about the right to reside on this conflicted land. A subjective conversation situates the people who are living on the land, their thoughts and desires, in the centre of a socio-political discussion, rather than communal ideologies, like nationality, that usually dominate the conversations about the territorial conflict.

The three subchapters are not meant to be read in a certain order, they drift next to each other as though spreading around like scent, and are not set in a chronological order. Each one of them proposes a different exploration, both metaphorical and material, to the manifestation of the scent collection installation and exhibition. Together they show how the bodily sensation of scent contributes to a broadening of the socio-political conversation about locality and the right to inhabit this conflicted land, through an art installation. The reader is welcome to follow her/his nose and choose in which order to read them.

I wanted it all to disappear

Scent is one of the most difficult sensual experience to trace. Many times, one of the first questions visitors to the *Guava scent collection* exhibitions asked me was “How long does the scent last in these bottles?” The answer is that this is impossible to estimate. The connection of scent to dissolution is what drew me to experiment with scent in the first place; I felt that the territorial dispute about the land east of the Mediterranean endlessly repeated itself: both nations claim their right to reside on it for over a century, and I was exhausted hearing the same discussions over and over again. I wanted it all to disappear.

The local territorial dispute is chiefly based on questions of peoples’ origin and nationality, through which the current right to inhabit the land is attained. Since these two categories have led to an unsettled conflict, I was wondering whether different types of considerations might be part of the discussions about who should live on this land and how. The art-action of collecting scents offers to metaphorically evaporate materials that signify this territorial dispute and consequently establish a new relation to the conflict that is not exclusively based on nationality and origin.

Currently the collection contains two categories of scent: one, a category of scents that are extracted from land taken from places in the centre of the territorial conflict of the area; and two, a category of scents that are extracted from local crops that indicate the connection of inhabitants to the land they live on. Soil and locality are both main issues in this conflict that evolves around the right to reside on and inhabit it.

The *Guava scent collection* was first initiated as part of the platform in an exhibition¹⁰⁵ at Beit Hagefen Gallery¹⁰⁶ in the city of Haifa at the end of 2017. The first collection of scents for the exhibition was made from produce collected at the market in the gallery’s

¹⁰⁵ Self Collecting, Group exhibition, Beit Hagefen Gallery, Curator: Yael Messer, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Beit Hagefen is an established and well-known Municipality institution for over five decades that promotes the joint company in Haifa in particular, and Israel in general. Over the years, Beit Hagefen has worked in a variety of fields and creatively to bring together the various religions, cultures and nationalities living in Israel.

neighborhood, Wadi Nisnas, known for its *Baladi*¹⁰⁷, local products. Wadi Nisnas is a Palestinian village-like neighborhood in the city of Haifa, and in its centre lies the only Arab market in town. The neighborhood is known to have poor housing conditions and is overcrowded, due to the low income of its residents and the ongoing neglect of the municipality, which is preserving it as an oriental slum.¹⁰⁸ During the season of early winter, greens such as za'atar and sage can be found in the market next to oranges and lemons, and next to them, the season's last batch of local guavas.

The guava fruit originates from Central America. Since 1526, it has been spread by man, birds and other animals to South America and the West Indies. It was adopted as a crop in Asia and in warm regions of Africa soon after it arrived. Egyptians have been growing guavas for a long time and from Egypt, the fruit traveled to Palestine.¹⁰⁹ The weather in the area suited the trees and it quickly became a *local* crop.¹¹⁰ This makes the guava fruit an interesting case study of locality. The guava fruit was collected alongside other local crops of the season from the market. This collection of local produce concentrated on questions of locality: When and how does something or someone become local? What sort of intersections are generated between locality and rights over a piece of land?

The second scent collection was extracted during an exhibition of the *Guava Platform* in The Mamuta Art Centre in Jerusalem.¹¹¹ It was completed by collecting soil samples from all the locations where the platform's art-actions took place. These included the locations of the three films in the series, the vicinity of the online radio station used for the ***Guava Platform broadcast***, and from the surroundings of the complex where the **performances** were presented. In all of these locations, there has been a long, ongoing conflict of the land. An example is Quneitra, where the film ***A day becomes*** takes place. The town of Quneitra was a crucial conflict point between Israel and Syria in the 1967 war. During the

¹⁰⁷ Baladi in Arabic means literary 'of town' or local and it is used to describe crops as well as music in the area east of the Mediterranean and Egypt.

¹⁰⁸ For further reading about the area and city refer to: Faier, Elizabeth. 2004, 119.

¹⁰⁹ Morton, Julia. F. 1987. 356-363.

¹¹⁰ According to the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2014 there were 1350000 square meters of crops in Israel alone.

¹¹¹ Guava, Solo exhibition, Mamuta Art Centre, Curators: Sala-Manca, 2018.

ongoing Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, Quneitra's control moved back and forth between Israel and Syria, and today the town itself is in Syrian authority, but large parts of the region are under the Israeli rule.

The elusive character of scent affected the realization of the scent collection in two ways. Firstly, it influenced the process of extracting the scents from the substance. Secondly, it was part in the decision to invite visitors of the exhibitions to smell the extracted scents. As explained above, in Western thinking the volatile quality of scent was treated as a flaw. Philosopher G.W.F Hegel claims that by seeing and listening, what one hears and sees is left untouched, but by tasting and smelling one dissolves what is sensed: "We can smell only what is in the process of fading away".¹¹² After experiencing a certain scent, there is no possibility of re-capturing it and reflecting upon it. Because of its material volatility, smell, Hegel claims "...cannot have to do with artistic objects, which are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow of no *purely*¹¹³ sensuous relationship".¹¹⁴ Hegel follows the convention that scents, because of their elusive character, are purely physical and therefore preclude the critical distance needed for his conception of art. Beauty in art, he claims, expresses a higher truth that is of both physical and conceptual nature. As the experience of a certain smell is maintained merely in the body, one therefore cannot reflect upon scent after it has disappeared, and consequently it cannot be considered as an art object. I want to show how scents' material tendency to disappear is actually crucial for the metaphorical aspect of the scent extraction and collection; and how the maintenance of scent in the body in fact contributes to the participants responsibility in taking part and positioning themselves in the local conflict.

The scents are extracted through a process of vaporization and condensation of water and oils. This type of process was chosen as it is one of the earliest and most elementary ways to collect scents using merely the basic elements of water and heat.¹¹⁵ This

¹¹² Hegel, Georg. W. F. 1975.138.

¹¹³ Italics in marked in the original text.

¹¹⁴ Hegel. 1975. 39.

¹¹⁵ In addition, the simplicity of the extraction process will potentially allow for others to take part in collecting the scent and enlarge the collection in future developments.

extracting method requires time. It is a long procedure that takes about two hours for each batch of material to be extracted, whether soil or local crops. The materials distillate throughout this long process by drawing out the scent together with all the water within the extracted materials. As a result the extracted container of what used to be the material is drained and the substance is left to decline. For me, the extractor, it feels as though this process wrenches the liveliness out of the materials, taking the essentials out of the local crops or the soil leaving their materiality drawn-out, empty.

Since the extraction and collection process needs to be controlled carefully, I patiently watch the materials slowly pass away. More importantly, metaphorically this process of collecting scents takes away the material ground of the local territorial conflict. In order to collect scent, the art-action metaphorically diminishes the land that inhabitants are fighting over, and the plants that symbolize the connection of the people living on it. By distilling local plants and soil only the scent of what they used to be is left. The course of action from material to scent dismisses the substance; it takes the land that people here are fighting over and the objects that symbolize locality and vaporizes them into scent. Metaphorically, the decline of the matters that are crucial in the local territorial conflict, proposes to search for new ways for one to position themselves in the debate. It allows one to shift their standpoint about how to live on this land. It also invites, maybe, to include more perspectives than the importance of land and locality, other parameters that might be able to enrich the current debate and through them find ways to broaden the now stuck discussion. For me, this was a way to signify my despair about the ongoing territorial conflict. It was a way to metaphorically make the core material of the conflict disappear and ask whether a piece of land or the quarrel over who is “more” local are really as important to die or kill for?

The distilled and captured scents are put in small bottles marked with the name of the extracted material and its extraction date. The extracted material, what is left after extracting, declines. But this is only one aspect of how scents’ tendency to disappear was considered in the exhibition of the scent collection. The volatility of scents is a matter of time, and it is also related to the amount of times people open the bottles and smell its content. When people repeatedly sniff a specific bottle, or the longer a bottle stays open,

a lesser amount of scent molecules will last in it, and the intensity of smell in this bottle will reduce. The action of inhaling a scent from the bottles caused the one who smelled to take part and encourage the volatility of the collected scent. Visitors of the exhibition thus urge the collected scents to further evaporate the substance of soils and local plants. If the distilling process takes away the material of the extracted substance, than the act of sniffing the collected scents, encourages the scent itself to disappear. If I, the extractor, metaphorically made what lies in the centre of the local conflict to diminish, now visitors might be seen as participants in this art-action by taking part in making what is left of these materials to vanish. Whoever participated in smelling the collection's scent during its exhibitions became symbolically responsible for carrying the vanishing leftovers of a certain material with them. In this art-action, the bodily experience that is stored in the smeller's body becomes a way to metaphorically join my resistance to fight over a piece of land. The scent remains a bodily experience as Hegel claims, but in regard to him, I assert that even if this is the case, it can still be considered as part of an art-action. As a result of smelling, the smeller symbolically participates in dissolving the land, and consequently, may find new ways to reposition her/himself within the local territorial conflict.

Accordingly, my answer to the repeated question of how long the smell will last in the bottles would be: "It will last as long as the people who smelled it live to tell about their experience". The *Guava scent collection* insists on materially and metaphorically containing this elusive character by extracting and collecting scents, and encouraging people to smell them during exhibitions of its installation. The collection works with the characteristic feature of scent to disappear in such a way that their disappearance becomes a vital part of the art-action itself, the volatility of scent becomes a dominant part of the art-action. This is why I propose the *Guava scent collection* as a metaphor for the dismissal of matters that are at the core of the conflict in this area: soil and local crops; connection to land and the right to inhabit it. Opposed to the claims against scents' volatility, in this art-action volatility is a productive and beneficial (both physically and conceptually) aspect. Within the art-action of the collection I assemble the materials that signify the parameters of the conflict in a process that metaphorically dismisses them into scent, an ever-changing volatile substance, and then I ask people to inhale and

further dissolve it. These scents will now survive only within the visitors of the exhibition who smelled, who now metaphorically carry the remains of what is so forcefully fought upon here.

To represent what is not there

"I don't recognize the smell of the land of Bir al Maksur¹¹⁶ at all, I tried all the bottles of scent from this soil, and I did not perceive anything" Rahma told me when visiting the *Guava* exhibition¹¹⁷ in Jerusalem. "Do you think it is because I was born there and still live in the same village?" she asked and looked at me, as though I might have an explanation for her. Was the scent so familiar to her that she couldn't sense it? Or did she not have any words to describe or recognize the scent of the area that she had lived in all of her life? Our conversation continued and opened questions of familiarity with the land. We discussed how people become accustomed to their place of birth and to where they live. We thought about places that are so well known to us that they become part of our body. Then we thought whether a land can be as well known to someone as their own body? Can it be like not having words to recognize and signify your own smell?

Plato described scents as impossible to classify: "The only classification we can make is that scents which disturb the substance of the nostrils are unpleasant, while those which restore the natural state are pleasant".¹¹⁸ The lack of descriptive words or the gap between language and scents implies that it is very difficult for us to reduce and classify scent in specific terms. The American psychologist Trygg Engen claims that the association between smell and its terminology is weak, unsymmetrical and easily influenced by the verbal factor: "Odor perception is not organized lexically by nouns but around the similarity of objects causing odors and especially the contexts in which odors usually occur".¹¹⁹ It is as though scent refuses to be incarnated into words and wants to remain a physical sensation, without form and structure.

The struggle to find words to describe what one smells affected the scent collection exhibition in two ways. Initially, prior to the first exhibition of the scents¹²⁰ my deliberation

¹¹⁶ Bir al-Maksur is a small Bedouin village in the lower Galilee. The Israeli Antiques Authority recently found evidence of humans living in the area of the village as early as the late Roman period. For further reading: Abu Zedan, Fadi and Mitler, Itamar, 2014.

¹¹⁷ Guava, Solo exhibition, Mamuta Art Centre, Curators: Sala-Manca, 2018.

¹¹⁸ Plato. 1997. 67a, 1268.

¹¹⁹ Engen, Trygg. 1987. 502.

¹²⁰ Self Collecting, Group exhibition, Beit Hagefen Gallery, Curator: Yael Messer, 2017.

was how to exhibit them as part of an art installation. The main struggle was to determine whether the scents should be spread in the room or should be contained inside other objects. How many items should be part of the installation alongside the scents? In both cases, exhibiting and finding descriptive words for scents, there is the question of how to *represent* scent. Following the initial installation, I noticed that the scents stimulate conversations. I was keen to continue the talks and curious to find out what kind of socio-political discussions about the local territorial conflict that scents could promote, if ostensibly there are no descriptive words to do so? In the following I will explain how these two impacts contributed to the installation and exhibition of the *Guava scent collection*.

The scent extraction produces a colorless, transparent liquid infused with the odor of the material from which it was extracted. It is a beautiful liquid at the edge of nothingness: clear water that reveals whether it contains something, only when it is actively sniffed. The elusive character of the extracted material urged me to merely spread the collected scents in it and to keep the exhibition room on the verge of emptiness. This sort of installation might emphasize the elusive character of scents. But, since I wanted the scents to be recognized and to signify the absence of a particular material they were extracted from, another urgent issue presented itself: the need to represent the scents in additional objects and items, such as bottles with the extracted perfumed liquid or papers that are soaked with the scents. In this way, the installation would enable the presented scents to be recognized with texts on the bottles or paper, and would allow the addition of items and objects that are part of the extraction process to the room.

My endeavor was to set up an installation that is suitable for a physical experience of scents. But it was also to allow the sense of smell to induce and take part in rethinking the extracted materials and how to position oneself to what these materials might signify. Should other sensations like sight, sound, touch be employed to bring forward these intentions, and if so, how? Or should there be nothing in the room but scent? Are the collected scents entrusted to speak for themselves? Or should additional objects support and articulate the presented odors? I found myself struggling to find the precise way to represent the scents in the installation. The questions that troubled me corresponded with

the struggle to find terms and words to clarify and categorize the sense of smell and scents.

Scholar and poet Diane Ackerman describes smell as the *mute* sense, the sense that has no words: “Lacking a vocabulary, we are left tongue-tied, groping for words in a sea of inarticulate pleasure and exaltation”.¹²¹ The words one uses to talk about scents, she claims, are terms for other things: floral, fruity, sweet, etc. One is only able to describe how a scent feels: pleasurable, sickening and so on. The gap Ackerman notices between the lack of words and a concrete sensation, is for her what gives smell a magical distance, a power without names that holds a secrecy within. In the visual arts, the presented objects usually represent themselves—they *are* what is exhibited—but when considering the installation of the scent collection this did not satisfy me. It felt as though in the exhibition the scents must to be translated into additional objects. The clear scented water needs to be collected into vessels with names of the materials and extraction date written on them. In order for those to be sniffed by visitors’ the vessels should be placed on shelves or in a cabinet. In addition, if a visitor in the gallery is asked to stay in the room and inhale the scents long enough to reflect upon them, a bench or some other piece of furniture should be present. As a result, the room would become crowded with many additional materials and objects: vessels, shelves or a cabinet and sitting benches. All of these objects might be visually tempting, but would produce sensations that distract from the sense of smell. These objects then would stimulate additional senses and eventually take away the mere interaction with the scent that initially I wanted to exhibit. The transformation of scent into descriptive words that relate to other things, like Ackerman suggests, is similar to the attempt to transform scents into other objects by exhibiting them. In both cases odor derives support from and relies on other elements to represent itself.

Eventually I decided to get rid of as many objects as I could. The room was kept almost empty: shelves were built on the walls, painted in the same color, and small bottles were placed on the shelves. But after installing the scents in the room, I was again, not satisfied. Because of the strain between words and scents and as a result of the difficulty

¹²¹ Ackerman, Diane. 1990. 6.

to represent the scents as themselves, I decided to not just exhibit the scents in the bottles. The difficulty to represent scents in the exhibition resulted in changing the character of the exhibition. It would no longer be an exhibition of the scent collection, but a live installation. An installation in which scents would be extracted and visitors would be invited to discussions that were induced by the smelled odors. The art-action of the scent collection changed its character as a result of the co-relation with the non-descriptive aspect of scent. It turned into a performative action of distilling and holding conversations, alongside an installation of the remains: bottles to be sniffed and an extraction table with the objects needed for the process.

Whenever I arrived in the exhibitions, I found that bottles had been moved between shelves, indicating the comfort and ease visitors were experiencing in the room while smelling the scents— possibly walking from place to place with the bottles. Making the exhibition hall functional gave visitors the opportunity to focus on the scents and, hopefully, to allow the experience of all the feelings and thoughts that the scents induced. The scent extraction performance routinely took place in both of the exhibitions of the scent collection. My presence and the scents in the room (and around the whole building) attracted visitors to the table and generated immediate conversations regarding the scents that spread around us. In the exhibitions of the scent collection, the performative extracting and distillation became part of the art-action alongside the conversations that were held. The conversations were both triggered by the sense of smell and were about the smelled scents. They evoked memories in visitors that questioned locality, regional living conditions and feelings of residentship.

The conversations that were triggered by the scents dealt mainly with feelings of locality, memories of childhood and the sensation of belonging to a place. The conversations with me or whoever else was in the room were sometimes spontaneous responses to the smells. At other times, I intentionally led these conversations and invited groups or specific people to discuss these issues while extracting the scents. The lack of words— or the gap between the existing words and scent— provoked the visitors (mostly inhabitants of the area) to think and try to use a new language for a known discussion.

Most of the discussions about the territorial conflicted land east of the Mediterranean are conducted in an established language. Each inhabitant already has a certain line of reasoning at her disposal that will include words that are over-used and imbued with meaning. An example of this is the different names with which people indicate the area of the Palestinian Territories: people who are part of the settlers movement will call it Judea and Samaria, as it was called in the Bible during the kingdom of Israel; others, who believe this land belongs to Palestinians refer to the same area as the Israeli-occupied West Bank. These names immediately activate the conflict. Yet by engaging in the conversation on scent, visitors were challenged to find new words to enter, to take part in this old conflict and to redefine their positions. The activation of the installation therefore turned the lack of descriptive words, or the gap between language and scent, into a beneficial characteristic for exhibiting the *Guava scent collection* and the socio-political conversation it promotes. In order to engage in a conversation through scent, there is a necessity to find unknown words or a new language, and this might allow for new understandings of and connections with the conflicted issues discussed around the scent collection.

Talking through scents

“I hate the scent extracted from the land of Haifa” a visitor told me in the exhibition in Jerusalem¹²², where scents from the lands were collected. “Doesn’t everyone?” she asked and was disappointed when I told her she was the first to share this sensation with me. Her physical reaction to the scent was so strong that she could hardly accept that it was only her particular experience of the scent. We began a conversation about memories of the places we lived in, just to find out she grew up in Haifa, miserably, waiting for the moment she could leave the city forever. Now, forty years after she left, she still does not think about moving back. Maybe this is why the scent disturb her so deeply? Did the scent evoke her personal most intimate memories of Haifa?

Philosopher Walter Benjamin signifies that remembering through smell generates an experience of infinity. Experiencing an event is something finite, he claims, something that comes to an end, but remembering “...is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it”.¹²³ Remembering is not merely an assembly of perception, of what was experienced, but it is also the action of the weaving of one’s memory.¹²⁴ This weaving is a personal activity that recalls all that was not forgotten and succeeds in placing theses in a certain order. The weaving of memory tells us more than the experienced perception of occurrences, Benjamin says, because it reveals the way these experiences are recollected, the connections that are made between them, and how they remain with the one who remembers. But the sense of smell, Benjamin claims, brings to the surface another way to remember, it is an invitation to the ‘sea of lost time’.¹²⁵ A smell opens up a whole, indefinite and formless surrender into one’s personal memory. The visitor from Haifa was one of many visitors who have submitted themselves to the ‘sea of memories’ that were induced by the scents of the exhibited collection and engaged in personal and intimate conversation with me.

¹²² Guava, Solo exhibition, Mamuta Art Centre, Curators: Sala-Manca, 2018.

¹²³ Benjamin, Walter. 1968. 202.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹²⁵ A term borrowed from the name of Marcel Proust’s book: *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927).

Philosopher John Dewey states that empirical sensuous experience of the world, smelling for example, is usually considered as subjective and therefore irrelevant to the development of knowledge: “Prestige goes to those who use their minds without participation of the body”.¹²⁶ Dewey is pointing out that all of the senses, and the body in general, stood in the way of ideas and the process of the intellect.¹²⁷ But smell, taste and touch in particular were at odds with intellect and knowledge in the history of Western thought. Philosopher Immanuel Kant, for example, refers to the sense of smell as being subjective. Because the idea observed from scent is “more a representation of enjoyment than of cognition of the external object”¹²⁸ different people might be differently affected by a given scent, and often cannot come to an agreement about it. Kant found that there are no common agreed upon concepts that one could use to communicate the sense of smell. In other words, odors, he claims, tend to be described through personal references rather than a general terminology. The subjectiveness of the sense of smell is what made this sense untrustworthy in philosophical or intellectual arguments. The sensuous experiences that were induced by scents in the exhibitions, invited visitors’ subjectiveness to become part of the conversations. Most of the discussions led immediately to a personal memory connected to the smelled material. As a result we held intimate subjective discussions that responded to the scents and were aroused by them in each visitor.

In both of the exhibitions the socio-political conversations that the scents induced indeed were subjective and intimate. Visitors immediately expressed to which land they feel connected and to which they did not. Many times these feelings developed into conversations about locality and the right to inhabit this land from their personal-physical, interior standpoint. The scents of local produce turned into a unique and personal conversation about the visitors’ thoughts and feelings, which then initiated a conversation that included their childhood memories, cooking preferences and intimate connections to the plants and crops that grow around them. Recent science-related research found a

¹²⁶ Dewey, John. 1934. 21.

¹²⁷ For further discussion of the senses and their connection to knowledge within this website/thesis: **Feeding/Eating the Other.**

¹²⁸ Kant, Immanuel. 2006. 46.

strong connection between the sense of smell and memory, as described in the famous Proustian memory effect, which regards scents as particularly powerful in triggering autobiographical memory cues.¹²⁹ Studies show that odor-cued autobiographical memories are qualitatively richer and reliably superior in the amount of detail yielded. These results strongly support the proposal that scent is especially effective in provoking past experience. Scholar and poet Diane Ackerman equally claims that smell can take a person directly into the centre of a memory: scents open “a route that carries us nimbly across time and distance”.¹³⁰ I argue that the subjective socio-political conversations opened up the normally narrowly enclosed discussion of such conflicted questions in this area I live in. The subjective sensations of the visitors stood in opposition to the more objective terms that are commonly used in socio-political discussions. The conversation through the scents disconnected their feelings and thoughts from the general discourse and changed into a distinctive and intimate one.

Locality and inhabiting land is usually discussed through general terms and concepts. These sort of discussions rely on the communal identities, like historical and religious kinship based on nationality, as being part of a certain nation. They promote identifying only with people who are in their own group of identification, and exclude people who are not. Freud claims that civilization imposes on society cultural ideals, general concepts that demand to ignore subjective variations: “The first consequence of civilization was that even fairly large numbers of people could now stay together in a community”.¹³¹ In civilizations, he claims, developments of society could progress smoothly and people had better control of the world around them. Since the sense of smell is a reminder of a time before culture took over and before man gathered in communities, it was devaluated. The suppression of the sense of smell signifies, according to Freud, the repression of subjective desires. Smelling is a reminder of when man was uncivilized and not organized in communities that might protect common needs. Following Freud’s argument, the subjective qualities of the conversation held in the exhibition pay attention to the visitors

¹²⁹ Chu, Simon and Downes, John J., 2000. 111–116.

¹³⁰ Ackerman, Diane. 1990. 84.

¹³¹ Freud, Sigmund. 2004, 60.

distinctive and personal desires. They place a plurality of identities at the center of discussion, challenging the supposedly homogeneous perceptions of the area's inhabitants.

The conversations in the exhibitions took into consideration the people who live on this land. This suggestion is in correlation to Philosopher's Hannah Arendt definition of plurality: "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world".¹³² Arendt states that plurality is a central condition for human action. The fact that all people belong to the same species, but yet each one of them is a different individual, is what sets the ground for human action.¹³³ Accordingly when basing the conversation on nationality, one enters a discussion with the set of values and preferences that promote the political interests of the state. But when one joins the conversation from a subjective point of view the discussion can open into new directions. Their personal experiences are a source of additional connections to the land they live on, that are not merely based on nationality or other general concept. Participants voiced their needs and desires of living here, and as a result they acquired a more influential role as themselves, more than is usually asked of them in collective political interest. They were invited to take an active part in independently thinking about how to live on this land.

The subjective conversations that were part of the scent collection exhibition invoked this plurality in order to bring in new ideas and find new paths to entangle the long and ongoing territorial conflict. This might encourage people to take responsibility for their actions and beliefs, even after the smell dissolves. Responsible for carrying the memory on, a memory from local plants and a conflicted land, that, as time goes by, will not be as it is remembered now.

¹³² Arendt, Hannah.1958. 7.

¹³³ For further discussion of Arendt's political philosophy within this website/thesis: **Back to Present** and **Insist to Resist**