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"We're witnessing the beginning of a new paradigm" – an interview with Wolfgang Georgsdorf

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To develop a sign system of odours: this is the ambitious goal of the artist, scientist and inventor Wolfgang Georgsdorf. And he has built a brilliant prototype of a fragrance machine: the "Smeller".

Mr Georgsdorf, five months ago Google announced the start of the

"Google Nose", a scent search engine with which you could sniff odours directly on the monitor. The software, it was said, transforms air into olfactory molecules. Are you already one of its users?

Google Nose was a good April Fool's joke. But seriously: the possibilities that here appear as a vision have long existed in rudimentary form. We could already build devices today that would enable us to perceive smells in a way we wouldn't have thought possible until recently.

You've built such a device.

Yes, the "Smeller". No April Fool's joke. Last summer at the exhibition *Sinnesrausch* at Linz I presented my invention for the first time. With a team of experts, including architects, designers, perfumers, mechatronics engineers, chemists and ventilation systems technicians, I constructed the prototype of a machine that makes possible the sequential perception of odours. That is, in a sequence of signs, as we've been used to perceiving images, sounds and letters for a long time.

And that works?

Very well, as a matter of fact. The Smeller makes it possible to distribute odours in a space and then makes them vanish just as quickly. Imagine: with every breath, you breathe in a new fragrance. And without these fragrances overlapping. Olfactory sequences, "smellodies", which come and go like images, resound and die away like tones. This is a completely new kind of perception; it can't be compared to anything we know.

A world full of scent molecules

What do you mean?

We normally don't have the possibility of experiencing odours as dramatic, time-based poetry. The world is full of scent molecules distributed in the air and overlapping with each other. With the Smeller, we can gain control over the air in a space. Just as we've succeeded in directing light in the cinema and sound in the concert hall into certain channels, so we've succeeded with the Smeller in manipulating the air in a space down to the smallest eddies.

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Scene from the making-of Smeller (Video, directed by Wolfgang Georgsdorf)

That sounds extremely complicated.

The Smeller is a complex device, but the effort required is relative when you compare it, for instance, to what is necessary to construct what today we call cinema – with all the engineering achievements, the complicated machines, the highly explosive celluloid. Or think of the effort necessary in making an organ sound in a cathedral: all the tones of brass, the wind chests, pipes, bellows, all the calculations for room acoustics, acoustic refractions, echoes. I've long wondered why we haven't cultivated the medium of smell as we have the media of image and sound. Because the possibilities of artistic expression are fantastic. It's a new paradigm.

Sequences of odours and symolfactories

How would you describe the experience of perceiving a Smeller room?



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Just by breathing and smelling you experience a wealth of sensation such as we know only when we're overwhelmed by audio-visual impressions. And I don't mean only flashbacks, the so-called "Proust Effect", which we know odours can trigger. The Smeller emits sequences of odours with a precision that goes far beyond the

evocation of concrete analogies, including places, times and experiences. Think of the smell of snow a day before it snows, the smell of a street in summer after it has rained, the vapours of resins, mosses, lichens and fungi that reach the nose just over the surface of the water when we take a swim in the lake in late summer. And now imagine that these experiences combined into something completely new.

You mean you can actually "compose" olfactory works?

Exactly. I call them "symolfactories" [Sinolfien], in allusion to musical symphonies. I've already written a few for the Smeller, including *Häuserfugen* (i.e., House Fugues), in which you can olfactorily explore the built spaces of a city: a train station, airport, restaurant, car ride, lift car, hotel lobby, bathroom, indoor



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swimming pool, gambling casino. Or *Eine Kindheit* (i.e., A childhood), which makes it possible to experience the olfactory world of a child from birth to first love: my first spring, my first circus with the smell of

cotton candy and tiger urine, my first school day with the smell of erasers, linoleum, ink, paper, shoes, clothes. And this year, at the film festival Crossing Europe *NO(I)SE*, I presented the first olfactory film for the cinema via the Smeller.

Exploratorium of the sense of smell

Where can we now experience the Smeller?

Currently, unfortunately, nowhere. But we're talking to some cultural decision makers in Berlin. I think it's very important to understand that the Smeller is far more than only an art installation. It's an exploratorium of the sense of smell, the prototype of a multi-sensory space, complex hard and software that makes smelling experienceable as a medium equal to the other senses. The days when smell was dismissed as a "lower sense", as the "step-child of the senses", could soon be over.

So we're soon about to encounter smell more and more as a technically implemented medium?

I'm convinced we will. I think it's only a matter of time. We'll see a kind of olfactory television and elaborate olfactory marketing campaigns. And we'll learn to talk about smells in a new and more nuanced way: how we perceive them, how we encode them, how they manipulate us. Just as we've long been used to doing this with images and sounds.



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