

Oswaldo Maciá: Cynical Perception

Jim Drobnick

The expanded range of the senses employed by artists over the past three decades confirms that a “sensorial turn” has occurred in the visual arts. While the reasons for this turn are diverse – a critique of ocularcentrism, a focus on the body and its processes, a greater presence of artists unconfined by the Western sensory hierarchy, among others – the results are similar: the senses are understood to be more than mere conduits for raw data, they are the means by which identity is realized, community formed, knowledge produced. Rather than being consigned to the margins, the senses of smell, taste, hearing and touch have gained significance as alternative means to revitalize an experiential engagement with the art audience and to explore aesthetic and political questions in more fully embodied ways. One of the pioneers of the surge in sensory practice is Oswaldo Maciá, who has incorporated a wide range of media into his work since the early 1990s to push normalized sensory boundaries, encourage audience participation, and investigate methods of knowing through tangible, pungent, discordant encounters.¹

Many of Maciá’s works involve the pairing of smell and sound. In some ways, the combination is unlikely, since smell is usually associated with taste (they are both chemical senses), and sound with the visual (both are prominent in broadcast and recording technologies). Yet smell and hearing share several traits: they are conveyed through air, involve a binary set of organs (nostrils and ears), and have been long associated in perfume discourse through the terms “notes” and “chords.” Despite these similarities, for Maciá sound and smell exist in a productive tension, which is especially evident in his recent works on display at the Henrique Faria Fine Art Gallery. Even

though the olfactory and the acoustic inhabit the same space, the two sensory domains act beside and against each other. The effect is more *dysaesthetic* than *synaesthetic*, where the sensory modes maintain their singular identities to challenge one another rather than meld into a unified, seamless whole.² Such dysaesthesia is intentionally self-reflexive, for the collage of smell and sound generates a perceptual incongruity that visitors are prompted to cognitively address.

The two main works in the exhibition demonstrate the potential of Maciá's method of mingling sensory modes to a simultaneously complementary and antithetical effect. *Cynic* (2013) includes a metal stand with a glass aquarium filled with a black liquid, a duo of speakers, and a hovering tangle of curling carbon fiber. Viewers are positioned in a dynamic confluence of the smell of "cynic" (a blend of amber, cypriol, civet, saffron and cumin, among other ingredients) amid a soundscape of mating and distress calls by animals on the brink of extinction.³ The curlicues of tape animate the volume of air in the gallery, seeming to perform as a visual symbol of the waves of sound and scent circulating in the room.⁴ "Cynic" might seem like an odd choice to name such a sensorially rich configuration, for it recalls the popular sentiment of pessimism and scorn, an attitude that affords little political agency and tends to reinforce the status quo. But Maciá's use of the term harks back to the eponymous Greek philosophical school (including such figures such as Diogenes, nicknamed "the dog") that promoted intense ethical scrutiny upon individuals, beliefs and actions in order to inspire people to live more virtuously.⁵ In the context of *Cynic*, the suggestion is that one cannot rely upon a conventional approach to make sense of the unorthodox arrangement of smells, sounds and tape loops. Instead, sensory experiences must be closely examined, the aesthetics of each component considered in its specificity, and

one's own conclusions drawn. The material complexity of *Cynic*, then, presents a stimulus for sensorial thinking.

In the second installation, *Empty Smoke* (2013), visitors confront a similar configuration of animal sounds, scents on a pedestal, and looped carbon fiber, this time vertically oriented. The title signals a conundrum: while smoke consists of innumerable minute particles that contaminate the air and cloud vision, what would it mean for it to be empty? A key may be the link to the Cynics, once again, for whom the obfuscating veil of smoke (*typhos*) was the symbol of illusion, foolishness and hypocrisy, ills that their philosophical critiques sought to dispel.⁶ For smoke to be empty, then, it would have to be cleared of the flaws that occlude a lucid view of the true value of living a beautiful life.⁷ If *Cynic* stages the practice of sensorial thinking, *Empty Smoke* alludes to the result. Both works combine to exemplify what I would call *cynical perception*, which involves central principles. First, cynical perception compels a keen attentiveness to materials and sensations, thus avoiding pre-established perceptions. Second, it entails a reflexive approach to what is being sensed and how it is being sensed, that is, it questions the normative exercise of the senses. And third, it proposes generative action towards language and knowledge in order to produce new ways to speak about and understand the world.

It is significant to note that Maciá incorporates research directly into his practice. The recorded sounds and synthesized scents arise from two of the world's vastest sensory-specific databanks – the British Library Sound Archive's wildlife sounds, containing over 150,000 sounds by 10,000 animals, and the International Flavors & Fragrances (IFF) scent library, which has collected and created tens of thousands of smells since the nineteenth century. From these libraries, Maciá chooses sounds and scents that are unusual to a contemporary Western audience by virtue of the

geographical remoteness, for example, the call of a rare Indonesian cicada, or lapsed relevance, such as scents that have not been commercially applied for fifty years. In both cases, he collaborates, implicitly with the hundreds of bioacoustic researchers collecting samples from around the world, and explicitly with Ricardo Moya, Senior Perfumer at IFF, to create enigmatic aromas. The environmentalism implied in Maciá's reference to bioacoustics – specifically, the archiving of species' sounds before they become extinct – could be applied also to the sense of smell. In the mediated environment in which many urban inhabitants live, olfactory encounters are often diminished by deodorizing mandates or prescribed through market decisionmakers. Could there be considered a need to protect and appreciate the animal calls and forgotten scents for their own intrinsic merit, as if they were both endangered species? In this vein, Maciá's sensory sculptures concentrate on uncommon fragrances and sounds to challenge the limits of perception and understanding. The point is not simply to guess and identify the origins of the sounds and smells, for that would only confirm what is already familiar. By contrast, the opportunity presented in this exhibition is for recuperating cynical perception; it is an invitation to sense, reflect and think about unusual scents and sounds. Posing as an abstract epistemological query, Maciá's works bear an intensely experiential result: knowledge in the process of its sensorial formation.

Jim Drobnick has published on the visual arts, performance, the senses, and post-media practices in anthologies such as *Artist-Curators* (2013), *Senses and the City* (2011) and *Art, History and the Senses* (2010), and in a number of journals. He edited the anthologies *Aural Cultures* (2004) and *The Smell Culture Reader* (2006), and recently co-edited special thematic issues of *PUBLIC* ("Civic Spectacle," 2012) and *The Senses & Society* ("Sensory

Aesthetics," 2012). He curates with the collaborative DisplayCult (www.displaycult.com), teaches at OCAD University, Toronto, and recently co-founded the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. Upcoming publications include a book on olfactory art.

Notes

¹ Interview with the author, April 18, 1999.

² See Jim Drobnick, "Reveries, Assaults and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art," *Parachute* 89, Winter 1998, 10-19.

³ The scents bear specific associations relevant to the practice of Cynical philosophy: amber for assertiveness, cypriol to be stimulating and probing, civet for animality, saffron and cumin for spiciness. Email from the artist, July 24, 2013.

⁴ For the artist, the tape loops also signify that all sensory information, despite the different pathways, ends up as electrical energy in the brain.

⁵ Maciá references Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Interview with the author, July 12, 2013. It is interesting to note that a number of Diogenes' contrarian gestures criticizing Greek social mores involved the inappropriate use of the senses. See Thomas McEvelley, "Diogenes of Sinope: Selected Performance Pieces," *Artforum*, March 1983, 58-9.

⁶ See Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996.

⁷ Maciá also refers the word "empty" to John Cage's notion of silence, especially 4'33". Interview with the author, July 12, 2013.