



GAY MEN SMELL 'SEXY'
IN A DIFFERENT WAY
TO STRAIGHT MEN

Airport duty free lounges used to satisfy my urge to gift everyone endless colognes and perfumes at a satisfying price, as well as allowing me to indulge in all manner of wonderfully packaged fragrance brands. Later I discovered that genuine and unique scents are difficult to bottle: they come from the little nook in my arm after a day spent in the olfactory gallimaufry of the city, or the scent pervading my mother's bedroom in London when I was a child, and then there was that guy who I sat next to on a train to Venice a few years ago. Real scents can be a time capsule of certain moments in your memory bank. Scientists, artists and brands are all too aware of this fact. Diptyque from France, and Sweden's Byredo for instance create somewhat unusual smells from nature and in doing so bless us with a multi-layered, labyrinthine patchwork of scent. Our scent is what makes us unique; it's kind of like our fingerprint we take out into the world. So what makes scent so primal and yet simultaneously decadent? Out of the five, or six, senses, our sense of smell is said to be the only truly unique sensory quality: indescribable and able to induce memories in an overwhelming manner. Smell's primordial germ stems from the key basic survival patterns in life – the hunt for food, the avoidance of predators and of course selecting a mate. The process starts when we inhale air, which then travels upwards into the nostrils, entering into a lab of sorts containing millions of olfactory receptor neurons where light volatile chemicals gather. We humans are able to distinguish between over 10,000 different odour molecules. There are people, however, who are not able to detect certain smells at all, due to a lack of key olfactory genes. This can be a definite plus in some

instances: read summer subways in New York after an early morning in the neighbourhood leather bar!

SEXY GAY SCENT

In 2005, *National Geographic* published an article about a new study that revealed that gay men smell 'sexy' in a different way to straight men. The study showed that gay men responded differently when exposed to a suspected sexual stimulus found in male sweat. The study also suggests that when homosexual men smelled the odour of male sweat (which is actually a chemical in the male hormone testosterone) the corresponding behaviour displayed by the cerebral area was comparable to the reactions displayed by women's brain behaviour. Men secreted at least ten different steroid compounds in their sweat, but progesterone derivative androstadienone found in male sweat, urine and saliva in particular is said to arouse gay men (and straight women).

This of course supports the notion that gay men are not bred but born that way (thank you Lady Gaga) and that brain activity and sexual orientation are linked. "This is one more line of evidence that there's a biological substrating

for sexual orientation," said Dean Hamer, a geneticist at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland in the *National Geographic* article.

Although Hamer, the author of *The Science of Desire: The Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior*, was not involved in the research, his book supports the findings of the study. The study was conducted by scientists at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and was published in the research journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. During the research, the scientists exposed heterosexual men (and women) and homosexual men to chemicals found in male and female sex hormones. One chemical is a testosterone derivative produced in male sweat; the other an oestrogen-like compound in women's urine. For some considerable time, scientists and researchers have suspected that these chemicals are pheromones (molecules emitted for the purpose of sexual attraction, almost person-specific poppers of sorts). The latest studies, published in *Scientific American*, show that these sorts of studies are still inconclusive. Nicholas Wade reported in his article for *The New York Times* in 2005 that the hopes of the fragrance industry that humans might have a structure designed to detect pheromones

ASPIRE TO TRANSPIRE

HEAVEN SCENT

THE SCENT OF MALE SWEAT IS SAID TO AROUSE GAY MEN. AND THE SMELL OF CHOCOLATE MILK IN A PLASTIC CUP BRINGS BACK CHILDHOOD MEMORIES. NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE NOSE.

TEXT: DANIEL SCHEFFLER



SCENTS BY CHRISTOPHER BROSIUS (SEE NEXT PAGE).

were dashed, as this mechanism is in fact largely inactive in humans. However some aspects of pheromones are definitely present in humans. Sweat, for instance, increases physiological arousal, one way or another. It is, whether we are conscious of it or not, another way of communication. The studies, done by Cutler and Preti in 1986, show that women in a group setting such as a sorority, or a collective of nuns, may synchronise their menstrual cycle: one of the ways in which pheromones interact and affect other people. Pheromone-like compounds are also found in salivary, seminal and urine secretions, but studies tend to focus on the most accessible: axillary sweat. The Swedish study did discover though that the brain's hypothalamic region, which is responsible for sexual behaviour, becomes activated when straight men smell the oestrogen derivative, but gay men and women instead respond to the testosterone compound. "It shows a different physiological response to the same external stimulus," said Ivanka Savic, a neuroscientist at the Karolinska Institute and the study's lead researcher, in the *National Geographic* article. "This response occurred in the brain region involved in reproductive behaviour," she continued.

MY NEURONS FANCY YOU

The biological explanation is that the human brain reacts differently to potential pheromones in comparison with common odours. Hamer cautions that the gay men's different brain activity could be either a cause of their sexual orientation or an effect of it. But, he said: "It certainly seems unlikely that somehow being interested in men would cause the brain to rewire itself in such a dramatic way." There are also studies that have found that gay and straight men respond differently to the body odours of others. According to *National Geographic*, scientists at the Monell Chemical Senses Centre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, found that gay men preferred odours of other gay men, while the odours emitted by gay men

A FRAGRANCE, WHICH AFTER SOME RECOILING FROM THE CRITIC WAS JUDGED TO BE THE SMELL OF A MAN'S ANUS



WESO BY SISSEL TOLAAS.

were the least preferred by straight men (and women). Although this research does not yet provide direct answers for homosexuality, or sexuality, what does remain interesting, still years later, according to Wade, is "if sexual orientation has a genetic cause, or is influenced by hormones in the womb or at puberty, then the neurons in the hypothalamus could wire themselves up in a way that permanently shapes which sex a person is attracted to." Or, alternatively, it could be just a consequence of straight and gay men using their brain differently – pretty much a given.

FEAR OF SMELL – SMELL OF FEAR

Norwegian scent designer Sissel Tolaas worked on creating her signature range of smells, including *Guy #1* and *S&M Guy*, based on the findings of the 2005 *National Geographic* research. Tolaas is a Berlin-based scent expert who has worked across the globe collecting what has now amounted to over 7,000 scents. Her exhibit *The Fear of Smell – The Smell of Fear* at MIT's List Visual Arts Centre is where the male sweat derivative came in handy. She rounded up nine men who were willing to give her some sweat from their armpits. The perspiration from for example *S&M Guy* was collected while one of the guys was hanging out at sex clubs. His nervousness

and excitement made for some interesting sweat that Tolaas bottled and used at her exhibition, but it is also on sale at a number of little boutique stores in Berlin's Mitte district. "I believe in pheromones, but I am more interested in prejudice and behavioural patterns," says Tolaas, who is currently working on a project with fellow Berliner Kostas Murkudis, which was showcased at this year's Edinburgh International Fashion Festival in August. The collaborative project is called *The Endless Dress – The Endless Smell*. Murkudis will start by designing the first stage, which is a dress, and then Tolaas will create her part of the first phase, which is a smell. It will then be documented in its entirety by Jonas Lindström. Tolaas believes "we smell with our entire body from the nose to semen to hair," and that is the premise of her work – figuring out new ways in which scent affects human behaviour. She does not wear any perfume herself, for instance; as she thinks her bodily scent is more interesting on her than anything manufactured. She also believes it gives her whole body a chance to smell everything around it and believes that men – in particular gay men – often do the same, as she has discovered during her studies.

THE BOUQUET OF BERLIN

This has tied in perfectly with her latest work, which involves her travelling the world and mapping different cities. For instance, in

September, she created a scent map of Kansas City called *SmellScape* in conjunction with the Grand Arts non-profit gallery and the Kansas City Museum. Museum visitors were able to trace the smells she trailed across maps in the museum and then go out to explore the scents for themselves. She created similar smell-mapping projects in Paris, Berlin, Mexico City and Cape Town, but in the case of Kansas City, the installation is devised as a game: a smell-based city treasure hunt. This is another in the latest heavily-funded development by museums within the last decade to create and display experiences rather than mere objects in glass cases to be looked at. Perhaps Sissel's next task will be a 'gay scent map' of Berlin's pink establishments. "Participants are challenged to explore six downtown neighbourhoods on foot and nose-first, alert to the power of smell, in a quest to find and collect scratch-and-sniff playing cards infused with location-specific scents," said Seth Johnson, from the communication department at Grand Arts. "Players will return marks of their finds to the Grand Arts, the game's hub and home base, where they can track their insights and others' on a large map in the centre of the gallery. Players can also use a free, downloadable iPhone app to enhance their experience of the game complete with clues, check-ins and a feature which will invite players to record and share their own scent-based impressions of the city," he said. "Industries have lied to us and tried to convince us that things need to smell a certain way," Tolaas said. She uses these queries to understand and challenge why detergents smell like fake lemon and lavender and believes we, as consumers, should be challenging our sense of smell much more than we already do. Tolaas has worked with the MOMA in New York, the National Museum of Beijing and the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin on various projects including designing tools challenging memory in psychology and smells related to sleep patterns. Her grant comes from the International Flavors and Fragrances fund: a \$4 billion company that produces perfumes for Prada and Calvin Klein, among others.

FROM CABS TO COLOGNE

Another scent expert across the Atlantic is Christopher Brosius, a former cab driver turned self-taught perfumer. Now based in Brooklyn, the outspoken founder of 'CB I hate

perfume' famously said that he did actually hate perfume, and has been hyper-critical of all things smelly: good or bad. He built his career by creating concept fragrances like *Clean Baby Butt* and *In the Library* and a few years ago conducted an experiment where he created a perfume that carries no scent at all. He decided on his 'invisible scent' idea after assessing that some people cannot detect certain scents and others lose their sense of smell altogether. Brosius did not learn his perfuming technique the way most perfumers do. He avoided the degrees in chemistry and studies of eminent

"THE CREATION OF FRAGRANCE IS ONE OF THE HIGHEST ART FORMS CRAFTED FOR THE SENSES, THE EQUAL OF PAINTING FOR SIGHT AND MUSIC FOR HEARING"

fragrance houses. His technique came instead from driving around New York City in his cab, and honing his skills daily whilst on the road. Having worked at Barneys and Kiehl's, it afforded him access to a variety of scents and allowed him to build up a repertoire of freshly created odours. He eventually started a company with a partner. One day, he threw a bag of soil, collected from a farm he was staying on, on to the table. He wanted to replicate that earthy smell and so by identifying molecules and adding some notes he created his *Soaked Earth*. In *New York Magazine*, Brosius speaks about the way that smells brought back memories for him, strong emotional moments, and that is what made him want to explore more and take the understanding of scent to the next level, wherever that might be. Hysterically, Brosius once presented Chandler Burr, a former scent critic at *The New York Times*, with a fragrance to test, which after some recoiling from the critic was judged to



CHRISTOPHER BROSIUS.

be the smell of a man's anus. And Burr was ultimately correct, plus it was a clean anus at that. Brosius is an artist, a scent artist, who likes to play and recreate but also to uncover deep, subconscious thoughts. Eventually his 'invisible scent' was created using jasmine, whose olfactory properties were reduced to an almost undetectable level: unusual for the powerfully persistent compound. He then added a touch of moderated sandalwood, which he chooses to call 'the ghost of sandalwood'. Over time, the fragrance as he envisaged it began to emerge and he added the final ingredient (minus some chemicals of

course), which was sex. Natural amber, which possesses a similar molecular structure to human hormones, was added, which, mixed with the body's natural oils, will render something truly unique. Burr has decided to name it *Where We Are There Is No Here*.

GOOD VIBRATIONS

Whether it is the use of poppers, now widely known to be carcinogenic, or the odour of sprinklings of fresh sweat on the dance floor, the sense of smell plays a key role in the process of physical attraction. "The creation of fragrance is one of the highest art forms crafted for the senses, the equal of painting for sight and music for hearing," said Chandler Burr, the author of *The Emperor of Scent*. The book trails the story of the scientist Luca Turin who has spent his life working with scent, which could quite possibly culminate in a Nobel Prize. Since 1996, this Lebanese biophysicist has been the leading proponent of the vibration theory of olfaction, which proposes that the vibration of molecules is what primarily produces scent, as opposed to their mere configuration. His theory has yet to be fully proven however, and his research, which is being conducted at MIT, is ongoing. His theory may change the way we understand scent and pheromones for ever, but for now we will have to remain content with the notion of a simple attraction based on sweat, cologne or triggered memories. ■