Conception of SYS: The Smell Of A Mysterious Being

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Abstract

This presentation explores the conceptual design process behind *SYS: The Smell of a Mysterious Being*, an arts-based research project within the broader framework of *Sensing Living Systems*. The work investigates how olfactory experiences can be reimagined as a medium for interspecies connection, sensorial imagination, and artistic inquiry. Departing from traditional visual-centric approaches, the project emphasizes smell as a powerful yet underexplored channel through which human beings can sense and relate to the living environment.

The design process integrates philosophical reflection, sensory experimentation, and spatial composition. Inspired by ecological thinking and post-humanist discourse, the project conceptualizes "SYS" as an ambiguous lifeform that exists through its scent rather than visual form. This approach challenges anthropocentric perspectives and encourages participants to engage with unfamiliar modes of perception. Through iterative prototyping and participatory encounters, the installation invites audiences to navigate a performative space where smell triggers emotional memory, curiosity, and a sense of presence.

By foregrounding olfaction as a central design element, *SYS* opens a dialogue between artistic practice, sensory research, and ecological awareness. The project not only proposes new ways of experiencing art beyond the visual but also reflects on how design can foster more intimate relationships between humans and other living systems. This presentation highlights the theoretical foundations, creative strategies, and experiential outcomes that shaped the work, offering insights into art as a mode of speculative sensing and environmental imagination.

Keywords : arts-based research, systems awareness, GST, senses, sense-ability, smell, multisensory scenography, democracy, voting processes, communities, present-oriented systems awareness, future-oriented collective intelligence, sustainability

Introduction



Why do we ask this simple yet complex question ‘HOW WOULD IT SMELL LIKE?’, why do we ask people to imagine a mysterious being in a specially developed multisensory voting booth? And why in the course of our arts-based research project “SENSING LIVING SYSTEMS - Exploring the Potentials of Multisensory Scenography for Systems Awareness”, which is about conveying an understanding of living, complex systems - whether in nature, society or art? – We ask because we realise that a not yet tangible being emerges. We decided to call it SYS.

What kind of being is the SYS? Animal, human animal, spirit, plant – or a hybrid of all of them? We do not know it yet, but we set out on a search and start with an olfactory approach. What we already know: it is a being that can easily cope with the complexity of the world, and is rooted vibrantly in communities to guide towards thriving futures.

But before we take a deeper breath of a possible SYS-Smell and explain why and how we installed a multisensory voting booth, let's start with the motivation for SENSING LIVING SYSTEMS. – What is this artistic research project all about?

SENSING LIVING SYSTEMS (SLS)

First of all, we would like to give an insight into the intentions of SLS: The world we are living in is a *living system* and humans are living systems, which can only survive in living systems. (Bertalanffy 1968, Laszlo 1972). But modern economic and political systems unintentionally put business in conflict with society and humanity in conflict with nature (Dixon 2017).

As Thai intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa wrote in *The Wisdom of Sustainability* (2009), “Through meditation and art, we can connect with our Mother Earth and affirm our cooperative nature by acknowledging the environment as part of ourselves." Following this intent our arts-based research project focuses on the (non-visual) senses to address one of the fundamental problems that hinder consonance between humanity, their economic systems and nature: poor mental preconditions, a lack of ‘sense-ability’ for sustainable systems change, which is necessary for human civilization to continue existing and prospering in this biosphere.

French philosopher Merleau-Ponty defined the task of phenomenology as a rediscovery of the perceived shape of the world, which remains hidden under the sedimented layers of subsequent information and knowledge. He considered the "identification of obstacles" as essential for discovery (Merleau-Ponty 1959). In the context of our project we assume, that the lack of *sensing* of living systems and systems principles constitutes a significant obstacle, thus the lack of in-depth understanding. We are in urgent need for mental skills to deal with global challenges and our increasingly complex environment (self-evidently *a living system*) towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs - as a compass for transformation / systems change is implied in the SDGs). To cope with this deprivation we suggest the creation and exploration of multisensory scenographies as a catalysts for increasing *systems sensing* capacity in an expanded *world of experience* (German: *Erlebniswelt* – cf. Glasersfeld 1996).

An interdisciplinary team of artists, systems scientists and scholars from different fields from Europe and Southeast Asia co-create, explore and analyze the potentials of the multisensory scenography together for addressing the perception of living systems, through sensory experience. Regarding to relational skills we hereby are focusing on *sense awareness* (German: *Spürbewusstsein* – Schellenbaum 1992). Regarding to cognitive skills we are focusing on the sensing and the understanding of systems principles (i.e. boundaries, entities and relations) and their handling.

Understanding artistic research as *perceptual work* (Baecker 2018), the multisensory experimental settings and processes directly address sense awareness in particular focusing on the sensory domains: smell, audio, and haptics. A multisensory scenography is featuring

multiple artworks/sensual artefacts: scent installations, soundscapes, objects and spatial interventions are merged and orchestrated to enable an immersive experience. Based on findings concerning different senses and the predominant character of the visual sense (Roque, Kendrick et al. 2015, Divjak 2016), the visual sense is deliberately ranked after in our approach and experimental arrangements. Visual information is reduced, it follows the function of the scenography but is not further emphasized by the use of visuals, images et al. MUELLER-DIVJAK´s (Jeanette Mueller and Paul Divjak) past experiences and findings in the field of scent-, audio-, and expansive spatial installations function as studies for the project. The expertise on empathy and trust (Müller 2009) and *Integrative Scenographies* (Divjak 2012) also benefit the process.

Past and current research on the senses and the impacts of connectedness to/empathy with nature (Keninger, Gaston et al. 2013; Tam, 2013; Franco, Shanahan, Fuller 2017) as well as on the capacity of nature-based stimuli to enhance mindfulness, connectedness and imagination, were taken into consideration. (Howell, Dopko et al. 2011; Bates, Hickman, Manchester et al. 2020; Beer 2021).

Arts, sustainability, and systems science

The entanglement of art and sustainable development ideas and strategies has been outlined and explored by a large number of artists, researchers, and scholars, and has re-emerged as an important field also of artistic research during the last decade. There is no doubt that art practice aims at bringing social and environmental issues to the public's attention is significant (Kent 2010 et al.). Sociology is increasingly interested in the link between arts and sustainable development. Social science studies suggest that art can contribute to shaping environmental behaviour (Curtis 2007, 2011; Curtis, Reed & Reeve 2014).

In the context of environmental education, David Curtis (2011) outlines, that art can have the ability to communicate information and create awareness by creating a space for concern in the realm of a general conversation but also staging and entertainment. Other advantages for using art for environmental education and awareness building include, inter alia, the engagement on an emotional and personal level with a matter usually seen as intangible. Art can create awareness that leads to individual agency and collective action in prevention and adaptation, provide embodied experiences and learning by using the senses. (Marks, Chandler & Baldwin, 2014; Roosen, Klöckner & Swim, 2017; Bentz, 2020). Preliminary studies concerning "art, empathy and socio-ecological sustainability" – such as Tanja Beer´s research on "Eco-scenography" are taken into consideration as well (c.f. Curtis 2009, Beer 2021 et al.).

Yvonne Volkart has stated that relationality and concerns for the "natural environment" are generated less by technological sensing techniques than by the aesthetics of sensing (Volkart 2020). Fien explanes that appreciating the aesthetic and intrinsic value of nature is important in people's willingness to conserve natural environment (Fien 1993, 2003). Many other authors have expressed that this willingness can be encouraged by art (Eastburn & Milligan 1998; Green 2002). On the base of their study "Towards ecological sustainability: observations on the role of the arts" David J. Curtis, Nick Reid and Ian Reeve propose that art can help to shape environmental behaviour by "creating empathy towards the natural environment" (Curtis et al. 2014, p. 174). This cannot only be enhanced by art, but is also supported by the ability of systems thinking and systems research outlined and presented in detail by systems science (Bertalanffy 1968; Meadows 2008; Laszlo 2015, Meadows 2020).

Systems science as a transdiscipline enables the integration and translation of domain specific scientific knowledge from the self to the collective and environment (epistemology), observing (science) and intervening (design). Especially its focus on "systems awareness", which combines systems thinking and systems sensing serves as basic fundament for our research. Whereas "systems thinking" is dealing with analytical and conceptional capacities

to understand complex interdependent phenomena, “systems sensing” is focusing on intuitive understanding of complex interdependencies. “Systems sensing” is less established as an academic term, because it leads to approaches concerning learning and teaching more common in the creative arts, than in classical mental, analytical education. (cf. Senge 2010, Rousseau, Wilby, Billingham, Blachfellner 2018, et al.)

Stefan Blachfellner, Managing Director of the BCSSS, Sustainability & Innovation expert, Felix Tretter, BCSSS Vice President, philosopher, psychologist and psychiatrist, who already emphasized the importance and innovative character of the collaboration of art and science as early as in the 1980´s, and Alexander Laszlo, BCSSS President, international renown systems scientist, who could be won as member for the project´s advisory board, are essential agents in the collaborative arts-based research process.

Hypotheses

An innate system intelligence exists within us. According to this view everyone starts out with a systemic *sense-ability*, a tacit appreciation of systemicity in the experienceable world. As individuals as well as collectives, humans develop the mental capacity of themselves separated from their environment to the extent of their disconnection. The purpose of systems science is developing an in-depth understanding of connectiveness and interdependencies to contribute to sustainable systems solutions. Systems literacy as a common language intends to give people the capability to articulate and reflect on their innate *sense-ability* and act on it in a considered way, expressed as a responsible and effective capability.

Developing and strengthening systems literacy cannot be a sole academic endeavour. Especially as the structure of scientific education is one contribution for separating direct experience from conceptualization and embodiment from learning. Courageous approaches are needed for expanding the scientific paradigm. The mental capabilities for a holistic systemic worldview can be supported by insights stemming from the arts and arts-based research.

Our project starts from the assumption that the interconnection and merging of scenographic methods with systems science epistemology can lead to novel access of system awareness, system *sense-ability* and ultimately systems literacy.

Project objectives

The creation and promotion of relational skills is the research guiding motive beyond disciplinary, cultural, gender, age and worldview boundaries - and its artistic and systemic exploration, documentation and reflection.

1. The scenographic studies and the multisensory scenography aim to be an embodied learning experience for recipients to sense themselves as living systems embedded in living systems.
2. The scenographic studies and the multisensory scenography aim to further establish the field of scenography as a means for arts-based innovation and transformative research.
3. The scenographic studies and the multisensory scenography informed by systems science aim to support systems science education from systems sensing to systems literacy.

To summarize, it can be said that we live in a world that is permeated by systems, whether in nature, technology, business or society. A deep understanding of systems is crucial for the creativity to solving complex problems, making better decisions, anticipating future

developments, coping with change and creating sustainable futures. It is important to understand that everything in our world is part of a larger system and is interrelated, from biological cells, humans and animals to trees and governments. We have an innate ability to perceive systems and their interdependencies, but often unlearn this through linear thinking, fragmented perception and mechanistic world views. The SENSING LIVING SYSTEMS project explores – with a special focus on the senses of smell, hearing and touch – how direct sensory experiences by staging olfactory, auditory and haptic artworks and stimuli artistically, i.e. by way of specially arranged spaces, can contribute to heightening our awareness of nature and civilization (societies, their included communities - and their rules and relations) and to developing a deep understanding of living systems and imparting systems literacy.

SENSING LIVING SYSTEMS expands the field of scenography as a means for arts-based innovation and transformative research and supports systems science education, from systems sensing to systems literacy. Living systems encompass cells, organisms, ecosystems, and global biospheres. They are characterized by complex interactions and adaptive mechanisms. Their study allows for a better understanding of life on various levels and provides critical insights for addressing communal and global challenges.

To understand the development of the aforementioned multisensory voting booth and to grasp why it has generated an astonishingly high voter turnout and resonance - let's dive into insights and reflections on the olfactory sense.

THE OLFACTORY SENSE

About democracy, odours and living together

When we think about how we want to live together, we think about democracy as a suitable form. When we think about democracy, we often don't think very sensually.

Not all people who live together have the right to choose who should represent ‘the people’. And very many living beings/entities have no right of co-determination as to how we determine and organize living environments and forms of coexistence. Animals, plants, the biosphere - we still often see nature as separate from the human community.

If we perceived and thought more sensually - could we live together differently? Our senses are crucial to how we experience and engage with the world around us. They enable us to gather information, communicate with each other, appreciate diversity and build relationships.

If we think of a democracy of the senses, there is a leadership, a predominance of the visual sense, followed by the acoustic sense. What would democracy look like if the olfactory took centre stage? What influences, what currents would we smell? Would we be able to perceive reciprocal influences and dependencies? Would we experience our communities and democratic processes differently? Would we be able to shape them differently, more inclusively?

If we were to force a more conscious perception of all our sensory impressions and refine them, would it perhaps be conceivable to have parliaments in which the voices of other living beings, other entities - even if they were not humanoid mammals - would also count? Plants, animals, the entire biosphere as stakeholders (entities that have stakes, that have something to lose or gain) in human societies?

How could we imagine and realise our interaction and coexistence with all life if all our senses were considered equally important and sounded together? To approach this question, we have staged the ‘SYS-Smell-Voting-Booth’, in which a democratic process is used to choose from six different odours. The electorate is extremely diverse, as will be explained in more detail in this paper (in the section about the AIL). A high level of diversity is much more likely to produce creative results, as Jeanette Mueller discussed in her dissertation ‘Trust and Creativity’: homogeneous groups find it easier to build trust, but communities with a high

level of diversity are more creative. (Mueller 2009) A variety of different 'tastes'/'styles', views, ideas, experiences and inputs is particularly valuable for our art-based research process.

Every breath opens up possibilities

'All breathing is potential smelling.' (Divjak: The smell of the world, 2016). In fact, smelling cannot simply be switched off. Even when life evolved on our planet and still took place in the darkness of the oceans, living beings were able to smell even before they could see or hear. The first sense to develop in an embryo is the sense of smell. Nevertheless, it is often taboo and regarded as a forgotten, secondary sense. Perhaps because the human species is so proud of its 'reason' and odours cannot be controlled with the help of our intellect. They are imbued with versatile forces that can suddenly unfold their molecular power. The cerebrum cannot monitor them; they have a direct effect on the limbic system and thus influence our emotions, triggering affects and memories. Scents influence our mood - they can trigger hope, sympathy, rejection, fear, lust, generosity or withdrawal. The sense of smell affects our lives, actions, imaginations and thoughts on many levels, even if we are often not even aware of this fact.

To explore more about the possibilities of olfactory artistic research we developed six special concept fragrances especially for the Austrian Democracy Lab. The unusual perfume compositions of our fragrance installation *'Democracy of the Senses' - The Austrian Democracy Lab Fragrance Edition* gave visitors the opportunity to take in the scent for the first time at the opening of the Austrian Democracy Lab's final conference *'Perspectives on Living Together - Towards Democracy'* (Künstlerhaus Wien, December 2022). The six fragrances *Toxic Masculinity* (Gender Liquid), *Humanista* (Ultra Light), *Acqua Coloniale* (Intensa), *Solastalgia* (For Her/Him/Them), *Moral Grandstanding* (Privé) and *Woke Water* (Organic & Fairtrade) reflect discursive currents and raise questions. They create an expanded access to democratic debates and ideas of the world in which we (want to) live together - not only through language, but also through the sense of smell. They stimulate a discourse evoked through the nose. The scent compositions stimulate conscious perception, immediate emotional reactions (which manifest themselves as spontaneous curiosity, laughter, joy, pleasure, enthusiasm, approval, amazement or even aversion), as well as the sharing of associations, stories, inherent knowledge - and shared experiences.

These findings were also incorporated into the multi-sensory scenography 'Conception of SYS'. When we talk to each other about odours, we are talking about subjective impressions. It is important to be aware that smells are perceived subjectively and that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' smells. What is perceived as pleasant by one person may be unpleasant for another. In this sense, the sense of smell can also help to remind us that we are all different and that it is important to respect our diverse needs and preferences.

From nose to nose

Our imagination is stimulated and our vocabulary expanded when we talk about smells, because we need and develop a language that goes beyond the reductionist dichotomy: 'stinks' - 'smells good'. We can talk about associations and images that arise in us through the shared perception of smells. By talking about emotions and the shared primary experience, we can recognise ourselves as subjects who perceive the senses. We experience that we can also react very differently to smells. We realise how unnecessary and pointless polarisation is and how we blossom when we allow ourselves to perceive, think and communicate beyond opposites.

The six fragrances in the *Austrian Democracy Lab Fragrance Edition* act as olfactory mediators, they help to build bridges between different sensory perceptions and cognitive systems and stimulate democratic dialogue and an exchange of knowledge about communal life - from nose to nose, so to speak. Fragrances enable us to design, describe, negotiate - and ideally also help shape - living environments without marginalisation and devaluation.

Discussions and debates that go beyond preconceived opinions and world views - often already created by algorithms and influenced by them - can take place.

Our sense of smell enables us to perceive the world around us in a more differentiated way, which can enrich and increase our appreciation of it. Fragrances and odours that are (re)remembered and perceived together as shared olfactory experiences can help to create a sense of connection. Thinking and talking about smells and scents open up a meaningful playground for olfactory artistic research, which focused on direct exchange with others, getting to know a wide variety of living environments and facets of perception as well as the importance of olfaction in current and future living spaces and communities. Smells contribute to awakening thriving desires in us, they help us to learn, to recognise the present and to develop ideas for our common futures. Our project, our art-based research, allows us to do just that - and its success also has a lot to do with the place where it mainly takes place: the AIL.

THE AIL

The AIL, Angewandte Interdisciplinary Lab, at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, is serving as both a platform and an instrument to develop, test and explore the project´s sensual approaches. Alexandra Graupner, Head of AIL, dedicated to managing art and artistic-research projects, facilitating discourse between various fields of knowledge and connecting partners from the fields of science, arts, design, research and business against the background of the resources of the University of Applied Arts, not only guarantees the transdisciplinary aspect of SENSING LIVING SYSTEMS and its scenographic studies and multisensory scenographies, but also ensures a professional project management. The AIL, a location at the interface of art, different fields of research and the public, is a hub for artists, artist collectives, diverse creative communities and other agents of innovation and change and their meetings and events. The AIL serves us as an important prerequisite for the unfolding of the project´s very potential, knowledge transfer and transformation, unforeseen synergies and emergence.

The AIL is located in one of the most beautiful and impressive buildings in Vienna - the former Postsparkasse, built according to plans by Otto Wagner between 1904 and 1912. Otto Wagner (1841-1918) was an Austrian architect, architectural theorist, visionary and urban planner in the Belle Epoque and Fin de Siècle. The AIL building is one of his most important Art Nouveau buildings. Several classes and studios of the University of Applied Arts and the Academy of Sciences, national science funds, real estate companies and other enterprises are also housed in the building, and students and visitors are always present in the AIL, as it is located in the very centre of the building, in the former cashier's hall. The venue, at the centre of which is our ‘SLS cabin’ with its scenographic studies and multi-sensory installations is located, is open to the public. Tourists and visitors from all over the world also meet there in the Café Exchange. Opened Monday till Saturday on average, there are 450 visitors a day. School classes and students from other universities also come to our regular exhibitions and presentations and these many different people enable a unique participatory exchange, and artistic research processes that do not take place behind closed doors, studios or labs, but ‘right in the centre’.






MULTISENSORY SCENOGRAPHY

Theory

Since perception is fundamentally shaped by synesthetic interaction of all sensory modalities, the staging of interaction of complex sensory modalities is at the core for our research design. An understanding of sensory perception as a multisensory attempt is state of art in science today. Our brains continually integrate information across the senses to reduce perceptual ambiguity, improve perceptual performance and enhance valuation. (Spence, Driver 2004; Nudds 2014)

The multisensory scenography is defined by its manifestation as an integrated, interdisciplinary staging of a participatory space for the co-creation of multisensory experiences in order to enable processual happenings in the cultural field, enabling bodily experience, sensual resonance, and fostering self-reflection, knowledge exchange and empower actionability (Divjak 2012). Multisensory and immersive experiences in the arts, and *expanded scenography* are increasingly discussed in a broader context (Brejzek, 2011; McKinney, Palmer 2017; Pursey, Lomas 2018; Velasco, Obrist 2020; Beer, 2021). Artistic research of multisensory scenographies suggests, that sensory interaction and the temporary deprivation from one vital sense (e.g. the visual) is leading to a more immersive experience by the responding audience ("Dreaming Chamber" by Karen Casey, 1999, "Sensory Experience Design Studio" by Kornbongkoch Harnpinijsak, 2019 et al.) Others proclaim, that our sense of smell and sense of hearing could have a significant impact on our self-image and body perception (Brianza, Memoli 2020).

For the design and implementation of artworks for setting multisensory stimuli as impulses for sensing and sense awareness – sound, smell, haptic in particular – we are referring to insights from scientific research and applied research on "sensing nature" and the resulting benefits (Keninger, Gaston et al. 2013; Franco, Shanahan, Fuller 2017) and our own artistic preliminary research (see: following sections A, B, C). This results in an innovative experimental, physically experienceable scenographic setting.

Our interest lies in the staging of subtle physical materializations, stimulation and examination of specific sensual-bodily sensations and experiences addressing the non-visual senses, creating and exploring a physically accessible environment for participation and co-creation, a "narrative space" as research setting. (Mohammed, 2019). The arts-based placement and translation of complex interrelations, and the investigation of overarching multisensory effects and their impacts are aiming at the benefit to advance inspiring visions,

create a bigger picture, and empower inner development and outer actionability concerning systems awareness.

A. Emphasizing smell as a scenographic agent

We live in a culture permeated by the visual and pay far less attention to other sensory information. Despite the archaic priority of the sense of smell, which is closely related to that of taste – perceived molecules are directly addressing the limbic system triggering emotions and memories (Hatt/Dee 2011) –, it still remains subordinate, probably not least because its inherent surprising, uncontrollable, and potentially anarchic potential (Divjak 2016).

Artists like Marcel Duchamps, Olafur Eliasson, Jannis Kounellis ("Unitled"), Sissel Tolaas ("The smell of fear the fear of smell"), Karla Black, Clara Ursiti ("Eau clair"), Robert Jelinek ("Cash"), Wolfgang Georgsdorf ("Smeller 2.0"), or Peter de Cupere have worked with scent. The olfactory artistic work and expertise of Paul Divjak functions as an important prerequisite for the implementation of smell as a scenographic agent in our project. Building on and expanding his cultural-theoretical publications (e.g *Der Geruch der Welt* (*The smell of the world*), 2016), and his artistic research projects working with *smellscapes* (Porteous 1985, Young 2020) and scent installations (e.g. "Diffusing Molecules", Neue Galerie New York, 2003; "Last year in Jerusalem", Jewish Museum Hohenems, 2016; "The Smell of the Moon", Natural History Museum Vienna, 2019, "Diffusing Terpenes: The Effects of Forest Bathing", KMH, Liechtenstein, 2022) the olfactory approach for the development of scent installations/smellscapes for the multisensory scenography is not least based on Divjak´s comprehensive experience in that field. This includes his profound knowledge concerning essential oils, aroma chemicals and other olfactory substances, as well as their use and application as a potentially powerful – and still often underrated and -developped – scenographic agent. In particular, a promising study, which identified the aroma-chemical HedioneTM as a scent that excites a human pheromone receptor (VN1R1) and thus has the ability to influence human interactions in terms of cooperative behaviour (cf. Berger, Hatt, Ockenfels 2017) or the use of (natural) scents that trigger either aversive or compassionate behaviour, negative reactions or increasing positive resonance, will be subject to closer examination.

Preliminary experience and findings concerning the sensation of smell and the impact of fragrances on humans (Weber, Heuberger 2008; Cavanaugh 2013; Franco, Fuller et al. 2017, Barwich 2020), smell as an aesthetic experience (Shiner 2020), scent as art, olfactory artefacts and scented scenographies (e.g. Di Benedetto, 2018; Kjellmer, 2021) are taken into consideration. Within the methodological framework of our research, the specific use of scent as staged artefact / olfactory agent consideres as a crucial, key interacting factor in the development and exploration of the multisensory scenography.

B. Emphasizing haptics a scenographic agent

We are "beginning to feel the ground slip away beneath our feet*"* Bruno Latour states. (2018, p. 14) This remark is more than just a metaphor, it´s literally a description of how humans perceive the state of the world today. In times of massive soil sealing, the haptic approach for our project features the use of natural materials and soil, with reference to Latour, taking up the concept of the "Future Walkways" as developed and implemented in various research settings, galleries and museums by Jeanette Mueller (Princess Sirinthorn Gallery, Nakhon Pathom, 2016, Galerie Gugging, 2018, küfermartishuus, Liechtenstein, 2018, Künstlerhaus Bregenz, 2020 et al.). Participatory observation and qualitative interviews with students at the Silpakorn University (at occasion of MUELLER-DIVJAK´s exhibition "The Transition Show") have shown that a barefoot walk on the natural walkways in and outside the Gallery suggested a change of perception regarding the mindfulness towards one´s environment. These observations as well as studies on the impact of walking environment and connectedness to nature (Birdsall, Harvey 2016) and haptic perception in interaction with the

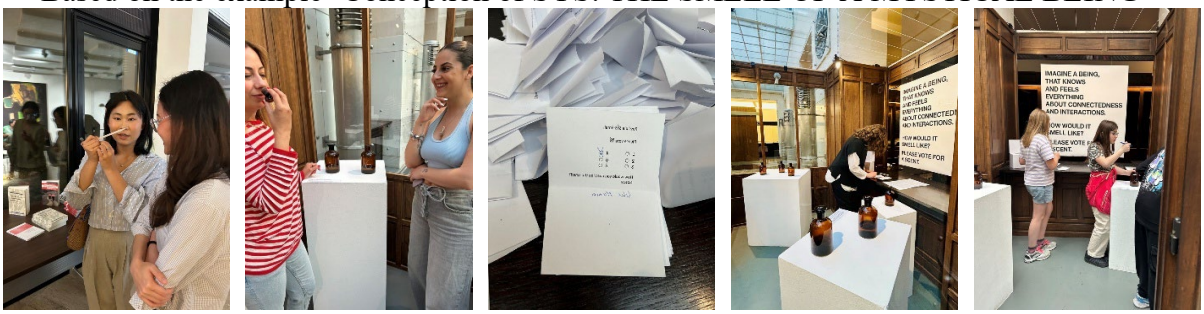
other senses (Helbig, Ernst, Grunwald 2008, Stokes, Matthen, Biggs 2017) are essential research findings for our project. The creation and application of pathways and artefacts made from human-made and nature-based materials functions as an essential space-creating measure for our testing arrangements, and the staging of a series of experiments concerning spatiality, multisensory qualities and sense awareness.

C. Emphasizing sound as a scenographic agent

Referring to studies suggesting that natural sounds have a "specific value in creating space for imagination, particularly when delivered with care and as part of the co-creation of sensory experience" (Bates, Hickman et al. 2019) the concept for the auditive approach, which is taking place in close cooperation with electronic musician and composer Bernhard Fleischmann features interactive multi-track sound installations based on field recordings from Europe and Southeast Asia. The collaboration with artists Jiandyin and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture (TH) and musician/composer Tuntun Taratawan Krue-On - hereby enables an essential cross-cultural approach. The soundscape´s development and implementation are rooted in the tradition of *acoustic ecology (ecoacoustics)* or *soundscape ecology*, which involves the interrelations and effects of acoustic impressions on human beings (Schafer, Truax, 1978). In this regard previous sound art projects and research by Paul Divjak, which examined effects of field recorded soundscapes on human beings (e.g. the soundscapes "harvested" in bee hives in the Austrian alps, and being performed at MAK – Museum for Applied Arts, Vienna (*Bee Pop*, Divjak/Schlögl, 2012), or a sound installation featuring the swelling of sea waves recorded around the globe ("The Great Wave/Dream Island", MUELLER-DIVJAK, Künstlerhaus Bregenz, 2020) served for the development of soundscapes for underpinning the experiential setting and modulation in the focus area.

Practice

Based on the example 'Conception of SYS: THE SMELL OF A MYSTICAL BEING'



The question posed in the staged voting booth concerned the knowledge and sensory perception of connections / connectedness, relationships, and interdependencies - as a kind of essence of "SYS-consciousness" - and can be seen, in a way, as the very aim of the multisensory scenographies and the project as a whole. For our arts-based research process, it is revealing what very different people associate olfactorily with this - what smells and olfactory images they have of it.

A sound installation is also integrated into the voting booth, which makes breaths, the deep inhalation of odours and a conscious inhalation and exhalation audible. This subtly creates an almost meditative atmosphere. We assume that every breath can be possible smelling, but also possible meditating.

The six different smells were mainly developed and realised by Paul Divjak and the artist duo MUELLER-DIVJAK. One of the scents was curated by them during their research trip to the USA and was created by Sanaa Al-Sagnia Amar, a young scent artist, based in Manhattan and rooted in West Africa. All the scents are compositions of a variety of natural and synthetic ingredients. Some of them were developed especially for this scenographic study, others were already part of previous artistic interventions, installations and performances.

We deliberately kept the coordination very simple and analogue. For several reasons, we decided against using an online app for voting:

-To support handwriting - and to tap into the appeal of an act that has become increasingly rare.

-The act of writing on an old-fashioned piece of paper, the experience of folding it up and placing it into the ballot box – we wanted to offer and incorporate all these different tactile experiences into our sensory approach.

-To promote independence from smartphones.

-To encourage playful engagement with a democratic act.

We discovered that many people genuinely enjoy voting – even when they do not stand to gain or lose anything from the outcome. And how willingly they share their thoughts, ideas, and associations when they are invited to do so – and when they feel that their input is appreciated.

THE SYS

Let's look back at the beginning of the paper and ask the question again: Why do we use the phrase 'How would it smell like?', why do we ask people to imagine a mysterious being?

Yes, because we realised that a not yet tangible being, which we call SYS, emerges. But it arises because we have called it. Because we have explored and discovered that we need SYS.

Assuming there is a powerful multisensory scenography that conveys a profound and lasting understanding of living systems to the people who visit and pass through it within a reasonable period of time: what would these people be capable of afterwards? What would they be able to become, how would they behave? - We think that an artistic elaboration of a positive anticipation of this possibility offers a chance to awaken a longing, and that a desire, an identification with a magical possibility is exactly what we need to get beyond the narrow confines of our educated, but limited perception.

SYS is the imagination and anticipation of what is to be achieved. The embodied, internalised systems knowledge and wisdom, the present systems awareness:

SYS has 'embodied' all knowledge about living systems. It is a sensual being that combines 'sense' (the meaning of life) and 'senses' (sensory impressions).

The SYS is still a mystery - a mythological and at the same time contemporary real being, an entity who has developed systems awareness and is very much at home in a complex and challenging, constantly changing world - and enjoys it. An embodiment that copes with multiple developments and crises in the socio-, eco- and techno-sphere, and gets along with a wide variety of people and entities and contributes to the well-being of all beings.

It's not really there yet, but here's what we know about it: The SYS is a being that shows great joy and resilience. It is fully 'embodied', perceives very intensely with all senses and trusts its sensory impressions. Its entire body serves as an instrument for perceiving situations in which it finds itself. It is fully aware that it is a sensitive living system that is embedded in and dependent on other living systems.

The SYS has developed a special sense for living systems and it is therefore not possible for it - or only possible with great overcome and effort, and associated with pain - to behave destructively towards life. It has the impulse, a kind of instinct, to behave benevolently towards all living systems. The SYS is very sociable, but also needs a lot of time on its own. It avoids too many stimuli. - And it likes to roll around on the floor. The SYS is very playful and aesthetics are very important to it. It does not tend to be a know-it-all and does not insist on its convictions, but allows itself to be touched by new insights and impressions, including those of others, and likes to calmly weigh up what overall picture it can form from the different

data. The SYS assembles the fragments of phenomena it receives and perceives into a larger whole.

SYS-beings are not interested in judgments and evaluations. They assume that everything is always in motion and changeable. For a SYS, enjoyment is an important value. Enjoyment and appreciation in the present. Very mindful in order to enable future enjoyment. SYS-beings prefer to walk barefoot and use the soles of their feet to feel the surfaces, the different floors and ground textures, the earth, carpets, grass, sand, snow, stones, mud, wood, moss and asphalt. They sense the temperature, the texture, the moisture or dryness, the cracks, the peaks or the softness.

The SYS laughs at every opportunity. Above all at itself and at life itself and its challenges. It also shows humor in serious matters. Its behavior is characterized by friendliness and politeness. Its thoughts and actions are very generous.

The SYS sleeps when it is tired. More or less no matter where and when. It lies down in a hammock, curls up on a blanket, stretches out on the sofa or bed, leans back in a chair, closes its eyes, smiles and sleeps. Trustingly, without a guilty conscience, regardless of the time of day or night. The SYS knows that it cannot be attentive when it is tired. If the body and mind need rest, then it is of great importance and shows great intelligence to make this possible. No substitutes, no distractions, no screens - just sleep. SYS-sleep.

Without sufficient sleep, sensory perceptions become inaccurate, reactions careless - big mistakes are made. Apart from that, the SYS knows that sleep is a wonderful means of not doing anything stupid - resources are conserved during sleep, unnecessary excitement and waste are not possible, dramas and expenses, CO2 consumption and overloads are reduced. When you sleep, you love - yourself and life. When you sleep, you are peaceful. When you fall asleep, you practise letting go. When you sleep, you trust, when you sleep time doesn't matter, when you sleep you can be anywhere, you are mobile without transportation. When you sleep, you need less. The SYS likes to lie alone and also with others. It hugs and sleeps.

Sources / inspirations:
- Research results from interviews and in-depth discussions with Southeast Asian and European artists and systems scientists,
- feature and documentary films from Thailand, Korea, USA, Southern and Eastern Europe
- Participatory observations and analyses of contemporary art exhibitions and videos
- Reflections on own performances and installations
- In-depth interviews with audience members and participants of our performances and installations

VOTING RESULTS

Over 1,900 people took part in the scent-based vote as part of the fifth installation in our *Series of Scenographic Studies* ‘Conception of SYS - THE SMELL OF A MYSTERIOUS BEING’, primarily at AIL Vienna, but also at MIT Boston, the SAR Artistic Research Conference in Porto, the Austrian Embassy in Bangkok and the Songkhla Art Centre (TH) and other temporary voting booths.

Countless voters not only ticked one of the six odours but also wrote down their associations and thoughts on it - and often on all smells. Often accompanied by small drawings.

From where we stand today (end of May 2025), there is a neck-and-neck race between two smells. Anna Irgang keeps precise tables and electoral registers. All ballot papers will soon be available and analysed. We are incredibly excited to see the final results.

Data availability

The enumeration of all election results will be completed by 11 June 2025. The presentation of the election results will take place on 12 June 2025 as part of a research presentation at the AIL in an analogue and local format. From July on, the results will be able to make publicly accessible. The detailed analyses of the results, their explanations and artistic interpretations will be presented in a follow-up paper and further developed multisensory scenographers in the coming weeks and months.

Conclusion

We only perceive the world we live in partially, not as a whole. And we rely mainly on our eyes. What we consider to be our reality is only a fragment, moreover, we are currently dealing with an unprecedented revolution in the digital world, while facing global crises and challenges. The effects of the rapid multimedia AI impact on the individual, on perception, societies, communities, countries, regions and the entire globe are beyond human imagination. Image, text, and sound: nothing anymore is evidence of what is actually happening. Everything is potentially possible – and that, in already challenging, critical times. Will we increasingly perceive the world only in categories, in patterns that AI prescribes to us, that it drives into our consciousness with every click? How can we cope with this digital revolution and promote direct experiences, and sense-ability, and awareness for the complexities and interdependencies of living systems? Well, we´re not sure, but at least we need to give it a try … to sense, to touch, to listen to and smell the status quo and emerging realities – **to become SYS** in a way – in order to celebrate the presence of life and to create thriving futures for creative communities on this wonderful planet.

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