

## Negotiating shifting smellscape in everyday life

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What if we are confronted with unfamiliar smellscape in our homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces and cities?

Given the cultural conditioning of the senses, the smellscape of everyday life (homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces and cities) play an important part in everyday encounters, experiences and emotions in time & space. The future-in-progress which frames our research artefact is one of increased global mobility and climate change, in which unfamiliar smellscape are encountered more frequently, integrating with and permanently altering the taken-for-granted smellscape of our lives. How do people of different cultures negotiate smells in practice, in a variety of settings? What emotions do smells (scents/stench) 'in and out of place' (Douglas, 2002) evoke? What vocabularies do people draw on to describe these experiences?

Our project began with the assumption that materiality is both visible and invisible, it is substance, surface and medium (Ingold, 2007). Our visible research artefact (the bracelet) produces invisible research artefacts (the smells) which enter different contexts, spaces and social situations. Mobility is integral to the research artefact and the questions it poses, which is why it has been made as a charm bracelet.

Our making journey was different to our usual research processes as we used our bodies and senses to explore interaction, and made artefacts to explore ideas. Some stand-out experiences which informed our final project are outlined in the following paragraphs.

In the dance workshop we began by mirroring one another in our motions and movements. The mirroring— although not 'interacting' in a conventional sense, produced an experience of embodied empathy, in other words the movements of stretching and bending, which felt nice to us both, gave a sense that we understood each other. By reaching out from the two dimensional into the three dimensional space, the mirroring became more interactive, though still not touching, the shift out of the two dimensional plane created a different sensation. Without intention this transformed from mirroring to interacting (e.g. reaching our opposite arms to touch the palms of our hands). Our interaction changed again when we introduced two sticks into our 'dance'. Using the sticks made movements more synchronised, more flowing, more elegant. Then with balls, our interactions became more intimate, less comfortable as we stepped into each other's personal space, and via the ball, touched arms and shoulders.



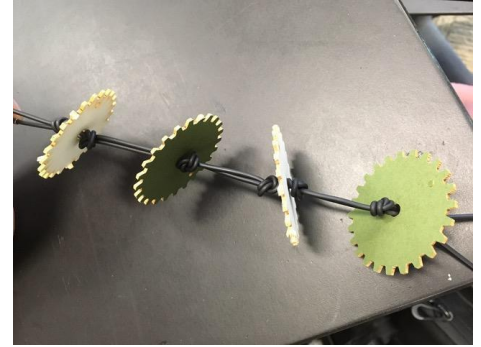
From these embodied explorations of interaction we came to the first making workshop. We each made our own artefact. Nicola made 'data trails' (Picture 1 and 2), Jyoti made a data bracelet (Picture 3). For Nicola, working with the materials made her think about volumes of data – about what data, materialised, would look like. What volume would it have?, how heavy would it be?, how much storage space might it need? how could it be stored? And how might such a materialisation make us consider what is stored, and what is collected in the first place, in a more thoughtful manner.



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

Jyoti's data bracelet was conceptualised so that it could collect data during the activities of a working day, and once removed, discharge the data to a host system or cloud, whilst at the same time (through the rotation of cogs) become energised for the next day.

When the two were joined together we developed a future narrative, in which data storage had become the responsibility of individuals. As, over time, this became heavier and heavier to carry, the bracelet had been designed to download to the 'data trails' each night. This made it possible to continue wearing the bracelet day after day, but there were massive storage issues because of the volume of data trails. Garages and attics were full, mass storage facilities were taking up land in cities. Securely storing the trails of data was becoming difficult. This was leading to a much greater concern and consideration about the data collected in the first place, and what was kept, ultimately leading to a reduction in big data.

The making process – and the requirements to make an artefact – led us to conceptualise data as a material artefact. Giving a tangible value to the invisible data made concerns of collecting and archiving data visible. Here it was not about organising the data in a particular way, but rather questioning the volume of data that is collected, saved and archived by each individual, and its potential implications in the long term.

This everyday future was a fiction based on a real emergent phenomenon. 'The everyday' referred to the production of data, each day, moment by moment, at the scale of individuals (captured by the bracelet). This is a trend that we view as already underway, for example in smart phones and watches, and apps such as Strava.

The fictional aspect was the manner in which the data was turned into material (circles of paper, straws and elastic bands, representing different types of data), and the consequences for storage, protection and ultimately the decline of data collection.

The idea that data is material – or that data has material consequences – is not a fiction. Data centres require energy for the running of servers and the cooling of machines. As data grows, much of this data is unused – even unknown – similar to 'waste'. This has resonance with the broad conceptualisation of 'materiality' in the main project, in which we view not only the bracelet, but also the smells themselves as forms of materiality and as 'research artefacts' in their own right.

It was encouraging to see how materialising big data, helped generate new questions about the implications of such practices in environmental, ethical and personal terms.

### Main Project



Staying with theme of invisible materialities, our main project focussed on 'negotiating shifting smellscapes in everyday life'. Smell by itself is not given any meaning or name unless it is in a certain context that is shared by more than one person. The cultural and personal histories by which smells get meaning is not usually thought of. In this project the question we posed is what happens when suddenly the context of smells changes? How do people of different cultures negotiate smells in practice, in a variety of settings? What emotions do smells (scents/stench) 'in and out of place' (Douglas, 2002) evoke? What vocabularies do people draw on to describe these experiences?

Making the Bracelet:

Testing smells and materials.

We designed a visible research artefact (the bracelet) which produces invisible research artefacts (the smells) which enter different contexts, spaces and social situations, as such we bring an imagined future into the present to explore its possible embodied experience. Mobility is integral to the research artefact and the questions it poses because of the concern with scents 'in and out of place' explored through 'smelly' interventions in different

contexts and social settings. For this reason the artefact was designed as a charm bracelet.

As we wanted to include the real smells from daily life rather than leaving this bit for imagination, we quickly shortlisted the smells which were eventually included in the bracelet. These were namely handwashing soap, freshly brewed coffee from the vending machine, fresh cut lemon, canned beer, sambal (oriental chili spice).

We then started looking for some interesting materials that could possibly suit as a substrate for smells and at the same time as charms of the bracelet. Cardboard pieces, felted wool fibres in different colours, sponge, hand-knitting yarn, and while taking a walk outside, we found some

naturally worn down tree bark pieces which looked quite interesting and were added to the collection.

The process of applying smells on the above selected substrates was eventful. Realizing how the original smell changed once put on a substrate, was quite unexpected. But this led to further experimentation. It took a while for the doused materials to dry, and thus until they could be taken to the next step of making them into charms. After a few hours of letting them dry, we tried to dry them with a heat gun in absence of a hair dryer. Eventually we made charms out of the selected materials by attaching hook and ring to the leather strap.

Afterwards we had to leave the materials overnight, and get back the next day to photograph them and make them ready for presentation. So, the morning afterwards, brought surprising guests to our charms bracelet! We had a lot of fruit flies around the bracelet and in the room. It was disappointing at first, but later we realised that this really made an interaction around the table.

The bracelet thus tried to bring an envisioned aspect of the future everyday into the present, so that such changed contexts might be explored in a materialised, embodied and experiential manner. However, we are left with a question as to whether the bracelet would be technically possible in the present, or if our imagined artefact which would bring the future to the present, in fact relies on future technology.

### **References**

Douglas, M. (2002) *Purity and Danger*. Oxford: Routledge.

Ingold, T. (2007) Materials against materiality, *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14:1-16.