



Sean Raspet

Nc1c(C(OC)=O)cccc1

2014

methyl anthranilate (methyl 2-aminobenzoate)

dimensions variable, 8000 litres (approx. 9.344 metric tons)

Beginning with reformulations of hair gel polymers and cosmetics products in the early 2000s, Sean Raspet has spent the past several years focusing on the specific chemical substances of industrial production—precursors, emulsifiers, surfactants, plasticizers—with a particular emphasis on the raw chemical products of the flavor and fragrance industry. Raspet sees the industry of “functional perfumery” as a liminally aesthetic dimension and an area where both the specific materiality of present-day culture and its attendant processes of abstraction are manifest.

Raspet’s recent projects have included: numerous flavor and fragrance formulations based on the interrelationships of basic molecular structures; a three year project that has involved a chemical analysis and reformulation of Coca-Cola and Pepsi with a related patent application; several chemical air-sampling analyses of interior environments with resulting fragrance/chemical mixtures; the registration and production of new molecules that have not previously existed; and most recently, a series of “hydrocarbon

reformulations” that produce forms of reconstituted crude oil or “abstract gasoline” by recombining purified chemical products in the proper ratios to arrive at synthetic, almost chemically identical versions—a kind of “reverse engineering” of these quintessential petroleum substances.

An abiding concern for Raspet has been the division between art production and that of the mass-scale economy at large. While the discourse of the commodity or of corporate/brand aesthetics in art has focused almost exclusively on the finished, store-bought commodity product or on the mediated brand-imageⁱ, Raspet’s insistence has been on the unfinished, unprocessed precursors—on the liquidity of functional substances as pooled capacities.

Even the term “ready made”—a staple of art discourse—embodies the limited purview of art in relation to the economy. For Raspet, the processes and products of industry are never “ready made” but exist in liquid forms (in a metaphorical, but often also a physical sense) in continual reformulation. Whereas the majority of art and cultural discourse focuses on consumption, Raspet concerns himself with the specificities of production. Commercial products are the result of numerous processes and decisions that are limited by economic conditions and the availability of functional materials. These decisions are often opportunistic, contingent, and indicative of the mode of production of the economy at large—for example the flavor and fragrance industry’s reliance on the products and techniques of the petrochemical and plastics industries. Likewise a specific substance—e.g. a purified molecule—will typically form the basis of numerous, incommensurate products, none of which are presented to the consumer in their purified form.

The boundary between production and consumption also extends to popular culture where representations of articles such as IBC tanks, chemical drums, palletized warehouses, and forklifts are as likely to be associated with terrorism or crime as they are with legitimate industrial production. In a “dematerialized” culture, such allusions to an underlying material infrastructure and its sites of production convey an implicit, if latent, threat of violence—or even of immanent destruction. (As a possible indication of this condition, Raspet was recently questioned by an FBI official as a result of a photograph he took of a chemical plant down the street from his studio in Commerce, California.)

Indeed the “maple syrup event” in which the city of New York was periodically inundated with a thick maple smell—that was later found to be the byproduct of a Frutarom flavor processing plant in New Jersey—was initially feared as a chemical weapons attack by many Manhattan residents. In a similar vein, when the Elk River chemical spill occurred near Charleston, West Virginia, the first clue to local residents was a distinct licorice-like smell permeating the air: the chemical 4-methylcyclohexanemethanolⁱⁱ, which is used to purify coal and was released into the water supply, is very closely related in both molecular structure and flavor to artificial flavor compounds in use in various countries.

Despite this (not unfounded) anxiety within a “dematerialized” culture with regard to its own material infrastructure and substances, Raspet sees the products and techniques of

the flavor and fragrance industry as an allegory for, and an embodiment of, what he calls the increasingly “synthetic mindset” of culture at large. This paradigm of “revisable materiality”—i.e. a condition wherein objects and substances are increasingly imagined as malleable and reversible with fully adjustable qualities—is not unlike a kind of synesthesiac Photoshop filter, a variable slider, or an “undo” function that can be mentally mapped onto a given object or perception by an individual subject.

The flavor industry embodies this synthetic mindset *par excellence*ⁱⁱⁱ, given its penchant for the analysis of biological products such as fruits and flowers into their respective chemical components—which can then be reworked and reformulated as so many adjustable quantitative parameters (for example, the reduction of the olfactory phenomenology of a banana into its 2 or 3 primary flavor molecules, which can then be synthetically produced, re-proportioned, and recombined with additional compounds that may or may not exist in nature).

Despite this flexibility in the industry’s conception of nature and materiality, Raspet’s primary aesthetic critique of the industry has to do with its continued reliance upon a referential or “mimetic” paradigm in the way it presents its products. Even in the most elastic stretches of the object-concept of a banana, for example, the end product formulation is still presented under the rubric of “banana” as an uncomplicated and stable entity^{iv}. For Raspet, it would be more accurate to say that bananas smell primarily of isoamyl acetate (3-methylbut-1-yl ethanoate) than the other way around^v.

Likewise, even in the industry’s own literature, completely synthetic compounds that had previously not existed are still described with familiar (and generally inadequate) terminology, such as “grassy” “woody” “fruity” or “smoky”. Given the demotion of the sense of smell in Western culture with regard to other senses, and the considerable lack of non-mimetic terminology for olfactory perception, it is not surprising that even the flavor and fragrance industry would have to rely on describing scents in relation to other entities (i.e. wood-like, fruit-like, etc.), rather than being able to communicate the specificity of a scent as an entity/experience in itself. (Consider as a counter example the multitude of non-referential, abstract words for visual phenomena, which include all of the basic color names)

Here, Raspet’s project takes on an almost modernist tack: one relating to the specificity of materials and the possibility of allowing for the basic elements of an “aesthetic” work (in this case a specific molecule) to become autonomous entities or units of information in their own right. Since a molecular structure is the most basic distinctive “chemical signature” of an entity, the realm of olfaction presents itself as the proper domain for understanding material specificity on a phenomenological level: the sense of smell is the body’s pre-existing sensory apparatus for distinguishing between nuanced differences in molecular structure. Hence, scent and not vision would, according to Raspet, be the primary somatic sense and cultural arena for apprehending the ontology of materials and the manufactured environment.

The work presented here: *Nc1c(C(OC)=O)cccc1*^{vi} consists of the chemical methyl anthranilate (methyl 2-aminobenzoate). Methyl anthranilate is used in multiple products including bird repellent, artificial flavors and (historically) sunscreen. It is commonly utilized by the flavor industry as the primary ingredient in artificial “grape” labeled flavors, although it is not present in the majority of grape varieties. It is generally derived from petroleum byproducts and plasticizers such as phthalic acid anhydride. In the context of an art fair at a convention center in a major port city, the eight 1 metric ton IBC tanks (Intermediate Bulk Containers) may tend to redouble into the space of a trade show or industry function. This oscillation becomes particularly interesting in relation to how the material is sold: Raspét insists that all of his liquid artworks be sold on a per-litre basis, like most other comparable commodities, however an “art value” is always added to the raw material costs.

ⁱ In instances where the sites of production have been addressed topically within the field of art, they have generally been mediated through or represented within art’s pre-existing mechanisms—e.g. as documentary film or photography works of self-contained authorship

ⁱⁱ In the work (*CCICCC(CCI)CO*) Raspét collected contaminated tap water from a residence that was affected by this chemical spill

ⁱⁱⁱ and it has done so since the postwar era, from a production point of view

^{iv} At the same time, as Raspét acknowledges, this residual and often tenuous connection to an referent can allow for a kind of stretching and a space for play—something that Raspét has utilized in a work consisting only of isobutyl formate (2-methylpropyl formate): the primary flavor molecule of the “blue raspberry” artificial flavor (which was presented in its raw, clear form, without coloration).

^v Especially given the fact that isoamyl acetate is only one compound present in banana flavor—although the dominant one—and it is likewise present in a multitude of other fruits and organisms. It is even produced by certain honey bees as an alarm/sting pheromone.

^{vi} The work takes its title from the SMILES format version of the molecule, or Simplified Molecular-Input Line-Entry System—a system devised for data entry of molecular structures as strings of text.