

Gayil Nalls

2. *WORLD SENSORIUM, 1ST RECORD*

1999–2000. World aromatic phytogetic material (100 mL at 25%) in amber borosilicate bottle. Edition 1/18. 4 x 2 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

3. *BREATH, ESSENCE, AND (AFTER)IMAGE*

1998. Audio CD. Edition of 1,000. 62 minutes. Vehicle for Organic Aesthetics. Courtesy of the artist.

Presenting *World Sensorium* in its tiny vessel, Gayil Nalls asks us to believe in the authenticity of the vessel's contents as a very powerful substance: the iconic phytogetic materials of 230 countries. The laborious production of the scent involved extensive correspondence with political ministries who were asked to identify "national" plants. Nalls then gathered or processed each into essential oil, proportionally combining them according to the population of each country at the turn of the twentieth century. The resulting olfactory sculpture is in essence a 'pure' perfume. When the work debuted at the millennial New Year's celebration in New York City's Times Square, approximately one million people participated in what the artist terms "a collective metabolic experience." The 'world scent' cascaded downward from the ball-drop tower by way of Microencapsulated Paperworks, made with the same technology as print ad perfume samples. Celebrants simultaneously ingested the iconic scents of their own countries of origin and those of everyone present, in universal commemoration of a milestone of time. Positioned in both personal ritual and shared experience, the work provided a kind of multisensory rapture, which the artist contends human minds and bodies require in order to commune in memory, association, and understanding.

In *World Sensorium*, Nalls recognizes that the iconic statuses of plants in medical, culinary, ceremonial, and industrial history have profound implications on human cultural and biological evolution. By harnessing them, she has attempted to create an indexical substance that triggers an awareness of our universal identity. As in both Buddhist and Christian systems, similar 'recollections' entail a potential for healing or even 'enlightenment' or 'grace.' In these religious traditions, participants are not dormant repositories; each 'human vessel' is both container and content. Similarly, Nalls maintains that by participating in *World Sensorium*,

each individual transforms from fragment to whole in an olfactory-driven performance.

Ritual studies show that performance and olfaction have historically been intertwined. Theorist Catherine Bell insists that the "mind and body" must be understood as part of a continuum rather than in isolation, while Suzanne Evans says that olfaction facilitates this connection. Even preceding the modern discovery of pheromones, scent was often utilized in performance for characterization, while relics were claimed to have the 'odor of sanctity.' Like the stories that attract worshipers and inspire them to identify with a martyr or saint, "fragrance," Evans observes, "emanates out with its presumed proof of divinity and impacts all who perceive it" (Evans, 195). For centuries scent has been used not merely as an aid for classification, but also for authentication and instruction.

It may seem that the warm amber glow of *World Sensorium's* modest bottle might muddle or belie such powerfully symbolic contents. However, this very obscurity contributes to the work's ability to simultaneously pronounce and deconstruct the reliquary/relic model. By diluting its visual appeal and emphasizing its essential olfactory and performative potential, *World Sensorium* petitions for the expansion of its meaning beyond a literal or symbolic object in space, to a means of identification and a catalyst for transformation.

Sophia Marisa Lucas



4. *World Sensorium Microencapsulated Paperworks*
1999–2000. Microencapsulated paperworks containing
10 grams of *World Sensorium*.
Image: *World Sensorium at Times Square 2000*
Courtesy of the artist.

