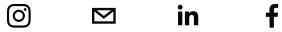



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FAIRE Voices  
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## When Perfume is Magical



Daniel Plettenberg owns a brand consultancy and is Co-Owner of AtelierPMP. As a brand consultant, he took a chance when Stefanie Mayr asked him to come up with an idea for a perfume brand. In 2012, they started to create their own, working with famous noses in Paris. Plettenberg is queer, a social and political activist, a lecturer in philosophy, a member of a leading German think tank, an artist, owner of his own radio show, founding a vegan restaurant in Hamburg, and is currently initiating one of the largest queer urban planning concepts in Germany. He understands his life as an ongoing chain of possibilities and is always working on many diverse projects.

*Images courtesy of the artist*

*Words by Daniel Plettenberg, interviewed by Eliza Strauss-Jenkins*

**ESJ: What really stands out to me with your work is how you are bending the norms of perfumery. I pulled a quote from your website where you say "you stand for a finely tuned rejection of superficiality, no appearances, only being." Usually, perfume is very superficial; we imagine the cis-gendered woman putting on perfume for a very particular [male] gaze. In creating a perfume whose fundamental purpose is to express one's state of being I believe you are creating a space where this understanding of the "natural" state is also a moldable one. Identity can be crafted and fluid, it's a sort of queering of the norms of perfume. I'm curious if you could talk about what perfume means to you and your identity?**

DP: I started to collect perfumes a long time ago, when I was 14 years old, and the first money I earned was spent on perfume. From a very early age, being a queer person, perfume was something like magic... an invisible aura... a scarf! Or, a protection shield for me to show my queerness without being too queer. It was something the mainstream could accept but it was still a political statement: to say I'm queer because I'm wearing—very early on—perfume. For me, it was always about creating a security shield, but at the same time, it was an extension of my personality. An extension that goes into the world and lingers while I'm leaving the room... I'm still there after I've left. In this way it's both—it's protecting me, but it's also diffusing my identity into different worlds, different rooms.

When I started to work with Stefanie Mayr, my business partner... her background is totally a political one. She started with a fashion label that's all-around punk with a strong political attitude. In 2000, it was very clear that with her very left-wing political background, being anti-racist and, well... all the big anti's. When it came together with my understanding of perfume, it was very clear that we wanted to do something special and different.



When we started with our first perfume—it was really funny—when we did our research to understand what we could do with perfumes, how they are made, how they're framed, and labelled, and talked about... We began to understand that while the language of perfume essences is endless, the language of perfume marketing is so limiting. It is shocking. It's all about the perfect body, sex, the designer's name or celebrity's name... I think that's basically it, except for the ingredients; that was shockingly one dimensional and stupid.

For example, with our perfume, anti anti, we wanted to advance a counter idea to all the Trump-ism and negativity in the world. We wanted to have a counter essence, a healing essence, the counter-poison, so to say.



It was just a wonderfully charming idea to imagine people every morning in their bathrooms spraying a little bit of openness and open-mindedness on themselves, and it would linger with them throughout the day. It's political but it's also an understanding that if you find a perfume that fits you overall, or on that very day, it's really an extension of your personality and identity. That's something I totally love about perfume. It's true that when you listen to how people talk about their favourite perfume; how they got it or where they had it on, and how people recognize them with it... things like that are highly emotional and so closely connected to yourself, to your self-expression.

With every artistic process, for us, it wasn't enough to just say "be who you are". It was always interesting to find a nice word,

or an interesting idea that somehow captures that same meaning. We stumbled on this very old word, *geschöpf*, from the German language. It translates to 'creature,' but also means to pour water into something and to create something new through this action. It was really nice to have that *schöpfen* creation process in the symbolism of the perfume.

Am I queering it? I don't know. At the very least, I want to open it up. I want people to understand that so much more is possible.



**ESJ:** As you explained, perfume is about perception. If the lens through which we are perceiving each other—i.e., perfume—is only that of the narrow mainstream, what you are then doing is offering a larger lens through which we can look. It is in my understanding, a form of queering, but really it's also just broadening how and what it is that we can perceive. What's your favourite or your earliest memory of scent?



DP: My earliest memory of scent... well, the first perfume I bought. It was Giorgio Armani, it is now 40 years old, but it was a quite nice mixture of warm citrusy and woody perfume. I loved it, it was magic because I, for the first time, understood that a good perfume can *do* magic.

The interesting thing is that everybody asks me if I have a favourite perfume. It's so hard to say because I have 300 to 400 in my little cooled cabinet. So, I don't have a favourite one. I have one where I like the story best—Sottile 1.61. It's by the Japanese perfume maker, Yosh Han. The beauty of it is that it tells the story of a little girl in her house in Japan, and her grandfather is calling her out into the garden because the Lily of the Valley is blooming. She runs through the house and at first, you smell all the scents of an old house, including the wet cellar rooms where she is running through and then she's coming out on the green grass and you begin to smell the green grass and suddenly you smell the Lily of the Valley. It's so hyper-modern! It is so philosophical as a form of storytelling. It shows the magic of the perfume-making art—what's possible. Because the stories you can tell are so different and amazing.



**“It was just a wonderfully charming idea to imagine people every morning in their bathrooms spraying a little bit of openness and open-mindedness on themselves, and it would linger with them throughout the day.”**

ESJ: I'm curious about your process of creating these stories. How do you go from your initial idea to building a perfume that is so multi-dimensional? Or a creative tale rather than simply a good scent?

DP: I always struggle to name my profession because, in a way, I'm creating all these stories around perfumes. I try to get the perfume maker to translate all these ideas into scent. At the moment, I'm in that process with my business partner Stefanie. We are looking into what kind of topics or political situations that may be of interest to us. We are trying to understand what's happening in the world that is of interest to us.

Once we have an idea of what our big topic is going to be, we write a briefing for the perfume maker. One of the big topics I'm interested in at the moment is trying new ways of living together. How do we leave the standard capitalistic and patriarchal systems behind us? What could these new ideas, energies, and formats of living together be? So, I'll go to the perfume maker and ask what his ideas would be on how to make perfume totally different, unseen of, unheard of, for a new generation of people who understand that it is now a time where we have to change massively—bring in a totally new attitude. At the same time, we will work on how to find a name for that; how to find a logo to express that. Usually, we try to find artists to collaborate with. While we're doing that, the perfume maker comes back with his first idea. Usually, there are about 3-5 very different ideas that he has worked on. He'll explain why he was thinking in this or that direction and we'll try out the samples, first without any explanations, and then we'll later get some information on where his ideas came from.



*Daniel and his business partner, Stefanie Mayr*

Up until this point in the process, within the five options, there is always one option we'll love, absolutely. Then, we'll work with our first choice on refining it, to make it our own. We will definitely adjust it and ask him to make it more long-lasting, deeper, bring in certain ingredients, things like that. It really becomes 100% our creation—our perfume expression, so to say. Hopefully, at that point, we have a logo and a good name for the perfume, and then it all comes together.







**ESJ: So, collaboration is deeply important to your creativity?**

DP: Collaboration is important in the creative process because of the translation. It's not just that you mirror yourself in the other person and this person agrees on whether it's a good idea or not, but what's more important is the fact that, for example, Stefanie and I will have a very clear idea of our concept and we'll give it to a perfume maker, and of course we have expectations, but to see how it works in *his* creativity, where something completely different comes out of it... We are always like: "Oh. Oh my god!" That is the important thing about creativity. Just doing a collaborative, workshop-style exchange is not enough. That's just one part of quality control, but to be mirrored by another person who is digesting your idea, and two days later Stefanie will call me to say: "You said something... there was this one word, and I've chewed on it and I believe that's something we should talk about," and I'm like—I forgot that I even said that. This is really the beautiful part of collaboration and also knowing that creativities are so different. Some people will generate something amazing just out of the blue but most people when it comes to creativity, they'll take bits and pieces from others and will digest them in order to make something new out of it.

**ESJ: When you go with a philosophical idea of what you want, do you have an understanding of the certain scent that you have in mind, or is it only born from that collaboration with the perfume designer?**

DP: It can be both. When we created Empa Topia, it was clear that we had a philosophical idea. The idea was that we need a new utopia but it would only work if it came together with empathy. For us, 'utopia' was something like a technical, harsh, revolutionary term. It was clear that this utopia scent should have something really extraordinary or strange or bizarre, even. Mark Buxton, our perfume maker, made a very green, rascally, absinthe-esque, punky, rhubarb perfume. I would say 30% of the people love it immediately and the other 70% of people ask, what is that? They have to get used to it, and I love that. At the same time, it was totally clear that Empa must be like a protective shield or like the warmth of a blanket. The task was to have these two separate perfumes, Empa and Topia, be also able to work together so that you can layer them.



**ESJ: In your perfumes, there's an understanding that everybody has a role; we are each going to play it and collectively we're going to figure it out.**

DP: The truth is, the number one most important thing that everybody has to understand when they are making perfume: people must like it. Nobody wears a perfume just because of a good idea. So yes, at the same time, we can make strange perfumes or challenging perfumes, and we try to do things the non-conventional way, but in the end, we must have the feeling that people *really* could like it. That's number one, but as soon as you step away from the essence itself there's a whole world where you can open up and queer someone's perception of the world, absolutely.

**ESJ: How has perfume influenced your understanding of creativity? Because obviously, you're talking about the stories and the building of the stories, as well as collaboration. You are creative in all other facets of your life and not solely in perfumery, I'm curious how it has inspired your understanding of creativity and creative expression.**

DP: What I like about perfume is that you work to create a final product. In our company, we have the liberty and chance to create something from the very first idea—then to the name, the perfume, the bottle, the packaging, and then suddenly it's in the shop. This has had a massive influence on my understanding of how creativity works because I think one of the biggest problems we all have, all creative people have, is where to start and where to stop. The creative process can always be endless, and you'll never know whether it's good enough or not. To learn that different processes have to come together and culminate at a certain time, and at a certain moment, is really a good education for every creative person.



At the same time, it is really one of the most beautiful things to understand that if everything comes together, suddenly, you have a story on the market and people write us emails and comments on social media saying, “Wow, this is something I never expected.” It’s not just that you make a product, basically to be honest, in the end, the product itself is relatively boring... Well, it's not boring, you just have the product somewhere in the shop. But to see that people can connect to the philosophy and understand your vision, that is something that's really amazing. Not something that many creative artists really get every day.

*To learn more about Daniel and his work, visit his [Instagram](#) and [Atelier PMP's website](#).*



Pennsylvania, where she is majoring in literature and printmaking. Having grown up in an artistic, multi-cultural family, she understands and cherishes the role that creativity plays in building, nourishing, and healing community. In 2018, Eliza was an “American Visions” nominee and received a Silver Medal from the National Scholastics Awards for her print “Pear Lady.” Her poetry and etchings have been published in the literary journal “Meat for Tea.” Currently in Pennsylvania, Eliza can usually be found blasting music while working in her printmaking studio or cooking a scrumptious meal for her and her friends.

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