

What Matters is the Act of Making Formula: A Reading of 'Wear Me'

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Sixteen aerosole diffusers hiss in a desolate white room. Hooked to an arduino, they disperse the scent of Ahn Sung-Hwan in devoted synchronicity. Set to the soundtrack of Sung-Hwan extracting the scent from himself, the shrine-like installation is a literal and conceptual distillation of his existence as an independent identity, carnal human and conceptual artist.

The auditory and olfactory experience that is 'Wear Me' originates from Sung-Hwan's previous project 'Take Off', which is placed at the entrance of the door to the scented room. It is a video installation that depicts Sung-Hwan smearing himself with a milky lard-like emulsion in an aseptic setting. Slowly the camera inches over his body to unveil a meticulous process of coating every hair, patch of skin and crevice with the glossy concoction. Sterile yet incredibly intimate, we gain an insight into the scientific process of extracting Sung-Hwan's bodily scent.

Together with Dr. Hwan-Myung Lee, a Cosmetic Biotechnologist at Ho-Seo University, Sung-Hwan repeated the process of extracting his bodily odours for three hours daily, for five days, during his stay in Seoul, Korea in August 2020. The result was 20 litres of extracted secretions of sweat, sebum, dead skin cells and daily hygiene products. Then, through the process of solvent extraction, this collection was distilled into 400 milliliters of Sung-Hwan's essential oil.

The essential oil is displayed next to the video in a pharmaceutical glass bottle, inside a brightly lit LED vitrine. The liquid has a musky scent, with what seems like orange-blossom or pine accents. It is pleasantly human and less pungent than typical essential oils. The oil is accompanied by six bottles of perfume, which Sung-Hwan made by adding alcohol to the essential oil, to make his product more spreadable and wearable.

The spreading of his essence has been the core of Sung-Hwan's work since he began his work in 2019 for his masters graduation project for Design Academy Eindhoven. Since his graduation, he has gone on to create a series of iterations of extracting and disseminating his essence in a multitude of ways. The first iterations were more visual and physical, as they saw the replication of his head in plaster, which he used as building blocks for objects. This was followed by experimentations of inflatable balloons and scented candles in the shape of Sung-Hwan's head and body. The addition of an immaterial material; air and scent, led Sung-Hwan down the path of deciding to remove all visual queues of him for the audience to experience him, and installing just the 16 aerosole diffusers and the sound of his scent's extraction in a blank room.

By distilling his essence and inviting the audience to experience it, Sung-Hwan manages to engage himself in an interaction of mutual exploitation with the audience. Our sense of smell is strongly related to emotional memories and Sung-Hwan manipulates this quality to bring us even closer to experiencing and absorbing him as a boundless entity. Upon entering the scented room, we have no choice but to breathe him in, making us his consumers and creating an intimate scent-bond with him.

This unique experience also unveils how 'Wear Me' capitalizes on the transcendental experiences that we typically associate to religious icons, and plants this interaction in a contemporary setting. The project questions what it means to experience an identity. Sung-Hwan likens it to the miracle of Jesus Christ sharing bread and wine made of his body. He sees this practice as the sharing of Jesus' identity by imposing his powers and popularity upon his subjects. As his products were consumed, the audience of his miracle became his intimate corporal consumers and believers. A similar process of consumption occurs when we inhale Sung-Hwan's scent; it is pleasant and his concept is poetic and likeable-- we believe he is real and good.

Aesthetically, the display for his scent resembles popular minimalist perfume-shop designs of today, proposing the scent of Sung-Hwan as an item for consumption. Reframed through the capitalist lens, the idea of consuming Sung-Hwan's scent is not that odd. After all, there are copious celebrities selling their scents as a part of their branding. What sets Sung-Hwan's scent apart, however, is that this scent is an encapsulation of his actual body, rather than a composition of scents he likes. The presence of his bodily elements into the product breaks the boundary between the producer/idol, and the consumer, and instills an exchange of intense intimacy between them. Like Jesus and his followers, Sung-Hwan's audience experience him as a transcending entity to be physically and symbolically consumed.