

fontenay aux roses

Fontenay aux Roses is the name of a small town south west of Paris. It is also the name of a group of devices designed for a research project housed in the Innovation Centre at Central Saint Martins. The name was chosen for its connection with a nineteenth century novel written by Joris-Karl Husymans, called A Rebours. Various translations into English as 'Against Nature,' or 'Against the Grain,' this is the story of a wealthy young dandy who eschews the pleasures of life as a member of the Paris bourgeoisie in order to pursue a purer form of sensory hedonism in almost total isolation. To concentrate more fully on this quest, he quits his grand address in Paris and takes up residence in a cottage above this town; Fontenay aux Roses.

After moving, and with the help of a small number of staff, he sets about transforming the property into a kind of shell in which he experiments with the creation of artificial pleasures in all their sensory forms including literature, philosophy, smell, taste, touch...

In one of the rooms, for instance, he creates an ersatz ship, complete with decking, bulkheads and portholes, through which he can gaze out at a fake ocean, so that: "... he could picture himself in the 'tween decks of a brig as he gazed curiously at a shoal of ingenious mechanical fishes that were wound up and swam by clockwork past the port-hole window and got entangled in artificial water-weeds; at other times, as he inhaled the strong smell of tar with which the room had been impregnated before he entered it... In the last resort he could turn his gaze upon a litter of fishing-rods, brown tanned nets, rolls of russet-coloured sails, a miniature anchor made of cork painted black, all heaped together near the door that communicated with the kitchen by a passage padded, like the corridor joining the dining-room and study, in such a way as to absorb every unpleasant smell and disturbing noise."

The name of the young dandy is Jean-Duc Des Esseintes, and during his retreat he creates an increasingly bizarre range of machines to test and satisfy every sense. One such machine is a 'mouth organ,' through which he can manufacture taste sensations at will, even going to the extreme of matching them to pieces of music in order to create more elaborate synaesthetic pleasures. His most notorious concoction, though, is a huge turtle, which he has gold-plated so that it can walk around the house providing a contrast and accent to the carefully chosen interior decor. Typically, though, this is not sufficiently decadent for its owner - "At first, Des Esseintes was enchanted with the effect; but he soon came to the conclusion that this gigantic jewel was only half finished, that it would not be really complete and perfect till it was incrustated with precious stones." Accordingly he sets about having the creature studded with jewels. Not just any old jewels, either. He carefully specifies a mixture of Chrysoberyl Cat's-eyes, Cymophanes and Sapphirines. Needless to say, the turtle dies shortly afterwards. This novel is of great interest to industrial designers in the twenty-first century as they can identify with the fierce underlying critique of artifice. As we struggle with the interpretation of new technologies and modes of interface, there is often a barely-concealed suspicion that these 'improvements' or 'advances' might, in fact, be part of the problem, rather than the solution.

The EScent research project is one such example. It involves the development of novel means of delivering scent through microprocessor-controlled circuitry. In response to environmental or bio-feedback, the devices can spray microscopic doses of scent onto their wearer. This offers several advantages, for instance in using perfume more economically, or in changing one's scent at different times of the day. There are many potential medical spin-offs in fields such as drug delivery and disease prevention, but it may well be in the perfume industry that we first encounter this technology.

When designing devices for these applications, it is impossible to forget the lessons learned by Des Esseintes, particularly as one of the prototypes is so voluminous as to require a bag to house the power supply and control circuits - suggesting an owner who is in pursuit of a sensory effect at the expense of everything else. Hence, one of the devices, Fontenay aux Roses 1 takes the form of a bag with a colour-shifting lenticular surface and a number of tubes running through the strap that carry different perfumes. The second device, Fontenay aux Roses 2 is a smaller, brooch-like object that has various snap-on covers to suit different occasions. These were produced using a rapid-manufacture system that made it possible to mould complicated undercuts, and would potentially allow for limitless expression by the 'author;' no doubt something of which Des Esseintes would greatly approve...



fig. 1 Fontenay Aux Roses device 1 being shown at the CTIA 2005 "Fashion In Motion" Technology Fashion Show, 14th - 16th March, 2005, Ernest N. Morial Conference Center, New Orleans USA. Photograph Courtesy of CTIA - The Wireless Association

fig. 2 Fontenay Aux Roses device 2a
fig. 3 Fontenay Aux Roses device 2b
fig. 4 Fontenay Aux Roses device 2c
fig. 5 Fontenay Aux Roses internals

The EScent innovation project is part of a larger AHRB-funded research project devised and managed by Jenny Tillotson in the Innovation Centre at Central Saint Martins.

Text and industrial design by Ben Hughes
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Bag Prototype made by Ann Chui
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Figs. 2-4, photography by Daniel Alexander

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