

Crystallised Sweat

How **biomaterialist Alice Potts** creates intimate bodily archives by slathering disused garments in glittering human excreta.
Written by *Flora Ivins*

Perhaps the most primordial of experiences is sweating. It is carried through into the most intimate moments. Despite its primary physiological function of regulating body temperature, sweat cannot be separated from unspoken semiotics. Where smell is the phantom limb of personhood, radiating sillage, sweat is the intangible psyche. Representing desires and fears alike, it morphs and twists into a veritable proof of effort and, by extension, life.

Bodily fluids have long proved integral in defining the human experience. Early medical practitioners revered the ‘Theory

of the Four Humours,’ developed by Hippocrates and later Galen in the 14th century, which relied on the imbalance of bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile) to explain psychological and physical ailments. An excess of black bile was attributed to untamed melancholy and used to explain famed literary character Hamlet’s woeful disposition. The ancient Greeks, however, were more optimistic. Civilians anointed themselves in *gloios*, a mixture made from the scrapings of sweat, skin and olive oil from athletes’ bodies. It was believed to be a remedial elixir, ushering in medicinal benefits and prosperity.

Some legends claim sweat was once more valuable than gold.

With its universal provocation, perspiration in the 21st century holds a shameful whisper. Ever-popular Alo Yoga sets are optimised for sweat reduction, synthetically wicking away any signs of effort at lightning speed. Anti-perspirants wage chemical warfare on the body, and we now celebrate a glandless, post-apocalyptic verve. It feels worlds away from the drenched cotton t-shirts of the early aughts (think Miranda Hobbs’ workout garb and the on-court fantasy of Serena Williams). What once was seen as a badge of honour is now considered a deplorable taboo.



Alice Potts aims to challenge that by manipulating sweat as a fluid to embellish the body. The biomaterialist and self-proclaimed “sweat expert” gathers vats of the stuff, all of which is stored in her south London flat. Her collection methods mirror the rudimentary practices of the ancient Greeks – she just “scrapes it off people”. Meeting Alice, you can feel the vivacity that propels her art. Her ability to form connections with anyone lends itself to her work too. By scraping sweat from strangers she meets on the street, from friends or from her own body, then filtering for impurities and crystallising the filtrate, human excreta births intricate clusters of jewels as individual as fingerprints.

Once an MA student at the Royal College of Arts on a tight budget, Potts’ biomaterial and readily available invention unlocked a new level of accessibility. “Sweat was really random,” Potts explains, “but I have always been fascinated by geometry and nature.” Whilst sweat is primarily composed of water, it is accompanied by a plethora of minerals, like sodium, that can be exploited for sartorial gain.

Surprisingly, odour is largely a non-issue for Potts, who only dabbles in secretions from the eccrine gland which cover the hands, arms and back, and not the bacteria-loving nether regions. This doesn’t stop her dramatic reputation. “I have been likened to the novel *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind,” Potts laughs, “But instead of killing virgins, I collect people’s sweat.”

In order for crystals to proliferate, an item must first be worn and marinated on the body to form a ‘seed’. Following the seeding of the desired product, scrapings of sweat are poured into buckets and dehydrated in Potts’ kitchen oven in 8 hour shifts. This forms a brown, sticky substance containing the remnants of fragrances, dead skin cells and lingering alcohol. Amongst the dregs, pepperings of crystals appear which can then be extracted by a cold water flush. The filtrate is then redissolved in distilled water to create the purified solution. Any garment can be strung up on rusty hooks and submerged in the sweat-filled PVC box. Evaporation over time reveals the material transformation and the bejewelled relics it leaves behind.

The first iterations of Potts’ biocrystallisation process saw the slathering of disused pointe shoes in sweat, subverting the effortless grace of ballet by allowing crystals to spread as geometric chunks of human glitter around the toe box. This 2018 graduate project turned the heads of fashion moguls like Sarah Mower, and opened the door to an Onassis Foundation fellowship in Athens. Four years living in Greece saw Potts turn her shared apartment into a bioplastics factory. The shared kitchen acted as a seaweed dehydrating station. She also attempted to create a sweat-powered electrical generator by “hot-wiring circuits around the house”, an under-explored venture she hopes to develop.

Potts plays a deft hand at resurrecting decaying garments too. Recently, she was commissioned to reimagine a 1900s Madame Grès gown for the Barbican Centre’s Dirty Looks exhibition. The original dress had previously been excluded from museum plinths due to party-induced stains scouring the bodice and skirt. Wine spills, armpit marks and dirt juxtaposed the refined elegance that is associated with its haute couture designer, making it the perfect candidate for a perverse restoration. Greased up and hung out to dry, the pleats of the bodice now glisten in lavish fashion among the works of Martin Margiela and John Galiano.

To some, Potts “insulted one of the most important designers of our time” by dousing a historic gown in perspiration. But it takes empathy to breathe life into the past. Gifting the objecthood of a discarded garment to something *almost* immaterial, something that can pool at the chest and seep between swaddling layers, is a radical act of preservation. Each piece lovingly creates a chemical archive of the human experience, framing the elusive traces we leave behind. Life itself is in a constant flux and prone to decay. The digital age, although ever-evolving, feels static and intangible due to its sheer pace. “We have all sort of droned into the same person,” Potts says. “People are often judged on their background or appearances, but the anonymity of my pieces allows superficial factors to be disregarded.” The composition of sweat is heavily influenced by external factors like temperature, diet and genetics that can indicate our physical and

emotional states (although not in the clear-cut way that Hippocrates presumed). In essence, Potts uses the fluid to capture a bodily archive.

This idea is underscored by the personal, physical items that are chosen for embellishment. A particular series that interests me are the four baseball caps hanging on the wall above Potts’ TV stand. “A lot of my work was based on this idea of connection, human individuality and purity,” she explains. Each cap serves as a micro study of a person and their way of life. One profiles a vegan yogi master, another a raver who parties into the witching hour on the daily. The hats themselves are practically unwearable. After the sweat soaks in and dries, the item solidifies into a permanent rigor mortis. One especially poignant piece is a pair of trainers Potts ran her first marathon in, sliced vertically to reveal the foam innards and synthetic linings. Due to a slipped disc she has difficulty running now, so the shoes immortalised in her effort feel all the more special.

Looking to the future, Potts dreams of consulting on biomaterial integration for luxury fashion houses, working directly with Iris Van Herpen, and sculpting the crystallised sweat of Olympians. “I am very lucky that I can show the value of hard work through my pieces,” she says. As a kind of alchemist of the body, her practice is rooted in tacility and connection. Potts’ work homages the unsung purity in the fleeting and raw experience of being human. In an age of conformity, perhaps the most natural act is to sweat.



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