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Sissel

TOLAAS

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It's like entering an invisible cloud. Meeting smell artist and olfactory researcher Sissel Tolaas in her vast apartment in Berlin's Wilmersdorf district——part of which is her Smell Re_SearchLab Berlin, a laboratory and art studio——means walking into the enveloping atmosphere of an unfamiliar fragrance at the front door. Or is it an odour?

The smell is indefinable, omnipresent; neither fragrant nor stinky.

The olfactory disorientation proves a point that Tolaas has made her life's work: that most of the human race no longer knows how to follow its collective nose. *We know how the world looks, but we don't know how it smells*, she says. Most of what we smell in the western world is cover-up or artificial *fresh* scents: a deodorisation or sanitisation of long-forgotten markers, an erasure of the sense of place that smells can convey alongside the visual and aural. Not only have natural scents been overpowered by what industry deems clean and acceptable, but we've essentially become olfactory illiterates ... to somewhat mix a metaphor.

Countless brown-glass bottles and canisters in metal line a multitude of shelves in the lab room, a space that seems to breathe various fragrances. On a large work table in the next room, Tolaas shows me a picture of a child playing in a heap of garbage. *Our sense of smell starts off neutral*, she says, explaining that the child has not yet learned that garbage is supposed to be stinky. Smell is the sense most directly linked to memory and emotion, but humans only learn about smells by *smelling*. Through their societal expectations, they then begin to judge odours and fragrances as either good or bad (with the exception of recognising toxic substances, olfactory judgement is nurture, not nature). This scent knowledge builds until

puberty, then remains set——one reason why people in most western cultures think white linen should smell a certain way, or that a sweaty foot, or the damp sock that was on it, is stinky (Tolaas has, in fact, 40 variations on the smell of a stinky sock in her archive, a room that represents 25 years of research and thousands of molecular concoctions). *We can't relearn smell, but we can add to our smell knowledge*, says Tolaas. *What I do is decontextualize smells and take people out of their comfort zones.*

The confusing smells in her foyer are just the beginning. Tolaas——a striking blonde, a passionate speaker, a native of Stavanger, Norway, and a Berliner since 1990——often shows her work as art. Her exhibitions might see viewers touching spots on a museum wall and leaning in to smell *fear*——which she explored and replicated by asking 22 diagnosed phobics, all men, to contribute bacteria from their armpits, which Tolaas then synthetically replicated in her lab and embedded into the museum wall. Her work also involves independent research supported by International Flavors & Fragrances (IFF), a company that sells molecular compounds to companies making washing powder, flavoured chips, or other fragrant things we take for granted. Tolaas has worked with a long list of institutions, including Harvard, MIT and most top European universities. She's created the scent of Sweden for Ikea and the scent of power, greed and manipulation for Balenciaga (involving money, blood, antiseptic and petrol).

Then come collaborations with other artists and institutions: Tolaas is close to artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset (see page xxxxx), who commissioned her to create an olfactory public artwork in Munich in 2012. More

recently she worked on *Resurrecting the Sublime*, a project that aims to revive the scents of extinct flowers with Christina Agapakis, Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, and tech company Gingko Bioworks. Tolaas's various *smell sketches* of the flowers have been displayed in the Centre Pompidou and the Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial, and will continue to travel through American museums in the next year. Currently she's working on capturing the smell of our oceans, and even works with the United Nations.

How did Tolaas dive into our most mysterious and least understood sense? Some of her interest can be traced to her childhood in Norway. *I was very curious, and was often outside——and so much came from an early realization that we often talked about the 'weather', only saying it was good or bad, but forgetting there's so much more, she explains. How could I understand the air I was breathing? We all breathe more than 25,000 times per day, assimilating cubic metres of air and the odour molecules within it——smell literally becomes part of us. Young Tolaas studied organic chemistry, and slowly figured out how to make the world of smell more than merely an area of arcane academic research* she continued studying in many universities, among them Oxford, in various disciplines including linguistics. *Smell has multiple realities. I dedicated myself to working with the invisible, she says. Chemical communication was the first communication on planet Earth. It's still going on; we just don't take it seriously.*

The first step in helping the world gets its nose back is identifying and isolating single olfactory impressions. Photographers capture images with cameras; musicians record sound on sophisticated devices, but recording smell is trickier. Tolaas has customised scientific equipment with which she *records* the smells she encounters on her field-work and research trips (the metal tins in her archive are deoxygenated and meticulously labelled). *Showing up and just being there is half the job, she says. She smells around in corners, on walls, breathing in plants, foods, fabrics, people. She'll first smell in an analogue way* (she's said that she's spent most of her life *exploring the world from the perspective of a dog*), then decide whether she needs to use the recorder, which looks like a futuristic capsule, to record smell molecules issuing from various sources. The recordings are then analysed in IFF's R & D Lab in the U.S. and the data is sent back to Tolaas. After that comes her work in the Berlin lab, which means isolating the recorded smells as well as simulating them using more than 7,500 chemicals. The smells and data are integrated into her broad variety of activities. Just one ongoing project is City SmellScape, for which Tolaas has olfactorily mapped 52 cities——most recently Detroit and Vladivostok. She claims her nose is so highly calibrated she has never made a mistake in replicating a scent in her lab, but it wasn't always that way; her olfactory sense, she says, is average——its accuracy is the result of years of training.

The many directions and forms her research takes quickly boggles the mind, but it indicates a broader awakening to smell's power and potentials. *In the past five years, the interest in smell and my work has absolutely exploded, says the artist. Beyond Tolaas, other artists like Anicka Yi or Pamela Rosenkranz more regularly use fragrance in their artworks. An Institute for Art and Olfaction has emerged in Berlin. It's difficult to fathom how productive Tolaas*

The SMELL of ALL



N°5
CHANEL
PARIS

THE SMELL OF SUCCESS (AND GARBAGE)

SISSEL TOLAAS

JOHNSON & JOHNSON GLOBAL STRATEGIC DESIGN OFFICE, NEW YORK

CULT
OF THE
BLACK
MADONNA

The building sits between the five existing and heretofore separated museums. Inside, its sweeping entrances, soaring ceilings and broad staircases allow for large groups of art lovers to arrive and gain orientation, a nod to Berlin's—and the world's—increasing cultural tourism. *It's the sixth building that supports the other five; an attempt to connect the infrastructure much better, says the architect.*



is (her Instagram feed indicates a non-stop travel schedule and the tagline *smell the earth*) and how much knowledge is captured in the vials and tins in her studio, but she remains an indefatigable pioneer.

Her aspirations keep broadening as well, with concepts infused with optimism. Smell can be about tolerance: understanding how a less or more affluent neighbourhood scents can bring people together and foster understanding. It can be about understanding history: technology now allows Tolaas to create smell mock-ups of World War I, or replicate how Berlin's Muellerstrasse—a thoroughfare running through the multicultural Wedding district—smelled in 15,000 B.C., when the landscape was mostly sand dunes. Smells can be about anchoring reminiscence, evident in her Smell Memory Kit, a collection of abstract scents (those that are not yet attached to any reality or reaction) to breathe in when experiencing something extraordinary, to plant the event in memory. Or about offering hope—Tolaas asked children in a refugee camp in Jordan to bring their favourite scents to a workshop.

And smells can be about language, another of Tolaas's interests (she speaks seven languages). We describe what we smell almost exclusively referentially: something might smell like cut grass, roses, or petroleum, but there are no words for the scents themselves, like there are for colours. For the past 20 years, in partial collaboration with the Max Planck Institute of Psycholinguistics, Tolaas has been compiling a *smell lexicon* called Nasalo. It currently comprises more than 4,300 words like *shiiza*, *ruswat*, *euch* or *mmm*, that describe certain scents based on the phonetic reactions of people around the world to the smells Tolaas presents them with.

In her ideal world, we'd know a broader wealth of natural scents and we'd judge them less harshly. We would understand far more of what is going on around us. We would get back in touch with a part of our humanity we are in danger of losing. The fragrance wafting every so often through her studio is the scent of wood, temporally distilled to encapsulate its lifespan from living tree all the way to cutting lathe. It was a commission from a Scandinavian wood company, and is an unfamiliar, invisible reminder that we're more than just eyes and ears. *I want people to open up their senses again, says the artist, who never wears perfume. Experiencing what the body can do is amazing.*