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Sissel Tolaas, *Smellscape*, 2012, Photo Megan Mantia.

What's that Smell? Getting Another Sense of the City



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Sissel Tolaas, *Smellscape*, 2012, Photo Megan Mantia.

Grand Arts
1819 Grand Boulevard
816-421-6887
Kansas City
Sissel Tolaas
Smellscape KCK/KCMO (2007-2012)
September 7-October 31, 2012
and outposts throughout downtown Kansas City,
Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas
on Sept. 7, 2012
Opening reception: Sept. 7, from 6-9 p.m. at
Grand Arts. Additional sites TBA.
Gallery talk with the artist: Sept. 8, at 1 p.m.
Additional programs TBA

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

Olfactory mysteries are everywhere in Kansas City and Norwegian-born artist Sissel Tolaas is asking citizens to root it out.

We know what our city looks like, and can sometimes sense the vibrations of certain neighborhood at particular times of day or night. But it isn't often one associates a particular area with its smell. OK, I take that back, the putrid scent of donuts or pretzels means a local wastewater treatment plant is masking its operational stench. But that isn't what Tolaas is aiming for. Tolaas collaborates with Grand Arts (for the first time in five years) to map, collect and reproduce the smells of downtown Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas.

In 2007, Tolaas presented *The Fear of Smell/The Smell of Fear*. This exhibition, which I discussed for another publication, utilized painting, sociology and chemistry to give us a look into the "issues of smell, language and communications" through an intensive study of men with severe social fears. The gallery space was void of color and objects, but for a few perfume testers on a shelf. Instead, Tolaas covered an entire wall with colorless micro-encapsulated



Sissel Tolaas, *Smellscape*, 2012, Photo Megan Mantia.

paints that allowed visitors to scratch and sniff at random, detecting the scents of her various subjects.

Tolaas herself once said, "Information goes through your nose instead of your eyes." A linguist who speaks nine languages, she has an understanding of smells in association with environment that are utilized in other cultures; including Andaman Islanders of Southeast Asia and the Desana peoples around the Amazon in South America. The idea leaves you free to recall an abundance of memories and future plotting associated with particular odors and scents.

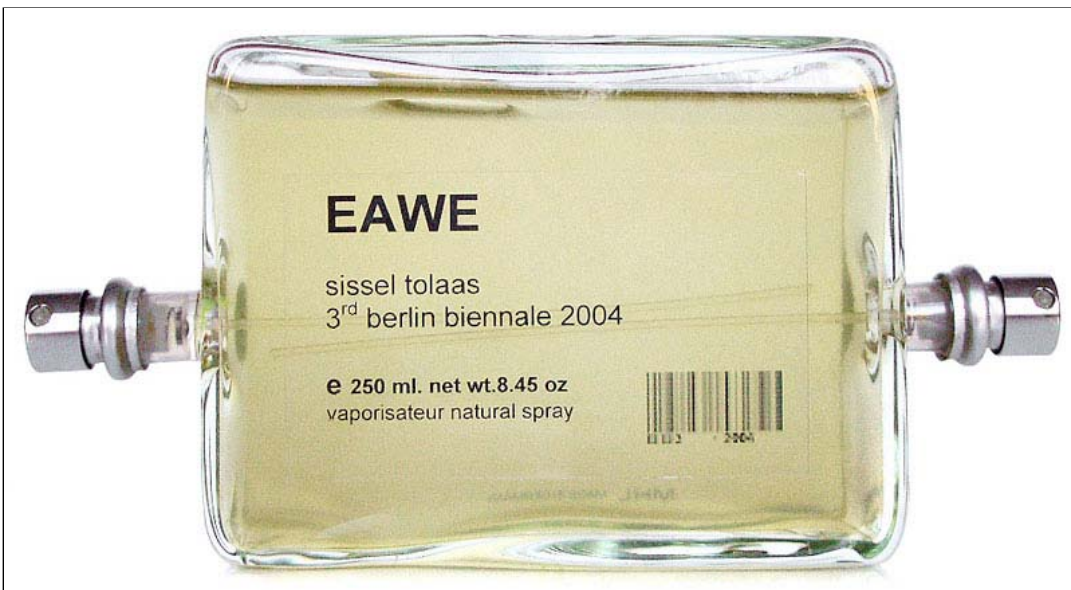
Tolaas has undertaken similar smell-mapping projects in other major cities, and for Kansas City, the installation will take the shape as a game with the entire city participating. She has challenged us to locate and collect scented cards specifically located in neighborhoods as Kansas City Municipal Court, City Market, Kansas City Museum, Kaw Point Park, KCKPL's Central Library, and Bethany Park. Neighborhood maps will highlight each of the six "Outposts" within walking distance. Collecting one card at each Outpost, players will identify the smell they detect, moving on to the next Outpost until all the cards are collected.

Points are scored through number of cards collected and number of smells noted, so the more Main Posts and Outposts a player visits, the more points he or she scores. Analog players can take their cards directly to Grand Arts, the game's hub and home base, to contribute insights and determine scores. Smart phone users can download the SmellScape app to "check in" at Outposts with a Smell Card code and update scores automatically. Words and images signifying all players' experiences will be uploaded to the SmellScape live map, viewable online and projected on the walls at Grand Arts' downtown gallery.

This project is not solely predicated on environment. I suspect other determinants such as race, gender and socio-economics will play a part in results as well. Participants can use their other senses as part of this mapping, but it will be their own memorable recollections that set off the primal reactions to ones experience.



Sissel Tolaas, *Smellscape*, 2012, Photo Megan Mantia.



Sissel Tolaas (Norwegian, born 1962), *Berlin, City Smell Research*, 2004, Glass and smell simulation, each bottle 15 x 18 x 6 cm, Photo Sissel Tolaas.