



This page and facing page: Sissel Tolaas, *The Fear of Smell / The Smell of Fear* (installation view), synthesized human sweat pheromones micro-encapsulated and embedded in wall paint. Grand Arts, Kansas City, Missouri. Research supported by IFF Inc. Photo by EG Schemph, courtesy the artist and Grand Arts.

The Language of Smell

Blair Schulman

The writer Michael Crichton, before he became a best-selling author, studied to be a doctor as a backup plan at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, because he found the English department there too difficult. One of the fundamental lessons he learned from being a medical student was that his education was not entirely about memorization; it was about finding the “middle position, where they (the doctors) were neither overwhelmed by their feelings nor estranged from them.” Education is as much about emotions as it is about factual content.

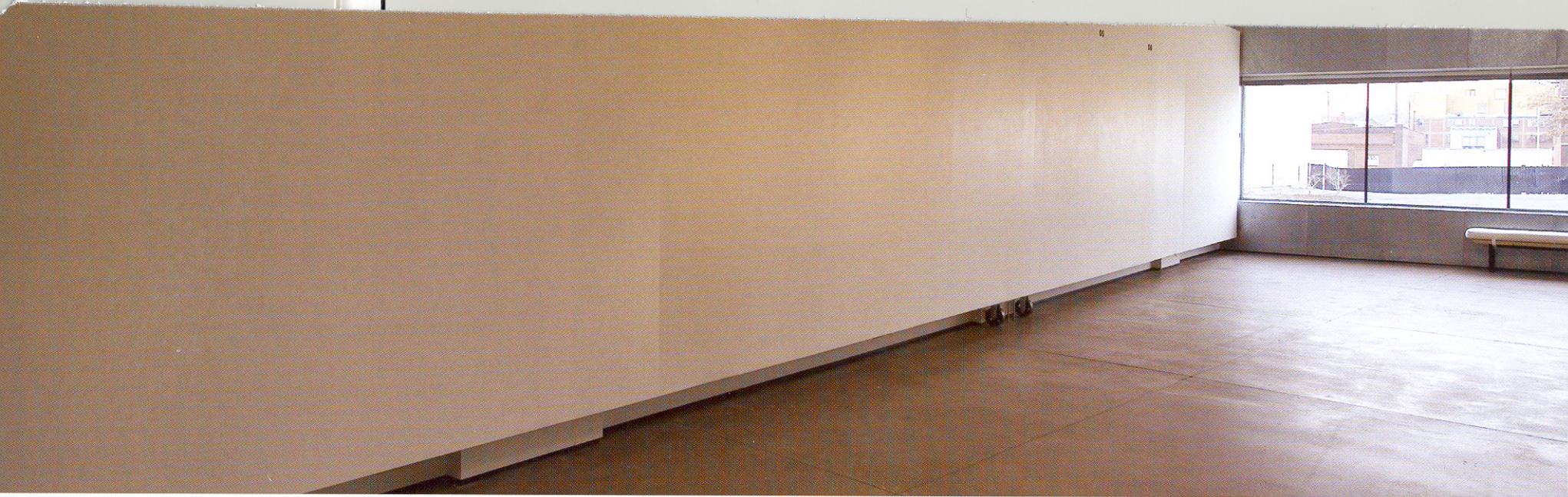
Sissel Tolaas exposes us to a similar ideal, giving us quite an education with *The Fear of Smell, The Smell of Fear*. Tolaas, a Norwegian residing in Berlin who studied painting, chemistry and mathematics throughout Europe, has focused on the issues of smell, language

and communication since 1990. Similar installations on different scales were prepared in Liverpool, England, and Boston, Massachusetts, both in 2006. The essence of her latest installation, presented at Grand Arts from January 12th until March 10, 2007, was initially void of visualization. Where was the color, the instant response? It was not there initially; however, it was quite substantial in a way that took some work on the part of the participant. The gallery itself was void of any details. Two tall panels extended the length of the room on either side, painted in indiscernible shades of white, a plate glass window the lone distraction between the walls looking out to the street. Atop each panel are the numbers one through nine, which separate the variations in smell. One needed to come up close, scratch the walls and intake the scent. The fundamental task Tolaas committed to was engaging 16 men of unknown (to us) ethnicity, age and

Sissel Tolaas: The Fear of Smell / The Smell of Fear
Grand Arts
Kansas City, Missouri
January 12 – March 10, 2007

socio-economic backgrounds. Although it is revealed that these men shared a common bond where they all suffered, or lived through, extreme social fears. She had her subjects affix themselves with a “pad” that absorbed their sweat. Tolaas then extracted this scent and through micro-encapsulation, added it to paint that was applied to the panels. This micro-encapsulation prevented the scents from losing their pungency. The scratching and sniffing never wore out and that enabled people to smell Tolaas’ subjects as if they might be in the room with us.

Regarding these individual smells: a distinct variety, for the most part, was in place. At first, one was not quite sure if they were smelling dirt, cilantro or paint. All smells were quite clearly from men having something deeper going on in their lives. Who were these men? A chain-smoking sociopath? A vegetarian who cried



easily? In the end, the reactions were uncomplicated and spoke to some bare essentials — fear, lust and disgust. Momentarily overwhelmed by the compartmentalized rush of each smell, your mind is transported to a name, a place, another time. As Tolaas herself says, “Information goes through your nose instead of your eyes.” You are awash in the color of memory. Others might relate and contrive and agree with one another that their takes on these scents are similar, but the parity of relationship is the visitor’s alone; an erotic memory or creeping sensation you share with no one else. Constantly “bombarded by sights, sounds, smells, tastes and textures,” visitors use one sense to focus on and process the entire experience. Smell is an emotional response, and it cuts straight to our core, scaling whatever walls we have been trained to erect.

Stacy Switzer, the artistic director of Grand Arts, explained that the reactions between the men and the women who had visited were not all that severe. The women, for the most part, reacted more favorably to the scents and with more maturity to the undertones they implied. It seemed that younger men visiting together, like packs of wolves or fraternity brothers, had a different group

reaction, tending to be somewhat more embarrassed by the sexual or behavioral undercurrents. Perhaps it was a sense of discovering one of their own in trouble, and the primal response was a need to single out the weakest to maintain the hierarchy. One-on-one the same men might have released the group mentality and perhaps allowed a more candid dialogue with themselves.

At one end of the gallery, were the original scents; “perfumes” in spray bottles affixed to a shelf, each number corresponding to the panels. This writer helped himself to a few spritzes on individual sheets of paper to take away. A primal reaction for animals is that they can smell fear, so I brought the papers home to my dog and let him smell. His reaction was interesting. I gave him three to smell, and the first sheet he turned away from immediately. Another he smelled but soon lost interest. The third sheet he sniffed and sniffed; his nose moved back and forth in a way I had never seen him do before. *This person he finds interesting.* Now I understand him better when we are out walking — he ignores some people but focuses totally on others, turning his neck to watch as they move on.

A linguist who speaks nine languages, Tolaas constructs these installations as a way to create a lexicon — a language of smell, where people do not respond strictly in good or bad, but she creates a platform where shades of grey are unearthed and a new dialogue is launched. In many non-Western cultures, smells orbit prominently. Andaman Islanders of Southeast Asia, among the last hunting-gathering communities left on earth, organize their calendar according to smell. Other tribal affiliations are distinguished by odor as well, including the Desana peoples found in and around the Amazon of South America.

Tolaas has started us on a very old road that restores our sense of smell to the power it once had. Here is a way to explain and define ourselves by leaving out the pressure and pretense of describing who we are using the way we dress or reciting our curriculum vitae every time people meet. The end of this road might be a sense of achievement that takes us to a new level of understanding one another. ●