

# Fashion V Sport



5 August 2008 - 4 January 2009

## **BODISME**

An invisible red thread through *Fashion V Sport* will use smell to connect the visitor to different sections of the exhibition: DARE; DISPLAY; PLAY; DESIRE.

At various points the visitor can experience human sweat through sniffing, sensors and touch. The base of the sampled body smells is sweat extracted from people during sports activities. These smell molecules and structures are identified using headspace technology<sup>1</sup> and then chemically simulated in Tolaas's laboratory, IFF re\_searchLab Berlin. They are then 're-' presented in unusual contexts, evoking the invisible communication carried by sweat.

## **The BODY as a tool of invisible communication**

We take for granted that clothing our bodies is a sophisticated tool to visually convey our moods, status and personality. However, there is another important mode of communication involving our bodies that takes place subliminally every day. In an invisible process, exchanges of information carried by sweat communicate the state of our health, our emotions, sexuality, age, fitness, and aggression.

In the West since antiquity there have been concerns with body smells and methods to suppress them. Aristotle posed the question in *Problemata*, "Why has the armpit a more unpleasant odour than any other part of the body?"<sup>2</sup> 'Body odour' or 'B.O' is a smell produced by a person that we associate with sweating. Sweat alone does not give off a smell, because it is just water and salts expelled by the sweat glands to control body temperature. The bacteria on a person's skin mix with sweat to create the smell that we have defined in the West as 'B.O.'

This term was invented as a negative expression by a group of American advertisers in the 1920's. They encouraged women to buy their product 'Odo-Ro-No' by highlighting the women's insecurities with themselves and the world around them; only the advertised product could rescue them from the potential social shame of 'body odour'. Because most people are concerned about how they look and smell, these advertisers were phenomenally successful. They tapped into a deeply rooted fear of social exclusion.

Human olfactory powers are not as powerful as those possessed by some animals; nevertheless they are remarkably astute. We devote an astounding one percent of our human DNA to smell, which shows that it is still incredibly important to us.<sup>3</sup>

We make sensory decisions based on smell within seconds. New research shows that some people's smell is highly sensitive to a component of body odour called

androstenone. Androstenone is a human pheromone, a chemical attractant found amongst body secretions such as perspiration. Men release much larger quantities of androstenone than women; as a result they are more likely to be judged by their smell.

The study found fifty percent of the population cannot smell androstenone at all, and one half of the rest smell only a whiff. Those who are able to experience the pheromone do not consciously like it and compare it to urine or perspiration. The research went on to show a strong correlation between the ability to smell androstenone and the smeller's judgment of that person.

We are so used to the way our smells are organised and regulated for us that we don't notice it anymore. Yet in the past, smell served an important function to guide us through the world by letting us know whether something was fresh and safe or foul and dangerous. Societies frequently load symbolic values and code onto odour, using it as one of many ways to manage and enforce group cohesion/ division, hierarchy and gender distinctions. The idea of social classification through smell is illustrated by the proposal of a French perfumer in 1709 that different classes be scented appropriately. There would have been a royal perfume for the aristocracy and a bourgeois perfume for the middle classes, but only disinfectant for the poor! It is ironic that in our deodorised modern world the power lies with odour-neutralised businessmen rather than with those intensely perfumed, like the kings of the past.<sup>4</sup>

In recent times we have lost the true relationship with our environment due to advances in technology and the capitalization of the territory of scent. Olfactory management is found in all aspects of our lives: our deodorised perfumed bodies, the fresh pine/citrus-smelling home, and the air-freshened work place. Smell has been separated from the accompanying original experience so that we have lost the full vocabulary of what smells mean. With modern food technology a strawberry yogurt can be produced that mimics a few of the key smells we identify as being from a strawberry yogurt. What we experience however is the *idea* of the smell of a strawberry yogurt that is an edited version, and not the full complex smell itself.

It may well be that we face a future where no one will remember what a real strawberry actually smelt like, and that all odours will be mediated in this way. Hence, it is important to retain our right of freedom to smell before it disappears, having not even realised we had it.

## GALLERY GUIDE

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|----------------|---|
| <b>DARE</b>    | A 'clean' sweaty body without bacterial interaction   |
| <b>DISPLAY</b> | A sweaty body overlaid with deodorant/ artificial smells  |
| <b>PLAY</b>    | A sweaty body's unique 'smell fingerprint' that carries natural messages in pheromones, bacterial interaction,    |
| <b>DESIRE</b>  | A custom-made simulated body smell as a base scent with added molecules on top to communicate the desired message |

## ABOUT SISSEL TOLAAS

Sissel Tolaas was born in 1961 and grew up in both Iceland and Norway. She originally studied mathematics, chemical science, linguistics and languages, and visual art at Oslo University; Warsaw University; Moscow University; St Petersburg University; Oxford University, Princeton University. She speaks and writes in nine languages and has received a variety of international scholarships, honours and prizes. Tolaas has concentrated her work on the topic of **SMELL / SMELL & LANGUAGE - COMMUNICATON** since 1990, within different sciences, fields of art and disciplines. Work has involved numerous companies and institutions i.e. Cartier; Louis Vuitton: E. Lauder ;BBC Imagineering, London; Sony Computer Science Lab; BMG SONY; Swissotel Worldwide; Mercedes Future Lab; Rockefeller Foundation; Liverpool University; Oslo University; Moscow University; Bangalore High tech Park; Oxford University; MIT Boston; Harvard University; The Boston Consulting Group; BayersSchering Inc.; San Francisco Neurosciences Institute, SF ; Humboldt University Berlin.

Sissel Tolaas has exhibited in major international contexts, such as Biennials, museums and other professional institutions. Active participation in international colloquiums, conferences and networks. Advisor/consultant to: BBC Imagineering, London; Sony Computer Science Lab, Paris; IFF Inc. New York; MARS, ZH Suisse; IntelligentFastFood Inc., Salzburg/Vienna; Statoil New Energy Program, Norway; Charité Humboldt University Hospital, Berlin; Max Planck Institute, Berlin.

She established the research lab IFF re\_searchLab Berlin for **smell & communication** in Berlin in January 2004, which is supported by IFF (International Flavors & Fragrances Inc., New York).

Research on **INVISIBLE COMMUNICATION & RHETORIC** at Harvard Business School (Faculty & Research) since October 2006.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 headspace technology: a tool used commercially by industry to extract, analyse and mimic aromas. It can identify the weight, structure and composition of the extracted smell molecules
- 2 C.Classen, *Aroma* p.30
- 3 C.Burr, Dean Hamer, *The Emperor of Scent* Random House p.8
- 4 Classen, *Aroma* p.168