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As told to René Kladzyk, 1756 words.

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On scaling down to scale up

Smell researcher and artist Sissel Tolaas discusses making rules to break them, living life consciously, stepping out of your comfort zone, and why the process is more important than the product.

I was thinking about how marvelously attuned you are to communicating about smells, and wonder if you can tell me about your day today by describing some notable scents you've encountered throughout the day, and how you encountered them?

I wake up in the morning, of course, like everybody. I can breathe, and that means I can work. So, with all the breathing, I inhale all these amazing molecules. Even when I sleep, I smell. And I started a new exercise recently where I go to bed with a smell, and it literally triggers my subconsciousness and memories stored there. This is what I've been doing for the last four months—it's amazing.

I write a diary every morning when I wake up: whatever the memory, the dreaming, what are the activities, what are the topics... And then I do parallel studies. What was the purpose of linking [that] memory to that [smell] molecule? Or where did that molecule emit from? What kind of events, people, or places, et cetera? So it's a very interesting experience, and very exhausting. I wake up, at the moment, very exhausted.

[After] I wake up, I do my smell exercises before I do anything else: smelling molecular structures, smelling various types of chemicals I didn't know or should have known. It's very important for me to keep fit with my nose and my skill to smell, and I'm very fit in the morning.

And this practice, the purpose of it is to broaden and improve the precision and depth of your sense of smell?

Yeah. Just like with your muscles. If you don't keep your muscles fit, they decrease the function, and the same is with the senses. You need to keep them active. The more you train, the better you get. It's not that I'm born with massive skill to smell. Not at all. I'm probably kind of average, but I was very concerned and occupied with using my senses very early on in my life, and I very early on started to call myself an in-betweenener. I don't know why, but somehow I had a feeling I was moving between sensory information of various kinds. I had huge satisfaction in making those kind of statements about myself, and I became me somehow. Now, I'm a professional in-betweenener.

Can you keep going with your day? What do you do next?

So, after that, I then make myself a cup of coffee, or maybe I go for a run, but everything is after. The first and foremost important act in the morning, wherever I am in the world, even if I travel, I have small training tools with me. So, that is a must in my life. Nothing can remove those rituals from me.

I keep it a little bit slow until midday, and then start approaching the lab if I have concrete projects, or maybe just basic research going on. And, most of all, I spend a lot of time in the field. Being out there is half my job. I tend to work too much and too long, and that has been an issue, to try to break up the day in rituals and not to work too much.

I eat healthy, I am doing a lot of sports in addition to training my senses and sense of smell. I also do a lot of running and swimming. So, I try to keep fit as much as I can. My core way of living is literally being very thankful for what I have for free, and trying to challenge and use that as much as I can. What I mean is, we are all born with a body, and on that body we have amazing interfaces called the senses. And all this is for free, we just need to keep it active, and keep it challenged. Life suddenly starts to get different meanings. It's incredible that we are having this kind of opportunity as a species.

You described yourself as an in-betweener, which I think makes sense on a number of levels, not just in terms of existing in the liminal spaces with science and art, but also just even human and non-human. Especially because the experience of smelling is one of realizing your interconnectedness with all of the forces around you. Can you talk about how you developed your confidence in inhabiting that identity as an in-betweener? What advice would you give other artists who are attempting to do work in not clearly defined spaces, or are attempting to do something that's difficult to categorize?

We need to change [the lack of education around the senses] as soon as possible, and I'm trying as much as I can. By knowing this, and setting off a journey—not just mono-disciplinary—but being open, being curious. Daring to jump into deep water, and not being able to swim is essential for curiosity. And not giving up if you don't succeed. Learn from the failure, [that's] been a very important learning experience in my life.

As I was trying to find out, I learned so much. Take the time to do that. The process is more important than the product in the end, in terms of also defining a discipline, defining a profession What is art? What is science? What is winning in those? What is a musician doing? What is a mathematician doing? In the end, success stories are very often about the passion and commitment you bring to it. And that is only possible to gain by learning through experience.

Feel more. Dare to get out into reality. What are the issues in the world? What is my passion here? Why do I love to look at the snowflakes rather than look at the windows across the courtyard? Why do snowflakes take my attention more than those windows? These kinds of simple statements towards oneself in the process of getting somewhere are so important.

I have kind of a swirling question for you. It sounds like, in many ways, a love of life is what permeates and fuels your work.

Yes.

It simultaneously sounds like the rigorous way you approach doing this work is very important to you, but then also breaking the rules, or navigating the edges of the rules is important to you. Are there any rules that you've made for yourself as you've done this work?

Yes, but I break my own rules all the time. That's what I mean about daring to get out of your comfort zone, and take on challenges, find yourself insecure, and then gaining experience, and next time prepare yourself differently. All this is the process of being alive. What I do is literally living consciously. Every step I do literally I'm watching it. And it's nothing more than that. I make rules, and I break them. I make rules to be broken. And, living in Germany, it's necessary to break the rules, because otherwise you become really too much of something I don't want to be.

I'm very hardcore. When I say, "Yes," I mean it, when I say, "No," I also mean it. But I think it's very important to be open. I'm open. I'm very optimistic in nature. I think when you start to understand that life is complex, and we are connected with so much more than just other humans, suddenly there's so much

to embrace. Scale down to be able to scale up is what I try to do. Be small, because my ambitions are big. And be invisible, which I try as much as I can. I don't even have a website.

It's funny, because I feel like some of the ways you're describing how you approach working is also the way that smell works, the way that smell moves and responds, and is constantly changing.

Yes, totally. I tell you, it's like, if you want to meet me, you have to show up. It's like with smell, you have to show up to smell it, otherwise it's gone. I'm a metaphor for what I do. And that is my strength. I say, "Yeah, so what?" Either you show up or that was it.

I had this conversation with a friend of mine on Sunday. I started to write to people, because I cannot send smells through email, so I send smells with letters and postcards. And I've gotten all this amazing feedback. "Oh It's so nice to get mail from you, Sissel." So maybe we need mail art again.

You're opening the envelope, and inside is a smell, and suddenly it takes you on a journey and beyond. Sitting on a screen and talking about the smell that I so amazingly discovered the other day doesn't mean anything to you, not at all.

I think maybe when you start paying attention to in-between spaces, and when you become a person who inhabits boundaries, you have to become more fearless, because our whole world is structured around confining things, and creating boundaries so that we can feel comfortable and safe within them.

Yeah, exactly. What is so important here is to find different tools and new instruments, and change the rhetoric around topics of concerns in the world. Living in the time of Trump and conspiracy, it's been massive for mankind. How do we find our way back? I tend to think we need to start from scratch again. That's why I mentioned writing a letter, personal stuff. Having attachment to something that's personal. We are just statistics these days, in this whole word of numbers of how many died and how many are vaccinated.

So, how do we show care again? How do we get beyond all this in a way that benefits all of us, not just those who are rich and privileged. I think it's massive. And that's why I say, yes, back to where I started. Day one, we are opening up to the world all our senses, and we are happy, we are joyful, and we learn introducing the senses in the context of emotion, and they stay with us forever. How do we bring back that quality to life? It's massive.

Sissel Tolaas Recommends:

Books: The Unreal And the Real (Ursula K. Le Guin); Eloquence Embodied (Celine Carayon); Manifestly Haraway (Donna J. Haraway)

People: Marshall McLuhan

Places: Trans-Siberian Railway

Name

Sissel Tolaas

Vocation

Smell researcher and artist

Fact

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