

“Laboratories of Art and Science”

At the invitation of the Ernst Schering Foundation, scientists and artists this year met in the studio of artist Sissel Tolaas to talk about “Methodological Work in the Context of Art and Science.”

“Kunst kommt von Können” (art comes from artanship) – so goes the well-worn battle cry of an unhappy public. It accuses contemporary art production of having come to depend solely on creative ideas while no longer demonstrating any technical mastery. The artists laugh at this overvaluation of technical know-how. For them, talent lies in the idea, while the execution can be delegated to third parties, if necessary. This is precisely where the Forums on Science and Art tread on highly sensitive ground. Again and again, the small groups of artists and scientists who meet to find a common language come up against the same old question: How much do artists have to know to approach scientists as equals? Of late, it is not the philistines who demand to see the qualifications of art. In an increasingly specialized world, it is the artists themselves who feel compelled to question their methods.

The Ernst Schering Foundation had the happy inspiration to focus on an absolutely untypical artist in its fourth Forum on Science and Art, which took place in November 2007 as part of a series defined by unconventional dialogues. Born in Norway in 1961, Sissel Tolaas presented her art as an efficient research project, which seeks to hold its own not only in exhibitions, but also in the everyday life of consumers. Sissel Tolaas investigates smells and has made it her life’s work to make people more aware of the world of smell. To this end, she has developed a sensorium that allows her to first analyze and then reproduce every emotion-stimulating smell. No wonder that research labs and industrial companies line up at the IFF re_searchLab Berlin! This is the name on the artist’s doorplate that identifies her studio as part of an international research group.

The symposium takes credit for presenting an artist who basically employs the same means for her artistic work than for her industry-commissioned research. In this case, the techniques of art prove to be a competitive product on the market. By collecting a sheer endless number of smell samples, Sissel Tolaas not only creates the foundations for a more efficient smell design on the part of her clients. She uses exactly the same means and methods for her museum exhibitions – for example, when she takes news reports from all over the world and represents them by smells from the respective regions. Or when she uses smell profiles to portray people and places, always on the search for the neglected sense for old and new smells. Tolaas argues that art, in this case, profits from science. New know-how cannot be generated with the modest financial means of art – here, the studio visit became a provocative case in point.

Does that mean that “science-art” in the future will be doomed to lead a double life as an applied discipline? As design? As a service project? The forum organizers had the good sense to confront the knowledgeable artist with an expert on methodological theory. Carsten Reinhardt, professor at the Institute for Science and Technology Studies of the University of Bielefeld, presented the development of new research methods and methodologies as a kind of independent lab project. Reinhardt’s question was not so much directed at art, but at the methodological creativity of science. With the forum’s overall title being “laboratory,” Reinhardt demonstrated the historicity and contextuality of the laboratory. From a historical and methodological point of view, Tolaas’ studio appeared as one tool among many. Seen in this light, the method more and more appeared to be a tool taking on a life of its own, almost as a range of services offered. Is this another step towards depriving researchers of their prerogatives?

As the forums of the Ernst Schering Foundation have shown, there are no final answers to these questions. There is, however, a steadily growing demand for a systematic analysis of the relationship between science and art which, for all its problems and tensions, has always been a very productive one. *Text: Gerrit Gohlke*



Anette Sommer & Mari Brellocks



Carsten Reinhardt,



Sissel Tolaas serves up smells to:



Smells conserved by Sissel Tolaas

