

perceived or actual improvement through their expectation of change.

What is the relationship between thought and perception? To what degree can thought direct the outcome of experience? Can emotion, memory associations, and bias be separated from the impact of environmental factors on a human body? How does this

relate to the culture of thought surrounding medicine and alternative healing practices?

Faith's installations don't form conclusions. She leaves us to sweat it out, and ponder the systems of knowledge that dominate our contemporary preoccupations with health and wellbeing.

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FAITH LA ROCQUE received an M.F.A. in Tapestry from Edinburgh College of Art (2006), and a B.F.A. in Art History and Studio Art from Concordia University, Montréal (2004). Recent group exhibitions include *Star Project*, Minokamo Woodland Gallery, Minokamo, Japan (2011), *Ineffable Plasticity: the experience of being human*, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto (2011) and *Echo Dell*, Narwhal Art Projects, Toronto (2012). La Rocque has received several grants and awards, including the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize awarded by the Canada Council for the Arts (2010). La Rocque is a multidisciplinary artist living in Toronto and exhibiting internationally.

SNEAKY COEXISTENCE: THE ALCHEMY OF THE REAL

BY CAMILLA SINGH

Faith La Rocque's work takes shape from an unexpected mix of skepticism and belief. It arrives through the excavation of material histories and discovering the vagaries of cultural value they accrue over time. She appropriates unscientific products and practices used in alternative health therapies to create sensory objects and environments that derive meaning through the interplay of perception and belief. Her process is methodical and quirky, tracking inquisitiveness into forays of research akin to detective work and laboratory experiments.

Over the past couple of weeks I have been talking with Faith about the forms, ideas and materials she has been researching and sourcing for her installation at YYZ Artists' Outlet. Conceived as a group therapy salt cave, the piece found its beginnings in her direct perceptions of the physical gallery space during site visits. She was struck by the pervasive smell of a nearby café and challenged herself with the proposition of purifying the air without physically altering the space. Stumped by her own provocation, she returned to the gallery, only to find something was different. She couldn't be sure whether her perceptions or the environment itself had changed, but she really wasn't aware of a smell anymore.

Faith always checks out the location she will be working in. I have witnessed this directly and also through her own accounts after the fact. She moves around using all her senses to form a multi-sensory picture of the physical space. And like a detective, she identifies a problem and then solves it. Or at least she identifies a problem that becomes a catalyst for her work. The final piece may have little (or lots) to do with the initial challenge, but it acts as a means for engagement between the physical environment and her body.

In 2008 she took part in the *Cosmic Ray Residency* at The Banff Centre for the Arts, led by artist Janice Kerbel, under the

direction of Curator Kitty Scott. While settling into the studio space assigned to her, Faith became acutely aware of a persistent draft, which she found distracting and unpleasant.

She applied a square field of magnetic paint onto the wall and used rare earth magnets to hold two points of a diaphanous sheet of plastic against it. The draft kept the wispy plastic surfing in delicate balance between the dueling forces of gravity and magnetism. She harnessed her annoyance with the draft and transformed it into an experience of aesthetic and metaphysical contemplation.

Throughout the residency she continued conducting studio experiments using physical forces and the senses to explore the properties of magnetism and the practice of magnetic healing. Her experiments resulted in five studies for new works, and concretized a trajectory investigating consumption, ritual, and faith in relation to alternative health therapies.

Now, it's not as though the draft was the reason she worked with magnets and gravity. It simply acted as a point of physical and psychological engagement with the space; the catalyst that mobilized her experiments. She'd arrived at the residency fully equipped with supplies of rare earth magnets, magnetic paint and the appetite to explore their properties and efficacy as tools for healing. Applying a psychological and physical engagement with the space to the outcomes of her material research is a process that recurs in her practice.

OK, so back to YYZ. It's hard to know what changed when Faith revisited the gallery, no longer cognizant of an overwhelming café smell. She walked the space again, looking for a ventilation system to hold responsible, but couldn't find a vent. What struck her this time was that the air was stagnant—not a lot of airflow, and no natural light in the space. It seemed stale but much less oppressive than the sweetness of the café, and this new perception opened the space up for her.

Her shifting perception is not surprising considering that smell affects us on a subconscious level and the neurological sequences involved in olfactory perception are closely related to the way the brain processes emotion, memory and associative learning. Smell is thought to function in an idiosyncratic manner based on interaction between the stimulation of olfactory receptor cells by airborne molecules and conditioned responses present in the individual. The brain links exposure to new scents with an event, a person, a moment. Smells often recall childhood experiences because exposure to new odours happen most during youth, and associations are also formed in the womb. The sweetness of the café may have been pleasurable or uplifting to someone else.

In addition to airborne molecules and conditioned responses, hormones, mood, appetite and other shifting factors effect olfactory perception. The smeller is not a passive bystander objectively taking in the environment just like the next person. The smeller is partially responsible for constructing the scent and its meaning, and is prone to fluctuations in the ability to detect an odour.

Faith continued thinking about purifying the air in the gallery, like a detox, which salt is purportedly capable of. She also discovered a niche industry that produces specialty scents for virtual reality applications including US Military training. In training scenarios, synthesized scents are used to acclimatize and habituate soldiers to smells they will encounter for the first time in war affected areas of the Middle East, such as weapons fire, raw sewage, and burning wire. Associative learning and conditioned responses to new odours are cultivated in a non-threatening virtual reality environment and soldiers are taught to recognize poisonous or potentially harmful gasses.

The scents are also used with US Military soldiers returning from war who are experiencing post-traumatic stress, which

is what Faith initially came across in her research on healing techniques. Synthesized odours help soldiers initiate memory recall and confront their experiences.

Salt caves are natural or constructed environments with floors, walls, and ceilings made from salt crystals that purify the air, providing alternative healing therapy to occupants. They are detoxifying environments used to treat and cure allergies, respiratory ailments and disease, fatigue, insomnia, heart and cardiovascular diseases, as well as induce general wellbeing. A microclimate concentration of iodine, magnesium, potassium and other minerals is formed that transfers into the user's body in a group therapy setting.

Or does it? Open mindedness is often preceded by desperation: in the face of a crisis, if all else fails I'll seek new options. When health is at stake and medical science doesn't provide a solution, alternative therapies can rise in appeal. Technological innovation often outruns our ability to understand the health impact of its byproducts and people face cancer without a conclusively identified source in unprecedented numbers. Maybe that has something to do with why increasing numbers of people seek alternative healing therapies. This is one facet of the contemporary human condition that Faith's work converses in. She creates unstable environments that question the way our concept of efficacy exists in relation to our beliefs, and what factors can influence those beliefs. Her environments take our senses into account and alter them according to our beliefs.

There is a concept in alternative healing called high acceptance that describes a person's ability to benefit from the healing therapy. Whether consciously or not, the patient plays an active role in the outcome of their treatment. In medical science there is the phenomenon of the placebo where it is recognized that a person can create