The Smelling Committee

by Caitlin Berrigan and Michael McBean

Artist Statement:

The Smelling Committee is an interactive smelling artwork that is a goofy yet meaningful ecological awakening through the sensory exploration of our neighborhoods. The Smelling Committee works across narrative, performance, guided tours and an online mapped odor data bank to which users may post found smells via cell phone.

Inspired by the olfactory bravado of the original group, the first tour was led as an historical simulacrum of the 1891 adventure in Williamsburg, NY during the 2006 Conflux Festival for psychogeography. The trek invited reflection upon the ephemeral, odiferous fabric of Brooklyn neighborhoods by actively smelling sites, discussing the neurological structure of smell, a natural history of odor, pollution and industry in Brooklyn, and personal smell stories. We use our eyes to navigate geographies, but it is our sense of smell that ties us most tautly
to our emotional memories. Histories of New York are ripe with scents and stinks, some
rousing citizen action just as the Smelling Committee of 1891 discovered oil refinery pollution
along Newtown Creek. The Smelling Committee revival attempts to map a small portion of this
heritage as a collective endeavor.

Participants are invited to embark upon an investigation of the aromatic territories in their own
neighborhoods, and to join the ranks of the Smelling Committee by submitting their
discoveries for comparison and reflection to a collective map online. Because experiences of
odor are intimate, highly individualized and often ephemeral, such a mapping endeavor
encourages an embodied experience of space, one that defies static mapping and often the
notion of repeatable encounters. Nonetheless, the embodied investigation of fleeting
experiences in one's surroundings encourages an involved ecological relationship with the
materiality of the lived environment. Perhaps patterns will emerge of culture, pollution, cuisine,
disarray, weeds and refuse-developing a new, non-taxonomic natural history of the stench
and fragrance of the 21st century.

RELATED URLS:
[Odor Data Bank]: http://smellingcommittee.org/mapit/sniffit.html

CONTACT: Caitlin [at] membrana [dot] us

BIOGRAPHY:
Caitlin Berrigan is an artist in tactile and edible sculpture, immersive installation, electronic
media and interactive performance. Her pieces have been alternatively characterized as
disturbing, sexy and even smelly. Invoking the history of science and pop culture, her works
address the ruptures & confluences of the body’s grotesque form, its medicalization, and
many variations as object of desire. The results are quietly disturbing works of subtle
humour & irony that speak to our violent and conflicted relationship to the body.

Berrigan’s practice is conceptual, carried by material things. She is interested in objects and
situations that lure in participants to activate them, producing an experience within their
bodies that connects physiology and intellect.

She has presented her work in the Whitney Museum’s Initial Public Offerings, Storefront for
Art & Architecture in New York, Dumbo Art Under the Bridge Festival, Anthology Film
Archives, P.S. 122 Demo Space in New York, L.A. Freewaves, SIGGRAPH, the Conflux
Festival, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in D.C., the Bent Festival at Eyebeam,
Stuttgart New Media Festival and the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv among other
venues and festivals. Berrigan is a Master’s candidate in Visual Studies at M.I.T. and
received her B.A. in art production and art history from Hampshire College in Amherst,
Massachusetts. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture and was an
artist-in-residence at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Center for Biotechnology & Bioart
and the Experimental Television Center in New York.