

“Some of us went to a symposium on art in saunas and spas and thought we should try it here,” says Stephanie Fielding, an artist and member of the Toronto-based collective 8-11. Since January, the group, which also includes curators and artists Xenia Benivolski, Simon Schlesinger and Sarah Kilpack, has coordinated ‘Sauna Sessions’ – artist projects



mounted in a sweatbox in the backyard of their warrenlike eponymous space in Chinatown. “Artist Sean Procyk from Alberta designed and built it, and most of the materials were repurposed,” continues Fielding. “The biggest expense was the stove. It fits about eight people comfortably. Building it was a bit self-serving because it was our personal heat source during the winter, too.”

8-11 opened in June 2014, and immediately landed the kind of publicity most grassroots endeavours dream of. DJ/music producer Skrillex snapped a picture of the gallery (which had two balloons shaped like aliens in its front window) and posted it to Instagram. The photo was liked by over 63,000 people.

However, the gallery’s sign, a lightbox based on the striped logo of 7-Eleven, the international convenience store chain, created by Toronto artist Elle Kurancid, was also in the photo. “Someone at 7-Eleven’s corporate office must be following Skrillex because we received a cease-and-desist letter from them, ordering removal of the sign,” says Fielding. The group held firm, however, and the matter drew the attention of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, which may come to the gallery’s defence if the case proceeds. “We originally planned for the sign to be an artist commission that would change, but then Elle’s work became a symbol of artists’ rights and freedom of creative expression,” says Fielding. To date, there’s been no follow-up from 7-Eleven, but the sign does cause people to enter the gallery looking for gum, milk and condoms.

At present, 8-11 invites artists to mount exhibitions rather than soliciting submissions. Programming has featured noteworthy local talents such as Nadia Belerique, Brad Phillips, Laurie Kang and, recently, Montréal’s Walter Scott, whose installation of provisional-looking sculptures was as charmingly abject as Wendy, the title character in his popular artworld-based comic strip. One chilly April afternoon, Toronto artist Lili Huston-Herterich held storytelling sessions, titled ‘Sweat Shorts’, in the sauna.

Offspace: 8-11 TORONTO

The 29th instalment of ArtReview’s guide to the most-interesting-yet-sometimes-overlooked independent ARTSPACES, HANGOUTS or apparent recreational facilities from around the world

This time a sauna. That’s currently shut (some of the neighbours have the impression that the people who run it are selling drugs or running a brothel, because naked women have been seen in the vicinity).

by
Bill Clarke

Participants reminisced about scars and marks on their bodies. “In a sauna, you’re stripped down, which makes you feel vulnerable. It’s a space that can be social or solitary, and has connotations of luxury,” she says. “I wanted to exploit these different associations. I didn’t know most of the participants, and several people came alone.” One participant talked about a bee-sting scar she got while in Japan for her grandfather’s funeral. Her story became a springboard for a conversation about family, death and dying.

“There’s also an endurance aspect of holding an event in a sauna because, well... it’s hot,” adds Fielding. “And, with projections, the equipment needs constant attention, otherwise it stops working because of the humidity.” (Huston-Herterich says she could last 20 minutes before needing a break.)

Speaking of heat, only days before this article was due, 8-11 faced some again. “A neighbour complained to our landlord about seeing naked women in the backyard,” says Fielding with a sigh. “I’m not saying that women at ‘Sauna Sessions’ haven’t gone topless, but that’s legal in Canada, you know?”

The landlord asked that, for now, 8-11 shut down the sauna. The group is looking at making the sauna mobile or partnering with sauna businesses in the city so that upcoming events, including one in which Leipzig-based artist Edgar Leciejewski will turn it into a steam room using alcohol (there is, apparently, a long German word for this), can go on as planned.

“The community has been very supportive of the gallery,” says Fielding. “This one neighbour has the impression that we’re running a brothel and selling drugs, but such misunderstandings are all part of trying to do something different.”



Photos: Yuula Benivolski. Courtesy 8-11, Toronto