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Art Review

Oceanside's conceptual exhibit risky but worthy

By [Robert Pincus](#), Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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“We're still struggling to form our identity. We can't exist in a bubble. That's not success.”

– **TERI SOWELL**, *director of collections and exhibitions*

(John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune)

There are images on the walls of the Oceanside Museum of Art; also a video by the artist, Brian Goeltzenleuchter. But the central object in the featured exhibition is a fragrance; its bottle bears the words “Institutional Well Being” and the logo of a company run by the artist.

His name is nowhere to be found on the bottle or the box. And his fragrance, manufactured in an edition of 500, is available for purchase in the museum shop.

The photographs, clinical in style, appear to illustrate the testing and production of this fragrance. The video features the artist sounding and looking like a corporate head or an inspirational speaker, discussing the philosophy and products of his very real company, Contraposto Home Decor (cphomedecor.com).

Goeltzenleuchter blurs life and art, commerce and aesthetics in his work, which is solidly in the tradition of conceptual art reaching back to the late '60s. So is the way that the work embeds itself in the workings of the museum, often called “Institutional Critique,” that artists like Michael Asher and Marcel Broodthaers pioneered in the late '60s and early '70s by changing gallery or museum spaces or altering the relationship between objects and spaces. And Goeltzenleuchter's exhibition – its full title is “Institutional Well Being: An Olfactory Plan for the Oceanside Museum of Art” – is a kind of performance art, too, in which you can't be precisely sure where straightforward seriousness subsides and irony takes over. (He could do well in the world of infomercials.)



The guy in the lab coat is artist Brian Goeltzenleuchter, playing the part of an applied kinesiologist. He used his “research” to create a fragrance for his museum exhibition. (Oceanside Museum of Art) -

The mission of the project is, as stated on the bottle and on the wall text in the museum, to promote institutional health. Toward that end, the artist interviewed board members, the museum staff and a few others. He also had staff and board tested for reactions to various smells, according to standards in the field of applied kinesiology, and there are charts on the walls that measure the results. (They are colorful, though for the layperson they are virtually incomprehensible.)

But in the end, it would be more accurate to say that this project has been the catalyst for institutional debate and controversy.

“It's been a real challenge for our audience,” said Beate Russe, the president of the museum's board. “It's hard for them to understand what it's about.”

The museum, now 11 years old, has been a kind of grass-roots success story, an institution with a local following, little known outside San Diego County, and has been guided by a homegrown staff. Just last year, it expanded dramatically when the historic Irving Gill building that served as its gallery space was supplemented by a larger-scale structure designed by well known Los Angeles architect Frederick Fisher.

Though Russe believes that museums are there partly to educate and challenge their audience, this show reached too far, too fast, in her estimation, for a museum with a populist, even a parochial, bent in its programming.

“A lot of people didn't see it as art,” she said.

Teri Sowell, the director of collections and exhibitions, thought the time was ripe for a show like this. She's been on the job about a year now, arriving a few months after the expansion was completed. And she thinks it's time for the museum – with greater exhibition space for shows and the collection – to think about defining itself more broadly, raising the curatorial bar.

“We're still struggling to form our identity,” said Sowell, who also teaches courses in African and Pacific Islands art at UCSD, and worked as a curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art from 1993 to 1995. “We can't exist in a bubble. That's not success.”

She decided that her first big curatorial effort in this important role for the museum should go where exhibitions haven't gone before at the OMA. And with some reservations, the museum went along with her proposal.

“I wanted to create a show that would encourage self-reflection, that would encourage us to ask: How are we making decisions?” said Sowell.

The show prompts speculation in the form of questions, such as: Where is the art? Is it largely in the objects themselves, the edition of 500 bottles of fragrance? Is it in the pictures and the accompanying artist's documents on display (such as a memo to the staff and board explaining his idea and/or his wellness questionnaire)? Is it in the show as a whole?

In considering these questions, we might recall an often quoted remark by one of the first conceptual

artists, Sol Lewitt: “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” So the artfulness, in “Institutional Well Being” is in every aspect of it, because the ideas at the root of his project give rise to everything on exhibit.

Perhaps some of the Oceanside audience didn't even want to pose these questions – didn't see art in any dimension of the show. Board President Russe says that the reactions she's received have been almost unanimously negative.

This view of “Institutional Wellbeing” points to an intriguing conclusion. Conceptual Art may have secured a place in global history decades ago, but it has to fight the battle for acceptance all over again at the local level – in Oceanside and, most likely, in other places. The history of art is different things to different eyes.

At the Oceanside Museum of Art, it appears conceptual art is now something of a phenomenon non grata. At least, that's the majority view.

Founding director Skip Pahl echoes Russe with his point that “It was a stretch for a lot of people.” But he did offer his own defense of the show.

“I look at it for what it is,” he says, “a performance piece, a construct of the artist, a fun performance, light and spirited.”

Clearly, he doesn't see anything more far-reaching in Goeltzenleuchter's project. That would qualify as damning it with faint praise. It also dismissed any notion that it might have more serious ideas within it – which it does.

The artist, who trained at UCSD and recently gave up a tenured professorship in Washington state to return to San Diego, isn't about to tell the museum what to think about his work. But Goeltzenleuchter, who has mostly shown in Europe, is pleased to have an exhibition in the town that shaped him as an artist.

Sowell, who met him during his time at UCSD, thought his show suited her aspirations as a curator. He's local but also interjects a kind of work that had thus far been ignored in the OMA's program.

As the artist says of his approach: “I had become dubious about being in the studio. I wanted to arrive at art through commerce.”

He wanted to work in a way that ran parallel to the art world, creating things that an audience might not necessarily recognize as art – at least initially.

Even Russe points out that the debate surrounding the show has been interesting for her. “It has generated lots of discussion,” she says.

And as much as Goeltzenleuchter's art is rooted in ideas, his fragrance is pleasing to the senses. It turns out to be site-specific, too: Its scent evokes sea air.

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