



SMELL AND PERFUME



SCENT AND AFFECT

AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST, BRIAN GOELTZENLEUCHTER

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Brian Goeltzenleuchter grew up in Southern California, in a culture that places great value on consumption, display, and performance. Goeltzenleuchter brings interdisciplinary research to the creation of designed environments, scripted and improvised performances, olfactory art, and multimedia presentations. The locus of his practice is Contraposto Living, a socially engaged, interdisciplinary artwork that takes the form of a legitimate business. He is Artist-in-Residence at the Institute for Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles and Research Fellow at the Institute of Public and Urban Affairs at San Diego State University.

Debra: Your work is very interdisciplinary and always seems to include a component related to smell. How did you become interested in creating olfactory experiences?

Brian: I'm very interested in the ephemeral, and its historic relationship to the democratization of art. I am also interested in the way that relationship can be made problematic by commoditising the ephemeral. So, I started a company, as an art project, that offered lines of scented products and services that did just that. Institutional Wellbeing, for example, is one such service. Institutional Wellbeing is designed to use smell as a way to reveal the structure, politics and social dynamics of cultural institutions. My company, Contraposto Living, identifies cultural institutions undergoing substantial changes in structure and/or identity and offers to create an "Environmental Wellness Fragrance" to encourage a productive, harmonious workplace. The outcome of the project is a multi-sensory exhibition that suggests how fragrance can function as both olfactory brand and gentle critique.

I use smell as a point of departure in my work because it is so elusive, and it allows people to put aside their pre-conceived notions about things.

Debra: It seems that this approach is very much rooted in the Southern California culture of affirmation and therapy. Did these museums you analyzed push back on the idea that institutional woes could be healed by a method that

seems to draw on the practices of aromatherapy?

Brian: Well, it's interesting, because I've done this project six times in the US and Europe, and the only institution that didn't buy into the project was on the East Coast!

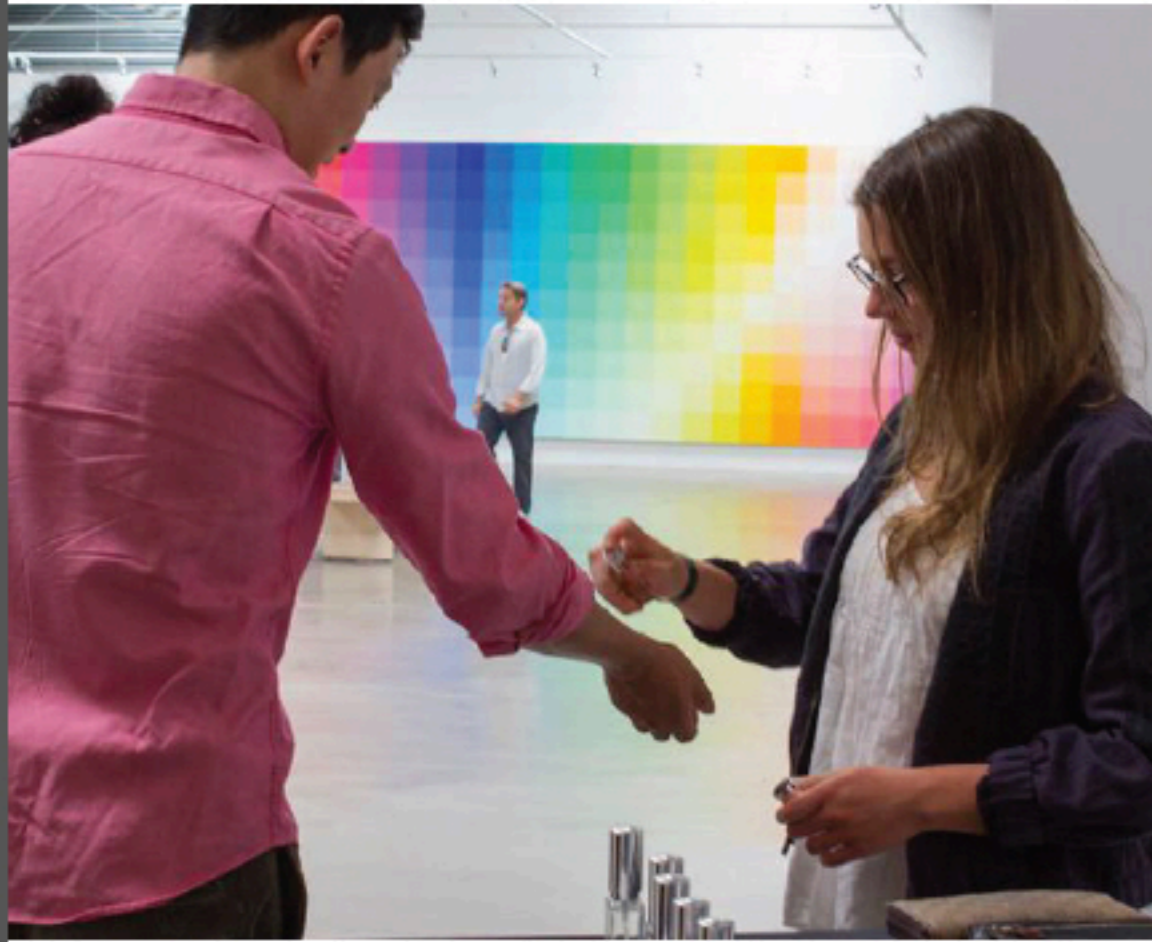
Debra: Your work crosses into medical/therapeutic territory. It's interesting to me that you make it clear that the Institutional Wellbeing project is not campy. Did you need to get approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to proceed with your project? [IRB is as US body that oversees projects that utilize human or animal subjects].

Brian: Since I am a research fellow and not technically faculty at San Diego State University, no. Also, when I began this project, most universities could not conceive of artists using people as media.

Very early on I was interested in non-western approaches to healing as they related to western notions of scientific medicine. I have also studied the potentials of the placebo effect. I am very interested in sincerity in action and I really do feel that my interventions could heal these institutions. Though in some cases I think the placebo effect and the cathartic value of humor have greater efficacy than smelling the environmental wellness fragrance.

Debra: Is that how you would describe what your art is doing? I think of the work of Theaster Gates here in





Chicago, with his interest in the social space as a site where justice can be brought about by the actions of artists in the community. Is that how you see your art?

Brian: Comparing my work to that of Gates is difficult. The ethical ambiguity in my work would reveal me to be something of a fraud by comparison, but yes I do see some overlap in the way we both are interested in institutions and social spaces as sites where the dynamics of culture can be truly revealed and contemplated. And yet, I'd say I'm much more equivocal in my stance. I'm skeptical of artists who give unironically, claiming to want nothing in return. Not that Gates does that, but it's prevalent in socially engaged art. My work is socially engaged but not necessarily socially remunerative.

Debra: So, are you using scent as conceptual technique?

Brian: I'm not sure what you mean by "conceptual." A lot of artists, over the course of their careers, will have affairs with different techniques or materials. My interest in scent has been relatively monogamous, partly because scent as a material is so multivalent. That said, I'm ambivalent about the current arguments surrounding perfume. The arguments about synthetics versus naturals, the lamenting of branding being more important than the juice, even the problem with the exclusivity of educating would-be perfumers in the history of the medium is less and less a factor in this age of networked communications and DIY education. I'm interested in perfume from a sociological perspective, perfume as a cultural object. What the sociologist Claus Noppney would call "sense making." How do we make sense of scent? And how can something seemingly immaterial be considered an object?

Most importantly, I am interested in the history of scent in art practice, which is just beginning to be unpacked by scholars

like you, Jim Drobnick, Ashraf Osman, and Caro Verbeek. My practice is rooted in the senses, so in that way I am an olfactory artist. But I resist the idea that smell is not visual – that does get me. Certainly, while perfume is primarily olfactive, it would be wrong to say that it does not have a visual component. The advances in distillation have removed the visual aspect of perfume – making it hard to see it as anything but olfactive. Though it would be wrong to assume that it has always been like that, or will always be like that. James McHugh, for example, writes about the perfume techniques of the medieval Indian "man-about-town" as described in the Kama Sutra. These young men, with their skin painted in colored, scented pastes and bodies draped in floral garlands, certainly would have been seen before they were smelled! It goes back to the preoccupation we have in dividing up the senses. I want to counteract that tendency by reinforcing the entire body as a site where these modalities work in concert.

I guess if I am using scent as conceptual technique it would be to problematise certain cultural legacies of conceptual art.

Debra: I'm very interested in the community aspects of your recent project entitled, Sillage. Can you situate the work in terms of its social and political implications?

Brian: I'd say my work is more social than political. I'd describe the design brief of Sillage as creating a portrait of a city – in this case, the city of Los Angeles – by consensus, really through language. I created a survey that asked Angelenos to consider Los Angeles as a "scent-scape." What smells do residents associate with various LA neighborhoods? So I'm not out there with headspace technology sampling the smells of the city, but surveying people who live in the city about what they think different neighborhoods smell like. I'm interested in their olfactory impressions, not mine. So there is a bit of crowdsourcing in the project, but I'm not necessarily bound to all of what comes out of the survey. Sillage is about representation, and every representation casts its subject in a role. Here's how the museum describes the event:

Sillage begins as a collection of eleven fragrances that represent the major regions of Los Angeles. Designed by Brian Goeltzenleuchter, the scents are based on a survey he created in which Los Angeles residents were asked to describe the smells they associate with various neighborhoods. Each fragrance can be thought of as a scent-scape: a fragrance in which a distinctive background smell describing the sky and ground creates a foundation, on top of which episodic smells reveal themselves over time. At the Santa Monica Museum of Art, patrons approach the Sillage booth and identify the region in which they live to the Museum's staff, who log the data and spray a corresponding scent on the patron's wrist. Over the course of the day, a collective scent of the Museum's demographic fills the space.

After working as an artist for fifteen years or so, I think I understand how people act in an art space, the hipsters and the

people in the know, as well as those who are less comfortable in galleries and museums. Smell can be mystifying in an art space and a bit like a magic act. As much press and love that Sillage seemed to stimulate, very few got the idea that I was orchestrating a demographic smell of where the museum's patron base lives. My art can be antagonistic, yet with Sillage, everyone seemed so happy for a change! Maybe it was the fact that the work was perceived to be *about* them. One reviewer from the Los Angeles Times did make the leap, and confronted the question about the very fraught relationship between the museum and its neighbours because of the museum's proposed expansion.

Debra: You are currently working with the Institute of Art & Olfaction in Los Angeles. How does the Institute support your work?

Brian: The Institute is actually a co-sponsor of Sillage. I am one of two artists-in-residence at the Institute. Saskia Wilson-Brown, the Executive Director, founded the Institute and there are perfumers and scholars in residence working on interesting projects.

Debra: Recently in the scent world there's been some attempt to assert that perfumery is art. For example, Chandler Burr's exhibition at New York's Museum of Art and Design, The Art of Scent 1889-2012, which featured twelve "works," including Jicky, created by Aimé Guerlain in 1889; Ernest Beaux's Chanel N° 5 from 1921; Jean-Claude Ellena's Osmanthe Yunnan from 2006; and Daniela Andrier's Untitled, created in 2010. As an artist who works with scent, and makes perfumes, what is your thinking about this turn?

Brian: I think it is something of a con game, really. I'm not a big fan of neologisms, especially the hi-jacking of the term "olfactory art," which has been rebranded as a neologism for "perfume." Perfumery, like art, has a tremendous history that is already historicised and theorised. But perfume is perfume and art is art. It degrades both histories to suddenly change the name in the middle of the game. Artists have been working with scent for a long time, at least since the Futurists. Art historians have just begun to write a history of olfactory art, in part because of the challenges the form has posed to collecting and archiving.

That kind of claim (that perfumery is art) seems irrelevant in the post-medium art world anyway. Those who make that claim seem to forget, or be unaware of Duchamp and the history of the twentieth century art's attempt to blur the lines between art and life. Christophe Laudamiel recently said something that resonates with me: perfume has had a Renaissance but not an Enlightenment. What would it take for perfumers to become Modern? Roudnitska, writing in the 1970s, for example, made perfumers seem akin, not to contemporary artists, but to lone artist geniuses working in the Beaux Art model of art production.

How embarrassingly out of touch. How does that square with advanced contemporary artists working in the 1970s like Chris Burden and his performance (Shoot, 1971) of being shot in the arm in an empty art gallery?

Debra: I am interested in learning more about how you see the relationship between scent and affect. This seems critical to your practice.

Brian: When I first started working with scent I underestimated how it would affect people. Scent is a way to explore the irrational. Are people ready for it? It's so immediate, and as of yet, can't be downloaded off your computer. It's an area still ripe for exploration.

Within the narrow domain of contemporary art, I use scent because it frustrates a lot of art world conventions. For instance, the difficulty to verbally describe the sensation is refreshing for me, as an artist, because it challenges the ease in which art people use language to discuss, describe and evaluate art. I also love that you can't reproduce smell in a picture, so you have to go to the show, not just read the review, to experience the art.

Debra: Recently I've had the pleasure of reading a new project you are about to publish in collaboration with a poet, Kathy Whitcomb. It's called The Art Courage Program and has an olfactory component. Can you describe this new endeavor?

Brian: The Art Courage Program is a dry witted parody. It plays with the agendas of self-help therapy and the historical avant-garde by conflating the two in a consumable package. The program encourages readers to move beyond negative art reactions, learn from and be healed by their experiences, and find acceptance and even appreciate art. The most subversive thing about this project is that it can be easily misconstrued as being earnest. In this way, the book can invite ethical questions but ultimately dodge answering them by means of its parodic form. We've published different editions, a color softcover and an iBook for mass distribution, and a limited edition artists' book that is housed in book-on-tape packaging and contains an audio cassette, printed aphorisms, and shockingly strong wellness fragrances.

Debra: And finally, I'm curious to know if you have a favorite perfume?

Brian: Well, if I am wearing perfume in the summer I like to wear Eau de Cartier. The rest of the year it's Terre d'Hermès. Though lately, I've been wearing Royal Hawaiian Sandalwood essential oil that I got from John Steele. Another favorite, that I have never worn, but find so attractive on women, is Hermès' Un Jardin sur le Nil by Jean Claude Ellena.

Debra is Chair of Fashion Studies at Columbia College, Chicago. She is writing a book on scent in art and design practice. You can follow her at @debraparr