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Brian Goeltzenleuchter at OMA - some thoughts

by Kevin Freitas

"Though Russe (*Beate Russe* — *president of the museum's board of directors*) 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." — Robert Pincus, from his review *Oceanside's conceptual exhibit risky but worthy*



photo courtesy: Brian Goeltzenleuchter

How do you know when art reaches too far? Do you try to slow it down, dumb it down, make it accessible to everyone: bite-size sugar-coated morsels for easy digestion and contemplation? Russe's commentary surely raises the hackles on all of us who smell institutional dogma and knee-jerk conclusions. But then beyond *partly* educating and challenging its audience, what do museums *do* exactly? And what about those infallible artists: are they not partially responsible for the *pétrin* Russe finds herself in? Of course they are. The question then becomes, who is responsible for an artwork's content and its subsequent showing after it leaves the studio? The simplistic response would be the artist is responsible for content and the museum for putting the work up on the wall. If that division of labor truly exists, then Russe has no reason to complain. So what is she questioning?

I think, despite Russe's gibberish commentary and the apparent backlash the show has accrued, some of the problem might lie within the show's formal structure and less to do with the artist and his ideas. I have a smidgen of doubt, as incredulous as her remark may seem, that it isn't a matter of Goeltzenleuchter's work being too advanced for the public, but the intangibility of an idea put on display that simultaneously positions itself as an art form laden with art historical precedents — as Pincus clearly points out in his review (a movement that many may be unfamiliar with including Russe), appears to also point an accusatory finger in her direction (clearly tongue-in-cheek), propounds some type of scientific experiment and data to back it up, but might fail in convincing the audience that what they are viewing is relevant and can be meaningful to them. Russe's criticism in

an oblique way then, might be questioning what types of art should be made for the museum. What Russe doesn't understand is that art like museums, have limits in their capacity to communicate everything to everyone. It doesn't make the adventure any less exciting for trying, but the art must somehow signal a larger purpose beyond its exhibition when in a public domain (as opposed to a much more private domain such as a gallery). How that manifests itself either didactically or pragmatically with a clear intent, is the key I believe, to a show's successful reading by the public.

We're often too quick to raise the flag of injustice, the very notion of questioning artistic expression seems more than anyone of us can tolerate. One thing I'm quite sure of though, it has never been a good idea to prevent artists from leaving the confines of the parish to venture out beyond the fringes of what is deemed acceptable, and in doing so, break the posted speed limit. It doesn't make for work necessarily better or stronger, it makes for work that is essential, healthy, and instructive even for the choir.

In order to accomplish this though, you need bright intelligent individuals at the helm, willing to step up the game for everyone's betterment. Art is not unlike other fields of research: would you ask a scientist to pace herself in finding a cure for cancer? Of course not, that would be absurd. To think that a museum and the *people* who come to visit are not equipped to deal with contemporary ideas and the artists who furnish them is equally as absurd. Teri Sowell, the museum's director of collections and exhibitions, clearly understands the necessity to expand and not contract.

If there is an *Institutional Critique* to be made, which in essence, is one of the main goals of Goeltzenleuchter's exhibit — a fact clearly stated in the show's title "Institutional Well Being: An Olfactory Plan for the Oceanside Museum of Art" — emphasis on the word plan, as in a plan of action to be taken presumably against or for some cause, the show then is a complete success. It has come to remedy the sort of mentality, as myopic and shocking as it may appear, that Russe epitomizes in such a broad definition of today's modern museum. I'm all for provincialism and restraint when appropriate. I can do away with a lot of "shock art" and ideas that run amok or are simply lazy. I am at heart, a true populist willing to break down barriers between art and the public through dialogue.

It is difficult to accept however, Russe's mother-knows-best approach to governing a museum and Goeltzenleuchter's devil-may-care approach to making art, when there has been no clear attempt to "explain" either method to a public put before *le fait accompli*. Art should always be at the service of the public and not in service of its own interests. A cultural institution is not merely a showcase for avant-gardists, but has a direct line to the populace it's serving. In doing so, it has a larger responsibility to frame an artist's work - however obscure or difficult it might be - within a context that corresponds or at least attempts to address, the failures and successes of the artist's process in an effort to better relay that experience to the public. Art cannot feed off of its vitals forever. Let me explain.

Goeltzenleuchter's work presented in all its clinical sterility is intentional. It is cold, sometimes austere but it's not clinically dead. You can poke holes in the ideas and their execution, this is true, but only if you're unwilling to accept the show's theatricality of the absurd (a sort of Muzak for the senses through smell), its position as anti-art (against its commodification, bottling the experience as opposed to buying a derivative), and its subversive humor. None of which is difficult to understand with a moment or two of reflection on the part of the viewer. This is not a requirement of course, and maybe we shouldn't have to think at all while looking at art, but it would mean missing the whole point of the exercise if we didn't. What is missing is art's ability to communicate clearly its intent or message — we're not talking 17th century Poussin here — but 21st century contemporary art left to its own devices combined with the public's general unawareness of contemporary art practice, which ultimately results in stand-alone containers of individual thought in a form or shape we call art.

And that form is the key to the art's understanding. If art is about ideas then everyone is a conceptual artist. My point is this, sometimes, the art needs a little extra help in bridging the gap between itself and the viewing public. It may not be the artist's fault or responsibility that I do not "get" his work, the true art experience according to [John Dewey](#), occurs when the artwork and I meet for the first time, in the same space with very different experiences which are only enhanced through an exchange of information and knowledge. The artwork in other words, does not speak unilaterally, it is as much a receptor as it is an emitter.

How does this relate to Goeltzenleuchter's exhibit? A crucial element to the show's conductivity I believe was perhaps poorly placed. I'm referring to the [pitchman](#)-like video that concludes and summarizes the rather obscure graphs, charts and olfactory experiments one enters upon in the first half of the exhibit. Placing the video at the end of the exhibit is like telling a story that is too long, the delayed gratification in knowing the outcome, dampens the excitement and the interest of the beginning. Getting to the point by placing the video at the

beginning of the exhibit, I'm convinced, would have heightened the viewing experience and the understanding of the artist's intent and would have avoided the unwarranted and unnecessary intellectual floundering of the museum's president of the board. This isn't to say that the artist by doing so, would have given us all the clues – Goeltzenleuchter is far too clever and in control to allow us this luxury – it would have however, allowed us to find some of our own, on our own, by pointing us in the right direction. There's certainly nothing wrong with that.

You can read Robert Pincus's complete review of Goeltzenleuchter's exhibit [here](#).

Spun by Art as Authority on juin 29, 2009 08:18 PM | [Posted to Art Reviews](#) | [News](#) | [San Diego](#) | [Permalink](#)

Comments

"And that form is the key to the art's understanding. If art is about ideas then everyone is a conceptual artist. My point is this, sometimes, the art needs a little extra help in bridging the gap between itself and the viewing public."

Kevin - I think you are looking in the wrong place for these conclusions. A gallery setting remains the frame to all your references. If reality or a bridge to that notion is of interest to you, I would recommend some Bertolt Brecht or even Augusto Boal; BOTH embracing a unique idea in "invisible theater", would put a new light to your questions; but even with that I doubt it. Or perhaps The more recent, Nicolas Bourriaud's "Relational Aesthetic"; although, it hasn't had the field test to merit a serious conclusion. Point is, you are raising some really outdated questions.

Posted by: [Larry Caveney](#) | juin 29, 2009 09:57 PM

"A gallery setting remains the frame to all your references."

The issue at hand is *precisely about* gallery settings, specifically OMA – let's remain on-topic.

"The future is already here. It's just not very evenly distributed."

– William Gibson

Posted by: [RG](#) | juillet 1, 2009 12:23 AM

Beate Russe, President of the (OMA) Museum Board was quoted in today's paper "believes that museums are there partly to educate and challenge their audience, this show reached too far, too fast for a museum with a populist, even parochial, bent in its programming." "A lot of people didn't see it as art." Further on, the article states that "it appears conceptual art is now something of a phenomenon non grata. At least, that's the majority view." Then Skip Pahl, founder of the museum is quoted "a fun performance, light and spirited".

No need to discuss what is art or why art is not thriving in San Diego when the President of a Museum Board, after having approved a project comes out with such perjorative, disdainful statements.

The piece has far reaching, serious, thought provoking ideas in every detail of it. Brian's piece belongs in Tate. I for one, will go see it there.

Posted by: [Catherine](#) | juillet 1, 2009 10:05 AM

We are all always influenced by the parameters set by institutions of all forms and how they effect our actions. So how can this topic and these questions ever be out of date?

An interesting question that comes up here is: how can artists or art related institutions function intelligently and raise intelligent questions without resorting to exclusionary internal art jargon (even within the work itself) and/or dumbed down condescension? McDonalds is as populist as it comes, but that says nothing of the 'nutritional value' of its content. The "VIP" room at the MCASD's openings only function is to separate the princes from the paupers, not to enhance the art or the publics' understanding of it.

It seems like the OMA attendees of this show need more events like this and not less. "It has generated lots of discussion," (Russe quoted in the Pincus article) More shows that generate discussion would help to promote the idea that art is successful when it generates discussions and not successful when it is something that is quickly read, and accepted, as art. People questioning what they see (no matter how "outdated" or outside of the current trend of theory those questions may be) seems like a positive outcome for any exhibition.

Appealing to theorists as proof that any "conclusions" (as if there are any here) are the current correct ones, and not using them simply as historical precedent, does nothing to promote 'popular' intelligent questioning or to help dissolve exclusivity either.

Posted by: david white | juillet 1, 2009 04:25 PM

The events and attitudes described in Pincus's review are as complexly layered in ironies as the exhibit itself is layered in meanings.

There is nothing in *Institutional Wellbeing* that any American adult does not already have extensive familiarity with from TV, magazines, and department stores — the only "conceptual" component involved was the relocation and repackaging of this information in a gallery context.

In April OMA hosted a panel discussion for the topics surrounding the exhibit (I was one of the panel members), and people who attended the discussion described it as one of the most compelling museum events they had ever attended. Yet to the best of my knowledge none of the museum leaders who questioned or dismissed the exhibit bothered to attend this event.

I suspect the entire controversy would be a non-issue — and the exhibit hailed as an unconditional success — if OMA had created support information for the everyday museum attendee that was as accessible and compelling as the information presented to attendees of the panel discussion. Live and (in the case of the OMA leadership, hopefully) learn.

Posted by: RG | juillet 2, 2009 01:39 PM

Kevin, the question you raised in your article is very, very important. How much information should the public get to explain an exhibition? Too much and it panders to the lowest common denominator. Too little and it is considered elitist. I think the answer is site and artist specific. OMA could have embraced the curator, her show and the artist and made an effort to understand the work more. Once they had done that it would have been apparent that their audience needed more help for this show. I went on a quiet day, had the whole museum almost to myself and sat and watched the video all the way through. I laughed, I understood more and I enjoyed the rest of the show more for it. So I think your suggestion was terrific. Put the video first, and this starts to address the balance. The panel was great and so the question then is what else could they have done. I can't wait to see what Brian does next. A big thank you to Robert Pincus for his article as well.

P.S. I think the Oceanside public should not be underestimated...this is not rocket science. They just need to know that it is all right to be challenged by what they see and, in fact, should welcome that challenge.

Posted by: Patricia Frischer | juillet 2, 2009 07:11 PM

As Mr Goeltzenleuchter's fabricator and engineer I got a little bit more involved with this piece than most. I

suggest that the Museum's board president saying that there is a problem with the piece only underlines some of what Goeltzenleuchter is positioning. All institutions, whether corporate or social, no matter how beautifully veneered they are have some level of dysfunction. Even more to the point is the position that there might exist a commercial product made for them that could bring harmony to the group. This is clever art and an even more clever metaphor for our consumer society. We are trained from birth that things can always be better if we have the right stuff at the right time.

In fact, what will help us all is a better understanding of our interpersonal dynamics and our perceived notions of a functional group. All of that information is given to us in the Institutional Wellbeing, in an order that I feel the artist planned. As you walk into the exhibit, you see on the wall documentary photos, and on the opposite wall copies of the questionnaires that OMA staff were given. This leads to the large rear wall which is covered in a giant organization chart with everyone's responses to the testing. Across from that, a meditation room with soothing light where you can experience the custom scent made for OMA. Around the corner a DVD plays the CP home décor website and then a discovery area allows you to experience the component scents which make up the fragrance, and a library with books on scent, culture and science. The final piece is the video, but I have to respectfully disagree on its placement being too late in the exhibition. I feel it's purposefully the last part which ties together all the ideas. If you have done your homework along the way, the video confirms what you have learned. If you don't take the time to watch the whole video, it's likely you also walked through the piece without completely understanding the components.

Posted by: Dave Ghilarducci | [juillet 3, 2009 08:45 AM](#)

I would like to elaborate on two points brought up in the discussion. The first point should provide a little more context for my exhibition "Institutional Wellbeing." The second point concerns my experiences with OMA in relation to what I think the museum is poised to contribute to our region's cultural scene.

Two things are worth noting at the outset about my project, Contraposto Home Decor. (For those unfamiliar with the project, Contraposto is a legitimate business from which the "Institutional Wellbeing" service is merely one of many products and services offered to private institutions and the general public.)

The first thing worth noting is that Contraposto has been my sole cultural contribution since I founded the company in 1998. Art, for me, is a practice - like law or medicine are considered practices - with a rich history of practitioners setting innovative precedents. The work I am interested in making engages some of those precedents. Specifically, as Robert Pincus brought out in his UT article, I am fascinated by the legacies of conceptual art. Since I'm a pretty ordinary guy who has had an extra-ordinary education in the history and practice of idea-based art I pride myself - as an artist and an educator - in demystifying what many (including many artists) consider an elitist or esoteric form of art. More to the point, my work attempts to reveal the stakes those legacies (of conceptual art) have in contemporary life. One outcome of this is that my audience (whoever that turns out to be) is often surprised to find themselves engaged and entertained, although when I develop my art I am neither concerned with teaching nor entertaining.

The second thing worth noting is that for many years Contraposto existed outside of the conventional art institution. In the early days I envisioned Contraposto inhabiting a cosmos separate from, if not parallel to the traditional gallery-viewing context. The gallery, I felt, was too heavily relied on by artists, critics, and audiences for the evaluation and distinction of artwork, when, really, it was no less valid or arbitrary than other systems. I mention this because in my world, art competed for attention with life; I ran a website, then a store, all the while traveling around giving talks about the company, hoping to arrive at something that was unequivocally "art" so that I could continue to move through the tenure ranks as a professor. I enjoyed watching people arrive at the art almost as much as I enjoyed arriving at the art myself. I make this distinction (of "arriving at art" rather than "making art") because a lot of art - particularly the type that winds up in museums - operates like a sign in terms of how it communicates; it relies on the conventions of the institution (frames, pedestals, etc) to point to the thing that has something to say, to which we, as viewers, presumably pay more than the average attention. However, I have always thought that my work with Contraposto operates like a speed bump; not only because it seems to enjoy its ordinary status - privileging those who notice it, and punishing those who don't - but because the reaction it generates in the people who run across it seems to say more about their comfort level with the things that inevitably pop up in life.

Concerning the museum's reaction - or more appropriately, the museum director and board president's reaction - to my project, I would like to stress an optimistic view of the whole matter, which has by now been thoroughly, if somewhat unilaterally, criticized on this blog and in print. Let's recognize and commend the museum's desire

to improve itself as manifest in recent events. The board and staff successfully completed a capital campaign to more than quadruple the size of its facilities. They identified a great architect who designed an addition that didn't compromise the integrity of the original Gill building, but which more than suggested an ambitious shift in the way the museum viewed itself. And they hired Teri Sowell, a scholar and curator who brings tremendous energy, empathy and skill to her position as Director of Exhibitions.

When Teri asked me to propose something for a museum exhibition, I visited OMA not long after the new architectural expansion was complete. The place was great. The architecture exemplified values of casual self assuredness in form and site that I thought was so perfect for Oceanside, and by extension, San Diego. I thought back to OMA in its younger days, to its small space and its mom 'n' pop vibe. I wondered if it had truly grown up, or if there was a discrepancy between its identity and the way its identity was exemplified in its new architecture. I proposed to Teri "Institutional Wellbeing," an olfactory service that my company offers to cultural institutions. For OMA, Contraposto would create an environmental wellness fragrance for the museum's staff, board and patrons that promised to ease any tensions associated with acclimating to the new building.

Since 2006, I have done several "Institutional Wellbeing" projects throughout the US and Europe. Each time the project takes the form of a sort of institutional portrait. For each portrait I conduct private interviews with staff, board, and patrons, which among other things offer me a candid look at institutional dynamics, those things not normally accessible to the average patron, but which play a tremendous role in shaping the cultural programming the patron consumes. In the case of researching the institutional dynamics at OMA, I got the sense that the institution had grown from infancy to maturity without the "parents" accommodating the change. That's why in the meditation room - the room in the exhibit reserved for experiencing the wellness fragrance - I chose to illuminate the space with the iconic blue light of florescent Bilirubin bulbs. These bulbs are known to many, if not by name then by sight, as the light used to treat jaundice in prematurely born babies.

I thought the bulbs were a gentle reminder of the outcomes of OMA's desire. This is to say, the museum wanted to grow, got what it asked for, and is now trying to come to terms with its identity. Hopefully. To be sure, the Oceanside Museum of Art owes its life and livelihood to a handful of people who have given their time and money to incubate the institution. These people rightly felt like it was their baby. However, when these same people decided - possibly at the motivation of staff, board, city and other factors - to expand the museum to become something more robust and sophisticated, they had to acknowledge that their baby would grow up. Framing the dialog around this issue was a central aim in my exhibition.

Could the solution be as simple as the parents letting go of the reins a little bit. I hope so, but probably not. Money is integral. Trust is integral. The arts community in San Diego has a singular opportunity to support an institution whose mission is directly tied to supporting them. The museum is poised to celebrate the diverse practices of the many artists in Southern California who are making, or arriving at, interesting art.

Posted by: Brian Goeltzenleuchter | juillet 5, 2009 08:47 AM

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