



# HYPERALLERGIC

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MUSEUMS

## The Unpleasant Smell of Lost Opportunities, or How One Museum Show Became a Luxury Boutique

Dahlia Schweitzer | January 24, 2013

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Daniela Andrier with L'Oreal, "Untitled" (2010) (image courtesy Givaudan; all photos courtesy the Museum of Arts and Design)

*Co-written with Sean Patrick Sullivan*

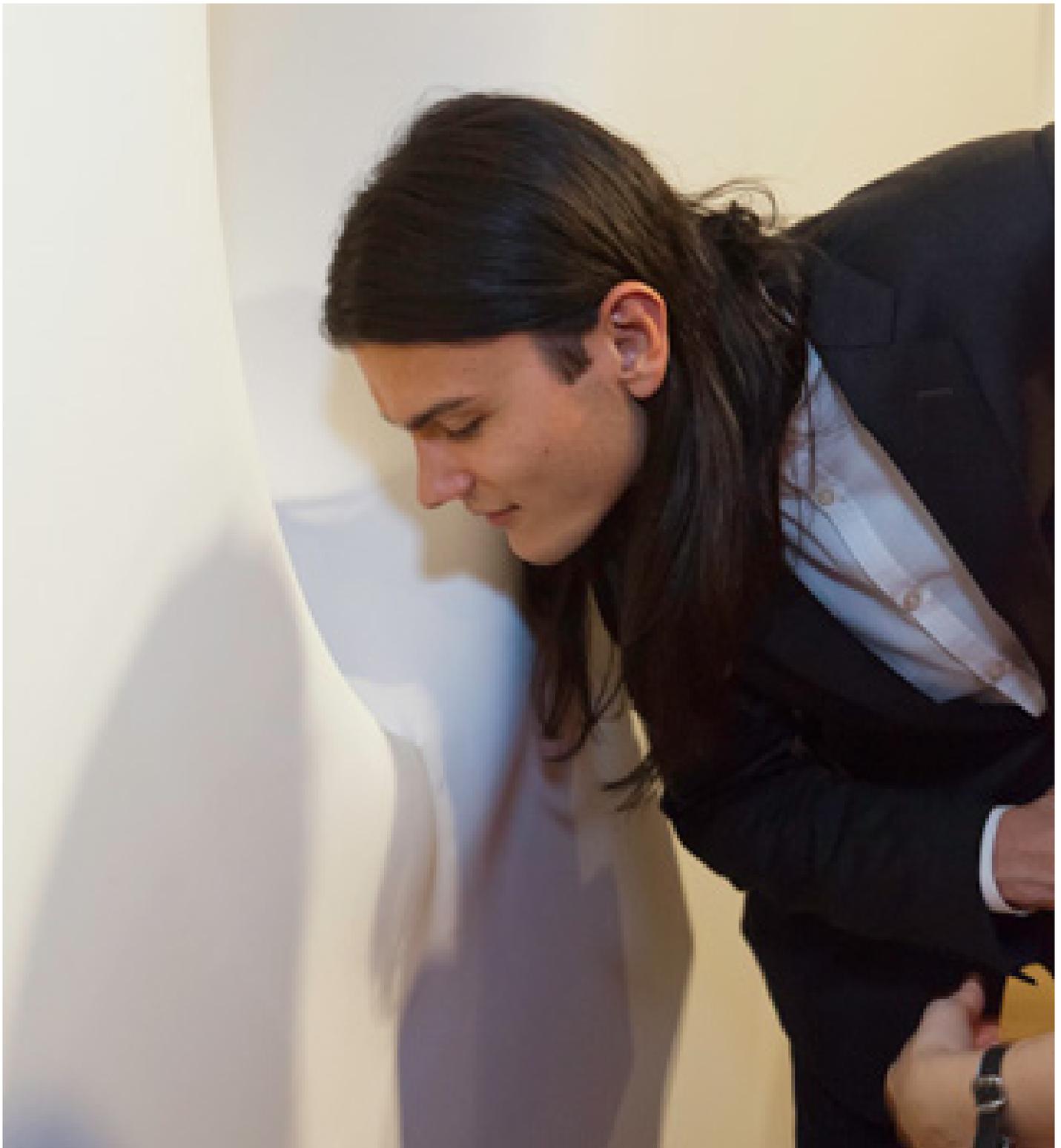
Camille Paglia, who famously polarized artists and intellectuals throughout the 1990s, is back. In her new book, *Glittering Images*, her mission is to bring closure to an era she feels is full of art-world stunts and isolating pretension, in exchange for a return to art-world appreciation among a general audience and beyond. For her, museums are the locus of this new evolution, and we could not agree more. If museums are the way by which people experience and understand art, and if we want to change that experience or simply get more people involved in it, we must begin by examining the interface.

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One way in which art is ever more essential to our contemporary society is for its retaliatory qualities against the world in which we live. In an era of fragmentation and distortion, of attention deficit disorder and image saturation, of television commercials that feel like music videos and music videos that feel like epileptic-inducing blitzkriegs, where the artificiality and two dimensionality of digital media has become the norm rather than the exception, the clarity of art becomes more important than ever. Our brains may reflexively shut down to fight the visual onslaught that is contemporary life, but we can detox, find serenity and balance, by going to a museum and standing in front of an image, by sitting and staring and contemplating. This is a quality of art — and of places that exhibit it — that cannot be duplicated or streamlined through any modern innovation. There is an experiential necessity of looking at art that should be a nonnegotiable part of understanding the world.

This is why museums — and the art within them — are so important, and why it's important to make them accessible to everyone. Beyond that, it's vital to take that studied serenity and those moments of contemplation and turn them, with a measured focus, on any and all aspects of our society that deserve closer study. This is why exhibitions like [\*The Art of the Motorcycle\*](#) at the Guggenheim or [\*Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations\*](#) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art were so exciting. Not only did they bring crowds through the doors, but they slowed down our rapid-fire life for the time that we were there, bringing our attention to those artifacts of the everyday that we would otherwise gloss over and ignore.





Installation view, “The Art of Scent 1889–2012” at the Museum of Arts and Design (photo by Brad Farwell)

By these standards, the exhibition *The Art of Scent 1889–2012* at the Museum of Arts and Design should have been up there along with the motorcycle and Prada shows. According to its brochure, the exhibit “situates olfactory art within the larger historical context of the visual arts.” How fantastic, and how utterly new. An exhibition about perfume? And one that situates perfume within the visual arts? This could have been groundbreaking and relevant to patrons of the visual arts, students of contemporary

culture, lovers of art and design, or anyone merely curious about the olfactory zeitgeist. However, as anyone who actually experiences this Diller Scofidio + Renfro-designed exhibition will tell you, it's nothing more than a failed opportunity (more on that later). And that's the least of this vacuous, superficial, and ultimately insulting show's problems.

At the risk of exhausting ourselves, let's start from the very beginning. As art educators and beauty-industry consultants — and in complete agreement that the olfactory arts have been under-taught, under-curated, and under-appreciated — we were eager and enthusiastic to visit MAD for the first time. Shockingly, less than five minutes into our visit, we were both quite clear on one thing: MAD is the worst designed museum either of us has ever attended.

Actually, that is not quite true; it is the *least* designed museum either of us has ever been to. When one first enters, there are no welcoming screens, signage, or graphics. One has to double back to pay for admission, and nothing in the lobby reveals what is upstairs, what is downstairs, or what the place is there for. Perhaps the institution's most hilarious (and depressing) mishap is the presence of a large circular bench, right in the middle of the lobby, that actually is not a bench. It is an installation. But one would not know that from the signage offering the title and artist, because there is none, only a surly security guard who scolded us for sitting on it. Fun fact: MAD seems to employ more security guards per square foot than the Egyptian wing of The Met. Given how impossible it is to determine what one is welcome to touch and what one is not, we can see why.

It would be easy to dismiss our critique of MAD's lobby as nasty and/or unnecessary to this review, except for the fact that this is a museum supposedly devoted to design. Beyond that, given *The Art of Scent's* potential to attract individuals who don't normally attend museums or who don't know much about craft or design, the lobby is not just a missed opportunity to excite and engage; it is a manifestation of all the worst stereotypes about the art world — its hostility toward outsiders, its willful ignorance of common sense, its total lack of quality control, and internal critique. Those truly interested in seeing how color, signage, and typography can be used to create an immersive, instantly understandable exhibition experience are better off visiting a standard-issue suburban movie-theatre multiplex.

Assuming you make it to the elevator without being berated for breaking a rule (we did not), you may choose to leaf through the official *Art of Scent* brochure, at which time you will notice that, for the most part, major funding and featured fragrances are from the same companies: Chanel, Hermes, L'Oreal, so on and so forth. You may wonder, "Will these donors and their fragrances dominate the show?" It is not much of a spoiler alert to let you know that, yes, they do. While it is appreciated that, in this day and current economic age, museums are heavily relying on sponsors to fund their exhibitions, this exhibition comes across — in a very heavy-handed fashion — as more of a retail showcase of exactly those brands whose money backed the show, rather than anything resembling its promise to connect olfactory to other applied arts.



Installation view, “The Art of Scent 1889–2012” at the Museum of Arts and Design (photo by Brad Farwell)

When those elevator doors open on the fifth floor, you are instantly exposed to the main event, at which time you are overwhelmed not by perfume but rather by déjà vu: no, you haven’t been here before, but you do already know what Sephora looks like. If you come to this show as we did — curious to learn about the gorgeous and complicated intersection of chemistry, perfumery, packaging design, and dream marketing — you can forget about it. There is zero discussion of any of those factors, which is frustrating not only because of the missed opportunity to explore their synergy, but also because perfume, more than any product out there, *is* about those factors. Expensive perfumes are expensive precisely because of the money spent on advertising (aka dream marketing) and packaging. Bottle designers can charge upwards of \$100,000 for their creations. Perfume is, literally, scented water that has been packaged and marketed and sold as a luxury experience because of a complex chemistry of ingredient combinations, because of our desire to feel loved, remembered, and unique, and because it comes in bottles that look like works of art.

Unfortunately, you wouldn’t know any of this from passing through the exhibition. This show consists of: 12 wall-mounted, vagina-shaped bowls into which you stick your face to receive a blast of a featured fragrance; captions projected alongside you that fade away just as you are trying to read them (perhaps a

failed attempt at expressing the ephemeral nature of scent?); a limited depiction of a fragrance through its stages of development; and an opportunity to dip pieces of paper into Petri dishes of featured fragrances. Experience the brand! Rub it on your wrists! Claim your free gift with purchase!

Not really, but close. Indeed, everywhere this effort fails as a show, it triumphs as a breakthrough in luxury-retail design. From floor plan to brand engagement to automated demonstration, everything is glamorous, sophisticated, and utterly ideal for a prestige beauty or fragrance franchise.

But one does not go to a major museum show to become an unsuspecting participant in a dry run for a thrilling new retail concept. Patrons of *The Art of Scent* are there to become bewitched and enthralled by the dazzling, spectacular, and sometimes scandalous art, science, and history of scent — because that’s what the promotional materials promise. Sadly, if you want to know how the industry’s transition from natural to synthetic ingredients came with increasingly over-the-top package design, epic advertising campaigns, and whispered promises of sex, romance, and *l’amour*, you’ll have to buy a book, get lost in Wikipedia, or discuss amongst yourselves. Strolling through this reductive, half-baked cornucopia of broken promises and missed opportunities will most likely make you wish you had just stayed home.

With its synergy between traditional and new, art and commerce, design and product, *The Art of Scent* could have been a step toward reimagining the role of the museum as well as the way many people understand art. Unfortunately, with its persistent refusal to send any real message or to help visitors find any meaning or appreciation in an important form of art and design, the exhibition, and thereby the museum, failed. Which may be why one MAD employee, after seeing how we were treated in the lobby, whispered to us, “You sure you want to stay? They’re all bitches here.”

*The Art of Scent 1889–2012* is on view at the *Museum of Arts and Design* (2 Columbus Circle, Columbus Circle, Manhattan) through March 3.

 **comments (5)**













