

EAT SHOP SEE STAY

Florian Rosenbauer

Every courier's nightmare must surely be to have to deliver an express consignment to a busy shopping mall on a Saturday afternoon. A sluggish mass opens up before him, slow moving and unpredictable in its flow. Completely unpredictable and uncoordinated, it pours down escalators and along the covered shopping streets. The molecules of this claustrophobically threatening structure can barely be isolated. On closer inspection one becomes aware of interlocked grandmothers, bedecked with enormous shopping bags, amorously intertwined couples and mercilessly shunting prams. Why do they stroll at such an unbelievably slow pace, licking ice-cream, staring, jabbering, in front of the sweating messenger? Why don't they look where they're going?

Jostling and shoving the surrounding bodies, only to conduct surprising changes of direction towards a shop window. Headless, robbed of their sense of direction. What, understandably, drives the courier to a white hot rage, is the god-given right of the flaneur from Walter Benjamin's *Lesart*. Because, what distinguishes the shopping mall from local shops and suburban shopping streets, just as much as from traditional market places, is its character as „world in miniature“, as Margaret Morse dubs it in her essay about the closed system, Television Freeway Mall. That, in our postmodern society, miniturisation enjoys huge popularity, is obvious.

From the model-railway in the cellar, through television pictures, all the way to the shopping centre, this type of restricted world presents itself to the observer as controllable, or at least capable of being mastered, as that which is outside. This outside first becomes evident as you approach the mall: security guards watch over the entrances so that the

unpredictability of the street, the urban jungle, does not disturb the idyll of the miniature town. Amongst these disturbances are numbered, not only beggars and criminals, but also street noise and cars. Rooves and controllable air conditioning or central heating create the perfect weather for shopping. The mall not only fosters this „nostalgic and safe image“ of a pre-motorisation city centre, but also a type of dream-world, in which we simultaneously arrive and start out and therefore, are always already there. Because what we see via shop fronts, shop displays, logos, and items displayed on maniquins and posters; what we hear via piped music, advertising slogans, and other such noises (artificial birdsong and the gentle plash of spring waters) is already well known to us.

An artificial dome surrounds us and we see ourselves in a bubble, propelled forward from within our personal space. The interplay of television, freeway (and hence car) and shopping mall is postulated by Morse and described by Roland Barthes in his theory of „transported imobility“. This private, or better, domesticised public space, also excludes such unpleasantnesses as work or everyday life, and, in the strictest sense, reality. Thus the courier, who was mentioned at the start of this tale, is an interloper in this paradisiac space, a foreign body to the entranced wanderers between worlds. Since the „essential secret of the shopping mall“⁵, the fascination of postmodern society in overfilled commercial machines, overflowing with sensory stimuli, becomes easier to comprehend; the question has to be asked, why is the viewer of this series of photographs confronted with yawning empty shop spaces?

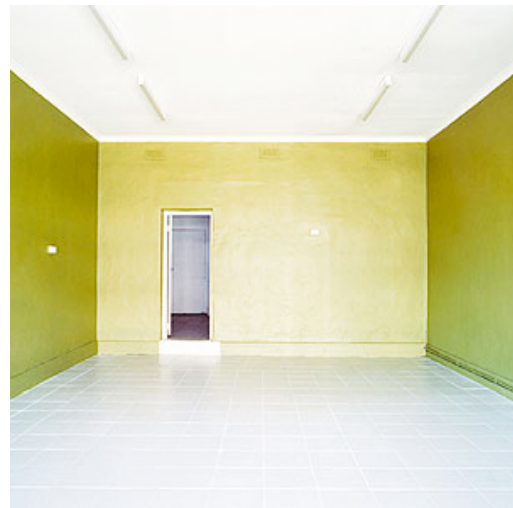
One answer could be that here something is being made visible which would otherwise be banished to a darkened

corner. Man - the visual creature's blindness to this detail, causes the empty local shop on the journey through local streets or the suburbs of the metropolis, simply not to be seen. Here, what we encounter is that which is unseen, made visible. With the emptiness, the emptied nature, that so many of these shop spaces literally exhibit (peering through the shop window pane), this work encapsulates the documenting of an instant, a development, which the New York artist Sze Tsung Leong described as the „Evolution of Shopping“⁶.

The evolution of consumer culture since the markets of Thebes (1,500 years B.C.), via medieval market places as places of trade and social exchange, to the „explosion of shops“ in C17th Europe. And yet further to the explosion of the great arcades of the C19th, the victory march of the department stores and supermarkets and finally the craze for the gigantic, that embodies the shopping mall. At this (albeit temporary) final point in the progress of consumerism, the long awaited dreams of the architects of virtual reality systems come true: with the „immersion in a 3D sphere where within a controlled environment, image, sound, smell and taste and an interactive illusion of control and variety of choice, are experienced or simulated“.

As compared to the polished shopping experience apparatus, the abandoned EmptyShops, ripped from the living world, are like fossils from a long-forgotten era. And regardless how much one tends to regret it, the stories that emerge regarding these spaces, concern destroyed existences and failed aspirations. One could view them wholly unsentimentally as a process inherent to the system, which sooner or later will also leave behind shopping malls, as an outdated concept. While Rem Koolhaas estimates at the turn of the millenium that the „advent of the C21st will perhaps go down in history, as the time whence the urban will not be understandable without shopping“, Anne Friedberg realised only shortly afterwards that computer and television screens have

already replaced the shop window to a great extent. Technological channels make teleshopping possible, being cocooned within one's house has become a lifestyle choice and the necessity for physical movement is being sidelined. The credo of this new society could just as easily be an old one; *Eat Shop See Stay*. The advertising slogan of one of the biggest Mega-Malls from Los Angeles only requires the addition of *at home*.



Prolog of *Empty Shops*
by Simone Rosenbauer (2005), Photography

⁵ Kowinski, William S., (1986) *Endless Summer at the World's Biggest Shopping Wonderland*, Smithsonian
⁶ Leong, Sze T., (2003) *Evolution of Shopping* In: Max Hollein (Hg) *Shopping*, Hatje Cantz Verlag (Florian Rosenbauer/2005)