

## CHAPTER 12

# Ritualization of Shopping and Artistic Interventions into the Temples of Consumption

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**Abstract:** The globalized world is still in the phase of late capitalism, signified by the establishment of multinational corporations, globalized markets and work, mass consumerism, and the fluid flow of capital. The question of the criticism of art towards the capitalist system, its ideology and consumerism is therefore still topical and is readdressed in this paper. To comprehend the logic of late capitalism, one needs to consider the means of consumption. In order to open space to examine contemporary art as being critical towards consumerism, one also needs to take into consideration the ontological changes that have occurred to art and pay attention to performative art. The author argues that if one is to seek critical or political art in late capitalism, one has to look for artistic interventions into the means of consumption.

**Keywords:** Late Capitalism, Contemporary Art, Means of Consumption, Consumer Culture, Shopping Mall, Ceremonial Centre, Art as Intervention, Performance Art

### 1 Introduction

The globalized world is still in the phase of late capitalism that has taken place from the 1960s onwards. This, as defined by Ernst Mandel (1972), is signified by the establishment of multinational corporations, globalized markets and work, mass consumerism and the fluid flow of capital. The aim of this chapter is to examine the functioning of the means of consumption, to borrow the term from Georg Ritzer (2005), and the critical potential of artistic intervention into these means. In order to do that, we need to consider the ontological changes through which art has gone and pay attention to performative art. By being

performative and also by setting out actions outside of spaces traditionally designed for art, one can assert that art has a much better chance of engaging in political action in the public space.

## **2 Cathedrals of Consumption**

The passage of capitalism from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to contemporaneity is marked by what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) called the passage from the “heavy”, Fordist-style capitalism, to the light, consumer-friendly capitalism. The latter is signified by the growth of temples of consumption. In his study of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, the renowned American philosopher Fredric Jameson (1991) noted that it was from architectural debates that his own conception of postmodernism initially began to emerge (Jameson 1991, p. 2). In architecture, postmodernism stages itself as aesthetic populism, which has at least the merit to efface the high-modernist frontier between high culture and commercial culture (Ibid.). Although interested in consumerism as the central feature of late capitalism, Jameson, however, does not examine how the means of consumption seduce the consumer and how shopping malls organize people’s behaviour. He is not interested in the consumer’s experience of shopping, the milieu in which consumption takes place, consumers’ psychology, their shopping addiction, or the ideology at work in the places of consumption. All these are the actual grounds that establish the cultural logic and the success of late capitalism. At about the same time that Jameson first published his theory of postmodernism (in 1984), the American theologian Ira G. Zepp analysed shopping malls as ceremonial centres (Zepp 1986). Zepp acknowledged that in the urban USA of that time, the 1980s, people continue to seek community, construct centred spaces and ritualize their lives, this time through shopping malls. These comprise mythic geometry, architectural rhetoric and offer a meaningful variety of human activities that take place there. Even earlier than Zepp, in 1980, the cultural anthropologist Alexander Moore analysed Walt Disney World as a ritual space and a playful pilgrimage centre. Moore ascertained that Walt Disney World organizes behaviour by combining play and ritual, which “comprise a metaprocess of expressive behaviour rooted in our mammalian past” (Moore 1980, p. 207). The ritualization of the lives of the majority of people in late capitalism has not only fundamentally evolved around consumerism. The means of consumption have become the “cathedrals of consumption”, ascertained George Ritzer (2005) and he points out the “quasi-religious,

‘enchanted’ nature of such new settings” (Ritzer 2005, p. 10). He establishes that people make “pilgrimages” to these places, “in order to practice our consumer religion” (Ibid.). These means of consumption are structured to have enchanted, even sacred, religious character. For example, sociologist Peter Corrigan (1997, p. 56) acknowledged that “the Church and industry can draw upon the same awe-inspiring techniques” and recognized “department stores as similar to cathedrals.” They are immense, vast gigantic, with huge galleries and staircases inside the buildings that enable one to look down into the vast and bustling throng. Corrigan (1997, p. 55) compares the effects of the architecture of the sites of consumption with the architecture of the church: “size is a characteristic of many buildings that are designed to awe small human creatures.” The other relevant idea emphasized by Corrigan regarding shopping malls is that they provide everything. He links this idea to the “broader notions of power: rulers who really can provide everything will forever have people in their debt, and a department store may well borrow some of the same effect” (Ibid.). Suddenly such a place “almost magically abolishes all thought of deficits or shortages” (Ibid.).

Ritzer (2005, p. 8) further establishes that shopping malls have become “more than commercial and financial enterprises; they have much in common with the religious centres of traditional civilizations.” People are enthusiastically part of consumer society and these settings offer the “greatest spectacle” (Ritzer 2005, p. 11). Because we can easily grow bored, the consumption settings compete to see “which one can put on the greatest show” (Ibid.). Not only shopping malls, but different types of settings “are rushing to emulate the cathedrals of consumption”, such as universities, fast food restaurants, souvenir shops, video arcades (Ritzer 2005, p. 10), and even megachurches which offer aerobic classes, bowling alleys, counselling centres, and multimedia bible classes (Ritzer 2005, p. 23).

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) analysed shopping as a rite of exorcism. People, he writes, are “running after pleasurable – tactile, visual or olfactory – sensations, or after the delights of the palate, promised by colourful and glittering objects displayed on the supermarket shelves” or “sensations promised by a session with a counselling expert. But they are also trying to find an escape from the agony called insecurity” (Bauman 2000, p. 81). The crowds gather in the temples of consumption, but not in order to talk and socialize, points out Bauman. Encounters in a crowded space are brief and shallow. People do not establish deeper or more complex relationships. However, crowded as the place may be, it is

not collective, reflects Bauman. “To deploy Althusser’s memorable phrase, whoever enters such spaces is ‘interpellated’ qua individual, called to suspend or tear up the bonds and shed loyalties or put them on a side burner” (Bauman 2000, p. 97). This fundamental link between the means of consumption and ideology is crucial to understanding the processes of subjectification and desubjectification taking place via the means of consumption, which is itself an apparatus. As demonstrated by Michel Foucault (1980, p. 194) and Giorgio Agamben (2009), apparatuses in a disciplinary society seize the bodies in the very process of their desubjectification. In order to produce new subjects, the apparatuses first split the subject through the negation and at the same time the assumption of the old. The apparatus of the prison, for instance, produces “the constitution of a subject and of a milieu of delinquents, who then become the subject of new – and, this time, perfectly calculated – techniques of governance” (Agamben 2009, p. 20). In a quite similar manner the means of consumption produce the constitution of a subject and a milieu of consumers who become the subject of the calculated technique of governance, altogether with the ultimate objective to accumulate capital and to increase the economic and political power of the social elite.

### 3 Art and Intervention

In 2003, Laibach, the founding art and musical group of the art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst, performed a visit to the shopping mall City Park in Ljubljana. As part of their outfits, the group wore a kind of military uniform particularly reminiscent of the Wehrmacht uniform. The group became known for provoking the public during the disintegration of the Eastern bloc with ambiguous performances with which they addressed the functioning of totalitarian systems. Their interventions were a torment for a society with collective memory of the German and Italian occupation.

Within the performance *Einkauf (Shopping)* they simply took a shopping cart and walked in a military style around the mall, doing their shopping in their uniforms with serious expressions on their faces. Their performance was uncomfortable for the people present in the given context. The consumers felt threatened and security guards were unsure whether or not to stop the intervention. The invisible envelope of the Arcadian environment designed for enjoyment and relaxation was suddenly broken. The action *unconcealed* the fact that the consumerist

space is clearly politically structured in a totalitarian manner, as it does not tolerate any penetration of other ideas, behaviours, rites, or ideologies. The performance showed the parallels between consumer ideology, as well as the functioning of its means of consumption, and political totalitarian systems. The seemingly non-political consumerism is proved to be fundamentally political. Art has, in this case, shocked the present public who was not expecting to come in contact with art in that context. Its function was to awaken consumers and to unveil the political structure of the temple of consumption.



Figure 1: Laibach, *Einkauf*, 2003. The group Laibach has performed shopping soon after the opening of shopping mall City park in Ljubljana.

Source: Photo by Sašo Podgoršek. Courtesy of Laibach

Temples of consumption offer “the comforting impression of belonging” (Bauman 2000, p. 99). Bauman pictured the places as a “floating boat”, a “self-contained ‘place without a place’”, which is a “*purified* space.” The place had been cleansed of variety and difference; the differences inside “are tamed, sanitized, guaranteed to come free of dangerous ingredients – and so be unthreatening”, so that “what is left is pure, unalloyed and uncontaminated amusement” (Bauman 2000, p. 99). The isolative and the excluding character of the temples of consumption is complete:

The place is well protected against those likely to break this rule – all sorts of intruders, meddlers, spoilsports and other busybodies who would interfere with the consumer's or shopper's splendid isolation. The well supervised, properly surveilled and guarded temple of consumption is an island of order, free from beggars, loiterers, stalkers and prowlers – or at least expected and assumed to be so (Bauman 2000, p. 98).

Consumption is related to the destruction of critical potential and moral indifference. In 2006 the artist Sašo Sedlaček hit on the core of this problem with his project *Beggar*.



Figure 2: Sašo Sedlaček, *Beggar*, 2006, Robot for the marginalized social groups.  
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

The *Beggar* is a robot made at home from recycled material, designed to help socially marginalized people. Sedlaček noticed that the huge places of consumption are exclusionary, as there are no homeless people to be found there, whereas poverty is an increasing social problem. Despite replacing historic city centres, these places have not fully assumed the function of an open public space for all (Tratnik 2009, p. 18). The *Beggar* was let into the City Centre in Ljubljana as a robot collecting money for the homeless. It collected much more than homeless people collect in the same time frame on the street, selling their newspaper *Street Kings* which is meant to be an alternative to direct begging. This says a lot about the

compassion people have toward the poor compared to the sympathies we have towards digital technology. If on the one hand people feel uncomfortable when confronted by poverty and homelessness, which invoke feelings of fear, on the other hand they are attracted to the mechanical or even more with the digital gadgets that they can play with.

The means of consumption rely on the mechanism of seduction. Bauman (2000) recognized that the heavy, Fordist-style capitalism, passed over to the light, consumer-friendly capitalism. If the first was the world of the rulers, law-givers, and supervisors who directed other people, the latter preserved authorities but now authorities coexist. The authorities of light capitalism no longer command, but they ingratiate themselves with the chooser; they tempt and seduce (Bauman 2000, p. 63). Yet in a consumer society everything is a matter of choice except the compulsion to choose. This compulsion grows to an addiction and is thus no longer perceived as a compulsion (Bauman 2000, p. 73).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the former communist European countries started to join the European Union one after another, as an alliance of the European countries with a collective political governance and a foundation in capitalism. In the former communist countries, the shopping centres were quickly built during the transition to capitalism. The phenomenon of consumerism at once struck the population in these countries. People who experienced a shortage of goods under the previous regime and used to smuggle them from other countries where they would go on shopping trips, were suddenly overwhelmed by the richness of the offer, the surplus of commodities that suddenly appeared near their homes. They were enchanted by the means of consumption and the complete experience that shopping at once became. The population, disappointed with the previous ideology, was subject to uncritically accept the arrival of the new capitalist ideology. The directors Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda showed how high the level of seduction and even addiction to shopping was for the Czech population in 2004, with their film project *The Czech Dream*. They studied the components required for the successful establishment of a shopping mall, apart from its construction, that would draw the consumers to the defined location. Klusák and Remunda built the whole promotion of the coming centre; they made out their own appearance, conducted the advertising campaign and even produced a theme song to emotionally attract the consumers. Finally, people arrived many hours before the expected opening of the mall, but the location was just a rural field and instead of wandering in the shopping mall they got a chance to take



a walk in the countryside. Many of the people who had arrived expecting to have a shopping experience felt angry. Afterwards, the project triggered rich public discussions as rarely seen regarding consumerism, the role of art and public financing of art, as well as on the political question of joining the European Union, which was current at the time.

In 2003 Sašo Sedlaček collected the advertising leaflets that he had been receiving from the shopping centres, and invited the public to build bricks out of this material in the gallery space (*Kapelica Gallery*). With a group of colleagues, he then conducted an action: with those bricks they built a wall with which they closed off the entrance of the City Park in Ljubljana. He accompanied the intervention, which he named *Just Do It!*, by stating that he was only giving back what he had received and had not asked for.



Figure 3: Sašo Sedlaček, *Just do it!*, 2003, Artistic intervention into the entrance of the shopping mall. The artist collected the advertising leaflets.

Source: Courtesy of the artist





Figure 4: Sašo Sedlaček, *Just do it!*, 2003. The artist organized a production of the bricks out of the collected material in the gallery space.

Source: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5: Sašo Sedlaček, *Just do it!*, 2003. Closing the entrance to the shopping mall with the bricks.

Source: Courtesy of the artist

## 4 Conclusion

These cases of performative art unveil the truth of capitalism, its refined hidden mechanisms and ideology, as well as its (side) effects, such as the increase in poverty within the population, ecological pollution due to the hyper-production of goods, shopping centres, and promotional material. Art is, in this case, not experienced through the mechanism of contemplation. Its function is to stimulate critical thinking. This is possible with an intervention of art into the marrow of capitalism, into its means of consumption which is the capitalist means of enchantment. This is an intervention into the Church of capitalism, the sacred environment, where the consecrated ritual of seduction takes place.

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