

Sleeping Beauty and Dead Canaries : Creative Workers

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1. The mall

Down the highway and off the interchange is the local shopping mall where suburbia celebrates the “*consumer republic*” (Cohen 2004). Shopping these days isn’t the same as when mom went downtown to buy [a] dress or hat, but no matter if it’s in an urban business district or at the mega-mall, an invisible crew of window dressers and fashion mavens “*pull it all together*”... “*especially for you*”. Shopping malls and other retail environments are complex social spaces, a product of conflicting agendas and meanings. Workers such as window dressers, known as visual merchandisers in the trade, negotiate between these conflicting agendas and levels of discourse to create compelling images and merchandise presentations, even as corporate branding strategies limit creative control and deskill the craft. Fashion has always been about newness and change, a competitive marketplace encourages the adoption of new technologies, retail being no exception.

The suburban mall is another permutation on the pattern of displacement of utopian dreams onto the personalized world of consumption. Walter Benjamin in his Arcades Project describes the physical transformation of Paris in the wake of the failed revolutions of the nineteenth century. The industrial production of textiles and the introduction of mass-produced iron and glass combined in the creation of architecture of “*transitory purposes*” of railway stations, exhibition halls and enclosed streets of shops. In the nineteenth century, Paris was rebuilt as a defensible city of wide boulevards, arcades; counterbalanced with an expanded sphere of private consumption in the interiorized world of mass urbanity. The arcade presented a phantasmagoria of consumption as a costly compensation for revolutions denied (Benjamin 1999, 15-26).

Architecture is a concrete expression of social relations in the build environment, social moments of transitory nature are frozen into physical forms. As commodification changes the marketplace, an array of shopping experiences structured around transportation and land use patterns coexist at different moments. Dead malls and stroller malls, pedestrian streetscapes and car culture strips form a tapestry of retail landscapes coded by class and race. Within this diversity, the fundamental contradictions remain constant, cultural workers exist on a battlefield of contested spaces and meanings between consumers and retailers, “*suits*” and workers, between gender, class and racial constructs of privilege and exclusion. (Pettinger, 2003). There is a constant interplay between power and resistance at multiple levels in late capitalist commodity culture; the cultural sphere is where domination is shakiest (Fiske, 1989). These inherent contradictions over determine and contextualize the role that visual merchandisers play in the everyday world of shopping.

Window dressers work for wages at mainline stores, or as freelance contract workers, but ultimately they are relatively powerless actors that respond to demands articulated by the powerful Display folk instill meanings on product or place by deploying visual signs ; cultural codes and markers not strictly economic, to increase the perceived value. As jesters and jokers in a corporate world, display people are a necessary but subversive element when the lines of demarcation between production and consumption are blurred. (Pettinger:2004) Making do and getting by, creative workers find niches where they can control their work, and resist commodification. As tricksters, “*magic fingers*” and jokers, display folks exemplify inversion, are an embodiment of misrule, and blur the line between mental and

manual labor. Display is performance in the theatre of the marketplace. Display mommies are invisible mavens of style exchanging cultural capital for autonomy in a social reality where life world is increasingly colonized by system (Habermas).

Through storytelling, window-dressers reverse relationships of powerlessness and construct a manageable reality. Display folk empower themselves symbolically and adapt to a changing world in language. In observations and in interviews, themes of branding and resistance, transgression and respect, loss and recovery emerge in the context of contested terrains and conflicted meanings. These discourses are shaped by the objective landscape of “arcades” and streets that bound the marketplace, themselves being products of utopian dreams transferred and transformed by the logic of late capitalism.

2. Methods and Problems :

For this study, I observed White Flint, a “dead” upscale mall, and City Place, an urban mall in transition. All are places where I work installing displays. Being actively employed as a part of the visual team at Bloomingdale’s and a contract visual merchandiser with Display Queens, I am a native informant and insider. I had total access to the field. I interviewed people I already knew quite well, some, for decades. My collaborators in this project were enthusiastic and engaged with helping me, going to great lengths to make sure I could capture this or that aspect of the work process or a good story. I interviewed display people who had been doing display for an extended period of time, as well as one person who just recently entered the field. I deliberately asked very broad questions to stimulate conversation. Being intimately connected with the industry, there is a certain degree of ambivalence in writing about it, about making the familiar strange, turning a different optic onto the everyday. Converting interviews and everyday practices into texts for analysis as well as examining my own reactions and experiences, confuses the subject and object of study. I was drawn to studies of reflexivity and portraiture in qualitative research writing, and the problems associated with including myself in the text. Certain practices of evasion and resistance as described by DeCerteau are difficult areas, since this report is a product of all those who agreed to help as well as myself. Realistic representations of social settings obscure the fact that they are abstractions. Grounding theoretical generalizations on the themes emergent in field notes, interviews, visual data, and memos is autobiographical. Finding codes across the texts I generated while working on my project forced me to think about deeper structures of meaning embedded in creative work. The constants of growing older, the tendency to romanticize one’s personal past and to generalize that experience onto reality through nostalgia seem to be inseparable; everyone has their “good old days”. As I worked on this project, I became acutely aware that qualitative research is as much about the researcher as it is about the site or subjects. I found my own gender, race and class identity present in the data. Some of my collaborator’s patterns of evasion when answering probing questions reflected my own role in the setting. Some responses made me uncomfortable. In the two interviews, I conducted one on one, in both cases I was a white male talking to women, in one instance, to a woman of color. In a formal setting with the tape recorder running, direct questions concerning race and gender in the workplace didn’t result in direct answers. However, in casual settings candid discussion of racial and gender barriers and power differences happens regularly. I am forced to ponder the question why in one setting it’s okay to be candid in another evasive.

3. Dead Malls, Stroller Malls

The two malls couldn’t be more different, City Place is an aging urban mall at the heart of a revitalizing suburban downtown, while White Flint is a formerly posh mall that sits along a postwar shopping strip. In spite of the differences, the role of the display person is essentially the same, enhancing the space. In my observations, what stood out were the conflicted terrains of gender, race, and role in complex social environments, traversed by visual people

negotiating inter-subjective meanings inferred onto commodities. Roles of salesperson, or store owner, stockperson or manager might be horizontal or vertical, but in the blurred boundaries of creative work, building alliances and “bonding” are preformative, when authority is based on solely on expertise in a subjective field.

Everyone knows a dead mall when they see it, but to define it is less clear. Three criteria seem to enter into play, the volume of traffic in the mall, branding level of the stores, and customer base, according to Robin, White Flint and City Place Malls are seen as dead and dying malls, even if the store fronts are almost fully leased.

According to Julie, because of the kind of stores in the mall and age of the clientele, White Flint is dead, “...OK, I think it used to be a fine mall, an upstanding mall, but now it’s totally run down, it’s lost its.....zest....it’s really just seemingly an old mall...the stores are not what they used to be....it was one of the posher malls, but now its just run down ...and they aren’t doing anything to improve it..... but it was an upscale mall... I don’t know what happened...all of a sudden we had PLF, and these little mom and pops come in its strange...I don’t know how long they are going to keep these upstanding stores in...”

Robin has a different view. She thinks White Flint Mall is doing better since more of the storefronts are filled than two years ago, even if the type of stores, volume of the traffic, and age of the customers isn’t the same as what would be found at a regional mall or an exurban stroller mall like Fair Oaks.

Both informants see City Place as dead, the stores aren’t branded upscale, and the clientele is perceived as working class, Julie says, “... City Place never attracted middle class shoppers...” City Place has no major anchors, it’s a mall of discount outlets and mom and pop stores.

Neither mall is a stroller mall; stroller malls are located in the outer edges of suburbia where young families tend to concentrate. I didn’t look at this type of mall in any systematic way for this project, but trips to Fair Oaks did allow for a comparison with the more urban malls that were my focus. Stores at Fair Oaks were coded upscale, mall anchors include Macys, Hecht’s and Lord and Taylor. Between the anchors were shops such as Abercrombie and Fitch, and Hollister’s. Fair Oaks had fewer independent shops than either of the two malls that were the subject of this study.

Pedestrian Cityscapes and Car culture

City place and White Flint are both located in aging suburbs but reflect different conceptions of development. City Place an urban vision, and White Flint a car oriented low-density pattern. City Place is culturally diverse while White Flint is considered white, sometimes even referred to as “White Peoples Mall.”

City Place Mall, located in the former Hecht Company store is a discount mall in a redeveloping inner suburban business district, just outside the DC line. The new Silver Spring includes infill development of commercial spaces, including bookstores shops and a multiplex cinema in what is conceived to become an entertainment district, anchored by the American Film Institute and the new Discovery Headquarters. The revamped commercial district has an Art Deco flavor, the AFI is located in a restored and renovated movie palace, and the streamline style shopping strip on the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road has been restored. The Tastee Diner has been moved from it’s original location to be featured prominently in the newly refurbished downtown Stores and restaurants in the revitalized section are chain stores, including Borders Books, Ben and Jerry’s, Starbucks among others.

People move in out of the new shops. The more expensive establishments are closer to the new development and restored Art Deco buildings, away from city place. The project resembles an Italian piazza, a public space segueing into the private space of the individual shops and eateries. At the new end of the street, I hear more English. I am still one of only a few Caucasians, most shoppers are people of color. I stop in a bistro sit down for a cup of coffee and speak to one of the employees at a new restaurant and she tells me that Sunday is the busiest day, but it was busier before the collage kids went back to school. Bike cops patrol the new streetscape, while loitering teens are pushed out to the bus stop in front of city place. The new Silver Spring is multi-cultural and gentrified, as one of my interviewees said "*they uplifted but kept the same clientele.*" The new urbanist downtown feels old time, with historical references, but in reality it is a duplicate of globalized enclaves everywhere (Smith 1996) the chain stores are outposts of a global consumer culture linked by advertising and the web, relentlessly marching against the local and specific. It is ironic that those localized, specific cultures of resistance become the source for cultural capital that is recycled back into the marketplace.

The cultural landscape of post modernity is flat, clean, crisp and corporate, evoking nostalgia in an a historical stylistic soup, where nothing ever is really new but the mix of elements pulled together from historical references (Jameson 1991). When one goes downtown to the gentrified new urbanist enclaves, one finds a Lucky Jeans Store, a Crate and Barrel, maybe a Hamburger Mary's etc, unique in their market, but standardized, branded nationally and in the case of some merchants, internationally. The revitalized downtown Silver Spring attempts to reproduce in nostalgia the mood and feeling of an old downtown. Mainline flagship stores crowned lively downtown shopping districts, suburban branches being derivative of center city style. The old days in retail meant plenty of mid-level careers in an industry dominated by regional department stores, a feature hardly being reproduced in this post modern pastiche of the past. City Place being a discount mall couldn't be a more striking contrast to the new urbanist project.

At City Place, as I sat in the eatery one afternoon, I noted that the shoppers sitting to my left and in front of me were people of color, non English speaking. I feel like the only white Native English speaker in the mall that afternoon. I see adults and teenagers carrying bags move in and out through the stores looking at merchandise. Some adults are holding the hands of young children, while around me people chat in Spanish and eat fast food. The anchors at City Place include Burlington Coat Factory, Marshalls, and Ross Dress for Less. Unlike Fair Oaks, or even White Flint, shops at City Place are mostly unbranded. Signage stresses value; specialty stores have no clear identity with the exception of shoe outlets.

In contrast, White Flint is located on Rockville Pike with two up market anchors, Bloomingdale's and Lord and Taylor. The mall is surrounded by low-density development built mostly during the 60s and 70s. My respondents describe it as a formerly posh mall that has seen better days. It has a white clientele according to my respondents, an aging clientele. As a neighborhood mall in a strip of office complexes daytime traffic seems to be oriented toward food services.

At lunchtime, I spent time in the eatery and observe patterns of seating, customers that were workers at mall stores often could be seen carrying their food away from the eatery. Many of the diners were workers from the surrounding office buildings. The mall seemed to be less of a destination for shopping than eating. Looking at the front of the mall, the facade is dominated by the marques for restaurants.

4. Cultural workers on a battlefield of desire : contested spaces and meanings

In the department store as well as in the shopping mall setting, the work of display is a negotiated collaboration between management, the designer, and subordinates. Everyone

works in the same space, but the social realities for individuals are very different, depending on background and life experiences. From the mall setting itself to the perceptions of the workers the social space and its meaning is contested terrain.

Power and privilege in a society defined by class, gender, and race seem to over determine social settings and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. A comparison of White Flint and City Place illustrates difference in conceptualizing a public space. At White Flint, the mall strategically placed couches and easy chairs on carpeted areas resembling living rooms. At City Place, management removed benches from public spaces. At City Place, “*Christmas is for children*” with the Santa Set presiding over the eatery, while at White Flint, Santa is relegated to a back aisle, and the center court is reserved for special events and entertainment.

Negotiating the construction of the Santa Set at City Place was an exercise in contested meanings. The food court is at the center of the mall, and a four-story atrium is a very large space demanding large-scale installations. The Santa Set however, combines a garden motif and residential treatment for Santa's chair - a result of conflicting visions of Christmas.

At White Flint, whiteness and white male resentment emerged in the data. During one conversation on the selling floor shortly after the first 2004 presidential debates a white male coworker said, “... *DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO KILL THOSE ARABS*” ...*Kerry is a wimp*”... Jeff says, “*I don't agree with Jackie upstairs, she thinks we can all just get along on peace and love.... we have to kill them if we want to end the war or the Israelis end the terrorism, we or they have to level them, we need to be realists...*”

In an interview conducted with Julia, a visual merchandiser at Bloomingdale's recently entering the industry, a close reading of the transcript reveals a theme of contested terrain in how the space of the shopping mall is used by consumers. She notes that at White Flint, “... *They don't come to shop they come to sightsee, they come to look, people come to go to Dave and Buster's a lot too, ...they want to do that game....kiddy thing...you find a lot of parents, a lot of strollers...a lot of that, the most of that, I guess then the older folks... the older folks come for the restaurants... because the restaurants are pretty good, you see a lot of that...*”

5. Branding and Resistance

Through branding, corporations attempt to control the meanings and images that they project. Workers resist branding through strategies of evasion and outright resistance. Branding extends to the workers; they become the embodiment of the corporate identity. For display folk, evasion and resistance take several forms, outright refusal to more subtle strategies of transgression and coded jokes at the expense of management. As commodification and deskilling increase, opportunities for transgression and resistance decrease. From dress codes to decision making, the interplay between competing agendas of power and subordination are exposed.

Bloomingdale's brand strategy includes a dress code of all black. It was striking that the basic black dress code didn't seem to be just a Bloomingdale's corporate direction, but rather a trend across the entire new service sector. A smile and a personal touch are an embodiment of brand in a service economy, basic black “*takes attention off you and focus it on the customer.*” Hairdressers, food service workers, and retail workers all seem to wear black. At Bloomingdale's, the dress code minimizes difference, we are all co-workers in the branded workplace. Regimented, trained to be friendly, “*outstanding*” an embodiment of New York style, we exude exclusiveness but lose autonomy in a workplace under total surveillance.

In a group interview, Cindy describes how it was in the old days, when visual merchandisers had more agency and control, **Cindy** : “... *That was Brad... that was Brad. see that was when we all did different things at Bloomie's...*”

Cindy: *When we used those red Japanese fans...the regional wanted me to do it just hanging. I said NO WAY. That would just look stupid...he wanted me to change it I refused... and you know, Colin came and he loved it..."*

6. Loss and Recovery : Display just has to come back

Nostalgic recollections of the personal and professional past seem to be recurrent motifs. I was interested in talking mostly with folks who had decades in the business. I was having dinner with Mr. Edwards the evening after thanksgiving discussing the end of this year's season. We had been talking and laughing about work, and I turned on the tape recorder to capture some of our conversation.

Laughing is important in display. Bakhtin in the introduction to Rabelais and his World, writes about the grotesque and mentions the laugh, as does in learning to labor. Laughing is transgressive, a suggestion of inversion and misrule.

In the old days the stores were all about fantasia, Mr. Edwards: *We talked about it already... laugh... in the past it was all about fantasia...it was all about the store not about buying and leaving... that's what those promotions were about...*

Interviewer : *the country promotions at Bloomingdale's?*

Mr. Edwards : *yes, those promotions.... It was all about the store....the experiences of being in the store... now you get a sea of racks... you get what you want and leave... the stores aren't wonderful anymore they are just presentable...*

Mr. Edwards goes on to explain about the loss of autonomy in the department stores. Fun and frivolity are a part of the creative process, something lacking when decision making is centralized ' *not the laughy thing*";

Mr. Edwards : *"I don't think so, not at this time, we used to have creativity, and the creativity isn't at the store level anymore, not the laughy thing, now you have the instruction to put this there, do that this way. It doesn't give you much room to play... before we each had a book but we could nudge it - we could do our own thing"...*

Mr. Edwards goes on to describe the changes in the workplace, and explain that back in the day, *"It was a most romantic time"*

Your mannequin was truly a silent salesperson... now it isn't that important anymore you have a sea of mannequins with no heads all of them painted white... across the nation...and they can barely do that ... they (the mannequins) are on this heavy, heavy bushed steel platforms with no choice about placement. There are no windows anymore so no need for dramatic mannequins any more...that's all over with, gone ...I have to say that was a lovely time, a most romantic time for me

Q : *Do you think it will come back?*

E : *I think it will come back, but when it comes back it going to be just as...because in the 50s...no in the 30s mannequins were all the rage and then mannequins stopped in the 50s and it was all forms, the heads went marching off and they were all forms until the 60s. In Garfinkels, every last window was a headless dressmaker form in front of drapery...that was it. All 23 windows...then in the 70s mannequins came back... maybe they will come back in 2010*

7. Transgression and Respect : Windows Gone Bad

In a consumer culture, the distinction between consumption and production is blurred. Visual merchandisers as aesthetic laborers and producers of cultural artifacts stand at the intersection, embodying the contradiction between production and consumption eminent in the cultural political economy. In a group interview, recurrent themes of transgression and getting respect for hard work stood out in the dialogues. Stories of windows gone bad that had “suits” or consumers on the receiving end of the joke are a standard narrative. In the texts, the recurrent sub-code of unrecognized labor seems to be linked to the dominant theme of transgression.

This interview was actually a conversation around a table after an installation completed the day after Thanksgiving. The site was Booyiemonger’s in Georgetown just around lunchtime. I started the tape in the middle of the conversation. The sound of laughter and the background noise of the sandwich shop interfere with the audibility. Two of the women are married with younger children who do freelance display because of the flexibility. Cindy’s sons are college age and older, Annie is single and works most of the year as a dental technician. Everyone had been in the industry full time at one point, working in department stores. Everyone was white and over 40.

Interviewer : *Jodie told me the Sleeping Beauty Story ... I almost died!!!!*

(The story : an animated Christmas window display at Filenes in Boston that Cindy installed had Prince Charming bending down and kissing Sleeping Beauty; Sleeping Beauty would then pop up and raise her arms. Overnight, the figures slipped down so that Prince Charming was kissing Sleeping Beauty between the legs... in the morning a crowd of customers had gathered around the window laughing uproariously... the store manager and Cindy went to see what the commotion was about and saw what looked like a sexual act between the animated figures)

Jodie : *THAT’S RIGHT!!! LAUGH... you were squeezing your heart pillow so hard... to keep from cracking up... your dad was sitting in the corner...that was the only time he smiled...*

Cindy, Jodie, and Barb : ...laughing (Jodie visited me in the hospital after surgery)

Cindy : ... *then she (sleeping beauty) POPPED UP when Prince Charming Kissed he[r] between the legs!!! WEEEEEEEE.... The shoppers were laughing... and the store manager was SCREAMING ...”DROP THE CURTAINS!!! DROP THE CURTAINS!!!! OH MY GOD... That was SO funny!!*

Jodie : *Sandy and Jackie were losing it when I told them THAT story.....*

The stories people tell often have sexual overtones and the butt of all the humor seem to be either authoritarian figures or customers or maybe both. This story is about a window display of bridal gowns using a floor length mirror and a mannequin. The designers wanted to make the dress look fuller than life by stuffing it with tissue, the figure was positioned to demurely gaze away from the audience outside the glass and into the floor length mirror. The team concentrated on the appearance of the dress in the glass not in the mirror. Nobody saw that the reflection in the looking glass made the mannequin seem to be very, very pregnant. However, a photographer for the local paper did notice, and captured the picture for the front page of the style section.

Cindy : *but Jesus - it was a bride!*

Interviewer : *you mean they stuffed the dress to make it look full?*

Cindy : *yes,*

Jodie : *they wanted to make the dress look full... give it a bell shape...in the reflection in the mirror the mannequin looked pregnant! The Post took a picture of the.... window showing a pregnant bride!*

Cindy : *well.... RJ was only looking at it through the window...not in the mirror!*

Cindy : *it was on the front page of the Post... "Garfinkel`s shows a pregnant bride"*

Laughing

Cindy : *Oh. My. God.....it was so funny! I don't think they got it... it was the reflection...it definitely... absolutely looked pregnant... that display director must have shit himself...*

Jodie : *When was that?*

Cindy : *It must have been the 70s...*

Another genre of story involves animals.

Cindy : *Actually one spring we used yellow canaries in birdcages. In windows ..an Easter thing...they died...the lights fried them!*

Annie : *NO...they Died...laugh...what store was that?*

Cindy : *Morton's. .you remember that store?*

Interviewer : *I thought that was a dime store*

Cindy : *maybe later.. back then it was a real store*

Annie : *in the 1980s?*

Cindy : *They were all over...I just remember the dead birds.. on the floor in the cages and then at the same time, Woodies had Penguins in the windows, when they shit, they bend over. and it comes out like a bullet...they didn't like being in the window. and pooped at the people ...splat on the windows!!! Peoples faces!!!*

Laughing

Jodie : *I remember monkeys in a window...*

In the same dialogues themes centered on respect or validation followed narratives of transgression. Display work isn't just fluff-but collaborative physical labor. Jodie tells a story that emphasizes the stressful nature of the work.

Jodie : *... White Plains store (has the same floor plan as the Bloomie`s at White Flint) has instead of a parking lot.. A gorgeous green field... trees .. A park.. that's a part of the New York State Mental Hospital... the year before when we were doing the France promotion, a trimmer (A display person or window dresser) a Porto Rican guy... went screaming through the main aisle... through the store... and strait up the hill and*

committed himself... they [say] he came back a year later and wanted to do Christmas....

Barb goes on to talk about physically demanding work of doing displays.

Barb : *you worked me like a dog!!!! I don't think I knew fish line from twenty-pound suspension wire..I was clueless*

We were doing twelve-hour days....

8. Conclusions :

New technologies and concentration of ownership have revolutionized the retail industry, as decision making and design have been shifted away from the store level to central offices. Globalized production and just in time delivery make economies of scale more profitable, and capital intensive; living labor servicing dead labor power. The culture of late capitalism is commodified, blending high and low taste cultures, styles, and historical references in a permanent state of the present. It's ironic that even as postmodern culture becomes more aesthetic (Jameson 1991) opportunities for creative work have become scarcer in a heterogeneous landscape of consumerism.

As society changes, some social worlds are lost. Change is a constant, but romanticizing the past is also an expression of nostalgia for one's own youth. Stories of days gone by recapture these lost worlds and hold the promise of a cyclical return. Story telling is a means to create a shared reality of transgression that reverses power relationships between management and the window-dresser, and between customers and workers as creative laborers strive to control their world through talk.

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