

Window Dressing : The Legitimacy and Value of Art Interventions in Vacant Shops

by Christopher Collier, artist & writer

When you see a man with a great deal of religion displayed in his shop window, you may depend upon it, he keeps a very small stock of it within

- Charles H. Spurgeon¹

At the end of 2009 it is estimated that approximately one in six of shop premises across the UK are languishing in a state of vacancy, by this I mean they are truly empty, not just empty of value, of life, but utterly empty, even of the often vacuous goods that normally cluster to fill them. Such a level of vacancy clearly poses a structural threat to the unity and totality of the consumer spectacle that seeks constantly to expand and encompass all arenas of life. These empty shops represent a gaping hole in its veil, in its potential manipulation of the urban environment, for without the illusion of its totality this spectacle is vulnerable. In response a UK government initiative was launched under the professed ideology of regeneration that enfranchised councils to commission artworks to place in the empty shop windows, no doubt expecting decorative and colourful 'wallpaper' to maintaining a conducive shopping ambience. In some cases however it is not the 'wallpaper' that they sought which has been delivered but rather a 'sandpaper' in the form of subversive intervention². The government believed that via this initiative the retail environment was to receive an ambient boost, businesses were getting publicity, artists were getting exposure and sales opportunities, councils getting kudos and invites to openings with free wine and canopies, even Alan Yentob was impressed, 'an ingenious way of bringing art to the people' he proclaimed from the homepage of The Empty Shops Network³. It seemed that everyone was a winner, with such words being bandied about as 'art' and 'the people' who could possibly object? Some malcontents however were not entirely convinced.

Some objected to state intervention in the arts in any shape or form, even as a financial facilitator with no apparent veto upon content. Some complained that the initiative masked a poverty of genuine policy to tackle the recession. They argued that it amounted to a concealment of the desertification resultant from a flight of business out of town centres into suburban wastelands and out-of-town shopping complexes. It was seen by some as a veil for many of the most crude visual symptoms of late capitalism's increasing monopolising and homogenising tendencies. Some saw the art work created as a result as representing a dilution of high quality art and professionalism: artist Bob and Roberta Smith's satirically edged palm reading intervention at the Frieze Projects section of the 2009 Frieze Art fair offered to divine whether the participant's artistic potential was destined for MOMA New York or Woolworths. Those more established artists have been critical, claiming that the initiative is essentially a place for amateurs, that there is a detrimental effect on galleries (and therefore on them) and that it contributes to a general erosion of quality. This is an elitist and market led argument that is the result of the persistent divorce of art from the contexts of everyday life and the fetishization of the gallery space.

¹ Charles Spurgeon *2,200 Quotations: From the Writings of Charles H. Spurgeon : Arranged Topically or Textually and Indexed by Subject, Scripture, and People*, compiled by Tom Carter, Baker Books, 1995

² Asger Jorn & Guy Debord: *Memoires [Memories]*, Copenhagen, Internationale Situationniste 1959 (Guy Debord and Jorn's second experimental book was bound in sandpaper so as to confound its cataloguing by destroying any other books which it was placed next to and was printed at Verner Permind's workshop.

³ www.artistsandmakers.com/emptyshops

Far more serious opposition is that which arises not from an artistic and cultural elitism or protectionism on the behalf of a status quo of gallery represented commercial artists or so-called cultural centres (the term is a tautological in that culture is to be found everywhere and therefore can have no centre) instead it arises from a mistrust of the state's involvement and concerns that artists are being manipulated to paper over the cracks in capitalism's flaking façade. There is a fear that artists are providing a superstructure to drape over the cracks in the economic base. It is an argument given credence by the ubiquitous usage of the terminology of 'cultural industry' by many involved with the initiative and by the insidious metonymy increasingly introduced to covertly replace 'the artist' with the status of 'cultural entrepreneur'. The capitalisation of the art realm since the 80s has been incessant with artists converted gradually into strategically trained professionals who must spend increasing time on career development, self-presentation and re-presentation, the terminology of the cultural entrepreneur gives this process its ultimate expression. 'Young cultural entrepreneurs will often work in run down areas where more traditional businesses fear to tread' claim Charles Leadbeter and Kate Oakley in a report for Demos⁴. This is a dystopian picture that presents the ultimate co-option of the arts into capitalism, where the arts no longer form an avant garde of a new and revolutionary society or an advance party for radical change. Instead they now become the avant garde of consumer capitalism, gentrifying and regenerating – not for social agendas but clearing the way for the occupation of urban space by consumer capitalism.

This may be a negative and polemical portrayal of the empty shops initiative but it must be one that the state and capitalist stake-holders share for otherwise it would seem to make little market sense for them to preside over the ostensibly non-commercial use of high street real estate. In short we are forced to question 'what's in it for them?' Whilst they might believe in the results of a consumer avant garde and the installation of capitalistic décor, these are not necessarily the results that they ultimately may get, there exists a potential gap between theory and actualisation, ideology and everyday life. These are the liminal borderlands of the spectacle that contain an ambivalence that engaged and politically aware artists might potentially exploit, subverting the state's sluggish bureaucratic machinery of cultural hegemony with the light-footed side-step of détournement.

To investigate these potentials further however it is now essential to understand the history of the initiative to place art in empty shop windows. It is a history that has its beginnings in grassroots art practice but which is mediated constantly by the intervention of the state.

Artists have long sought to escape the conventions of traditional artistic space, it is possible to see connections to the 'genre' of artists presenting work in shop windows (if we are define it as such) in the Bloomsbury group's subversive use of farming in order to escape conscription and their subsequent use of farm buildings and local shops as a space in which to show work. If we are to look still further we might even see traces of the practice as far back as the very roots of the avant garde itself in the Nazarene movement and in their rejection of the salon and the Vienna Academy in favour instead of taking up the occupation of the abandoned monastery of San Isidoro in Rome. Abandoned and empty spaces have long been a magnet for artists, as much for their cheap rent as their romantic appeal. Whilst it is true that abandoned and ruinous spaces held, and indeed still hold, a special resonance for artists of a romantic disposition it is likely economic factors have a bigger role to play.

Another important movement in illuminating the history of the art in shop windows

⁴ Charles Leadbeter and Kate Oakley, *The Independents, Britain's new cultural entrepreneurs*, Demos, 1999

initiative can be traced back to May 6, 1935 and the creation of the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) in the United States. Created in order to facilitate economic help to American citizens suffering through the Great Depression it drew upon an artistic community in the US already looking at artistic social interventions across the border in Mexico. They were inspired by the social potential and what could almost be construed as a construction of relational situations found in the 1920s and '30s reappropriation of the Italian Renaissance fresco techniques for social as opposed to religious ends by Mexican muralists. In painters such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Clemente Orozco the US artists had found a model which they could use. Under the direction and financial facilitation of the federal government headed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, artists were paid a wage, effectively converted into a nationalised industry, in order to create employment, stimulate the economy following what came to be called Keynesian principles and produce socially re-enforcing, hegemonic public art works. In this involvement by the state in the form of commissioned artists decoratively and socially intervening in a country hit by economic crisis we find a close parallel to the 2009 UK government policy of funding art in empty, recession hit shops. Whilst the Federal Arts Project created over 5,000 jobs for artists, producing over 225,000 works of art, the UK empty shops initiative has, it has been estimated - though figures are lacking, produced a figure likely to be in excess of 250 projects around the UK during 2009. It is estimated that this amounts to the involvement of at least 2500 artists with the number actually likely to be in way in excess of this as this figure does not include the 40% of projects containing less than 10 artists⁵. The empty shops initiative (in terms of the state intervention), whilst it may not account for all of these projects, has thus far yet to be given the consideration as a cultural phenomenon that it deserves considering its wide-spread nature and scale. It is likely from these figures that most major towns and cities in the UK will have seen some form of art intervention taking place in an empty shop during 2009.

Roosevelt's New Deal for artists might have provided elements in the subtext of state intervention through programmes of public art works in UK but the country also has a history of artistic intervention in disused spaces. In the mid 60s theatre company Centre 42 occupied the Roundhouse, establishing a centre for underground cultural events and in another example throughout the 70s large swathes of low cost and commercially undesirable real estate in Brighton was bought up by small scale enterprises and artists endeavours leading to a cultural renaissance and the transformation of Brighton into an artistic hub. The YBAs of the 90s London scene were adept at reclaiming old spaces such as empty warehouses and shops for studios and gallery space, one example would be City Racing in Kennington, famed for its YBA exhibitions. What stated out as an economic necessity became fashionable by association and much large and far more commercially successful artists (including the YBAs in their latter years) began to cultivate a deliberate and a rather unpleasantly false lo-fi aesthetic. The 2009 Zoo Art Fair took place in the semi-derelict industrial buildings of a 19th century warehouse on the edge of Shoreditch, and the location of art to the market value of many millions of pounds in the midst of an abandoned and vacant space of dereliction appeared perhaps a little contrived. Shoreditch is a good example of the fashionable associations that artists moving into previously abandoned spaces can bring. It is well documented the an influx of artists into an area can have profound and not necessarily positive gentrifying effects. The reuse of abandoned buildings continues right to the very top of the UK art world as testified by that derelict power station transformed into the grand cathedral of recuperated and historicised commercial art tourism, Tate Modern. It is not just large institutions that have employed such tactics however, during 2009 MOMA Cymru in Machynlleth extended its exhibition programme into the derelict and atmospheric old tannery building next door. There have also been many cases of smaller scale studio complexes reoccupying state infrastructure for

⁵ Figures based on estimates from The Empty Shops Network given in Dan Thompson, *Artists in Empty Shops*, www.a-n.co.uk, Oct 2009

creative purposes, for example the recently opened Old Police Station complex in Deptford or Cardiff's Chapter centre that has grown out of converted school.

Despite this long history, these projects have been disparate and disconnected, it is only under the looming shadow of the disastrous 2008/9 global recession that the intervention of state incentives has given the collection of projects coherent form and identifiable patterns have emerged. Since its foundation in 2001 the so called Revolutionary Arts Group, a Sussex base community arts organisation, has made it a policy to utilise vacant shops as a space in which to present artwork. Establishing what it named the Empty Shops Network it has during that time attempted to unify various similar projects into the form of a coherent movement. Due in part to these efforts and its increase in activity (as the number of empty shops increased with the worsening economic situation of early 2009) and also in part to its establishment of a dialogue with the UK government, the government responded by announcing a series of policies with the intention of using art to intervene in vacant commercial premises. During 2009 it could be postulated that the intervention of art in empty shops constituted a genre of practice or a loose movement or trend of working within the UK. The government's incessant and ill-defined soundbites regarding 'the creative industries' assailed the public for the entirety of the Labour decade, as politicians attempted to hijack some electoral advantage by posing with artists whilst simultaneously enacting wide-reaching programmes of hegemonic capture; turning the arts, through funding strategies and criteria, into one of the state's primary weapons of social engineering. In 2009 the state's latest attempt at hijack and capture was enacted by secretary of state for 'communities' Hazel Blears who briefed the media on new government policy to pump £3 million into the mobilisation of an avant garde for consumers, an initiative to conceal and recuperate the more obvious expressions of the capitalist state's failings. Blears claimed

Our ideas for reviving town centres will give communities the knowhow to temporarily transform vacant premises into something innovative for the community – a social enterprise, a showroom for local artists or an information centre – and stop the high street being boarded up⁶

Of course communities already had the 'knowhow', it was bureaucracy and financial disincentives that were stopping them, it was therefore rather the £3 million then was the decisive factor in the mobilisation of these projects. Local government officials, private business, industry leaders and tourism quangos were entrusted to carry out the policy and aside from the £3 million directed towards fifty seven towns and cities, Arts Council England earmarked another £500,000 from its budget specifically to fund projects involving artists interventions in empty shops provided they were seen to comply with the Arts Council agendas. This funding stimulated a significant growth in the number of artist-led projects being devised in conjunction local authorities which attempted to intervene in vacant high street space. Scinting the opportunity of inexperienced competition in the clamour for this particular funding pot, a number of larger charities and non-government organisations began to make moves at occupying empty shops with a resultant distortion of the original intent and an increasingly organised, professionalised and market influenced model emerging within competing organisations, existing concepts often shoehorned inappropriately into the context of vacant retail premises, drawn in by the prospect of funding.

Across the nations of the UK there have been multiple examples of myriad projects with diverse methodologies and varying outcomes in terms of success. Assorted examples included in central England *The Corner Shop* in Wolverhampton, *The Market Cinema*, *Artspace*, *Void* and the *Shop Front Theatre*, all in Coventry and *Frost* in Birmingham. In the west of England examples included *Malvern Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, *art360*,

⁶ Hazel Blears, given in Dan Thompson, *Artists in Empty Shops*, www.a-n.co.uk, Oct 2009

Windows on Art and *Static3* in Hereford and *Plymouth Slack Space*. In the east of England interventions included *The Shop* and *Changing Spaces* in Cambridge, *Slack Space* in Colchester and *Suffolk Artists*. In the south of England some of the great many projects included *Gallery This Way* and *Re:Space* in Hampshire, *Limbo Arts* in Margate, *iCandy Arts* in Hastings, *B&B Project Space*, Folkestone and *Creative Cabins* in Poole. In London projects have taken place from *Camden Town Unlimited* and *Supine Studios*, Hackney in the north to *Bigger Picture Gallery*, Crystal Palace and *I Love Peckham Shop Windows* in the south along with *Quest For Paradise Arts* in Wandsworth in the west. Even in the heart of central London in *Shop at 34* and *Watch This Space* in Covent Garden art interventions have come to occupy new space that whilst it is in an area that is traditionally a centre of arts activity also comprises some fairly highly valued real estate. In the north of England the *Sheffield Empty Quarter*, *Triangle Shopping Centre*, Manchester and the *Secret Gallery*, Morecambe provide examples. In Scotland the *Peebles Empty Shop Initiative* is one amongst many project that have taken place and in Wales *Do I have to paint you a picture?* in Cardiff is likewise an example of one amongst several initiatives.

In such a multitude of examples we find both positive uses of space in which artists have détourned the consumer arena towards progressive and fulfilling realisations and yet we also find negative examples in which art has been recuperated into the agendas of government bureaucracy and capitalist décor. One such example is Cheltenham where vacant shop fronts were covered over with decorative murals and advertising. This is an example of the dangers inherent in the scheme: artistic input has clearly been employed here for merely decorative and capitalistic purposes, a stimulating force for the consumption of space. Artists are exploited and even the traders themselves are not happy: one hotelier told the Cheltenham Echo that the place looked like a 'car crash town'⁷. We are reminded of J G Ballard controversial examination into the side effects of what he defined as the 'Death of Affect', the loss of emotional engagement and alienation of modern living, through the symbol of the car in his 1973 novel *Crash* where one of his most famous characters describes a car crash as 'the only real experience I had been through for years'⁸. Martin Quantock, chair of the town's Chamber of Commerce exposed his poverty of imagination and the true motives in endorsing the project bemoaning the fact that

At the moment there is an obligation for landlords to keep vacant units safe but nothing to ensure they look attractive...we are left with unattractive frontage⁹

Members of the public however were less impressed by the décor, commenting on the initiative:

Soon the High Street will look like one Xmas long present wrapped up by eye sore signs that will end up vandalised with graffiti [sic].¹⁰

And 'is this is what's known as "Papering Over The Cracks?"¹¹. It is an example of how the fears of those who questioned this initiative can come to be realised.

⁷ *Empty Shops could be Fronted by Murals*, This is Gloucestershire, June 22, 2009, <http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/news/shops-fronted-murals/article-1094858-detail/article.html>

⁸ JG Ballard, *Crash*, London, Johnathan Cape, 1973, pg 32

⁹ *Empty Shops could be Fronted by Murals*, This is Gloucestershire, June 22, 2009, <http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/news/shops-fronted-murals/article-1094858-detail/article.html>

¹⁰ *Empty Shops could be Fronted by Murals*, This is Gloucestershire, June 22, 2009, <http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/news/shops-fronted-murals/article-1094858-detail/article.html>, comment from 'help the traders, Chet', 22-Jun-2009 10:51

¹¹ *Empty Shops could be Fronted by Murals*, This is Gloucestershire, June 22, 2009, <http://www.thisisgloucestershire.co.uk/news/shops-fronted-murals/article-1094858-detail/article.html>, comment from 'Mal, Local', 22-Jun-2009 10:08

Not all negative examples of intervention are as obviously exploitative as the Cheltenham project. Reading provides a model that is fairly typical of the majority of projects and yet in many subtle ways demonstrates its hegemonic and recuperating nature. The town's *Art Windows* project saw arts organisation Jelly collaborate with Reading UK Community Interest Company (CIC) to fill vacant premises with temporary art interventions. Suzanne Stallard, Jelly owner, said:

When jelly first started we used lots of empty spaces and filled them with beautiful images – it's how it originated really. We are going to exhibit work by local artists and people who have a connection with Reading.¹²

Perhaps there was a misunderstanding in the transcription of the press release, but any 'art's organisation' that proclaims to have an 'owner' must be drawn in to serious question as a suitable actor in this initiative. Also the conflation of art with 'beautiful images' is incredibly retrograde, insulting and an inherently conservative and shallow appraisal of art. Having people with such attitudes running these initiatives is precisely where the danger of the scheme lies and why so many have called the project in its entirety into question. Also referring to the Reading project, Business Improvement District manager at Reading UK CIC, Guy Douglas, said:

Empty shops don't look good and they are not the nicest neighbours for the businesses next to them. This is a really appealing proposition to estate agents and it is great publicity for the artists.¹³

Here again the true hegemonic intentions are exposed, there is no place in the mind-set of such people for genuine artistic expression, their's is a retrograde, archaic conception of art that still sees its place in the salons and palaces of the European aristocracy, a decorative signifier synonymous with wealth and power. The concept of such world views is that art signifies wealth and as such gentrifies and lifts areas of dereliction. His naked assertion of an 'appealing prospect for estate agents' should leave the artists of that particular project under no illusions as to their place in the apparatus of capture. This is what artist Karen Hilliard when talking about a similar project taking place in Stroud called 'helping the feel of the town'¹⁴. These Reading exhibitions, once in place, must be able be vacated within 48 hours making it abundantly clear, if it was not so already, where the priorities of those facilitating the project lie. These are the dangers that any artist undertaking such a project must guard against.

Despite such examples of exploitative and hegemonic capture, there have also been positive initiatives. In Peckham the I Love Peckham Shop Windows saw thirty artists creating original artworks in the windows of local take-aways, charity shops and pubs, drawing culture away from the safe and complacent established localities of central London and out into areas in which culture has a far more 'grassroots' complexion¹⁵. The artworks in this example were very much engaged with their surroundings, being largely site specific, and included an encouraging mix of emerging and established artists from across the UK and Europe. Curated, by Emily Druiff, and yet still retaining elements of democratic engagement the initiative provided positive models of collaboration between a community and academia, a partnership which went a long way to preventing it being hijacked for by agendas of either government or business. Born out of a collaboration

¹² *'Art Window' plan for empty shop fronts*, Get Wokingham, Oct 28, 2009, http://www.getwokingham.co.uk/lifestyle/s/2059788_art_window_plan_for_empty_shop_fronts

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/news/video?videoId=99890>

¹⁵ *Peckham Shop Windows Become Galleries For Arts Festival*, 06 August 2007, <http://www.culture24.org.uk/art/art49675>

between Camberwell College of Arts (University of the Arts London) and Southwark Council it saw critically engaged creative interventions of a high quality relating to their space and the community of which they were a part.

Another successful example of how to avoid the pitfalls of such a project could be seen in Cumbria and the Arcade Arts initiative in Carlisle which recently hosted an Empty Shops Symposium. Instigated collaboratively between the Cumbria Network and Freerange Artists, the event brought together by artist Caroline Dalton, instigator of the Arcade project in Carlisle, included input from planners, councillors and speakers such as Dougald Hine from Space Makers and Paul Kingsnorth author of 'Real England'¹⁶. The project aimed to go beyond the presentation of work alone and to initiate a critical debate surrounding the use of empty spaces and their connection to the wider campaign to defend the distinctive character of UK town centres. In Cumbria alone projects utilising empty spaces have included *Devonshire Arcade* in Penrith, new spaces in *Whitehaven*, and *Arcade Arts* in Carlisle.

In Wales two particularly successful examples of the use of empty shops that occurred early in the current economic crisis and outside of the influence of the Empty Shops Network were Blaengar's *Far, Far Away* in Aberystwyth and the *Nutopia: Exploring the Metropolitan Imagination* conference Cardiff. *Far, Far Away* saw artist group Blaengar initiate a site specific intervention in an empty shop that saw a relational performance installation unfold through an interaction with local school children¹⁷. The work achieve a difficult balance of critically engaged, high quality art with an innovative, cross-disciplinary and site-specific intervention in the vacant shop space, the work was participatory, engaged, relational and indeed educational without being didactic, rather achieving its ends through experiential effect. It was in my view an excellent model of how such a project might be carried out successfully, utterly avoiding the hegemonic and capitalistic agendas that lay traps for similar interventions.

Nutopia: Exploring the Metropolitan Imagination, was an international conference held in an empty shop space in Cardiff Arcades and organised by artist Jennie Savage as part of her artist in residence *Arcades Project* with the aid of Welsh public arts organisation Safle. *Nutopia* was an inspirational cross-disciplinary event, deconstructing boundaries between town planners and artists, activists and architects, sociologists, regeneration agencies and academics in order to create a compelling new conversation on the 21st Century City. With input from international speakers from universities and agencies across the world, ideas flourishing in Cuba, San Francisco, Paris, Cairo and Cardiff were compared and discussed. The symposium explored ways in which we can not merely decorate or window-dress our urban spaces but reinvent them in revolutionary ways, challenging the idea that city centres are purely spaces of consumption. Instead the three day event looked at possibilities for non-economic exchange and examined tensions between resistance and commodification and how this impacts the personal lives of citizens. Exploring the creation and ownership of cities in the face of privatisation and the language of regeneration the symposium looked beyond physical space, exploring place as a perceptual landscape informed by a linguistic architecture. The programme included presented papers, practitioner-led discussion, a range of workshops, events and encounters, ultimately producing a publication to accompany the conference¹⁸. Having attended the symposium myself I can vouch first hand for the success of the event and to the quality and value of the cross-discipline discussions and presentations. Whilst Safle's budgetary backing no doubt facilitated to some extent the scope of this event, ultimately the

¹⁶ Adrian Lochhead, *Empty Shops Symposium*, Carlisle, Nov 11, 2009, <http://www.edenarts.co.uk/empty-shops-symposium-carlisle/>

¹⁷ <http://www.blaengar.org/page20.htm>

¹⁸ www.arcadesproject.org

symposium came about through the efforts, imagination and aspiration of lead artist Jennie Savage. It is a shining example of the truly ambitious and innovative events that can utilise empty shops in genuinely revolutionary ways when such projects are artist led and do not submit to a recuperation by government or commercial interests. Instead the vacant shop space was détourned and utilised in the discussion and creation of events that actually challenged and interrogated the spectacular hegemony of consumer capitalism rather than merely re-enforcing it.

If such potentials and also such dangers exist, and we have seen that they do and the circumstances in which they manifest, it is therefore essential to interrogate the very ambivalent and potentially controversial implications of the intervention of art within the context of vacant shops and their window spaces. In order to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion as to whether ultimately the placement of art in shop windows can be seen as a progressive project or a dangerous form of hegemonic capture to will be necessary to examine in detail the theoretical implications and context for such an intervention. It is such an investigation that I will now attempt.

The eyes are the window of the soul, or so claims the age old cliché in an archaic linguistic turn which presupposes the existence of an inherent soul that might be gasped if only we could look through to the heart, to the essence of things. In a similar way it might be stated that the shop windows are the guardians, the gaping gateways into the soulless decentred dispersal of late consumer capitalism. The shop window is a unique space, and whilst it has been extended inwards into the constructed ambiance of retail environments and outwards into advertising space and beyond, it remains a focus, a lens to look through, to stare capitalism in the face. It is an arranged and constructed space, an architecture, a situation, a surface without depth, a promise made to be broken. In the intensified and falsified arena of the shop window we find the ultimate reified concentration of consumer culture in within physical space. As advertisement, brand and marketing message manipulations create situations constructed to impact upon consciousness and unconscious alike, re-presented, multiplicitous, unrealised potentialities interject themselves between and within our very thoughts through ubiquitous screen exposure and the ceaseless hum of consumer ambiance. Much like as in the words of Georges Duhamel, as made famous by Walter Benjamin, we can no longer think what we want to think but instead 'thoughts have been replaced by moving images'¹⁹. Rather we are drugged on a super-addictive cocktail of false choices causing us to seek out, with the desperation of junkies pursuing a cultural hit, that 'spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence ... which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a 'star'.²⁰ The shop window is become analogous to the screen, the brittle surface upon which imagery dances and faithless promises are posed. This is not the computer screen of web 2.0 that invites our input, however superficially. This is the cinema screen, the television screen, the one way screen, a deafening monologue that broadcasts directly into the consciousness of our urban space twenty four hours a day.

The key word in Duhamel's observation is 'spectacle', what Duhamel described in 1930 was a startlingly prescient prognosis for the spectre that would come to haunt the late 20th century: the spectre of consumerism. Benjamin himself had faith in the almost messianic potential of moving images to deliver us from the fetishised objects of commodity capitalism as manifest through art²¹. He saw a way through the of the maze of arcades for

¹⁹ Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future*, Paris, 1930, p. 52.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction)*, 1936.

Baudelaire's flâneur²². The arcades were forerunners of today's ambient, constructed retail environments; regrettably the flâneur's detached observation was also to be developed in time and to become omniscient as every citizen grew to be a detached observer of their own re-presented life. Whilst Benjamin's observations proved seminal in assessing the culture of the 20th century West, it was Duhamel that was to be vindicated as the disruptive promise of the moving image was recuperated by capitalism, its threat embraced, its revolutionary potential inoculated and its power pressed into the service of advertprop.

We find echoes of the concept of commodity fetishism in which shop windows indulge and which Benjamin describes in reference to the work of art as the 'aura' in far earlier descriptions. Long before Benjamin claimed the moving image's potential to emancipate us from this 'aura' and indeed even pre-dating Marx's theories on commodity fetishism, we have Gogol's *Overcoat*²³. In a classic example of the illusory desire displayed in shop windows Gogol's browbeaten office clerk Akaky seeks respite from his drear world as a copyist in the false promises of consumer goods (the prized overcoat). The promise of the coat is fallacious, the spell is broken and Akaky succumbs to the alienation of his urbanistic décor and the banal repetition of his copyists life. He can not escape reproduction through consumerism, the reproduction is merely deferred. His enemy is not so much poverty as boredom.

The Overcoat may have provided one of the earliest articulations of the alienating consumer spectacle but it is not until the late 20th century, as the subject and subjectivity dissolved into a postmodern fragmentation of dissolute dispersal, that the seduction of the object was complete. It is within the hyperreal wonderland of simulated simulacra, the theatrical stage or cinema screen of the shop window, that this spectacular presentation finds itself manifest. The citizen is seduced into simulated reality – a hyperreality as described by Baudrillard²⁴ – the speed and amalgamation of global imagery and sign networks grows so comprehensive that reality itself 'dies out' leaving instability and vacuum²⁵. Like the hyperreal casinos of Las Vegas described by Umberto Eco²⁶ that exist in a dreamlike unreality, so the shop window re-presents an 'improved' reality back at us, one that has been 'recuperated' in a Situationist sense²⁷ and repackaged as commodity. The world of the shop window is become what Eco describes as 'the authentic fake'²⁸.

Still earlier than Duhamel, another precursor to this postmodern hyperreality, Marcel Duchamp, was aware of the spectacular nature of the shop window when he spoke of

hiding the coition through a glass pane with one or many objects of the glass window. The penalty consists in cutting the pane and in feeling regret as soon as the possession is consummated²⁹.

This is a description evokes the disillusion of Gogol's Akaky upon the consummation of his possession of the overcoat with its innate broken promises and yet it is remarkably similar in many ways to the endless repetition of desire inherent in the description presented of 'the spectacle' in that most famous theory of its articulation, that of Guy Debord and the

²² *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin's final, unfinished work

²³ Nikolai Gogol, *The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965, first published 1842

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Precession of Simulacra*, in *Media and Cultural Studies : Keywords*, Durham & Kellner, eds

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, Verso (1995)

²⁶ Umberto Eco, *Faith In Fakes: Travels In Hyperreality*, Picador 1987

²⁷ Recuperation: 'To survive, the spectacle must have social control. It can recuperate a potentially threatening situation by shifting ground, creating dazzling alternatives- or by embracing the threat, making it safe and then selling it back to us' - Larry Law, from *The Spectacle- The Skeleton Keys*, a *Spectacular Times* pocket book.

²⁸ Umberto Eco, *Faith In Fakes: Travels In Hyperreality*, Picador 1987

²⁹ Marcel Duchamp, Neuilly, 1913, from Marcel Duchamp's *L'Infinifif*, a collection of notes for his Large Glass.

Situationist International. Debord stated that 'in a society of the spectacle, everything is image and all we seem to have left are references to other references' – this is hyperreality. It is the Situationist International that connects Gogol, Baudelaire, Duchamp, Duhamel and Benjamin with the postmodern theory of Baudillard, Eco and Bourriaud. Debord defines the spectacle as 'capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image'³⁰. This recalls the Marxian concept of capital as dead labour but here we find the Marxian analysis no longer holding fast, poverty is replaced by poverty of experience, dead labour is replaced by dead time³¹.

Spectacular time, the commodification of time itself, is found in the units of leisure promised in the voyeuristic flânerie of window shopping. Window shopping is almost the modern equivalent of the passive resistance found in that other famous copyist of 19th cent literature, Bartleby and his famous line 'I would prefer not to'³². However, as for Bartleby, this passivity is a strategy of suicide. Bartleby's refusal to copy the documents as instructed is a refusal of replication but one which is achieved through a further repetition, a linguistic repetition. This is what Deleuze calls a formula³³, an *ameaningful* (as opposed to meaningless) subversion of language beyond the territory of communication. In this way Bartleby's language becomes reminiscent of Dada and Brutist poetry, compare his rejection of meaningful linguistic convention with Hugo Ball's cry to

give up writing second hand ... accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use'³⁴

his rejection of established uses of language is potentially revolutionary, an idea recognised in Dada but also again in the work of the SI. Language as a seat of ideology was an idea that the situationists took from Dada, stating that a critique of the old world could be posed in the language of this world, but turned against itself. It was a belief that the new language of revolution must come about from a revolution in the use of language. The process by which this was often done was through the classic Situationist technique of *détournement*, a technique that again sees the SI standing at the cross roads of the modernist avant gardes such as Dada and the postmodern theorists of the late 20th century, between the Dada collage and the postmodern appropriation, between the linguistic power discourses of Nietzsche and Foucault we find a situationist language:

The critique of the dominant language, the *détournement* of it, is going to become a permanent practice of the new revolutionary theory ³⁵

Like Bartleby however, Dada and ultimately even to an extent the SI could be said to have failed in the very fact of their insistence upon refusing ideological structures. Their refusal of *all* static ideologies and subsequent conviction in not posing models of replacement for the structures that they challenged merely left a passivity at the heart of the strategy. Just as Gogol's Akaky could not escape the repetitive banality of life through consumption, so

³⁰ Guy Debord *La Société du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)*, Chapter 1 *Separation Perfected*, section 34, Editions Buchet-Chastel, Paris, 1967

³¹ 'vivez sans temps mort' ('live without dead time') – anonymous situationist inspired graffiti, Paris, 1968

³² Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, Putnam's Magazine, 1853. The novelette, by American author Melville (1819–1891) depicts Bartleby, a scriviner who begins to refuse to carry out tasks for his employer with the stock phrase 'I would prefer not to'. Eventually his passive resistance to authority results in his dismissal, refusal to leave the office and subsequent arrest. Ultimately he dies in prison, refusing food with the same phrase 'I would prefer not to'.

³³ Gilles Deleuze, *Bartleby, ou la formule* In: *Deleuze. Critique et Clinique*. Paris: Éditions Minuit, 1993, pg. 89-114

³⁴ Hugo Ball in Rudolf E. Kuenzli *The Semiotics of Dada Poetry*, Stephen C. Foster and Rudolf E. Kuenzli, *Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt*, Madison, Wis, 1979, pg 67

³⁵ Mustapha Khayati, *Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary*, Internationale Situationniste #10, Paris, March 1966

Bartleby's refusal to engage is likewise no solution. That which is not explicitly radical is implicitly conservative. Passivity is no escape from the repetition of the spectacle, its décor conspires to produce situations of such profound alienation that they become conducive to suicide³⁶, and though suicide is a subversive act, revolution is to be preferred³⁷. Through the re-presentation of increasingly banal situations and the cultural poverty of objects the spectacle ultimately contains the seeds of its own weakness, its weakness is however concealed from us via the all encompassing diffusion of its power: this is not an epistemological 'control over', this is a far more ontological form of control, one which derives from within³⁸. It poses the question, how might one seize power when power is now diffuse?

'The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images' claimed Debord³⁹, hinting presciently at the diffusion of power that was to occur under the consumer relations of Neoliberalism. The power of the spectacle lies not in the objects themselves, nor in the imagery that we glimpse through the shop window, but instead in the relations that it creates between people, in the structure, the grid, the connections that hold us like Sloterdijk's foam⁴⁰. But if it is in the relations that we are held, as the situationists recognised in their *détournement* of language, then surely perhaps our best hope of escape comes from striking at these very relations, using the spirit of *détournement* and insinuating ourselves in the cracks at the edges of the spectacle, just as it has insinuated itself into every dimension of our lives. If the potential solution lies in the battle for this space of relation, then our weapon must be, as the SI recognised, the creation of situations. Where we find the fetishized art work in servitude of the spectacle we may seek to *détourn* the space, *détourn* the art object, reject the traditional art space and instead strike at the heart of the spectacular environment. This has interesting implications for shop windows as a space for the acting out of artistic relations. Drawing on Surrealism's avocation of a refusal of separation resulting in a unitary experience, this desire to create environments and a unification and reconciliation of Lacan's *umwelt* and *innenwelt*⁴¹ found its most charismatic expression in Chtcheglov's 'houses where one cannot help but love', where each person lives in their own 'personal cathedral'⁴². It is an idea that went on to be formalised in the Letterist concept of unitary urbanism which attempted

the study and negation of the relationship between the material world and its subjective experience. Emotions, desires, and experiences of all sorts differ according to the architecture of a space and the arrangements of colours, sounds, textures, and lighting with which it is created⁴³.

Unitary urbanism, and its development psychogeography, derived from the situationists' boredom with the alienating urban space 'not made for them, but without them and

³⁶ Unattributed, *Decor and the Spectators of Suicide*, Internationale Situationniste #10, Paris, March 1966

³⁷ 'Up till now surviving has prevented us from living. This is why much is to be expected of the increasingly obvious impossibility of survival, an impossibility that will become all the more obvious as the glut of conveniences and elements of survival reduces life to a single choice: suicide or revolution' *Banalités de base (Basic Banalities)* Part 1, Internationale Situationniste #7, Paris, April 1962

³⁸ Scot Lash, *Power after Hegemony: Cultural Studies in Mutation?* From the journal *Theory Culture Society* 24(3) 2007

³⁹ Guy Debord *La Société du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)*, Chapter 1 *Separation Perfected*, section 4, Editions Buchet-Chastel, Paris, 1967

⁴⁰ Peter Sloterdijk *Sphären III – Schäume, Plurale Sphärologie*, (Spheres III), Suhrkamp, 2004.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *Some reflections on the Ego* in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, transl. by Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006

⁴² Ivan Chtcheglov, *Formulary for a New Urbanism*, Internationale Situationniste #1 (Paris, June 1958), orig.1953

⁴³ Saide Plant *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, Routledge, London, 1992, pg 57

against them'⁴⁴ and was revolutionary in its essentially postmodern decentring and diffusal of the art work into the realm of life and relational space. It was a development that would lead ultimately to the 1990s theories of Nicolas Bourriaud and Relational Aesthetics⁴⁵. Some of the more radical situationists in the theoretical wing of the movement such as Vaneigem saw the need for the total dissolution of art; a cessation of art as a separate and specialised activity, instead seeking an integration of the artistic and poetic into everyday life. He was to claim that

People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth⁴⁶

To go beyond art and bring art into the realm of everyday life - superseding art, abolishing not only its fetishization but the very notion of its specialised activity and space so as to integrate creativity into the fabric of everyday life was Vaneigem's intention. 'We are artists only insofar as we are no longer artists: we come to fulfill art' was a claim made in situationist literature⁴⁷. The intention of bringing art into the realm of the everyday manifested itself in the subsequent expansion of performance art, movements such as fluxus, conceptual and sound art and the general transformation of artistic practice since the late 1960s. It was a current of practice that perhaps found its most coherent latter day expression in Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics defined as

a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space⁴⁸

In the situations and relations created by relational art Bourriaud hoped for the production of

intersubjective encounters. Through these encounters, meaning is elaborated *collectively*, rather than in the space of individual consumption⁴⁹

This however had been the great hope of Benjamin for the collective phenomenological situations produced by cinema, a hope that was to prove vain as cinema went on in the repetition through more and more extreme forms of presenting 'the spectacle of the end of the world' and not as Vaneigem had wished to work towards, 'the end of the world of the spectacle'⁵⁰. A relational unity of experience had been a concept that had manifested in artistic practices through folk traditions, games and performances and was also to be found in the medieval carnivals and mystery plays. In the romantic period the creation of situations found an expression in Wagner's attempts at the creation of a 'total art work' (Gesamtkunstwerk) crossing disciplines for a unity of phenomenological effect and an immersive, collective environment. The Gesamtkunstwerk was championed by Baudelaire, Debord however denounced Wagner's 'aesthetic synthesis' as 'futile'⁵¹, seeing theatre as a manifestation of the spectacle (in French 'spectacle' also means theatre) disliking the totality of the work that, unlike Brecht's Epic Theatre, concealed its theatricity. In the total

⁴⁴ Attila Kotanyi & Raoul Vaneigem *Elementary Programme of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism, Internationale Situationniste* 6, Aug 1961

⁴⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: la presses du réel, 2002

⁴⁶ Raoul Vaneigem *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Donald Nicholson-Smith translation, Rebel Press, 2003

⁴⁷ Unattributed, *Questionnaire*, Internationale Situationniste #9, 1964

⁴⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: la presses du réel, 2002, pg. 113

⁴⁹ Ibid pg 17-18

⁵⁰ Raoul Vaneigem given in *The Realization and Suppression of Situationism*, Bob Black, The Journal of Unconventional History, 1994

⁵¹ Guy Debord, *Architecture and Play*, Potlatch 20, in Potlatch 1954-57, presented by Debord, Paris: Gallimard 1985

art work he perceived the totality of the spectacle reflected in microcosm. Indeed the relational works of the late 20th century were to draw away from this totality and its implied totalitarianism - the supremacy of romantic artistic genius. Instead they drew upon new models of social interaction and creative production as manifested in new media and the internet. In a similar fashion, relational art often sought a democratisation of the creative process. Bourriaud was to claim that

the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist⁵²

Critics however have questioned the professed democracy of relational practice, perhaps drawing into question just how far from the Wagnerian creation of situations it has truly come, the artist is still the instigator, the agent provocateur at work in the manipulation of situations. Indeed the artist's techniques have been recuperated by consumer capitalism into the creation of rooms more conducive to consumption than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but shop. The techniques proposed for the liberation of the environment from boredom can as easily be turned to the spectacular manipulation of consumption. As is often the case, we find the solution and the problem more intimately entwined than we might imagine, what can be détourned can be recuperated also.

If then, art is revolutionary or it is nothing, how then are we to progress if even the revolutionary can be commodified? The situationists were acutely aware of this danger, more so perhaps than any other avant garde of the 20th century. The very fact of their historicisation leaves them vulnerable to recuperation. Their resistance to this process was dogged and fierce, when asked at a presentation of their ideas at the London ICA in 1961 what was 'Situationism'? Guy Debord stormed out, announcing, in French, 'We're not here to answer cuntish questions'⁵³. We are reminded of Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to', a refusal to engage on the terms of the enemy. 'Situationism' it was claimed was a term 'obviously devised by antisituationists'⁵⁴.

All of this leaves us with an interesting dilemma: whether we should refuse this engagement on capitalist terms or whether we should infiltrate the territory of the capitalist aesthetic for progressive intent by means of détournement. On the issue of shop windows as a legitimate space for artistic activity, it is a question of their being a territory of the spectacle left vacant by its own vacuousness. The empty shops are the naked face of the spectacle, frayed and crumbling at the edges, shaken by a crisis in confidence in capitalism. This crisis has in many cases resolved itself in artworks that have come to haunt this liminal space at the fringes of spectacular society, in many ways ghostly inversions of the consumer goods that they have replaced, potentially inviting those very intersubjective encounters that are the inverse of spectacular mediated relations. The problem arises in the question of whether these artworks are jamming themselves into the cracks, breaking apart the spectacular façade, or rather whether they are merely masking its bankruptcy, quite literally window dressing its visible failures.

The current vogue for placing art in shop windows lies in this incredibly difficult space: resourced as a state initiative, should it be seen as a subversion and disruption of state resources against themselves or merely a hegemonic propping up of the state's spectacular machinery? The result of this difficulty means that the initiative can only be judged valid and successful if artists can somehow side-step the clear hegemonic intentions of the

⁵² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: la presses du réel, 2002, pg. 13

⁵³ Guy Debord, quoted in *The Realization and Suppression of Situationism*, Bob Black, The Journal of Unconventional History, 1994

⁵⁴ *Definitions, Internationale Situationniste #1*, June 1958

schemes patrons. This can potentially be achieved by drawing upon the avant garde legacy bequeathed to us, utilising Dada's anti-commodity aesthetic, its confounding of understanding and interpretation. The propagation of an alternative to spectacular discourse might be attempted, to not merely re-present the consumer culture of conventional retail space through an art market place or a spectacle of distraction or decoration. We must draw upon the Surrealist tactics of arresting juxtaposition, the propositions of unitary urbanism and relational aesthetics in order to create spaces of alternative social relation. We must evoke the resistant language of Bartleby and Debord, the détournement of SI into the subversion of the urban environment, that décor that enframes the streets of our towns and cities. If we subvert the shop window, creating a reoccupation of the consumer arena by the creative forces of both art and un-mediated everyday life, we may achieve a subversion of the spectacular intentions of capitalist space, an occupation. Even if sanctioned by the state, once we are aware of this danger, this merely increases the opportunity for subversion, détournement the enemy's ideological and hegemonic weapons back upon itself. Simultaneous to the détournement of spatial arenas we might use this placement of art as a method of extracting it from the market place in which it finds itself increasingly tightly gripped: removing it from the art market by placing it literally in the market place of our market towns. This is a space that allows the work to fall between public art, commissioned intervention, graffiti and protest. It can also be a force for localism, disruption and a form of resistance to the monopolising 'slash and burn' spatial strategies towards town planning favoured by late capitalism as it strips our towns of heterogeneity and life. It also potentially presents a direct challenge to urban-centricity and centralising London focused tendencies of cultural presentation. This is because the works of the current UK shop windows initiative are largely dispersed throughout market towns or in economically declining industrial centres, they are to be found in the likes of Morecambe, Coventry, Colchester, Sheffield, Corby, Boston or Blackpool. This can be an installational form of détournement, a postmodern manifestation of the Dada montage or the situationist text, it contains the potential of a revolutionary reappropriation of material in the form of space itself along with its inherent signifiers, transforming it into a tool of critique.

We can see therefore that there exists a potential for progressive interventions but that we must be cautious, guarding at all times against the danger of recuperation. Martin Heidegger states when discussing the technological commodification of reality, quoting Friedrich Hölderlin in his *The Question Concerning Technology*: 'where danger is grows The saving power also'⁵⁵. It is within this ambiguity that art has become able to infiltrate the world of the shop window. Much as the situationists infiltrated the urban space utilising the dérive and détournement, today the recuperation of window display might be inverted, detoured. It was that inspirational proto-situationist Ivan Chitchevlov who stated:

Vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors⁵⁶

We might add vacant shop windows to the list.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Hölderlin *Poems and Fragments* trans. Michael Hamburger, Uni of Michigan, 1966, quoted from Martin Heidegger *The Question Concerning Technology*, from *Basic Writings* Ed. David Krell, New York, 1993

⁵⁶ Ivan Chitchevlov *Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau (Formulary for a New Urbanism)* from *Internationale Situationniste #1* Paris, June 1958