

The Third Place

In his interview the dramaturgic specialist Christian Mikunda describes the concept of the “third place” as an essential approach in the current design of shopping malls as well as museums. Such places replace the “good old places” of the past and today work with strategies such as “mood management” and are often designed to contribute as landmarks to today’s cities. According to Mikunda the significant increase of “media literacy” is one of the reasons for the merging of cultural and economic interests with the methods of the avant-garde. The account he gives on those developments at the outset of the 21st century provides an important context to the phenomena encountered in the TAKEOVER.

Hirsch: Art institutions worldwide—particularly museums, exhibition halls, etc.—have undergone a distinct change over the last two decades. Newly built and renovated facilities, improvements in presenting and facilitating the encounter with art, professionalization of services and marketing have led to—in some cases impressive—increases in the number of visitors. The Tate Modern and the venues of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation are prominent examples of an “art industry” as part of the much larger media industry. But are these art institutions—to the extent that they deal with contemporary art—now being abandoned by their artists in droves because there is just no advantage in declaring oneself an “artist” anymore?

Mikunda: On the contrary. I actually have the feeling that artists find all these facilities at which art can be exhibited and that have been made much more appealing than they were before to be increasingly attractive. The phenomenon you address is very interesting, and refers not only to places of artistic presentation but also to a certain type of semi-public, staged venue. In America, there is the concept of “the third place.” An American sociologist coined this term that originally had to do with the “good old places”: the corner tavern, the neighborhood barber shop, etc. He complained that these good old places didn’t exist anymore, only to discover 10 years later that they had been replaced by new places. This function was taken over by the shopping centers and also by the—staged and endowed with an added emotional quality—department stores, as well as museums and galleries.

The “first place” is the home one has decorated to one’s liking, the individualized dwelling, a concept of the 18th/19th century. The residence as a place of reflection about oneself and of self-expression. The “second place”—and this was not invented until the 20th century—is the designed workplace, the workplace that has a positive impact on the staff working in it, which wasn’t really recognized by businessmen in Europe until the ‘50s. The “third places” are semi-public sites, whereby what is interesting—since the example of Tate Modern has already come up—is that this is also a matter of landmarks. These are all places one goes to, though not necessarily to visit the museum itself, but rather perhaps just to visit the shop. One nevertheless gets something of the specially charged atmosphere of the place, like in the case of the Louvre in Paris, where one simply would like to see the pyramid and the space below it with its shops and cafés.

What these places do is also “mood management.” This also applies to shopping centers and even supermarkets. All of these places work with the same methods: light, video projections, etc. Basically, there’s no difference between the Tate Modern and the BILLA supermarket in Purkersdorf that features a projected video frieze on which shoppers see a field

of sunflowers and such things. It's been found that the level of aggression in supermarkets is relatively high, and with methods like these the shoppers are emotionally "tranquilized"—the supermarket as mental massage.

The Tate Modern has this big spectacular hall with an unbelievable feeling of space. There are three towers in it, and people stand in line for half an hour just to climb up one of these towers—which is an object of art—to be able to sit in a chair up there for two minutes and thus become an object themselves and to enjoy a particular view from above that one otherwise would not have. This hall is a full-blown "core attraction." A "core attraction" is characteristic of every "third place," a central feature that is so spectacular that seeing it is a must, that it becomes the talk of the town.

These venues—that previously were just sites of an art collection, places of culture and of personal reflection for a certain social class—are now becoming generally accessible, first-class meeting places in the heart of the city. They're now a "must see" where one goes just as one would go to Niketown. Both are staged venues that feature an emotionally charged ambience and for which there is no admission fee—the Tate Modern is also free—which is an additional characteristic of the "third place."

These "third places" are increasingly becoming the new landmarks within the city. They endow the cognitive map of the city with meaning. All of these new venues of the art industry feature spectacular exteriors. They can be very eye-catching, but can also look quite avant-garde. Daniel Libeskind recently designed or completed two such projects, whereby one never would have imagined previously that two such structures could even be said to be comparable to one another: the new Jewish Museum in Berlin and the planned Migros Shopping Center in Bern. Both projects are deconstructivist, both are strong, exterior-directed statements—the broken Star of David in Berlin, a giant open hand built into the landscape in Bern—that trigger corresponding brainscripts.

This is characteristic of these new venues and for the blending together of cultural and commercial interests and the methods of the avant-garde. These are extremely prominent architects, designers and multimedia artists, who have absolutely no compunctions about working on buildings like these. The museums are increasingly becoming "more commercial"—in the sense of aesthetics infused with an additional emotional charge—and thus places of entertainment. In precisely this way, classic places of commerce like shopping malls are also increasingly becoming places of the avant-garde of architecture and design.

The Bluewater Center opened two years ago in London. This was the world's first shopping center that is visited by design and culture tourists in the very same way that it is by people who are simply shopping. In a truly astounding way, the old idea of "design and art for all" is suddenly becoming a reality in shopping centers, and indeed not in the sense of adorning a building and the plaza surrounding it with large-scale works of art but rather as a strategically utilized means of the dramaturgical, three-dimensional design of a "third place." Venues like the Tate Modern and the Guggenheim Museums thus become first-class, commercially viable sites of retailing, consumption and the aesthetics of consumption. Nobody has a problem anymore with the fact that these two worlds are entering into a symbiosis. Perhaps one reason for this is that the omnipresence of the media has so accustomed us to internalize these signs—even those of art and the avant-garde—and to come to terms with them. Producers of TV commercials today can get away with editing techniques and aesthetics that would previously have been possible only in avant-garde works. Among other reasons, this is because people's skill in dealing with media and consumption—their so-called "media literacy"—has progressed so far, and the process of dealing with these codes has broken down boundaries, so that commercial methods can be used in

the avant-garde and codes of the avant-garde can establish themselves in the world of commerce.

Hirsch: Over the last few decades, advertising's relationship to art has been marked by a utilization and integration of artistic content, forms and strategies that has escalated from citation to exploitation. This "brain drain" in the direction of the communications industry seems even to be intensifying now with the appearance on the scene of creative people who have less fear of close contact with the corporate world than generations of artists before them. How does this picture look from the perspective of someone who advises numerous international clients on projects that make use of a great deal of creative potential?

Mikunda: I believe that this development has to do with increasing "media literacy" not only on the part of consumers but also of the creators of works of art and culture. What has taken shape is, so to speak, a common aesthetic pool. Consider the development of advertising over the last five decades: advertising in the classic sense began as "promotion" that simply proclaimed the benefits of a product and trumpeted them loud and clear to the public. Then came the image level, the level of hidden motifs, of emotionally charged messages. And suddenly there were no longer just one or two TV stations but 30 of them, and then the first "new" media emerged.

Then there came a turning point. People increasingly lost their fear of technology—entertainment electronics, the "hi-fi tower"—and its aesthetic codes. "Media literacy" kicked in, and advertising began to get more complicated and more highly encoded. Things that were once avant-garde became the subject matter of bumper stickers in the US. This gave rise to the third level of advertising that made use of wordplay and signs: *Liberté, Egalité, Portabilité* for the first generation of laptops, *Veni, Vidi, Visa*, etc. The fourth level of advertising commenced when advertising began to make fun of itself and play off its own methods. At some point, this system reached a limit in the time of MP3 and Napster, because one no longer borrows and admits signs from a new world of the media avant-garde. Makers of totally classic brands like Nivea—despite being quintessentially, by definition unchangeable—suddenly dare to place them in the hands of really young people and allow them to radically change the image without destroying the brand. Here, one partakes of a new world just as the music industry partakes of DJs, clubbing and raves, or advertising has partaken of the video avant-garde as its aesthetic provider.

Now, there might possibly be a fifth step in this development, whereby one no longer radically partakes of the aesthetic of another cultural realm—the avant-garde, for example—but rather totally incorporates it. That is to say, no longer to just use the aesthetic codes of certain groups but instead to incorporate and be completely pervaded by entire systems of such scenes. And these systems are allowed to pervade the entire cycle from production to the reception accorded the product by the user: when, for instance, someone is employed as a graphic artist by an ad agency and runs his own music production firm at the same time, or leftist sociologists who also model, etc. All of this fits together, obviously, because the agencies permit these systems of existence and become charged with them.

Hirsch: Members of the young generation, who have already been socialized with computers, games and the Internet, are no longer only those who partake of them, but rather now take part in their production in a wide range of creative fields. From the perspective of strategic dramaturgy, does this give rise to changes in how the staging of experiences transpires and which character these experiences have?

Mikunda: From the point of view of aesthetics and as far as the art market is concerned, I find it revolutionary that this development has brought forth a generation that is the first

to use what Berthold Brecht dreamed of: a radically interactive medium, or, as he put it in his classic radio theory, “reverse transmission by the listener.” In Germany in the ‘70s, there were “open channels” through which viewers could broadcast back. Then it turned out that TV viewers didn’t do it because they couldn’t. And when you can’t do something, it gets boring because the aesthetic density is not there. Brecht’s radio theory then nevertheless became a reality, though in a totally different way because we live in a patchwork age in which DJs sample together existing music and there exist technologies that allow people to do so themselves. Suddenly there comes along a generation of people in their early ‘20s for whom there is not only no longer a difference between mainstream and classic brand-name clothes, but also for whom the borders between those who produce aesthetics and those who partake of them are increasingly dissolving. Here, major brands go about the step-by-step process of learning to react to this new class of consumers and to offer new products that are especially relevant to the *mise en scène* of their worlds.

Hirsch: The boundaries between the various artistic “disciplines” are becoming increasingly fuzzy, and new role images are materializing only tentatively. A prerequisite of many large-scale projects is intensive cooperation by specialists in various different fields. What sort of changes have been made to models such as those used in an opera or film in developing the strategies employed in conceptualizing a theme park or a shopping mall?

Mikunda: There has been a paradigm shift away from Disney escapism, but also away from high-quality, purely aesthetic escapism. We are in a new era, in which we are still emotionally suspended between two centuries; we have yet to totally work through the 20th century, even though the 21st with all its new technologies is already here. In phases of transition from one value system to the next, people have a strong need for meaning, to “see what’s still viable,” what values one can take along from one epoch to the next, to put meaning to the test.

The 2001 Trend Word of the Year is “content,” not only in the e-media world, but also in the actual sense of the word. For this reason, big-name brands all shifted their focus to “content” about one to two years ago. If one considers a Niketown or a “Sephora,” an international chain of perfume shops, one notices that, throughout them, there are installations that convey information to shoppers about what is actually for sale there. These are, of course, “third places” in which one can see what happens in the world of public staging. Today, the avant-garde of the public *mise en scène* is in the Internet and in “third places.” Here, sensory explanatory strategies are utilized, and entertainment is blended with meaning. Just inside the entrance to a “Sephora,” there is a so-called “theater of fragrances” where a woman hands out tiny “sampler wands” that have been dipped in a particular perfume. Thus, the classic point-of-sale is also beginning to go beyond pure aesthetics and pure escapism.

One doesn’t just make something beautiful; rather, one fetches some kind of idiosyncratic architect who builds in his signature style. Here, one increasingly integrates high-quality architects and designers because, even in the mainstream of theme parks and shopping malls, people long to experience the totally individual signature of an artist, an architect. After all, people visit these places to emotionally charge themselves up in a deeper way. Nowadays, people no longer go to a shopping mall to be surrounded by marble and brass and to be in a sort of palace like the department stores of the 19th century. Today, one goes to places of personal reflection about the aesthetic standards of an age.

This interview with Christian Mikunda was conducted by Andreas Hirsch in May 2001.