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Consumption

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Brian Ulrich Copia

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Consumption and shopping are such integral parts of what we like to call our culture that we often no longer realize the full extent of the whole complex. Where does this fact really lead? I first noticed the importance of shopping when I told American friends that on Sundays, German shops are closed (or used to be, as things are changing there, too). The standard reaction, 'But what do people do on a Sunday?' was accompanied by bewildered or outright horrified facial expressions.

Photography Brian Ulrich | Words Jörg Colberg

Brian Ulrich's photography is centred on consumption and shopping, covering shopping malls - maybe the most American of all experiences - and thrift stores, places that I have personally been immensely fascinated with. I talked with Brian about the different aspects of his work.

JÖRG COLBERG: Looking at your photographs, I guess it is becoming more obvious why shopping malls are so strict about forbidding photography. When you go to a mall, how do you look for subjects or subject matter?

BRIAN ULRICH: It is often much like the experience of shopping itself. There are so many visual stimuli in these spaces that sorting it out and keeping a concept or idea in mind can be overwhelming. I am simply 'shopping' for pictures. Many factors determine where and when. In the 'big box' retail stores, my pictures are almost always taken candidly, so I usually look for a place where I can sit or stand for a bit of time, as well as one that has an interesting backdrop and decent lighting. From there, it is simply whoever walks into that space. I shoot film and it is all handheld, so for pictures with people, they have to pause, hold still, have no one walk in front of them, etc., and of course have a specific expression I am looking for, one where we can easily imagine getting inside the subjects' heads. I would hope that when they see my pictures, malls and stores would be more lenient on photographers. It is more free advertising! In fact, some stores do allow photography because it helps create a tourist destination.

JÖRG COLBERG: Actually, that is one thing I personally have failed to comprehend - how a store can become a tourist attraction. I think that

what probably lies behind this might be that I personally do not like shopping. So when I look at many of the people in your photographs, I see a lot of boredom, or alienation - some of which might just be my projecting my own feelings onto these people. But this brings me to my next question. I always feel inhibited taking a photograph of someone when I think that if I were in that person's shoes, I would not be feeling all that great. This is probably a filter that you cannot allow yourself to have. Do you have any filters preventing you from taking photos?

BRIAN ULRICH: Some time ago, in the early stages of this project, I met Martin Parr and showed him my work. One of the things we talked about was not censoring yourself from taking pictures. If you have an idea for photographs in your head, make them. I don't have a filter. I believe very strongly in what I am doing and am trying to do. I think people might assume that I am making fun of them, but I work hard to make pictures that do not do that, pictures that are beautiful and empathetic, which is one of the reasons I use large-format cameras. I take a lot of pictures, including pictures that are more than apologetic. These are ultimately edited out, but I learn more from taking and then editing them out than simply not taking the picture at all.

JÖRG COLBERG: I assume that some people must realize that you are taking photographs - or maybe they don't. What kind of reactions have you run into?

BRIAN ULRICH: With the Copia pictures, most people have no idea they have been photographed. I use a waist-level viewfinder and am actually very close. They might notice me with the camera and ask about it. I try

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to say something simple, along the lines of, 'Oh, this is just a new camera; I'm trying to figure out how it works,' or something along those lines. Again, I am not trying to deceive them. I just know that if I try to get into a discussion on a larger idea, people will draw assumptions on that idea. For instance, when you tell someone about an idea for a photo project and they shoot it down, saying it's just an idea and the picture will be very different. I would much rather have a discussion over a finished picture than over a concept. I 'found' some of the people in the pictures. They either didn't care about it or thought it was really funny. I later found out that the older couple with the motorized cart are good friends of my grandparents. I sent them each a print. They wanted to blow it up and put it on their front lawn!

JÖRG COLBERG: I have to bring this up, and I am sure you won't be surprised. Philip-Lorca diCorcia was sued by one of the subjects in his photographs. Although the court in the end sided with diCorcia, the issue is not quite as resolved as many of us would like to think with varying (state) laws, and so on. Pardon me for being the devil's advocate, but if models get thousands of dollars to be photographed, why shouldn't people be compensated when their photograph ends up in a fine art gallery with steep price tags on it?

BRIAN ULRICH: Very big question. One of the things that people fail to consider is that being an artist is never a lucrative career choice. You are lucky if you can find some way to support your work, be it by selling work, teaching, editorial jobs, etc. So I fear that when people see numbers attached to art, they have no consideration of what it actually costs to produce this thing that is for sale. Ironically, as with dish soap or any other product, people only look at price tags. Photographers have been documenting culture and creating records of people, times and history for a long time. If everyone were compensated for being included in a photograph, the collective estates of Winogrand, Cartier Bresson, Frank, etc. would all be bankrupt!

Also, at what point does one compensate? If one takes the picture and edits it out, but still has the negative, should someone be compensated for that as well? It is so problematic because no one ever expects a given picture to be a hugely sellable thing, as fine art. For every picture on sale, there are thousands of others that never make it into a book or gallery. The conditions are different for commercial or editorial jobs, where a value is attached to an image even before it is produced.

I also feel artists are held to higher scrutiny than other cultural figures. In the case of the DiCorcia lawsuit, this was apparent in the endless discussions about artists exploiting, profiteering, etc. There seems to be a huge misunderstanding of art and its place and purpose in society in general, perhaps more so in the U.S. than in other countries, but it is still everywhere. On any visit to a museum, one overhears comments like, 'I could do that', 'What makes this so special?', 'Who cares about a urinal on a pedestal?' In some cases, that is exactly the point. But some modern art has created distrust in the general populace because Duchamp (whom I love) and others showed us that art is in ideas, not in objects. This is very liberating, but if art is no longer 'special', if we remove craft from art, then it needs academia to explain it. For those who don't read some didactic explanation alongside the work, the work is just a urinal. It has no magic, is easy to dismiss. This distrust of contemporary and modern art filters its way into discussions like those generated by the DiCorcia

suit. It seems the artist is expected to act with higher regard and with greater consequences than political figures or corporations, people who actually do affect our lives!

JÖRG COLBERG: I am infinitely fascinated by thrift stores and do not even know why. I often think that while many thrift stores do make money for worthwhile causes, they are really only a somewhat perverted form of consumerism, with maybe an added layer of allowing you a glimpse into other people's lives. What do you think? Are thrift stores different? And when you take photographs at thrift stores, is your approach different?

BRIAN ULRICH: The thrift stores are very different. Part of what I am trying to do with the thrift store pictures is an obvious continuum of the Copia project. Although this is where all the goods, once so sparkly and desirable, end up - what gets thrown over the castle walls, as it were. I see a class issue. The stores exist because there is a huge social class in this country that needs cheap items. The intentions of the store owners will always be somewhat based on providing commodities. The stuff here is used. It has been touched, which makes the biggest difference.

'With the Copia pictures, I was originally most concerned with producing pictures that may help people question their own role as consumers.'

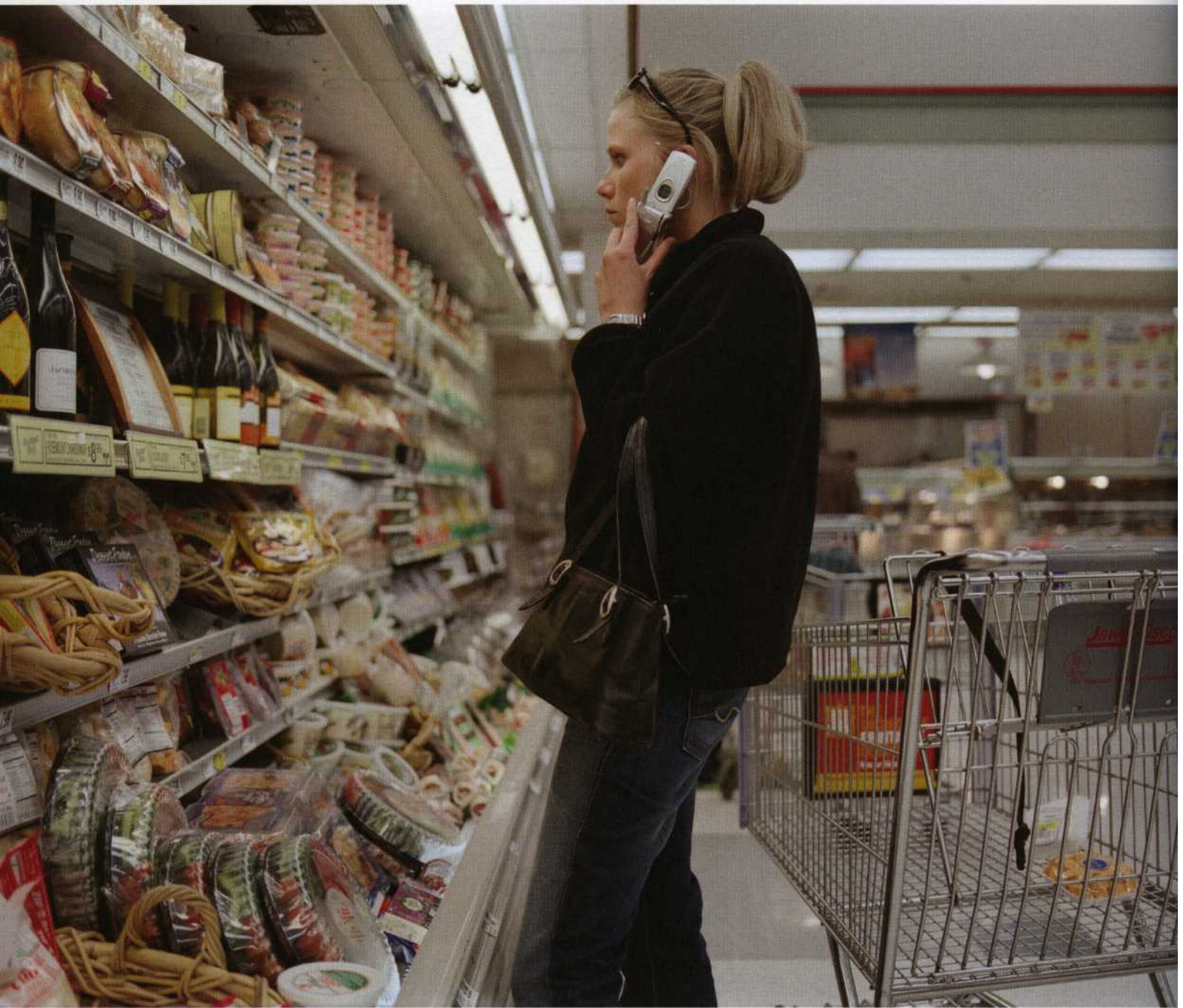
It is a kind of temporary resting dump for cultural artifacts. Last year's trends, aging posters, CD's, Windows 98..., things that have ended their first consumer life cycle so quickly, now begin a secondary life cycle. My approach here is a lot different, and it is still developing. I have almost exclusively used the 4x5" camera, and there are many more pictures of the spaces, the items, without people. It is a bizarre challenge to think of the endless piles of goods as still lifes, in the same way Walker Evans photographed depression-era farmers and their homes. I also think of a quote from Andy Warhol, that if one were to simply lock up a department store as is, that in 20 years - perhaps even less today - you could open it as a museum.

JÖRG COLBERG: Let me bring up something that I have been thinking about for a while, partly because of what I like to photograph. Your projects are clearly fine art, but they also have - maybe just a tad less clearly - a documentary or editorial character. I find it interesting that over the past few years, many photographers, without planning or coordinating, have started to develop these kinds of fine art documentary studies - or whatever one might want to call them. What do you think about this? How do you view your projects? Are they more fine art to you or more documentary? Or maybe you don't even think about it all that much?

BRIAN ULRICH: I think about it often. I teach classes on documentary photography. My thesis paper in graduate school was on the photographer Paul Graham and his approach to documentary. What I found interesting about Graham was that he ignores what Evans called a 'documentary style', a formal way of making pictures, and instead worked with







documentary ideas, photographing social change, political or economic troubles, his point of view. With the Copia pictures, I was originally most concerned with producing pictures that may help people question their own role as consumers. An early strategy for that was to put the pictures under car windows in parking lots. I quickly came to understand that this would simply be garbage and most people would never take it seriously. But, if the pictures are in a museum or gallery and they are 'art', I could use that authority to have the pictures examined more seriously. It is a hard thing to take a picture of something we look at or do every day and do it in a way that will ask to be scrutinized.

For me, this is where fine art and documentary come together – when I am creating something based on a social and political idea and making it into 'art'. I also think that a whole generation of young artists/photographers have had the work of earlier documentary photographers presented to them as art. Evans, Frank, Arbus, Riis, Hine, and so on are all in museums as art commodities, regardless of their original intent (which was different for each of them). Thinking of Hine's pictures, originally produced as propaganda for the National Child Labor Committee, and appreciating them as art involves a very different way of thinking about them. This affects the way new work is created. Most recently, I feel, the large numbers of projects based on photographic documentary and realism is mostly a symptom of artists reacting to cultural conditions.

JÖRG COLBERG: Judging from the reactions when you showed people your Copia pictures, do you feel you were able to achieve what you were after?

BRIAN ULRICH: Yes. This is where the work does seem to pay off. I often hear that after looking at my pictures, people can't experience shopping the same way, or, 'I see your pictures everywhere.' That is exactly what I am hoping to invoke! And it is amazingly surreal when it really works, that one can put together pictures with a point of view and translate that. It is something I feel strongly about: making work that people can understand, no matter what their backgrounds. We are all in the checkout line, all under those fluorescent lights at some point, standing in front of what seems to be hundreds of thousands of choices, then realizing that it makes no difference whatsoever. This is why the pictures must be empathetic, so we can see ourselves in the photographs.

This also goes back to the earlier question about DiCorcia. Although I love many different kinds of art, in my work, I am interested in appeal-

ing to a democratic audience. With this in mind, Copia has evolved into a much larger project. The first chapter is the big-box, middle-class retail experience, the second chapter is thrift stores and resale shops and the third chapter is the back rooms of retail stores. It really could go on forever, or until I get tired of it.

JÖRG COLBERG: When I met you last year in New York, you told me a story of what got you interested in photography. Would you mind sharing it?

For me, this is where fine art and documentary come together – when I am creating something based on a social and political idea and making it into 'art'.

BRIAN ULRICH: As an undergrad in college, I was totally uninterested in school. I was playing in a band and putting most of my time and energy into that. I had decided to major in graphic design, but I was horrible at it. I didn't finish anything or even show up for the final – a terrible student! I had taken a semester off from school and knew I needed to finish. I signed up for as many classes as I could to 'get it over with'. One of these was a photography class. Unfortunately, I still had this crappy attitude.

Early that semester, I was riding my bicycle home from class and had a bad fall on a very big hill. I believe I went over the bars and hit my head hard. One minute I was riding home from class, the next I was having this crazy dream where everything was in black-and-white, still images. I was walking around trying to figure out what was happening to me, but content that it was simply a dream and that anything strange here would result in clarity when I woke up in bed. Clarity did come, but in an ambulance. I had been walking about, knocking on doors and talking to strangers for some time, with a concussion, seeing everything in black-and-white stills. After a long emergency room wait and a weak patch-up, I was sent home. I became fascinated with this idea of stills. In photography class, I began trying to recreate this experience in pictures. I fell in love with photography and couldn't get enough of it.

