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Consumption



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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