

THE ART MALL: A SOCIAL SPACE

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York May 16–June 28, 1992



West Edmonton Mall 1990 Series, color.
Photo: Vikky Alexander

According to the economists, the country will emerge from the current recession when Americans start shopping again. Sure, it's a heavy burden, but Americans are known for their ability to spend. If the health of our economy depends on consumers purchasing goods they don't necessarily need and can't afford, then obviously the shopping mall is the only thing that can save us, for the mall is devised to make spending effortless and easy. From its inception, the mall was designed to lure, to lull, and to coax shoppers to defy their credit card limits, to buy on impulse, and to load their bundles into the trunks of conveniently parked cars.

But the mall is more than merely a place to realize materialist desires. Malls encapsulate a market and meeting place along the freeways in Edge Cities everywhere. Since they first appeared on the suburban landscape some thirty years ago, malls have become a prominent feature of the American social experience, and a powerful influence on the culture at large. They facilitate an exchange of not just commodities, but of information about who we are as individuals

within the greater cultural milieu by spreading the latest styles and ideals of beauty which we use to refashion and define ourselves. Malls are also where we learn about the latest trends in music, and film (record stores and movie theatres are regular fixtures in malls).

The Art Mall: A Social Space seeks to examine the mall's function in society, and to use it as a model for examining questions concerning the exhibition of art in a museum context. This project offered The Museum an opportunity to expand traditional exhibition practice, address broader audiences, include artists who were not known to the museum, and to provide artists an occasion to interact with the public in conventional ways. The New Museum sent out a call for artists' proposals that explored aspects of mall culture and contained a publicly interactive component. The exhibition on view represents only a fraction of the many intelligent and varied proposals received from throughout the U.S. and Europe. The concept obviously provided expression for the love/hate relationship many people feel towards malls, and artists responded with projects that were both critical and embracing; some are suspicious of the inherent manipulative power of malls, while others acquiesce to its calming persuasion.

Many projects in *The Art Mall* remind us that the comfort malls indulge us with is more than simply a climatically-controlled, perennial springtime shopping experience. Like television, the mall has become a cultural artifact that reveals our passion for a flawless world that is controllable and untroubled, offering the possibility for immediate gratification. Though the mall is engineered by developers and merchandisers, it is also the product of social and technological developments that reflect the desires and delusions of the greater American psyche. It is an ideological facade of life without homelessness or adult bookstores. The mall is a sanitized and edited version of what exists outside it. But this scrutiny of the mall also sheds light on the museum as an institution. Every museum has a distinct point of view, and conveys its own version of past or recent history. Museums have traditionally assumed themselves to be authorities on the develop-

ment of culture and the ultimate appraiser of the value of artifacts, even those of the various cultures throughout the world and time.

The exhibition also attempts to reveal the ways a shopping mall, like a museum, refers to that which it decidedly is not. The mall has flourished with the sprawl of suburbs and the spread of highways, and, though dependent on automobiles, it offers an escape from cars on a "street" without traffic. In much the same way, the typical mall's atrium resembles a hybrid of the town square and a park, and yet it is neither: it is too regulated to be a truly effective public space, and too sterile to be nature. And what of the museum? Is it most effective when it resembles the home of a wealthy patron that has been lavishly decorated with the "great" works of our culture, or the clinically white scientific laboratory that offers "objective" truths derived from the research and opinions of experts?

Because of the inherent impersonal quality of both institutions, many critics claim that the mall and the museum are ultimately dysfunctional public spaces that do not offer the opportunity for communication or community. The mall, they say, is a pitiful substitute for the main streets of pre-war America. The town square of old provided a casual access to information and the expression of ideas that concerned the well-being of its citizenry. It connected and involved people, gave faces to neighbors and promoted a sense of shared responsibility. Though malls possess the potential for creating such an environment, many sociologists contend that this sort of meeting place that is so basic to human nature does not commonly exist today. Museums, as well, contain a possibility for greater interaction among its constituents, yet most museums seem to rely too heavily on creating an experience of awe that suppresses more ordinary responses, and a reverence for objects and the authority the museum represents, to allow for the voices of those from outside the inner sanctum.

Despite this potential for greater participation and involvement, both institutions are in reality the domain of a select few. Malls are the property of their developers, patrolled not by public servants, but by a private security force with the authority to ex-

pel leafleteers or political demonstrators. Yet many contemporary malls, in an effort to appear an organic part of a community's local culture, have begun to adopt in their designs easily readable symbols and motifs that suggest a relationship with the distinct history of the region. In actuality, they often serve instead as a potent force in the homogenization of American culture by undermining the truly historical urban, downtown centers they are supplanting. Though many museums are public institutions, they, too, reflect the concerns of an elite group of usually wealthy patrons and collectors who dictate policy, direct the museum's management, and inevitably support practices and programs that appeal to those people most like themselves.

Ultimately, a mall is a mall is a mall, and, yet, there is something profoundly inviting about this eternally new, sparkling clean enclosure with its artificial light and soothing, muzak-filled display of products and services that prompts people to accept it as the center of activities in their community. In the traditional museum, it is the wealth of others that attracts the crowds. Here it is the display of a conspicuous consumption of the past that fascinates, so that, ultimately, the motives for visiting one are not that far removed from visiting the other.

Though some malls target very specific socio-economic classes or ethnic groups (as do museums, albeit unintentionally), in the end they are more alike than different, regardless of the price of the goods displayed. But it is in the suburbs and small towns throughout the nation where the institution of malls has the most profound effect, especially on young people. Shopping malls have been a significant part of the American youth culture for some time, because they provide access to the trends that define the young. Apart from home and school, adolescents spend most of their time in malls buying the latest style jeans and this week's most popular CDs, or simply hanging out. Suburban mall rats learn about consumerism and culture there. A whole generation has grown up with the mall, and it is the demands of this generation that are transforming it. Today's malls are becoming not just places that function solely as a marketplace for material

goods, but ones that attend a greater range of interests and activities. Like the mall, the museum has for years marketed "good" taste and delineated a refined sensibility, but this role is currently undergoing a change, in great part due to the inevitable failure to maintain such absolute authority in a pluralistic society.

The fact that malls have traditionally been constructed with the bottom line in mind rather than the needs of the people on whom they depend, has prompted many to rethink the function of shopping malls in American society. In the past, developers purposely limited the number of seating areas within their malls to discourage loitering by non-shoppers, and the restaurants in malls were often fast food franchises designed for high volume and a quick turnover rather than a leisurely meal over which people tended to linger. It was no secret that merchandising, not socializing, was the overriding emphasis of malls since the late 1950s. Similarly, museums control spaces by limiting the visitor's activities: guards are regularly posted to keep people from touching, smoking, eating, and to keep them moving in the right direction. A dearth of benches here as well has kept the lines of people flowing.

A glut of malls in the 1980s prompted a revision of this narrow view by requiring owners to accept tenants not traditionally found in malls. Some are beginning to include clinics, offices, and libraries among the shops and food courts. Community events like school proms, beauty pageants, parades, and social services like holiday dinners for senior citizens and charity balls have further signaled significant changes in the malls' relationship with the people they serve. This sort of alteration also occurred in museums in the Reagan years when public funding for the arts was cut and a greater emphasis was placed on private support. Art organizations became much more dependent on earned income—renting their spaces to private parties and catering to the interests of those with the means to support specific programs. As a result, some of these organizations have now come to resemble the franchises of private enterprise more than public institutions.

Another recent development in the evolution of malls is the emergence of some that dedicate great energy to making their spaces *entertaining*. Greater attention has been put on the mall's architecture, so that colorful, pop-out storefronts enliven the shopping experience, or dramatic design elements create a unique atmosphere (some actually replicate the distant Bourbon Street of New Orleans, or a European village). Many have begun to employ entertainment groups that are a regular feature in the space. The largest mall in the world, The West Edmonton Mall in Canada, which also boasts the world's largest parking lot, has even incorporated a theme park within its confines. It offers skating rinks, live dolphin shows, water slides, submarine rides, even bungee jumping, among the eleven department stores and 800 other shops. Because the mall also contains hotels, it has become a destination place for weekend travelers who need never leave the premises during their stay. Since the late 70s, museums have also begun to adopt bold designs into their architecture, and to include a broader array of activities for visitors. The emergence of these new public arenas inevitably prompts an examination of all the new social spaces, and a study of their potential effects on our society.

As an exhibition, *The Art Mall* aspires to reinvent a public space within the galleries of The New Museum. As the exhibition remakes the mall, so does it redefine the museum. Like a mall, museums have traditionally limited and controlled the social interaction and activities of their visitors; museum galleries have a quieting effect, reducing spontaneity of expression. Ironically, it is the spaces outside a museum's galleries that have come to resemble a shopping mall more and more. Almost every museum now contains a gift shop, cafe, and courtyard. The Museum of Modern Art was compared to a mall by some critics when its glass-enclosed addition, containing escalators, was introduced a few years ago.

The Art Mall, however, contains a cafe *within* the gallery, in part to suggest the food court found in every mall, but also to challenge the restrictions that are commonly associated with the museum experience,

LAST WORDS *Seyed Alavi*

Broadway Window The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York May 16–June 28, 1992

and to undermine the tension among a museum's spaces.

Similarly, artists in the exhibition have allotted time to work within their installations, and to thereby become an integral part of the piece, promoting an interaction with museum-goers and proposing a new model for public space. Performing artists, also an important part of *The Art Mall*, will make scheduled and unscheduled appearances throughout the run of the exhibition and portray some of the common, and not so common, activities found in public spaces, so that a synthesis of a social space and the presentation of art emerges.

Malls, like museums, are the warehouses of American culture. They embody our image of ourselves, our individual and collective desires, and our sense of well-being and comfort. They are changing the landscape, and the ways that people interact within communities. It seems imperative that we recognize the possibilities and limitations of both the museum and the mall if they are to respond to the needs of the people they serve.

Brian Hannon
Exhibition Coordinator



Seyed Alevi, *Words*

Participating Artists

Doug Aitken, Vikky Alexander, Todd Alden and Steve Ausbury, Tamas Banovich, Diane Bonder and Elizabeth M. Stephens, Didier Canaux and Adam Cvijanovic, Lenora Champagne and Vivian Selbo, Marta Chilindron and Eduardo Costa, Devon Dikeou, Judite Dos Santos, Greg Drasler, Brenden Fitzgerald, Rinaldo Frattolillo, Ken Gonzales-Day, Bolek Greczynski with The Battlefields Crew from the Living Museum at Creedmore Psychiatric Center, Toby Lee Greenberg, Hit and Run Theatre, Ben Kinmont, Kwok, Chip Lord, Gen Ken Montgomery, Peggy Phelan and VRcades, Barbara Pollack and Grai St. Clair Rice, Teri Rueb, Ann Duncan Satterfield and Carol Irving, Kerri Scharlin, Jennifer Schlosberg, Jeffrey W. Schulz, The Thing, Danny Tisdale, David Wells, Shunsuke Yamaguchi.

Seyed Alavi's work demonstrates a marked interest in the issues of language and in how we invest the formations of language with meaning. His recent installations comment and improvise upon issues of mass media, specifically focusing on the daily newspaper. In his sculptural piece *Trompe l'Oeil Columns*, piles of newspapers are scrupulously stacked and anchored by pedestals and capitals to form elegant, impressive columns which reach to ten-foot heights. The existence of the columns is predicated upon the inaccessible and therefore illegible printed text. Newspapers, as opposed to books or even certain periodicals, are typically collected only to facilitate their disposal. Lost from these dailies is any sense of influence or continuity; the latest edition cancels out everything that came before it and precariously claims the top spot for a brief time. *Blueprint of the Times* is a work made up of

five steel-framed triptychs which display blueprints of front pages from national and international newspapers. The pieces allude to the way events are made to conform to a preconceived structure—one proper to the purpose of mass distribution. These rigid structures offer no possibility for an equivocal message.

With *Last Words*, his video installation for The New Museum, Alavi proposes a move from the rigid use of language to a more poetic, multi-layered one; he presents the following hypothetical situation to a number of individuals:

"Consider the likelihood you have the opportunity to speak on national television, but are limited to a single word. Consider further that after you say your word you must take a vow of silence. In essence, this word would be your last."

Monitors installed in the Broadway window broadcast a steady flow of the taped, one-word responses. The spoken word sounds onto the street while it simultaneously appears subtitled against the image of the speaker on the monitor screen—the words reach the audience on the street both aurally and visually. A static camera records each person in black and white against a neutral background in the style of a “talking-head” documentary. Each segment of speech lasts from fifteen to thirty seconds, with intervals of silent, slow fades of equal, if not longer, duration. These fades are endowed with as much suggestive import as the segments of speech. By broadcasting different tapes on various monitors, Alavi creates a dialogue between speakers; the juxtapositions create layers of meaning and ways to rethink language.

Alavi reduces the slick visual appeal of video, engaging the viewer with silence and shadows. He refrains from using the myriad vocabulary of film and video language; instead, the only editing used is the steady stream of fades which frame each individual response. This slow movement to and from each respondent suggests a penumbral region that absorbs a steady seepage of afterimages and resonances. These transitions imbue the successive segments with lingering shades of meaning.

Alavi's work in *Last Words* is the inverse of the work done in his newspaper installations—a de-structuring or unbinding, the liberation of words from a constricting syntax. Rather than fashioning out of this compilation of words a cool, stylized column which can only await ruin, he creates a flowing stream of refractions and reverberations. Alavi's deletion of the coded editing language of film and video is paralleled by his elimination of the syntactic structure of human language. Loosed from this confinement, the one-word response is freed from a singular, specific reference or context. *Last Words* is an accessible, living, mutable body of meanings, sustained and given unlimited new incarnations by the continuous process of interpretation.

A widely lodged criticism of video is that it is inevitably locked in a present

tense. Alavi's project attempts to work with and against this condition: the viewer must vacillate between a past (the pre-recorded utterance) and the present tense of his own interpretation of the utterance. Again, unlike the work of *Trompe l'Oeil Columns*, *Last Words* demonstrates a present which need not obliterate the past. Here he allows the viewer to experience a community of voices, richly layered and generous in influence, which create a living history.

Though intentionally avoiding the construction of an objective, inflexible history, Alavi undertakes a type of reportage in *Last Words*. He admits that his own curious desire to discover a “spirit of the times” in part compels him to undertake such a project, which he intends to continue as an ongoing endeavor. His attempt at journalism then stems from an interest in a spiritual, rather than factual, account of the day. His intention is not, however, to assemble a dusty archive out of these recordings, but rather to use them as an impetus for the exercise of free speech. By providing a forum for individuals to speak, he hopes to encourage others to reflect on not only the power, but also the authority of speech, and to actively pursue how they can seize the necessary means for their voices to be heard.

Maria Christina Villasenor
Curatorial Intern

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The New Museum
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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