

THE MUSEUM AS HOLY SHOP: THE CHURCH, THE MALL AND THE FACTORY

Kathryn Mitchell



Figure 1. Holy Shop, acrylic on mirror, 2005. Kathryn Mitchell. Collection of the Forrester Gallery, Oamaru

Having worked in the gallery sector over the past ten years, I have become interested in the way art galleries and museums in New Zealand are evolving, from both a public and a 'grassroots' vantage point. The discussion that follows considers the role of the regional public museum in relation to my own painting practice, focusing on the contradictions inherent in the desire to create a spiritual space of contemplation and education, as against the issues surrounding the funding and management of such publicly accountable facilities. Underpinning my thinking about the museum as 'holy shop' is an attempt to understand the "interaction between what is displayed and how it is displayed."¹

In this article I attempt to analyse the contemporary public art museum as church, mall and factory, and speak to the way in which museums knowingly or unwittingly embody such contexts. I propose that the resulting amalgamation of contexts positions the museum as a 'Holy Shop.'

This shifting or dislocation of context is examined in reference to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in an attempt to refer to the museum's adoption of attributes associated with the mall and the factory, for example, while simultaneously attempting to retain a sense of the sacred. In essence, I propose that the reproduction of such contexts within the contemporary museum environment contributes to its loss of authenticity or its 'aura.'



Figure 2. Self Portrait 2008, acrylic on mirror, 2008. Kathryn Mitchell. Collection of the Eastern Southland Gallery, Gore.

Although I refer here to both public art galleries and museums, the terminology adopted refers to cultural institutions generally rather than specifically, as the lines or boundaries between the two are fluid rather than rigid, and these institutional definitions have also been considered and applied in a myriad of ways in various regional contexts. In terms of the public art museum, I draw predominantly from my experience as manager/curator of the Ashburton Public Art Gallery over a six-year period. The Ashburton Public Art Gallery opened in 1995 in the partially converted former county council building and serves the Ashburton district community, a population of around 30,000.

THE DECAY OF THE AURA

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin reflects on Marx's critique of the capitalist mode and examines the impact of the reproduction on art-making. The reproduction, he proposes, even if well executed, dislocates the work from its original context – its time and place – thereby eliminating its 'aura'.² So what is an artwork's aura, and how does Benjamin's argument relate to this discussion on public art museums as 'holy shops'? An artwork's 'aura' relates to its particular place in time – involving the history, traditions, practices and processes which drove its production. This "original" artwork, Benjamin proposes, is "authentic," and therefore what is affected by the reproduction is the work's authority. The authentic artwork is not, according to Benjamin, reproducible.

According to Benjamin, the introduction of photography made a work accessible by enabling a displacement of time and space: "The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art ..."³ While such situations of displacement lack any physical contact with the original, authentic, work, they nevertheless bear a trace or presence which is nevertheless "always depreciated." It is noteworthy that Benjamin addresses the issues surrounding reproduction not just in art-making, but appropriately links them to the technique of reproduction as a process which "detaches" the reproduced from the bodies of knowledge and tradition which drove their creation. A "unique existence" is substituted by something else, and this "tradition-shattering" is delivered in such accessible forms as photography and film which effectively present a trace, ghost or illusion of the authentic to the masses on a daily basis.

Benjamin points to a cultural change in perception as being responsible for the “decay of the aura” – the desire to shift experience to a place or space where one is able to gain a sense of having “been there.” This is offered in the form of a like-ness, creating an “adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality.”¹⁴ Since the ‘aura’ of the artwork is inseparable from its history, it has foundations in ritualistic and religious practices; however, “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”¹⁵

THE CHURCH

This discussion dates back to my earlier work, beginning perhaps with the painting *Holy Shop* (2005), acrylic on mirror: I stumbled across the Holy Shop, a small art deco building in Oamaru, after a visit to St Patrick’s Basilica which is located directly opposite. I was looking at the architecture of churches in respect to their relationship to public art museums. After leaving the church I was immediately attracted to this small, humble, slightly worn building, sign-written with the words ‘Holy Shop.’ I was so intrigued by the name and the extreme contrast between the overwhelming grandeur of the Catholic church and this modest structure with big aspirations, that I was compelled to visit.

What could one expect to find in a ‘Holy Shop,’ I thought to myself – perhaps ‘holiness’ could be purchased in rural New Zealand? Little could be seen of the interior as I peered through the glass of the door, my view obstructed by venetian blinds; however the sign on the door indicated that it was open for business. The interior delivered on the promise of its signage as I was confronted by a multitude of ‘holy’ consumables ready for eager customers to snap up in the hope of comfort, support, protection, redemption or possibly, more simply, just the vague promise of some kind of fulfilment. St Christopher’s protection on one’s journey, or the Virgin Mary’s nurturing aura can, I discovered, be obtained for the sacrifice of a few dollars. The love of Jesus can be expressed by the adornment of one’s car bumper with a glittery sticker’s exclamation.

My encounter with the spectacle of the Holy Shop’s merchandise influenced a rethinking of perspective in terms of the evolving position of the contemporary public art museum in relation to my painting practice. Guy Dubord says: “The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image.”¹⁶ While invoking the image of the church through architecture and the conventions of curatorial and exhibition installation practices, public cultural institutions, particularly in rural areas, are dominated by the overarching pressure of market forces. Because these market forces demand that culture is palatable as a consumable for the masses, it could be said that the public art museum delivers a product on which a service delivery agreement is based. These service delivery agreements notoriously become more and more ambitious in periods of economic and political transition when mission statements are reviewed, changing demographics re-examined and benchmarking exercises undertaken.

In 2007 the Ashburton Art Gallery hosted the exhibition “Modulations: Cantata Reconfigured,” by Lyn Plummer.



Figure 3. Whatever it takes, acrylic on mirror, 2008. Kathryn Mitchell. Collection of the Ashburton Art Gallery.

My engagement with Plummer's practice reinvigorated my interest in the positioning of the public art museum as church or as a sacred, ritualised space. Plummer declares "[a]n interest in the nature of space ... and especially in the secular, ritualized space of the gallery and its relationship to the historic, religiously charged ceremonial space of the spiritual. This attention focused on changing and charging the gallery space into one which demands that we reflect upon our private responses to ceremony and ritual and their multiple readings and meanings."¹⁷

"Modulations: Cantata Reconfigured" was the first exhibition the Ashburton Art Gallery toured nationally, and it was intended to change as it travelled. Here Plummer's role shifts from what is traditionally considered to be artist to that of curator: Her spatial focus was integral to the evolving presence of the work in each venue. Thus the gallery worked as a facilitator to manage the administrative and practical aspects of the exhibition, allowing Plummer to focus on the various manifestations that would come about as a result of identifying the spaces in which the work would be shown.



Figure 4. Modulations: Cantata Reconfigured, Lyn Plummer; Installation view, Ashburton Art Gallery 2007. Credit Photography Rodney Brown

Having secured the venues, Plummer liaised directly with each museum in regard to the form that the exhibition would take. As the notion of transition was a major component of the overall work, Plummer created a series of detailed architectural replicas or maquettes in order to resolve the way in which the space would feature in each manifestation. These maquettes captured something of the essence or 'aura' of the individual museums, allowing specific spatial exploration and the consideration of how each interception or transformation would function. While Plummer's 'modulations' used space in a way that utilised the museum as medium, it is arguable whether the museum provides a space devoid of meaning – a neutral ground ripe for manipulation. In my experience these spaces are unique, and loaded in their own way with what could be thought of as an 'aura.' In many cases, particularly with respect to museum conversions or extensions (rather than purpose-built structures), the buildings themselves appear intimately connected with the history and traditions of the space and place in which they stand, as Benjamin suggests.

In *Art and the Power of Placement*, Victoria Newhouse notes that “Alana Heiss, a pioneer of alternative viewing spaces and currently the director of MOMA’s PS. 1 Long Island City, wants the museum ‘to make you feel as if you’re in the presence of God.’”¹⁸ While I assert an interest in the exploration of the sacred within the public museum environment, I believe my own practice seeks more to address the conflicts associated with the merging and reproduction of contexts and the assumed loss or decay of the aura of the original. In the exhibition “Holy Shop” (Ashburton Public Art Gallery, 2007/8), I presented a series of paintings on mirrors hung in a cross formation, having first postered the gallery wall with a repeated A3 low-resolution image of a white gloved hand (my own) reaching for a jar of screws. In the far corner a plinth was piled with hundreds of white gloves, which were also reflected in a mirror hung on the wall nearby. The work was visible through a multitude of reflections. On entering the space, viewers became part of the space and part of the work itself as their own gaze was captured and reflected. The exhibition sought to question the concept of the original, authentic, artwork as a manifestation of the sacred – in this case small detailed paintings on second-hand mirrors, in opposition to the notion of mechanical reproduction as a manifestation of the accessible consumable – multiple photocopies. The exhibition also poses the question, What is the authentic original in which Benjamin’s notion of ‘aura’ resides? Are the paintings “authentic,” to use Benjamin’s term, even though they shift the context of the mirrors and have been painted predominately from photographs? Does the exhibition in any way create or contribute to the ‘aura’ of the gallery space?

In his introduction to Brian O’Doherty’s book *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Thomas McEvilley proposes that within the “white cube” we “accept a reduced level of life and self. In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love.”¹⁹ Here McEvilley introduces O’Doherty’s argument by addressing this disconnection from life, reality and perhaps self. The gallery space is, curiously, perceived by some as a neutral blank canvas as it were, for the artist to “paint,” as in Plummer’s case. However, Plummer’s practice concentrates on the use of the museum’s unique attributes or ‘aura’ to reinterpret the original manifestation of her ‘modulations.’

It could also be said that the role of the public art museum has changed, and no longer seeks, in totality, to evoke or retain the sacred space of the church; in order to find ways to increase the audience for visual art, museums enlarge their viewer numbers by creating attractive public spaces complete with restaurants, cafes and retail outlets. Many frequent museum visitors today may experience spaces in which laughter, babies crying, teenagers txt’ing, baby-boomers World Wide Web surfing, children x-boxing and students coffee-drinking is the norm. According to David Carrier, the museum “shows an amazing capacity to rework its interpretation. The history of art has ended; the historical expansion of the museum has been completed; and high art must cohabit and compete with the novel culture of mass art.”¹⁰

THE MALL

In her essay “The Architecture is the Museum,” Michaela Giebelhausen identifies a fundamental shift from the museum traditionally being perceived as church or temple-like to being more appropriately viewed in terms of contemporary purpose-built structures such as malls.¹¹ Dating from around the mid-eighteenth century, the purpose-built museum confronts its public with the space between the traditional – the sacred – and the new – the modern. Does museum architecture inherently define and frame its purpose, or seek to do so? In terms of its role as a maker, Giebelhausen’s claim that the architectural configuration of the museum shapes meaning and therefore the experience of the museum seems a given. Why, then, do so many modern museums appear to have little grasp of this principle when planning redevelopments?

“In the late 1970’s, Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, the architects of the Pompidou Center in Paris, described the new institution not as a museum but as a centre of ‘information and entertainment.’”¹² The persistent isolation of art from its cultural history may have changed in the sense that market pressures have forced institutions to appeal to the masses and produce a consumable product. Does this development echo Benjamin’s theory of the loss of ‘aura’?



Figure 5. Modulations: Cantata Reconfigured, Lyn Plummer; Exhibition Advertisement, Oamaru & Gore. Credit Design & Photography by Rodney Brown

If, as Giebelhausen proposes, “the architecture is the museum,” then is the reproduction of museum architecture, and of associated practices, contributing to the death of the museum – in the sense that its aura or place in history and tradition has been displaced in favour of presenting a wider public with an institutional replica, in order to draw us closer to the experiences that we now expect to be available to us? Although we also expect to see life and self represented in the public art museum, our perspective on this has vastly changed and we are, it could be said, increasingly comfortable with a ‘franchised’ environment which simply replicates experience and reconstitutes it in its most palatable forms, as required (depending on context).

My work, *Whatever it Takes* (2008), acrylic on mirror; was inspired by a new kind of ‘holy shop.’ In place of the demolished historic Somerset Hotel in Ashburton, a new structure rose up from the rubble – a mall. As the concrete slabs were erected, clearly visible from the gallery, a large central cross was formed by the negative space between the slabs. At the time, there was debate raging about the future of the historic Ashburton Railway Station which had been empty and derelict for some years. Many members of the community wrote to the local newspaper about their personal and family histories and narratives connected with the station. Although it was suggested that the station be moved, many felt that the building’s removal from its site would compromise or even destroy its significance to the people of the Ashburton district.

Ashburton has lost numerous historic buildings to demolition, and what replaces them are structures that – if we support Benjamin’s assertions – perform the role of replicas or reproductions, in that they seem to bear little relationship to their own time and place. However, it must be said that in undertaking these particular reconstitutions of the built environment, Ashburton is perhaps presenting us with a signifier of its own – a rejection of the ‘aura.’ According to Jon Goss, “our desire is such that we will readily accept nostalgia as a substitute for experience, absence for presence, and representation for authenticity.”¹³ Here the preference for the new in the form of a mall resonated for me in the ongoing debate surrounding the redevelopment of the Ashburton Public Art Gallery. Initially, the community elected to retain and revamp the former county council building to house the gallery. While subsequent proposals included the institution’s relocation to the historic Ashburton Railway Station, a preference for a purpose-built facility rather than investigating any further extensions to the current building was the model

pursued. The proposed purpose-built facility is of concrete tilt slab construction and is modelled on the county council building, but allows for additional floor space.

Considering Goss's article on the "Magic of the Mall," it is remarkable how closely our public art museums echo the imperatives of the shopping mall. James Rouse, one of the pioneers of the modern mall, claimed (in 1962) that malls "will help dignify and uplift the families who use them ... promote friendly contact among the people of the community ... [and] expose the community to art, music, crafts and culture."¹⁴ History and nostalgia are, conceivably, evoked in the mall to bestow an 'aura' on a replicated environment in order to lend it a sense of authenticity. According to Goss, the universal new feature of the contemporary mall is the clock; previously banished, today the mall clock serves as a reference to respectable, historic, civic and religious institutions.

According to Victoria Newhouse, "Placement has affected the perception of art ... since the first cave paintings. Where an artwork is seen – be it in a cave, a church, a palace, a museum, a commercial gallery, an outdoor space, or a private home – and where it is placed within that chosen space can confer a meaning that is religious, political, decorative, entertaining, moralizing, or educational."¹⁵

It is within this framework that *Whatever it Takes* begins to contemplate the political space in which it was made. As discussed above, this space impacts on all aspects of museum practice. The title of the work is the Ashburton district's motto and features alongside the Ashburton District Council's logo on all council correspondence. The work is built on the underlying structure of this logo, but replaces its elements with an amalgamation of the new mall – concrete slabs – and the historic Ashburton Railway Station. The image of the lily is used as a kind of brand or signature indicative of self which here seeks to portray something of the political struggle between red and blue – Labour and National.

In his discussion of art as commodity, Paul Wood references the work of Manet, an artist of modernity who was compelled to represent truth – a notion of truth described as "the commodification of everything."¹⁶ Wood's point is illustrated in works such as *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, where the celebration of the commodity is depicted "from bottles to barmaid as well as what you cannot see – the spectacle behind you that all those people in the mirror have paid to consume."¹⁷ Rather than referring to a history of cultural meaning, Wood presents Manet's image as a collection of props, seeming to imply that their connectedness is simulated or artificial. Wood argues further that it is possible for an artwork to directly engage with the commodified world while maintaining a sense of critical distance. In discussing Manet and the commodity, Wood appears to refer to an awareness of loss. Loss of a kind of authenticity or connectedness to a history of cultural meaning may also be described as a loss of 'aura.' His concept of the commodified world as both "seductive and lacking" again refers to our desire to consume art, often without satisfaction. Citing Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Wood refers to "a change represented in our terms by shifting attention from the symbolic dimension of art's representation of commodification to its condition as commodity."¹⁸ He questions the idea of truth and whether art has effected a "strategic withdrawal" from the commodified world. If so, then it is clear from Wood's discussion that such a withdrawal has been damaging or has at least left its mark.

In Sarah Thornton's essay in *Seven Days in the Art World*, this mark is reflected in a conversation with Paul Schimmel, director of MOCA, on the work of Murakami Takashi. According to Schimmel, "Takashi understands that art has to be remembered and memory is tied to what you can take home."¹⁹ He defends Takashi's inclusion of a Louis Vuitton boutique within the MOCA show – Louis Vuitton produced a limited line exclusively for sale as part of Takashi's show – and supports the artist's intention as an "institutional critique." Schimmel accepts this critique, arguing that branding is deeply meaningful to younger generations and that one can't ignore "the elephant in the room." In planning the exhibition of some 90 works for this show, the curator spoke of creating "a wonderfest temple quality,"²⁰ and Schimmel refers to the desire to "gesture to a commercial art fair from within the museum."²¹ Takashi's first studio, the Hiropean Factory, set up in 1995, was originally named in homage to Warhol's Factory, but was later renamed Kaikai Kiki after its distinctive four-eared rabbit and mouse mascots.

THE FACTORY

En route to Invercargill, freighting “Modulations: Cantata Reconfigured” to the Southland Museum and Art Gallery, I was struck by the dominance of industry along the main road, specifically the Edendale milk processing plant. Before reaching Edendale, I had become aware of the significant number of milk tankers on the road, a constant flow of traffic coming and going from the processing plant. The initial experience of the plant, for me, was like approaching an enormous beehive – slightly threatening in scale and with trucks streaming from a central opening in the building. The structure itself offers no obvious relationship with its surrounding area – almost as if it has been dropped in amongst the green pastures of Southland from above. The large rectangular boxes in which the milk powder is packed, horizontally striped in lavender and white with green tops and bright red detailing, accentuate the aesthetic of something constructed by a child from a box of Lego or a recreation of a *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* movie set.

At this stage I had been working as the manager/curator of the Ashburton Art Gallery for around three years. During this period I had, like many before me, been involved in a constant financial struggle to secure the gallery's ongoing operations and at the same time was working to build a case for the institution to gain an increased level of operational financial support. Unfortunately – despite a concerted and successful effort by the staff and committee to lift the gallery's community profile, increase and diversify services and lift visitor numbers – there was little support for the notion that the gallery should undergo development consistent with population growth in the area, or operate at a level comparable with institutions of similar size and community demographic.

This seems a very common story in cultural institutions in rural New Zealand. At the same time, it is also difficult to see that any meaningful attempt, in a wider sense, by policymakers nationally is being made to resolve these issues. The seemingly never-ending cycle of fundraising events, initiatives and grant applications required in order to carry out the basic operations of a rural public art museum is an exhausting process which, in my case and others, dominates the role, mission and vision of the institution. Not only are our public cultural institutions encouraged to become more and more productive in terms of turning over ever more ambitious annual public programmes, but this expectation often comes with no incremental increase in resources – let alone any consideration of the extraordinary work undertaken by committees, Friends of the Gallery, members and staff to keep our public museums afloat. Does the contemporary public museum director in rural New Zealand have any time to participate in professional forums, further training or seek advice and support from wider networks – or do they find themselves isolated in a constant struggle to attract funding and increase production while making cuts to basic operational requirements?

It was in response to these questions that I produced *Self Portrait, 2008*, acrylic on mirror, which reflects on the museum as factory, a centre of efficient production, churning out consumable products to meet visitor number targets. I used the image of the Edendale milk processing plant to explore my own position within the institution of the museum as a facilitator of production. According to Christian Witt-Döring, a curator at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK) in Vienna, “If we couldn't see the same objects differently at different times, they would die.”²² The constant re-contextualisation predominant in current museum practice, then, could be seen as the desire to revitalise the museum object/artwork/space which would otherwise die. In this sense, the loss of ‘aura’ could be presumed to be necessary in keeping the museum and its contents alive to new generations of visitors.

The adoption and amalgamation of the attributes of the church, the mall and the factory by the contemporary public museum, both architecturally and ideologically, leaves us to question what this new context may be. Over a period of time I have come to understand, and question, this reality in my art practice – not just through my own experience as manager of a regional public art gallery, or as an artist, but as a member of the community who views such shifts and changes in relation to the space and place in which they are located. Art museums do not operate in isolation, but are significantly affected by their communities and the ongoing flux of social, political and economic pressures. While the presence of the church is still felt by museum visitors, I believe this is being subsumed by the

more dominant models of the mall – centres of consumable desire and entertainment – and the factory – centres of efficient and profitable production. What remains then in terms of Benjamin's notion of the 'authentic' or the 'aura' may be thought of as a trace, ghost or illusion – a remnant or what was the original. While the answer to the question of whether this dislocation results in the destruction of the original or contributes to a reconsideration which consistently adds meaning and therefore preserves the 'aura' continues to be elusive. Contemporary museum practice reassuringly continues to support a level of self-assessment and critique encouraging artists, curators and directors to work together in the ongoing debate over how commodification and the reproduction have changed the lens through which we see, make and place the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

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- 1 Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005), 8.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (London: Pimlico Press, 1968 / 1999), 211-35.
- 3 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 214-15.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 217.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 6 David Carrier: "The End of the Modern Public Art Museum: A Tale of Two Cities," in his *Museum Scepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 181.
- 7 Lyn Plummer, *Modulations: Cantata Reconfigured*, exhibition catalogue (Dunedin: Lyn Plummer and Rodney Brown, 2007).
- 8 Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement*, 212.
- 9 Thomas McEvilley, "Introduction," in Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 10.
- 10 Carrier, "The End of the Modern Public Art Museum," 207.
- 11 Michaela Giebelhausen, "The Architecture is the Museum," in *New Museum Theory and Practice : An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 41-63.
- 12 Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement*, 212.
- 13 Jon Goss, "The 'Magic of the Mall': An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment," in *Exploring Human Geography: A Reader*, eds Stephen Daniels and Roger Lee (New York: Arnold and Halsted Press, 1995), 210.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 15 Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement*, 8.
- 16 Paul Wood, "Commodity," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 392.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Wood, "Commodity," 397.
- 19 Sarah Thornton, "The Studio Visit," in *Seven Days in the Art World* (London: Granta Publications, 2009), 203.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 22 Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement*, 112.