



John Lehr: The Island Position

Steve Bisson

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Consumerism is a term totally integrated into a sort of happy unconsciousness that accepts this phenomenon to the point of electing it as an indicator of the welfare of the economy. In this salvific vision of religious servitude, consumption stands as the only sustainable manifestation of being, which must necessarily be translated into an ephemeral demand that supports the means of production, and therefore the market growth. In the second half of the twentieth century, the civilization fully devoted to consumption has adopted this totalitarian creed, favoring a ubiquity of thought imposed and sold as the best of all possible worlds. The process of planetary mass homologation, which aims to dissolve cultural differences, has leveled behaviors among the Western peoples.

Today, in the cities, we find ourselves grazing in the streets colonized everywhere by the same shops and food chains. Here, we find the goods praised in glossy magazines. Goods made in invisible factories where labor without rights can be exploited. Here, junk food of global taste is sold to the palates unsuspecting of its nutrient pollution. Here, we can witness the tragedy of traditional merchants and small retail businesses. It is the crisis of the middle bourgeoisie, the massacre of a class that fights for its livelihood, while its fortune vanishes in the pockets of the banks and the lords of finance. This precarious mass, already reduced to poverty and expelled from the glamorous neighborhoods to the crumbling suburbs, is suffering thanks to the advent of electronic commerce its final competitive blow.

How did we get here? Consumption in the past was meant to satisfy basic needs. Somehow it was the man who first needed to consume goods, while now it is the goods that need to be consumed. This substantial difference tells us that if once the needs were real, now they can be planned beforehand and built for a purpose. Advertising exists to fulfill this reason as a weapon of mass distraction. Goods also need an expiration date, they must have an obsolescent nature to guarantee their continuous and renewed production. A forced consumption is thus masked by a daunting duty symbolized by the myth of progress. This is what led the philosopher Günther Anders to observe that humanity which treats the world as a world to use and then throw, treats itself as humanity to be thrown away. The obsolescence of things is, therefore, the main scope. Fashion is one of the many ways to threaten the usefulness of products, their physical resistance, and to push consumers to get rid of them despite their good condition.

How does the virtual economy affect all this? Through a process of acceleration in which the act of consumption already coincides with the act of purchase. The practice of consumption reduced to a physical and depersonalized dimension eliminates any sense of guilt and injects a dose of expectation as with the lottery. Compared to any store where there is still a trace of human relationships, in the virtual bazaar, the interaction is evanescent. Hidden behind the screen and vampirized by seductive advertisements the consumers acquire compulsively every good within their reach.

In this increasingly nihilistic climate and in this de-territorialized perspective, the photographic exploration of John Lehr finds its precise ratio. He sheds light on a melancholy battle, that of the small traders crushed by the crisis and the changes of the capitalist regime that preaches people to be stateless and indifferent to the places. The colored facades well portrayed by the American photographer mask the precipitation of community life in favor of a single value: the compulsive

and almost neurotic online exchange.

These are images that speak of a void, of the same that we find exhorted in the story of George Saunders. An existential black hole, which sucks everything. And above all the lives of people reduced to numbers, shelves, results that nurture this vicious circle. What we observe is the mirror of rampant materialism and a secular hedonism that reflects a language made up of prices rather than words, and of a banal and demeaning aesthetic. An amorphous, childish and almost demented alphabet prevails. 'The Island Position' is an isolated position, that comes from the atomistic vision of society that requires competitors in a perennial challenge, and politics indifferent to the fate of the increasingly less represented communities. In it are staged the futile attempts of the middle class to save, with embarrassing and improper means, what remains of the betrayed promise of the American dream. "Homo homini lupus" (Man is wolf to man) recited Hobbes...