

## Unified Mall Theory - Ben Armstrong

An aging man with dangly clothes and Andy Wahol-ish hair tells me that you don't see many people writing these days. I agree. He stands there for a while and I sit with my pen and notepad. It seems we are both waiting for the other to say something significant.

He tells me that he'd just invested in a traditional osmiridium tipped fountain pen, and that he wants to fill it with squid ink. How he plans to acquire this ink is a mystery. I wonder about the animal welfare issues that would arise from extracting ink against the wishes of the squid, but I decide not to broach this subject with him. Instead I ask whether squid ink is suitable for paper use. He asks me if I know the South Orkney Islands. I say more or less. He says that there were once these explorers who were shipwrecked there and when they ran out of normal ink, they continued writing in their journals using seal blood. This doesn't fully alleviate my concerns given the no doubt vast chemical differences between the two substances, but I nod anyway. It must be something about the aura of hardy maritime know-how.

He walks off and takes a sudden right-hand turn into Target.

I am sitting outside Target in order to be inspired. I am not merely choosing to be inspired, I am assigned to be inspired. Being on the receiving end of inspiration is non-negotiable. I am being paid a considerable sum of money to sit and be inspired by not only the outside of Target but Hobart's Elizabeth Street Mall in its entirety.

I have a set of assumptions about the form my benefactors hope this inspiration will take. They want me to contribute to the cultural landscape. They expect me to write about history and stories and the interweaving of history and stories. The phrase "nooks and crannies" has not been explicitly mentioned, but I feel it is implied. Place and context also seem like things I should probably mention. Probably something about David Walsh as well.

The Urban Self in Antipodean Spatiality. Geographies of Lived Expression. Public Voices, Commercial Spaces. Mythologies of Commoditised Public Identity/ies.

These are all great titles. Oodles of gratuitous pluralisation. Their greatness will surely compensate for any deficiencies in the text that follows them. They are also delightfully interchangeable. If you like, you can pick a favourite and use it as the title for this piece.

Having considered titles, my first task was to find some things to justify them. My selection of titles was of such calibre that any old titbit or snippet of a titbit should be enough. The upstairs section of Beaujangle's Café, where I went to access the toilet, felt like a potential titbit. It had a quaint, behind-the-scenes feel that was unquestionably historic with appropriately narrow stairs and corridors. I felt like I had to explain my presence there so I didn't stay long.

The mall's upper levels in seem to have the most bang-for-your-buck in terms of history, with lots of ambiguously old slogans and store names still printed on the walls: "O'Connor's", "Blazzers" and "Kent House". The implication is that the advertising of the last

century is worth protecting. These names don't mean anything to me and I suspect most users of the mall don't even see them.

More visible however, is a huge sign for a children's apparel shop which - in order to avoid potential legal complications - I will call "Zucchini Zone". It features designer infant clothes worn by a designer infant. The infant has some kind of denim cap as well. It could have been a cropped and recoloured SS propaganda poster, so blue are the child's eyes and so unwavering and impassioned its stare. At first I thought it was a doll. The child seems to follow me wherever I sit and I can't work out what its intense, omniscient gaze means.

In order to escape the child, I went back to Beaujangles. I ordered a coffee even though I didn't really feel like one. Again, I felt the need to justify myself. The mug holding the sugar sticks had a picture of a man - whom I assume is Italian - using a blowtorch to roast a single bean of coffee which he holds unprotected between thumb and forefinger. The man looks both skilled and trustworthy. I can't imagine that the coffee brand which produces the mug gives any kind of subsidy to Beaujangles for using it. They simply lend it authority. They imbue Beaujangles with the attributes of the Italian bean roaster in return for a marginal increase in brand awareness.

Being the only dedicated coffee shop in the mall, I was there by default. Beaujangles takes a great deal of care to present itself as a potential venue for bohemian tinged creative endeavours. As a result it was not very interesting at all. I'm sure the building is saturated with historical titbits but I had the very strong suspicion that if I announced my interests and the nature of my assignment to the staff they would be delighted and probably take me on a tour and relate an oral history of the institution.

I relocated to Subway, which was much better.

Solo bench sitting is a lost skill, like darning or wickerwork. Only a select number of the elderly retain the ability to sit in public without a specific purpose or timeframe.

I've noticed that groups of young men and boys who wear a certain type of hat have a certain form. They have a dedication to genre. The hat in question is such a universal symbol of acceptably deviant middle class youth identity that its wearers can't really be considered a subculture, which makes its associated rituals all the more striking. These include constant fringe maintenance, maximum utilisation of extendable pack shoulder straps and a kind of bouncy backward leaning walk. However, the most sophisticated expression of the hat wearing convention can be observed in the group dynamic. There is always a precise balance. Three is the optimum size. If there are three they alternate hat directions, either two front and one back or two back and one front. If there are four it is three to one. Variations include two with hats and one without a hat, or two with hats and one with another form of headwear such as a beanie. Sometimes there is one member of the group who is conspicuously smaller or younger than the others. There's only ever one. Their walking formation reflects this pattern. They project their hat wearing identity outwards, with wedge shapes or symmetrical thoroughfare-wide lines, sometimes jostling or spilling, but only within the constraints of the pattern. It is almost religious.

Mall walking styles seem to be important. People realise they are being observed. There are some people for whom this has such an impact on their coordination and overall trajectory that the only word that seems apt to describe the effect is buffeted. Even those who appear to be lost in conversation exert a little more control over their arms than they would if it was a quiet suburban street.

I am fully aware that the anticipation of observation affects me too. Probably more than most. When I'm sitting outside on one of the circular benches I can't remove from my brain the image of someone sitting on the other side with their spine twisted and head cocked reading everything that I write. Violations of the sanctity of my bench make me edgy. My knowledge of bench etiquette is not rigorous enough to properly interpret the meaning of them sitting so close to me. The way I cross my legs suddenly has severe connotations.

You can't escape the sociological fact that class is expressed through clothing and demeanour. I know that my prejudices are shared with strangers, unacknowledged but there, hanging in between the meeting of eyes. It's a kind of solidarity.

If you look hard enough you can see little human failings everywhere.

But not nooks and crannies or potential contributions to the cultural landscape.

A loud unaccompanied male vocalist repeatedly sings a line. The lyrics, as far as I can make out, are "but for the blood of Jesus." The mall's buskers are quite obviously and quite literally noteworthy. They are territorial but seemingly without a code of honour. Their only organising principle is volume.

The most significant busking event I have observed so far involved a choir of middle aged people - mostly women - who wore red scarves. They were called "Sisters and Misters". However there was a good chance it was spelt "Sistaz and Mistaz". They sung pop songs not particularly well but not terribly either. A small crowd of mostly other middle aged people formed and listened to "Roar" by Katy Perry and then "California Dreaming" by the Mamas and the Papas. They appeared to be sincerely into it. One of the listener bopped slightly. She was not a person who could be taken seriously as a bopper. Not in a broader context. The choir members were all very cheery, confident and liberated. The implication being that bopping was an encouraged activity.

The young people passing by tried to find ways to privately mock them. Many of these young people were hat wearers. Many were not. A very wizened and veteran looking cop oversaw the whole spectacle. The young people appeared uncomfortable as there was no easy go-to option for mockery. They didn't stop or get too close for fear of being somehow implicated. I wondered which party was more publically threatening. A committed goth watched with an ambivalence that looked rehearsed. The bopper continued to bop.

I realised that I was trying to mock the young people who were trying to mock the choir. There was a whole web of public sneering going on. It was almost a community. There is no element of this situation which is not absurd when examined closely enough.

Later I saw a breakdancing demonstration organised by a youth arts initiative. Some hip people in their twenties danced ironically for a moment as they were passing. One of them wore an unusual fabric hat that looked like something a nomad would wear as they gallop across the Eurasian steppe and ululate.

I am now an active participant in this delicate little ecosystem of image projection and mockery. I could call myself the apex predator but that would be insufferable because all I'm doing is sitting here and writing things in secret and becoming nervous when people appear to be making a beeline for my bench. The whole concept of what I am attempting to achieve is no less ridiculous or liable to be mocked than the man - presumably homeless, with a pant leg tucked into his sock - who pushes a shopping trolley with a brightly coloured suitcase in it.

There's a good chance that the choir formed because of a shared disability or some similarly inspiring collective attribute and I probably have no right to make fun of them for what is pretty unambiguously a positive thing. They could well have been raising money for a suicide prevention campaign.

I feel like this economy, or system, or whatever clever term impresses you the most, should be somehow connected to everything else in the mall. I should be able to employ it to make sense of the advertising slogans and the hats and the mathematics of public interaction.

I'm staring at everything at once.

The reason there is no pleasant and overarching narrative arc to this essay is because I am writing it in the context of loud hip-hop, elderly people saying "fucking King Lear", cleated cyclists who sound like horses when they walk, people running without running clothes, the outlines of private dramas, men who want to fill pens with squid ink and a blue eyed child who stares out from a sign like he knows something. Noise is my only cultural touchstone. None of my thoughts are fully internal.

There was a man who sat on the bench adjacent to me and talked on his phone for about half an hour about cancer. I could not work out his relationship with the person who he was talking to or the person with the cancer. His knowledge of the medical processes the cancer patient was going through was extraordinarily detailed. It was all no doubt heartbreaking and poignant and inspiring but for some reason my only reaction to the entire conversation was that it felt like a cliché. For some reason it seemed not unreal, but overly real. Like it was trying too hard to be real. Despite having no personal experience with cancer it felt like I knew exactly the way cancer should be talked about and the stages cancer suffers go through and how their family and friends are expected to act.

The worst part of it was that the man's body and voice were not the body and voice that people in these kinds of situations are supposed to have.

One of the shops I was sitting outside of featured a mannequin that wore a shirt that had "Erry Day" written on it. This puzzled me for some time.

I walked into the shop and stood next to the mannequin until a salesperson approached. I asked her what, in her understanding, the slogan was meant to signify, and why she thought people would be attracted to it if indeed she did. She told me she didn't quite understand what I was getting at. It was just a shirt, she said. I explained that my intention wasn't to mock or be clever, but that I was genuinely interested in what she thought of the phrase "Erry Day". Whether she herself would wear it. She said it's just one of those things. I suggested that the deliberate misspelling might be some kind of vague appropriation of ethnic dialect. She said she didn't think so. I suggested that perhaps it's a reference to something that has since lost its meaning and now drifts through culture, stripped of context, representing only itself. She said that she did actually think I was trying to be clever.

This conversation is entirely made up. I had planned to have it, but I realised the reality would have been a lot less eventful and considerably more uncomfortable.

An idea I had early on was to make myself familiar with all the shops by entering them and asking the staff questions. The questions would be innocent and of a legitimately curious nature, but so unexpected and phrased in such a way that the convivial commercial environment would be disturbed. I wanted to make their world seem foreign to them. I wanted to become a pest. The hope was that if I made enough of a nuisance of myself in enough shops word would travel about the guy who sits on benches for abnormal periods of time and goes around making employees uncomfortable. Ideally the shop owners would band together and make a formal request or petition to the council or police in order to have me permanently removed from the Elizabeth Street Mall area. I would then be able to make an insightful comment about the ontological management of public space.

Perhaps I would have reinvigorated their sense of community.

As part of this scheme I'm obliged to provide a paragraph from the essay which will be displayed next to a photo of me on a small urban billboard. Here is what I will provide:

Pandora: Unforgettable Moments. "Her hair's quite thick, apparently". Sussan: Neutral Tones. "Sorry, I'm a tourist. I didn't know." Young man walks arrogantly with banana. Tall thin woman screams at toddler. Actually screams. Four suited briefcased men travel in tight defensive phalanx. Papillon: Beauty. Academy. Hair. "Does your father know? Please reply." The people who wear shirts with slogans never look like the people you would expect to say those slogans. None of this is billboard suitable but the fact is you can't smooth a hairy ball. And you can't smooth a hairy mall.