

Kari Rittenbach

Entrée Libre

Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity.

—Project on the City II: The Harvard Guide to Shopping, 2001

Tobias Kaspar's artistic practice is, among other things, concerned with the semiotics of contemporary connoisseurship and the expanding global market for luxury goods, especially those linked to legacy European fashion houses. Some of these houses (including Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Lanvin, *et al.*) date to the era that the French novelist Émile Zola observed Paris transforming, structurally and psychologically, after the introduction of the *grand magasin*—or department store—a place where the collective desire to acquire merchandise was cultivated via delirious spectacle. Members of the public could pass freely into one such temple to the commodity-form (Printemps, Le Bon Marché, Galeries Lafayette) to behold fantastical, rotating displays of household items, objets décoratifs, and other exotic goods until it was nearly impossible to continue.¹ Thus shopping was invented as a particular behavior—cosmopolitan and semi-public—predicated on sensorial saturation and not always resulting in purchase, but more importantly, stimulating an appetite for the habit.

Economically, architecturally, and socially, the emergence of the *grand magasin* had a major impact on western modernity, and what some historians take as the origin point of contemporary consumption. Or more precisely, the “liberation” of use-value from exchange-value: “fixed market prices, a low profit margin and a high turnover enable[d] economies of scale, further enhanced

through concentration and centralization of the business, and diversification of goods.”² The diversion of capital through mass consumption, especially after 1989, in connection with the diffuse *image* of a heritage brand—rather than any tactile quality of a uniquely crafted garment—can easily be traced to the present day, also via brief detour through the late-20th-century “brick-and-mortar”³ typologies painstakingly analyzed by students of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Remarking upon the profusion of slick, seamlessly integrated retail outlets (often held by conglomerates) in airports, hospitals, and hollowed-out historic town centers, *Project on the City II* suggested these typologies made shopping spatially impossible to avoid.⁴ Distinguished from the daily purchase of necessary goods or indeed, comestibles, by 2001 the activity of shopping had become a side-effect of traversing metropolitan space, if not its chief purpose. In global megacities where acute socioeconomic inequality, health and safety issues, and questionably democratic regimes threaten the viability of public space, the climate-controlled shopping mall (and its clandestine security force) provide a veritable simulation of urbane commons.

The contemporary period is marked by the proliferation and anonymization of shopping; a formerly public, mildly perverse, even collectively experienced activity now relegated to the personal screen of each user’s handheld device.⁵ Like other forms of once-public discourse, the cultivation of consumer desire has pitched towards the detached and dysmorphic realm of digital space, where filter bubbles approximate feelings of specificity.

A world, or a look, *created just for you*. The paradox, of course, is that warehouses supplying the items attached to various images circulated by online retailers resemble more and more the “machines” Zola had imagined the *grands magasins* to be: vast fulfillment centers in which multitudinous cheap commodities are categorized, stored, and recalled again under miserable and often exploitive labor conditions.⁶ The role of the fashion industry in the toxic supply chain feeding mass interest in micro-trends has lately drawn wider cultural attention, with catchphrases like “sustainability” belied by emergent crises including waste colonialism. The distance between the image and the reality of fashion may be more apparent than ever.

Kaspar’s interest in luxury fashion consumption tracks the dissonance between a brand’s virtual projections and its actual production for the global market, focusing on the new banality of fashion images and the depreciation of spectacle. While art’s direct engagement with fashion has an established history—from Salvador Dalí’s collaboration with Elsa Schiaparelli, to Andy Warhol’s early illustrations, to Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns’s window dressing for Bonwit Teller—Kaspar’s work takes a more systematic approach to the transactional continuity of the currency-desire exchange. In this sense, both Sylvie Fleury’s assemblage sculpture *C’est la vie!* (1990) and Silvia Kolbowski’s conceptual piece, *an example of recent work may be seen in the windows of Harry Winston Inc., from approximately 5:17pm to 5:34pm, 1990* (1990), serve as precursors. In the former, a shopping bag from the fashion designer Christian Lacroix printed with the text of the work’s title

(also a fragrance) serves as a readymade among other variously branded bags clustered on the gallery floor, their contents obscured; in the latter, a quarter-page advertisement printed in the magazine *Artforum* instructs readers to observe the removal of precious jewels from storefront windows along Fifth Avenue at closing time. Out of view, the gemstones only stir passers-by as a brilliant memory (or fantasy) by night; like a sunset's afterglow. Fleury and Kolbowski both provide commentary on the cultivation—if not capture—of a growing market for luxury goods, and the delicate or ironic sublimation of consumer desire in urban space: as involuntary performance art.

Kaspar's ongoing work, *Personal Shopper* (2020–present), is the third series to transpose techniques common in fashion production to the production of contemporary art, namely “painting.”⁸ Begun as unprecedented levels of online retail traffic crescendoed in 2020—passionately driven from pandemic isolation at a volume that portended the collapse of city centers (such as San Francisco's), or reconfigured residential streets into perpetual DHL delivery routes—the series title invokes the concierge as a specialist with rare access to the luxury fashion system, while questioning the exclusivity flaunted by mass-media platforms. For *Artists Dress (Doodle, Flower Bouquet) I–IX*, 2022, main and angled perspectives of a long and draping Balenciaga robe with an all-over, multicolor pattern of artist doodles in ballpoint ink have been ripped from an e-commerce site and digitally printed in low-resolution across nine canvas panels. Over these variously scaled views (featuring two different models in full-figure, recto and verso, as well

as close-ups of the flowing fabric itself), Kaspar silkscreened a four-color floral stencil borrowed from a well-known manufacturer in St. Gallen that has also printed fabrics for brands represented in *Personal Shopper* works. Competing patterns in layers of opaque color conceal and reveal the full-coverage raiment—ideally presented for online display (“click to view”)—while drawing attention to the weave of the painting’s textile support. Excess ink and minor mis-registrations direct the eye away from the “objective” (if blurry) product photography to the hand-pulled character of the floral pattern.

As an early technology of mechanical reproduction, the silkscreen has been used by artists with ambitions both political (the Atelier Populaire, Sister Corita Kent) and social (Warhol), while here it is critically deployed to disturb the coherent digital reproduction of a covetable good and to reference an unbranded, authorless aspect of the fabrication process. By imposing a discreet industry “standard” over the top of a presumably special edition fabric decorated by an uncredited drafts-person in *Artists Dress*, Kaspar questions the value added to an object by perceived artistic genius, on the one hand (surface improvements to the dress), and by ephemeral connection to legacy luxury, on the other (surface improvements to the painting). The riffs and repetitions of the *Personal Shopper* series not only emphasize contemporary fashion’s endless reproductions of the similar, nor merely allude to the counterfeiting and common appropriations afforded by social media; the formal painterly aspect of the works themselves invokes the anti-aesthetic techniques of contemporary abstraction

after the development of digital reproduction technologies. These artless canvas panels dissimulate the notion of personal authorship and instead deliver style as a form of marketable authenticity.

Kaspar has described the stark “found” representations that form the ground in *Personal Shopper*—for example, the adolescent female in a white T-shirt who appears in *Millennial Mille Fleurs, Portrait* and *Millennial Mille Fleurs, Side View* (both 2022)—as virtual replacements for the department store’s changing room. Rather than provide vaguely narrative content for thinkpieces and articles published online, as did the stock images that proliferated digitally in the early era of web 2.0, the digital fashion image is engineered to first appeal to, and second, embolden the passive private shopper. Its aesthetic is unforced, not too attractive, easily identifiable. By fashioning e-commerce models as slightly better-looking reflections of the unknown consumer peering through the other side of the LCD screen, the online retail platform attempts to curtail the insecurity and undecidability characteristic of shopping in a poorly lit, humid, three-dimensional environment. The proximity of contemporary fit models to the luxury market base also demonstrates the ways in which unruly or excessive desires have been circumscribed by a kind of determinism that “mirrors” or models familiarity (brand loyalty) rather than advocating difference, the eccentric, or the “new.” With surveillance data derived from big, population-scale caches (what Shoshanna Zuboff has termed “behavioral surplus”) retail platforms, too, propose prediction products to frequent buyer-users.⁹ *If you like breton stripes, you may also like ...*

In contrast to the sensuous floridity of the *grand magasin*—for Zola, a gesamtkunstwerk styled by the imperious Octave Mouret to separate Parisian ladies from their gold coin—My Theresa, Ssense, Moda Operandi and High Snobiety reduce and narrow one's view to best encourage the uninterrupted click-through purchase. Fashion's contemporary mood is efficiency rather than fantasy. It models relatability and identification, linked to an unverified promise of quality, pedigree, construction. If the crux of fashion is a drive towards conformity, its digital images prime growing numbers to adapt.

In other *Personal Shopper* works, Kaspar's source materials derive from the accumulating lists of alluring objects that populate his virtual shopping cart. For *A Day At Dover Street Market (Youth)* (2022), small image tiles of black leather boots, sweaters, sweatshirts, and other winter-wear peek out from beneath a layer of miniature blush blossoms. Here the shopping cart doubles as the character selection screen for a disaffected art-adjacent GenZ fighter in a first-person game, while trifling with the algorithm's machine intelligence, and seasonal change.

Kaspar's room-spanning installation, *Personal Shopper (Retail Apocalypse)* (2021), presented in an empty storefront at Froschaugasse 4 in downtown Zurich, included a multi-panel work digitally printed with the entire contents of a Farfetch wishlist, just perceptible beneath semi-transparent seaweed green layers of an abstracted camouflage pattern. Here the tactical cover serves to ambivalently corroborate, even indulge, the digital and psychic effects of the present. The particular

regularity of the artist's layered intervention along the canvas expanse seemed to materialize the domestic, in the form of cozy patterned bedsheets, underneath which one might hide oneself to scroll through endlessly illuminated white pages serving satisfactory looks, all cropped according to the same square format until it is psychologically impossible to look any further—that is, until your eyes hurt, your lids droop listlessly, and you sink into oblivion: a sound and dreamless sleep.

- 1 Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): "Madame de Boves ... had guessed that Deloche was a new salesman, awkward and slow, who dared not resist the customers' whims; she was taking advantage of his timid obligingness, and had already kept him for half an hour, asking all the time for fresh articles. The counter was overflowing; she was plunging her hands into the growing cascade of pillow lace, Mechlin lace, Valenciennes, Chantilly, her fingers trembling with desire, her face gradually warming with sensual joy ..." (110).
- 2 Robert Proctor, "A Cubist History: The Department Store in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 13 (2003): 231.
- 3 A materially inexact metonym for shops set in real rather than virtual space, which are just as likely to be constructed in steel, glass, and various other cladding materials (wood, concrete, polycarbonate).
- 4 Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas, Sze Tsung Leong, eds., *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Cologne: Taschen and Cambridge, MA: Harvard Design School, 2001): "The most experimental, avant-garde architecture may now merely simulate the ambiguous and unspoken paradigms of shopping: smoothness, complexity, undecidability" (163).
- 5 Halbreich, Betty. "The word normal is subjective. My normal is not your normal, it never has been. Recently, I've been longing for my 'normal' New York. I miss the people, the buzz, really the energy. I don't know if it's the city that changed or me." Instagram, 6 September 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cw2urjOuMa3/?igsh=MzRIODBiNW-FIZA=>.
- 6 Heike Geissler, *Christmas on Amazonstraße*, trans. Katy Derbyshire, n+1, October 16, 2015, www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-interview: "The film shows how a stock delivery reaches Amazon. A pallet-truck operator drives a huge box to a young employee. She smiles, opens the box, and unpacks it. She scans the barcode on the items, puts them in yellow crates, and pushes the crates onto a conveyor belt. A cuddly elk pokes its head over the edge of a yellow crate, peeking into the world of work as if peeking out of a child's bag packed for a trip away. The elk is the leitmotif of the introduction. It reaches the warehouse in its crate and then is removed from the crate by an employee. Once again, the barcode is scanned, and the elk is placed on a shelf. You have to be a good walker, says the employee in the film. He walks almost ten kilometers a day, he tells you; that saves him joining a gym. Another employee takes the elk off the shelf, scans the barcode, and packs it in a yellow crate. Again, the elk peeks over the edge of the crate as it travels via transport belt to the packaging station and is finally put in a cardboard box to be sent to a customer."
- 7 At the time of this writing, some micro-trends include: hip-hugging trousers, ballet flats, fringed shawls. On Kantamanto Market in Accra, see: Sarah Kent, "Should Fashion Pay for Its 'Waste Colonialism'?" *The Business of Fashion*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/sustainability/fashion-pay-waste-colonialism-secondhand-clothes-epr-kantamanto>.
- 8 Prior series include *Reflector Paintings* (2015–18) and the *Embroidery Series* (2018–20).
- 9 Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 14. Furthermore: "Even when knowledge derived from your behavior is fed back to you in the first text as a quid pro quo for participation, the parallel secret operations of the shadow text capture surplus for crafting into prediction products destined for other marketplaces that are *about you* rather than *for you*" (207).



Tobias Kaspar's *New Address II – Stereotypical Artist* comprises a main book and the present insert. This book follows *New Address*, published in 2017 by Nero.

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