

Vitrine (noun): a glass display case: from French, shop window: ultimately from Latin - vitrum, glass (Oxford English Dictionary)



## **'Artsparkle04'**

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### **'Ego in Arcadia'**

by Jake Arnott

The future dream is a shopping scheme - The Sex Pistols

'In the future,' wrote Theodor Adorno in 'The Dialectics of Enlightenment,' 'all will be provided for so that none can escape.' This vision of the consumer consumed has long been nurtured in Leeds. The modern city irrupted into the 1900s by the force of trade rather than industry. And in the new century it is even more wreathed in the purple of commerce.

The great battleship of barter, Kirkgate Market, spawned Marks & Spencer, consumerism's answer to Marx and Engels. By 1900 a complex of eight shopping arcades were completed. 'The whole estate will be covered with buildings of elegant design consisting of shops and other business premises, with showrooms on all the first floors...the frontages have handsome marble pillars...The floor is covered with fine mosaic and the domes are richly decorated with frescoes.' This contemporary description keenly echoes Walter Benjamin's observation of the arcade as an exemplar of 'an emphatic striving for modernity and dissociation with the outmoded; inventions of industrial gas-lit luxury, glass-roofed, marble-walled passages which draw light from above.' The enclosed space, sucking in light from the sky, with coercively rich decoration, subdues and reassures its inhabitants with the addictive pleasure of parting with their money. Here, Benjamin observes, is 'art brought into the service of commerce.' The shopping mall, the new Arcadia, is placed in the heart of the modern, utopian city. In Leeds, ego is in Arcadia.

I lived in this city for most of the 1990s. It was a time of economic boom when that dreadful word 'regeneration' was being banded about. But there was no great plan for recovery, no social programme or real investment for the future. Instead the upswing would be consumer led, i.e. we would have to pay for it. Fin-de-siecle Leeds saw the feverish development of places where we could spend our money. The arcades, the very soul of this philosophy, were lovingly restored. A huge stained-glass firmament was constructed over the Victoria Quarter, a blue glass ceiling to mock the sky. In 1996, to the unconcealed delight of the small nation of shopkeepers, a branch of the uber fashionista London department store Harvey Nichols was opened in the heart of Arcadia. A publicity slogan was coined announcing Leeds as 'the Knightsbridge of the North.' Michael Paraskos, writer and co-founder of the New Leeds Art Club, has described this, quite rightly, as a 'terrible, embarrassing and shameful phrase.' Paraskos points out that as well as

excellent shopping facilities Knightsbridge contains The Natural History Museum, The Science Museum, and the V&A. Leeds' success as a financial and consumer centre has not facilitated any cultural revival in the city, instead it has stifled it.

What is to be done? Artsparkle is organised by a group of artists that came together amidst the harsh climate of this stultifying philistinism. They know that to retreat into some hermetic space where 'art' or 'culture' can be appreciated is not an option. Instead they make inroads into the belly of the beast and find a place in Arcadia to challenge its pacifying force. They occupy shopping spaces in Leeds to claim a cultural space in their soulless environs. Art can be consumed too but the art market's strength lies in deceiving the public into believing that rather than being market-led there is some detached notion of aestheticism that endows art with its commercial value. By playing with modes of exchange, Artsparkle invites the public to involve themselves directly in the relationship between culture and trade. It presents the stark reality of art as commodity fetishism but instead of an elitist arena where connoisseurs can collect and speculate on precious objects they allow a public to experience the bewildering contradictions between aestheticism and consumerism. They are also in Arcadia and to turn Benjamin's phrase around: 'commerce is brought into the service of art.'

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'Ego in Arcadia' by Jake Arnott 2004  
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