

YYZ Mall

Marmco International* celebrated a groundbreaking ceremony in 401 Richmond, on June 27th, 2009, kicking off construction of the first ever artist-run centre mall of its kind in Canada. *Massive Sale: YYZ Mall* was a 430 square foot retail space, a mini-mall built within the YYZ gallery. The mall officially opened on September 11, 2009 and it featured four small businesses designed by four sets of artists: Ken Ogawa; Aleks Ognjanovich; Ulysses Castellanos; and the Shinn family – Karey, Nick, and their children Eric and Zoe. The four groups of artists eagerly opted to participate within the premise that: if they were asked to open a small store what would it be like, what would it do, or sell?

The artist groups/ store/ small business owners were prompted by us to go through a series of thematic considerations, business development concepts, design, and branding exercises. The process unfolded in a manner akin to us acting as business consultants and project producers. A unique aspect of the project was its durational feature: the four artist groups ran their businesses, always in attendance in the gallery space during store hours for a duration of six straight weeks. The names of the businesses were: 156 Ehohe (Ogawa); War and Leisure (Ognjanovich); Chirajito Clown Painter (Castellanos); and Shinndustry International (Shinn). The respective slogans and themes of the stores were as follows:

'Hole in 1-5-6': Money exchange, perfume, and mini Golf.

'War is over, let's party!': Men's leisurewear and accessories based on the dialectic of War and Leisure.

'Everyone's a Clown': An artist workshop, studio and showroom where one can be surrounded by clown imagery, have one's portrait done as a clown, and that also functions as a record shop.

'From eh to zee its Shinndustry – An international family business since 1998': A family run business since 1998 that sells digital software and media, printed matter, apparel, accessories, textcessories, souvenirs, and design artifacts.

Massive Sale: YYZ Mall blended artifice and reality, with contemporary social and artistic responses pertaining to the programming agenda of YYZ Artists Outlet, while addressing greater social concerns that we have with respect to the changing neighbourhoods within the central core of Toronto. Metaphorically speaking, the artists involved, symbolized the notion of capitalist self-determination - ie: the small business owner as individualist; but paradoxically did so within the constraints of being an artist, and even more so within the grey area of non-commercialism: the space of the artist-run centre. All of this occurred within the context of an ad hoc mall, and raised the parallel question of whether our mega malls have become the nexus of capital and culture?

In addressing artifice and reality, we created a scenario where business modalities and cultural programming entities intertwined. We went to great measures to implement as many actual and real-world cultural and business concepts, attempting to augment the retail mix of 401 Richmond, and boost both the economic and social growth of YYZ. Social and cultural attractions such as lectures, satellite spaces and special events enhanced the mixed-use qualities of the mall. In support of its retail tenants, *YYZ Mall* provided unique advertising and marketing solutions to help drive visitors to its businesses. Extending the metaphors of paradox amidst non-commercial art zones, *YYZ Mall* existed in the dual anxiety of the small business that craves customers, and the artist-run centre that does not need them. Dovetailing were the thematic issues of artist-run centres and their struggle for larger outreach during a time of economic disaster and the looming threat of austerity measures by our governments. Straddling these issues *YYZ Mall* offered a cynical and

* Marmco International is the pseudo-corporate-moniker that we take on occasionally).

ironic model for small business owners, artists and their audiences alike – where artists and shopkeepers alter their strategies in search of economic viability; however, where art can fail and still be poignant - it is a sad sight to see an out of business sign in a neighbourhood independent business' store window.

Massive Sale: YYZ Mall originated from observations about the unique nature of small businesses in Toronto, and the ways in which the individuality and creativity of small business mirrors contemporary artistic strategies. The traits of individuality, eccentricity, difference, and humour, which the four artist groups in *YYZ Mall* expressed in abundance, mirrored the cultural meshwork that makes independent businesses in Toronto unique, and thus the local Toronto urban experience unique. Without the entrepreneurial spirit of small businesses, artists, and creative types, the city of Toronto would become a monoculture subject to macro-economic and social pressures. Ideally, it is this individualism and eclecticism of micro economic and cultural actors that makes the core of Toronto interesting. Losing this heterogeneity, forces the city into a situation where it is prey to mass commercial forces of branding, trendiness, and lack of locale. Once this change from heterogeneous to monoculture fully manifests, will we mourn this loss, or will we even notice?