

Unpacking the Holiday Presence: A Comparative Ethnography of Two Gift Stores

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an ethnographic study of two midwestern American gift stores. Using a processual model of gift giving, ethnographers employed participant observation and depth interviews in two separate retail contexts during the Christmas/Hanukkah season to create a thick description of elements of particular phases of the giving process. Summary ethnographies are presented in extended case study format as a baseline for comparing critical features of the phases, for deriving propositions about the contextual embeddedness of gift giving behaviors, and for interpreting the significance of retail environment on the social construction of the holidays. Implications of the study for infrastructural aspects of consumer behavior and marketing related to gift giving (such as female entrepreneurialism, organizational culture, etc.), are also explored. Directions for future research are outlined.

Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* (1969)

INTRODUCTION

While none of us may ever construct his or her reality in as disjointed or disfiguring a manner as does the mother of Billy Pilgrim, himself the protagonist of Vonnegut's black comedic novel, still we are profoundly affected by the gift giving relationships we forge over the lifecourse. Beyond the shallowness and desperation, implicit in the epigraph, of a search process merging bricolage and bric-a-brac, little of the sense-making apparatus and procedures of gift shopping in contemporary culture has been explored by writers or researchers. Since the probing of the semiotic significance of the gift itself has only recently been resumed (e.g., Cheal, 1987, Baudrillard 1981, Hyde 1979, MacCannell 1976), it is perhaps not too surprising that an institutional locus of meaning production and discovery--the retail gift shop--has been heretofore largely ignored. Consumer researchers of anthropological bent (Sherry 1983, McCracken 1988a) have called for the investigation of gift stores, while those espousing naturalistic inquiry methods have used such retail sites as a kind of

comparative foil to less overtly commercial or profane consumption venues in the development of theoretic constructs (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). The present chapter is devoted to creating an ethnographic baseline and a set of propositions by which a deeper understanding of the gift store as a complex institution may be derived.

The field study from which this ethnography emerges was framed in terms of a process model of gift giving proposed by Sherry (1983). This model describes the three stages of a transaction through which donor and recipient progress. All behavior antecedent to the actual gift exchange, most notably those conditions impinging upon search, occurs during the Gestation stage. The gift exchange itself, and its attendant ritual dynamics, occurs during the Prestation stage. The relationship between donor and recipient is realigned, and the course of future gift exchanges affected, during the Reformulation stage.

In elaborating this model, Sherry (1983) issued a detailed programmatic call for comprehensive, contextually sensitive research into gift giving behavior. In particular, he suggested that extended case study of the gift store, especially during ritually propitious seasons, would prove most valuable. Such study would assist in answering research questions associated with stages one and three of the processual model. The transformation of the purchased gift from conceptual to material realms, as well as from commodity to singular object, begins in this retail nexus. The investing of the object with "gift-ness," however shaped by advertising (Waits 1978), is catalyzed in the store. Meaning divestiture occurs here as well, when gifts are returned and exchanged. As a fieldsite, the gift store permits the researcher access to a range of gift giving behaviors, and facilitates efficient, holistic interpretation of a host of related issues. It is an opportune setting in which to begin tracking those "symbolic processes" Cheal (1986, 437) finds lacking in conventional studies of gift giving, and which are also underrepresented in conventional consumer research.

The following pages are devoted to several particular issues. First of all, the ethnographic methodology employed in the study is detailed, and the implications of such naturalistic inquiry for consumer research are reviewed. Secondly, two summary ethnographies of gift store activity are presented. These baseline thick descriptions are then compared and contrasted for the insight they provide into generalized and local understanding of consumer behaviors associated with gift stores. Thirdly, a short list of interpretive propositions is proposed, which reflects the researchers' understanding of their fieldsites. Finally, these propositions are offered as a springboard into further research.

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METHODOLOGY

A recent spate of articles and presentations (for exemplars and extensive references, see Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Hirschman 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Sherry 1987a; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) marks a reawakening of interest among consumer researchers in methods alternative to experiment and survey. The present chapter contributes to this re-emergence. The resurgence of qualitative research amounts to the dropping of the second shoe: the advocacy of a "broadened" conception of consumer behavior is now being accompanied by an advocacy of methods capable of accommodating this broadening. Thus, semiotic, humanistic, and naturalistic perspectives are being touted as correctives to a premature narrowing of focus, if not an absolute metatheoretical bias, within the discipline of consumer research. Without embroiling ourselves in the epistemological wrangle between so-called positivist and nonpositivist consumer researchers, nor embarking upon another tutorial exposition of alternative methods, we will lay out the tenets and limitations of the ethnographic approach we observed in our study.

Purposive or judgmental sampling governed site selection. Recognizing that among all consumer objects the "gift" is among the most likely to be imbued with a significant cultural biography (Kopytoff 1986), we selected retail outlets that specialized exclusively in merchandise positioned as gifts. That is, the principal function ascribed to objects in these stores by consumers and retailers alike is suitability as a gift (Thaler 1985). We found this emic ascription to be etically sound. The objects exist in a semiotic variant of a total institution (Baudrillard 1968; Goffman 1961), their intrinsic and extrinsic (or projected and projectible) meanings governed by the sociocommercial construction of "gift" as negotiated by retailer and consumer, and their cumulative impact creating a spatio-temporal dimension distinctly separate from the ordinary. As a promotional brochure from one of our shops suggests, these stores stock "everything you don't need, can't afford, but can't live without." In addition to this generic or hermetic judgment standard, issues of efficiency and comparability determined site selection. Thus we encountered informants whose primary situational objective was focused on issues related to gift giving, rather than on other buyer behaviors. Our observations and interviews occurred *in situ*, in a naturalistic context.

Each researcher selected one gift shop to investigate in detail. Because the study was explicitly exploratory, we sought to increase the quality and quantity of insight that might be brought to bear upon future comprehensive investigations, especially joint investigations of single sites, by immersing ourselves in separate fieldsites. Each of us discussed findings and conjectures on a regular basis throughout the study, and the direction of subsequent inquiry was shaped in part by these periodic discussions. This procedure has been termed "memoing" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Strauss 1987). Our emergent design was guided solely by our shared assumption that

significant activity occurred in gift stores, and that we could capture something of this significance in a thick description of our fieldsites.

Some elaboration on research bias will help clarify the design we employed in this study. As noted, we discovered no ethnographic precedent for our investigation. The nearest approximation unearthed, a curious hybrid of consumerist concern and muckraking expose' (Maclean 1899), was a covertly and unsystematically conducted participant observation study of selected activities in a number of Chicago department stores set during the Christmas season. As an early example of the kind of blitzkrieg ethnography (Sherry 1987b) that threatens sensitive interpretation of complex phenomena, despite the intriguing snippets of insight derived from transient field immersion, this sociological foray obliquely illustrated the potential contribution of a naturalistic inquiry of holiday retailing activity.

Given the impoverished but promising precedent for our study, and the fact that neither of us had conducted previous investigations that would plausibly allow us to construe our study as diagnostic research (Whyte 1978), we approached the problem from a virtual historical particularist perspective. Because the phenomena of interest were transient, and the duration of our field immersion was self-limiting, we focused principally on the creation of an ethnographic record that would enfranchise speculation within obvious limits of generalizability and permit the design of more sensitively targeted studies in the future.

With these modest aspirations and a chariness of affixing the label "ethnographic" to a single-season study, we settled on a pair of fieldsites. A conservative "one-researcher-one-site" principle was adopted for two reasons. Foremost among these was depth of understanding in the face of severe time constraints. By studying a single shop intensively, each of us was able to amass a far greater wealth of local detail to aid in the framing of a more comprehensive negotiated interpretation of gift store activity than would have been possible with a shared site design. In this sense, our exploratory study was incipiently confirmatory. The range of phenomena we hoped to describe was expected to overlap across stores, with outliers providing directions for additional research. A more pragmatic reason for single-site immersion had to do with the relative obtrusiveness of short-term ethnographic work. Our access to small, highly personalized and seasonally sensitive commercial sites depended in good measure upon our ability to interfere minimally with the round of life in the stores. The merit of a team approach (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988) is diminished to the degree that it impedes access to a site. Our consequent compromise was to transmute the notion of teamwork, triangulating our gender-mediated observations through routine, periodic discussions of our observations, interpretations and direction during passive and active stages of research, and negotiating the propositions with which we have concluded this chapter.

We selected our fieldsites to facilitate the kind of comparison that would allow the creation of an ethnographic record. That is, we used similarity as our principal criterion. Our stores carry comparable merchandise, and are operated as well as patronized by similar kinds of people. Owners, managers and clientele are drawn chiefly from the upper-middle class, with some spill-over from both lower upper and lower middle classes. Thus, we stress the exploratory nature of our study, and the clear limits to generalizability, and trust that future investigations of gift store activity which focus on outlets upscale or downscale with respect to our own will benefit from our description. Similarly, studies contrasting different kinds of outlets (family-owned and -operated vs. franchised, large vs. small, shops vs. mall stores, etc) are expected to benefit from this effort.

Seeking to exploit the liturgical calendar, we began the study early in December. Such timing allowed us access to shoppers during Hanukkah (beginning December 8 the year of this study) and Christmas gift giving seasons, as well as to the ambience of the commercial holidays. The study continued into the early weeks of January. Post-holiday investigation permitted researchers to include gift returns and exchanges, along with the purchase of self-gifts made possible through conversion of cash gifts and through sales, in their behavioral sampling frame. Each researcher spent between 12 to 24 hours per week, scattered across weekdays and weekends, days and evenings, at his or her respective site. In follow-up investigations, each researcher was able to attend a regional Gift Show at which store buyers routinely search, restock, trade information and observe trends. One of the researchers has continued to study her fieldsite longitudinally, and anticipates returning to the shop for her third season (McGrath 1988a).

Data were collected through participant observation, directive and non-directive interviewing, and to a limited degree by photography. Over time, researchers were given relatively unrestricted access to front and back regions (Goffman 1959) of their respective stores. As trust and rapport were established between ethnographers and informants, researchers' participation in the round of store life increased. Mere physical presence as an observer gradually gave way to active involvement of various kinds, as researchers became helpers during periods of peak activity. Depth interviews during periods of downtime, intercept interviews and periodic shopping with consumers, integrated throughout by observation *in situ*, made it possible for researchers to ask increasingly sensible questions about gift store activity as the study progressed. Data were recorded in field notes and journals. Member checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was observed to the extent that researchers solicited feedback on their observations from informants. Some key informants were provided with drafts of researchers' materials, and store owners were provided copies of the completed study as a condition of access and informed consent.

In the following sections, a summary ethnography of each of our field experiences is

presented. We explore a number of settings, actors, events, processes and objects related to the processual model of gift giving. Pseudonyms are employed throughout these descriptions. The two gift shops are located in noncontiguous communities in the same greater metropolitan region of the midwestern United States. As a primarily descriptive exercise designed to generate insight into gift giving behavior, the limits to generalization of this study are clear. Further, the observations contained in the ethnographies are acutely time-bound, forged as they were during periods of peak activity.

GIFT STORE I: THE MOUSE HOUSE

Tucked away near the corner of a festively lighted concourse of a very upscale suburban retail strip, nestled among restaurants, doctor's offices, specialty food stores, boutiques, spas and beauty parlors, is a quaint little gift shop called "The Mouse House." The shop takes its name from a once popular children's novel, and both the physical structure and ambience of its setting heighten the nostalgic storybook quality of the store. Every aspect of the Mouse House seems to invite the consumer's participation. The window display fronting the street is a traditional midwestern American Christmas scene, the flocked pane disclosing a beautifully decorated tree replete with ornamental angels and a host of assorted Christmas knickknacks. Upon opening the door, the consumer is met by the soft strains of seasonal carols and gently embraced by the pleasantly aromatic scent of a "Christmas brew" simmering in a kettle on the sill. An elderly golden labrador greets customers at the door, receiving frequent pats and comments from those entering the store, and jocular farewells from those leaving. An occasional customer is startled into laughter by the movement of a dog presumed to be stuffed.

Ambience

This invited participation is enhanced as the customer moves further into the store. The modest size of the store (a roughly trapezoidal 450 square feet) is a structural asset. Rustic barrel tables and containers, nonlocking glass cabinets and shelving units of various construction crowd the aisles of the shops. Walls and ceiling beams hold merchandise. Hutches, chairs and couches are similarly laden with goods. Walkways are narrow, and the displays cornucopic, forcing browsers to slow their pace in order to avoid upsetting or overlooking items. Nowhere is there displayed a sign requesting browsers to refrain from handling the often fragile and costly items. In fact, such handling is expected and encouraged. Such design creates the impression that the store is on the verge of bursting with its contents, overflowing with treasures of every description. Thus displayed, the merchandise seems quite accessible and familiar.

This cornucopic effect is enhanced by the owner's practice of rearranging merchandise periodically, highlighting the formerly hidden and downplaying the familiar; the appearance of added abundance is achieved with no additional stock. Yet at

no time does the store display appear chaotic or haphazard, despite the high traffic of the holidays. The owner's flair for interior design and appropriate groupings -- her sense for what McCracken (1988b) has called "Diderot unities," Cassirer (Fernandez 1986, 191) the "consanguinity of things" and Solomon and Assael (1987) "product constellations" -- acknowledged by clerks and customers alike, transforms the threat of clutter into a "Mouse House."² That is, one feels as if he or she has entered into a home, industriously over-furnished through the tirelessly acquisitive efforts of a tasteful hoarder.

Merchandise

The Mouse House is stocked with a staggeringly eclectic variety of goods. In both emic and etic perspective, the objects range from kitsch to fine art, from dispensable to collectible. Prices themselves range from a few dollars to a few thousand dollars. A variety of crafts from local artisans graces the aisles and walls. Jewelry, statuary, tapestries, wall hangings and crystal are everywhere in evidence. Greeting cards, figurines, dolls, paintings and toys of various kinds abound. Seasonal and novelty items are popular. Nail sculptures share counterspace with crystal birdhouses. Mobiles and chimes, aquaria and stained lead glass, candles and photo albums, reindeer-visaged baseball caps and gag medicinal products (e.g., vasectomy pills) are all to be found in the shop. Marionettes, whiskey decanters, costly kaleidoscopes, music boxes, wrought iron strollers, brass rocking horses and ceramic sundials are also available. If there is a rationale or unifying theme to this assortment, it is the notion of "uniqueness." The owner admits to having a knack for identifying beautiful things, and uses scarcity as a standard in her aesthetic canon. Clerks and customers alike repeatedly affirm the perception of "uniqueness" that attaches to the Mouse House and its treasures. Even the gag items partake of this uniqueness. "Uniqueness" is employed by informants in several senses: items are literally one-of-a-kind; items are believed to be unavailable in any other accessible outlet, although duplicates exist in-store; items *in toto*, the assortment as collective offering, are believed to be unavailable elsewhere, as the synecdochic sacralization characterizing collections

(Belk et al 1988) would suggest. Most of the items have a biography with which the clerks are intimately familiar. Provenance, details on crafting and crafts people, acquisition history, pre- and post-purchase personal experience narratives attached to items, and a range of evaluations are just a few of the dimensions captured in many of these biographies.

History

The Mouse House is a franchise operation that permits local owners a wide degree of latitude in personalizing the concept. Some owners are little more than passive operators who obtain all merchandising and operating ideas from the original "Main Mouse" and his network of owners; even buying may be completely delegated. Other owners are more entrepreneurial, and use the network for idea generation and information exchange, but prefer to personalize or localize their operation. Marilyn, the owner of our Mouse House fieldsite, is such an entrepreneur. She purchased a dying franchise, in which she was a clerk, five years ago as a "retirement" business. She relocated the shop, and has built it into a thriving concern. She avails herself of Mice "conventions" and "buying trips," but prefers to rely on her own sense of propriety. Frequently she commissions items from local artisans, and shops the U.S. coastal Gift Shows. She has established contacts in Europe as well. Success has forced her to move into her present retail location, double the size of her site just a year ago. Her personalization strategy has been effective. Customers have been overheard to speculate about the franchise-ability of the Mouse House. Others are surprised to learn that it is already franchised. Still others remark upon its "uniqueness" compared to its counterparts throughout the country. Marilyn does one third of her gross business and makes all of her profit during the Christmas season.³ This December alone she has sold 83,000 dollars worth of merchandise, and taken back only 400 dollars worth of returns in January. She has finished 25% over her projection for the year.

Choice Heuristic

Marilyn's business acumen and her selection standards reflect a tension between vocation and avocation. She is unable to articulate a choice heuristic with much precision. She enjoys "being around beautiful things" and claims a "knack" for buying them. Having always wanted to become an interior designer, she indulges this dream through the store, experimenting with color coordination, object groupings and the like. Relying on her own intuition and her husband's poor judgment ("If he likes it, I don't

² One informant, an art and set director, regularly "rents" props from the Mouse House (for 15-20% of cost--a transaction department stores won't consider but which in turn elevates their returns rate when purported "buyers" are finished using goods for a short duration) as backdrops or foregrounds for her work. "It would take me forever to set up a room if I used regular department stores. What they [the Mice] have on this one table here would be spread throughout an entire department in a regular store. I save all kinds of time here." Parenthetically she remarks, "Sometimes I go to the counter with \$500.00 worth of stuff and whip out the old charge card. I love the look on the faces of the West Lake women shoppers when I do that!"

³ That is, the store would not be profitable were it not for the increased sales during this season. Interestingly enough, one sixth of the gross business derives directly from the sales of miniature mouse collectibles. This line has been adopted as a special responsibility by one of the clerks, who maintains a detailed customer list.

buy it, if he doesn't, I do"), she searches the wares of artists and artisans, weighs the suggestions of Mouse House buying cliques, and attends several annual Gift Shows, until she discovers items she feels are "right" for her customers. This "rightness" is tied both to status, class and lifestyle dimensions of her client base, as well as to individual, idiosyncratic characteristics of particular customers. She is alive as well to trends, and believes the midwest is "at least two years behind the rest of the country." Thus, she will sometimes sacrifice her sense of propriety-- "I'm still buying mauve because the midwest doesn't know it's out" --but most often prefers to deliver coastal trends to an educable, impressionable clientele. She no longer carries "country" merchandise, despite her belief that the midwest doesn't know that "country is dead," because her particular customers are discriminating and *do* know that "country is dead." Marilyn is wary of trends, however, because they "die such horrible deaths." She avoids "popular" artists for similar reasons. She is as imprecise about the price-quality relationship as she is about her aesthetic canon, noting that "there is a *lot* of expensive 'tacky' stuff" in the marketplace competing for a buyer's consideration. Her own pricing policies are intuitive, with markups ranging as high as 400%. She has sold store fixtures to ardent customers, pricing the "goods" on the spot.

Marilyn attributes her success to intuition, enthusiasm and perseverance. The petite, middle-aged proprietor, dressed in as unfailingly stylish a manner as the giftware she has so carefully selected and arranged would demand, spends a good portion of her day in direct contact with her customers, many of whom specifically seek her out for conversation. She is clearly delighted with the work she has chosen, and with the skills she has developed on her own initiative. "I spent my whole life raising children," she observes. "I got my business training on the job." While these activities are bracketed as discontinuous events, with no overt or conscious relationship to each other, she appears to conduct her business operations much like a domestic economy. That such a gift business is peculiarly suited to a familial attitude is explored later in this chapter.

Personnel

Marilyn staffs her shop with seven other full and part-time clerks, to whom she refers as "her girls" (and to the public as "the Mice"); her husband lends a periodic hand when his own work schedule permits. The Mice function largely as consultants to shoppers, dispensing advice when requested ("Will this tureen look good on an early American table?" "Is this good for a grandmother?"), but rarely initiate a sales interaction directly. "The ladies" (an emic term used by regular and occasional customers) are valued for their low-key, no-pressure approach and for their friendliness. Customers often compare shopping in the Mouse House to visiting friends at home. The shop is frequently likened to a living room. Such recontextualizing reflects the efficacy of sacralization (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). The Mice are just as apt to be carpet sweeping or dusting around

shoppers as waiting on customers. Each of the Mice has a number of loyal customers for whom she pays special attention as new goods arrive in the store. This attention extends beyond mere in-store catering; a customer may be alerted to treasures before they are stocked, or items may be set aside and "reserved" for particular customers. None of the Mice works on a commission basis, and each professes to love her job. One of the Mice, Jane, observes tellingly,

"If you want to know the truth, it's like a private club. Marilyn's gotten hold of seven women who love to open gifts! Marilyn's a great little shopper, and we love to see what she's bought. We don't make much. It's just a lot of fun for two or three months out of the year."

Each of the Mice emphasizes the thrill of opening new merchandise as it arrives. The UPS deliveryman is eagerly awaited. Marilyn reinforces these expectations, noting that she always shops (the major Gift Shows) with the "girls" in mind. This builds everyone's excitement and enthusiasm. She has recently purchased a 10,000 dollar music box, and secretly awaits its arrival, knowing how it will delight the Mice. She will subsidize the purchase through the sale of music box tapes, and not feel compelled to sell the music box itself. The box will add to the store's "fairy land" atmosphere, she rationalizes. It is as well a gift to herself. The Mice exhibit a custodial regard for most of the store's merchandise, and refer constantly to Marilyn's exquisite taste. They appear to experience vicariously a continuous gift exchange relationship with their employer.

Seasonal Cycle

The holiday selling season at the Mouse House begins with a pre-Christmas Open House held in November, and concludes with a post-season clearance sale in early January. The Open House is Marilyn's way of allowing her 3000-customer direct mail prospect base the opportunity to enter what she calls her "inner sanctum," a privilege she believes these chosen few dearly love. Each of the Mice is able to identify a number of "big spenders" and "big givers" among the direct mail base. The former keep many of the purchased presents for themselves; the latter buy strictly to give to others. Marilyn advertises in local newspapers and this year took advantage of an opportune door prize she had won--free advertising time on a local cable station--to branch out into broadcast media. Clerks and customers alike identify word-of-mouth as the principal medium of persuasive communication. During peak season in December, the store is open days and some evenings, seven days a week. During this time there are distinct activity cycles that are distinguished by time and by patron gender. The heaviest traffic occurs in the late morning and early afternoon hours, when customer volume can shoot up from 0 to 50 in just a few minutes. Most of these shoppers are women. A milder burst of activity occurs in the evening hours, when male shoppers predominate. Weekend traffic is steady throughout the

day, and dominated by couples. Length of stay ranges anywhere from two to 35 minutes, with repeat visits on the same or successive day a common occurrence. Traffic builds steadily until late Christmas eve, with males being the most frantic last-minute shoppers. As one Mouse accurately observes,

"We get rid of all our dogs on Christmas eve. Men come in, and they're so desperate they'll buy anything. Tomorrow [a Saturday in late December] all the men will come in bringing their children to buy something for mother. They'll finally get around to it."

Few returns are processed after Christmas, and much seasonal merchandise is cleared in the January sale. The season concludes with a major rearranging of the stock and the decor, as the gift shop is prepared for the upcoming Valentine's Day holiday, and gradually readied for Easter.

Range of Shopping Activity

Holiday shopping patterns exhibit an interesting mix of intention and caprice, hedonism and stress, gift selection and order-filling. A number of vignettes illustrates this range:

- Two middle-aged women move slowly down an aisle, handling many of the items and admiring their merits. The older of the two discovered the store "by accident" one day, having come in to browse while killing time before a doctor's appointment. She "fell in love with the place," and its "unique, expensive, good things," but was discouraged by the high prices. She had returned one day with her husband, who was captivated by a painting of a cheetah, to the point of fantasizing about how he might rearrange their living room to accommodate the painting. She began secretly to buy the painting on time, and plans to surprise her husband with the gift. Today she accompanies her sister, whom she brought along to share the "experience" of the store. Together, they search for gifts for their children, but the older sister buys several fragile collectibles for herself as well. The collectibles will be stored away until her children are grown and gone from home, and then properly displayed.
- A young woman searches the aisles for something "unique and unusual" for her child's teacher. She examines a clown figurine, thinking it appropriate for a teacher who is a weekend mime. "There are lots of teachers in my family, and they always complain about the crummy presents they receive. My children's teachers always tell me I give the best gifts."
- A middle-aged man enters the store with a shopping list in hand. He has come with a list of collectible figurines drawn up by his wife, essentially prepared to fill her order. But he has found a way to personalize his selection. His wife believes she will receive the figurines gradually over the years. He, however, sets about selecting over \$500 worth of the tiny creatures, seeking to accelerate the pace of collection. Among the pieces selected is a mouse family with a male infant, which reminds the buyer of his new grandson. He refuses the wrapping service offered by the clerks, intending instead to allow his daughter to wrap the gifts in nondescript paper to conceal their nature and origin. "I'm the world's worst shopper," he states. "I hate it. I hate the crowds. I won't go to a department store and fight the parking. This store reflects a buyer with good taste. Merchandise is nicely displayed. I know my gift will be a good reflection on me."
- A young girl walks through the store with her mother, all the while pointing out "pretty" things, and seeks to elicit signs of approval and interest from her parent. "Shall I get *this* for you?" is a frequent question.
- A middle aged woman has come looking specifically for an owl statue like the kind her husband collects. During her search, she browses for additional items she might want. She decides upon a figurine of a bear playing with a turtle, feeling it well suited to her husband. She observes that, "this one [among several other variants] is *different* from all the other ones. I picked it even though it is more expensive. It's *doing* something!"
- A young woman selects a crystal bowl for its "pretty" and "unusual" qualities, intending to give it to a friend. She leaves with her purchase, but returns later in the day. On her second tour, she selects a birdhouse cleverly crafted with a golfing theme, for her sister's husband, who loves both golf and birds. Her selection is based upon her brother-in-law's annual complaint that grab-bag gifts are always sister-to-sister affairs. "Maybe now he'll be satisfied," she observes. She finishes her shopping by selecting a simple, inexpensive glass bowl for her mother-in-law.
- A young woman chooses a doll to present to her elderly mother, who is currently redecorating an apartment. The buyer has eyed the piece over the last few months, and feels it will be a nice departure from her traditional "bathrobes and perfumes" approach to Christmas giving. She likens her mother to the doll (in both appearance and presence), and thinks it will cheer the many elderly visitors her mother entertains.
- A young man carefully studies the shelves on his Christmas eve foray. He looks for gifts for more than half a dozen of his relatives. He does

all his shopping on this particular day, claiming to do his "best under pressure." Having travelled all over town this morning, he intends to conclude his spree in the Mouse House. He has bought light fixtures for his father, and will install them as part of the gift. He has come to the Mouse House for "hanging stuff" for his mother, noting her great delight in wall hangings. Initially seeking stained glass, he was struck with the appropriateness of a set of wind chimes which caused him to think of his mother. He tailors his search to the personality of intended recipients: "It has to be something special that you pick out yourself; it has to suit that person just right. If they gave me a list, I wouldn't use it." This is the third consecutive year he's concluded a successful search at the Mouse House.

- Puzzling over a shelf of knickknacks, two teenage boys agonize over a selection for their mother. Spying a nearby display one exults, "Hey! This is the kind of shit she likes!"
- An elderly male carries an expensive ceramic Schnauzer to the register. The dog is the result of no specific search intention; the choice is dictated primarily by his wife's loyalty to the shop. He'd like a male version, but contents himself with the only available figure, which is female. "We travel too much," he reasons, "and can't have a real dog. I think she'll like this."

Backstage Activity

While some of the Mice attend to consumers foraging through the aisles of the Mouse House, others of them disappear into the tiny working storeroom at the rear of the shop. Here, most often out of customers' sight and earshot, the Mice set about the activities of shipping and receiving, wrapping and repairing, and stocking and searching. In "the back," they are able to step outside of their Mouse personae, and to comment on the round of store life with little regard for decorum. Here they compare notes, trade gossip or rhetorical complaints, enjoy a brief coffee break, or slump against a convenient wall or shelf (which is often the sole respite from a long day spent entirely on their feet). Here is expressed elation or disbelief at the sale of a "dog," or disappointment at the sale of a favorite piece that has become a personal fixture or fantasy object. Expressed as well are observations of the boss's comportment: "Did you hear Marilyn bawl out that artist for flooding West Lake with his work? She's worried about his uniqueness!" Customers' behavior is similarly discussed: "Do you believe it? She didn't know the big "Miss Kitty" doll had parts [i.e., was anatomically correct] until she got it home and the kids found it in her closet! She was so embarrassed!" Or, "Some of them [women shoppers] know our stock even better than we do!" That activity in the back can become quite hectic is reflected in the triumphant declaration of Marilyn's husband, Joe, emerging wearily from a frenzied period of stock-pulling and wrapping: "Well, here it [a gift] is, Jane.

It's all wrapped, but I can't remember what it is!" On occasion, the back is invaded by customers, some of whom are store "friends," others of whom supervise the wrapping or customizing of their presents, and still others who use the phone and work table as a temporary command center, making frantic eleventh-hour consultations before committing to a purchase. In general, the order, candor, ambience and tempo of the storeroom and its activity contrasts noticeably with the fairyland of the store itself.

Giving to Oneself

Because the Mouse House is located in an affluent suburban region known as the "West Lake," and because its merchandise is frequently so expensive (including such seasonal goods as a \$1035 elfin statue and a \$695 bust of Father Christmas), comments regarding "price-iness" are often elicited from consumers. Price is cited as a determinant of quality by some, and as a pretentious outrage by others. It is often linked to wistfully expressed desires, and figures into guilt-inducing or -relieving reactions exhibited by consumers. Observes one Mouse: "There's not a thing in the shop that anybody needs. The West Lake is the perfect place for that." Such exclusiveness is often referenced with regard to consumers' behaviors and fantasies involving the giving of gifts to self. Again, some verbatims are instructive:

- "I'd love to receive a gift from here, but would never buy anything here for myself. Buying here is a time investment. It shows that people *really* care if they take the time to shop here."
- "People send other people in here rather than buy for themselves all the time. It seems less frivolous. You feel guilty buying non-practical things for yourself. Or, you say that you're *collecting*." That way, you're not *really* indulging yourself.
- "This [expensive piece of jewelry] is a present from me to me."
- A middle-aged woman selects two expensive kaleidoscopes and has them elegantly wrapped. "I'll give these to family members," she says, "and tell them, *this* is what you are giving *me* this year."
- A middle-aged woman carries a large, talking "Gabby Gorilla" doll around with her during her lengthy search, speaking absent-mindedly to it all the while. She tells a clerk she is unsure to whom she will give the doll, but that someone will receive it as a gift. Concluding her search, and laying her selection at the counter she announces, "I've decided that nobody is worthy of this but me. I'm giving it to myself."
- "I wouldn't buy these things for myself--they're too extravagant and 'gift-y,' if you know what I mean. I suppose if I *really* wanted to buy something for myself here I would, but it's

more things you'd just give to someone else as a gift."

- I wouldn't buy here for me, but I'd *love* to get. I've sent my husband here with 50/50 results. You don't really want to spend so much on yourself, but you don't mind so much when you give it away."
- "All I need to do is win the lottery. I can come back and buy what I want."
- Young woman, sweetly, to clerks: "Goodbye!" Same woman, sotto voce to husband: "Get me out of here before I go crazy and spend more!"

Thus it would seem that the gift store is more than just a treasure chest. It is also something of a Pandora's box. It can induce discomfort and distress, as well as delight. Desire is enkindled, yet often sublimated or canalized through the vehicle of the gift. Longing is fanned by prohibitive pricing and window shopping.

It is appropriate to conclude this ethnographic overview with an interpretation advanced by the gift store owner, and echoed by her "girls." Speaking of the gift business, she remarks, "People literally fall in love with it. With the piece and with the search." That passion motivates the search and figures largely in the bonding of the consumer with the purchased gift is confirmed by numerous informants. This love is clearly both erotic and agapic, a point to be considered later in the chapter.

GIFT STORE II: BAUBLES

Baubles is located in the downtown area of an older suburb of a major midwestern city. With a population of 75,000 this large, pre-Civil War city prides itself on its historic areas, preservation efforts, and century-old homes. It is nested among and affiliated with a neighborhood business cooperative, Poplar-Grove, named for the intersection around which the ten member stores are clustered. Most of the member stores are similar in size to the research site. The appearance of the downtown area, distinguished by restored paving-brick sidewalks, many deciduous trees substantial in size, and streetlights in a lantern design distinctive to the city, bespeaks wealth, and is an encapsulated reflection of one segment of the community. The surrounding member stores, specializing in gourmet bakery items, handmade jewelry, imported childrens' toys, fireplace equipment, women's clothing, and original artworks in paper, metal, and glass are relatively expensive small shops called boutiques which cater to an upper-middle class, urban and suburban clientele. Only one store in the Poplar-Grove area carries merchandise remotely similar to Baubles'. It is adjacent to the north, and is approximately three times as large as the focal store. Its one-of-a-kind ceramics, created by identified artisans, provides strong and direct competition to the merchandise in the focal store, but its reputation attracts customers interested in this type of merchandise into the general geographic area and into our focal store.

Design and Decor

The specific store chosen for study may be classified as small by modern retailing standards, with 1,100 square feet of selling space and with an additional 500 square feet for receiving, administration and storage. Most of this storage space is below street level. The interior walls are white, but a variety of shapes and textures eliminate starkness. The store design, with some partial interior walls and half-walls, several built-in display areas with architecturally diverse shapes and angles, and the use of mirror accents, does not bespeak its rectangular shape. The south wall is almost entirely mirrored and visually widens the store. The window display is also a selling area, with carpeted steps for customer and staff access. Within the small retailing space, the owners and staff delineate areas of the store with names suggested by the design architect. The entrance and front window areas are designated "the canopy," as the ceiling is tented. Beyond the canopy on the left is the "crumbling Greek ruin," with half-walls and columns. Halfway between the front and rear of the store is the sales desk, cash register, and jewelry display case, beyond which is the area identified as "the Temple," characterized as High Renaissance and designed to camouflage an existing interior supporting post. The back right corner of the store is a large open area constructed of natural wood and called "the Frank Lloyd Wright" area. The back left is contemporary, with grid shelving that parallels a ceiling grid.

The merchandise is displayed on several pieces of furniture (a canvas chair and loveseat, a cushioned loveseat and chaise lounge with frames constructed of natural willow branches, some still sprouting leaves), a pine table, white formica tables and cubes, an antique hutch and a carved oak fireplace mantel. These display pieces vary greatly in size, shape and texture, and all are for sale. The furnishings convey an aura of hominess and hospitality, but due to the vast accumulation of merchandise which they hold, they cannot be used for repose. Store merchandise is also hung on the walls, or from cross pieces in the ceiling. Items hung from the ceiling by nylon filament appear to be floating in space.

History

At the time of this study, Baubles is eight months old and the two owners of the store, Judith and Sarah, are involved in their first holiday selling season. They describe the opening of the store as a combination of hard work and lucky coincidences. Both had been thinking independently of opening a store when they were seated next to each other at a mutual friend's dinner party. (Now this friend, proud of their efforts and success, partially credits herself with the germination of Baubles, and visits the store frequently.) Neither owner had retailing experience; both are white, in their early forties, married to professionals, mothers of teenage children, and involved residents of the immediate community.

The gift store evolved from their original concept of a low-cost gourmet food store. The first

several months of planning to open a store involved a process of interpersonal socialization and discernment. Together they visited several restaurants, sampled the food, and commented on the decor. They traveled together, shopped together, and read the same magazines. They discovered that they had similar tastes and that they both found shopping in small stores enjoyable and interesting. They moved away from the food concept, and "all-at-once the concept of the current store seemed right." They decided to open a small store with unusual, interesting merchandise.

"It was a real seat-of-the-pants decision. We decided to put things in the store that we really liked, what we thought felt good. Amazingly, we've made very few errors in our inventory."

The name of the store was unanimously adopted as "right" when both women chanced upon it while simultaneously reading Victorian novels at the time of the store's inception. Two women who were hired as part-time employees one month prior to the opening of Baubles currently remain staff personnel.

Owners

The two owners perceive themselves as having complementary, rather than identical, roles and personalities. "We are two very different people with the same tastes."

Sarah is very quiet, almost shy, and is a self-taught interior designer. She seldom talks with employees and customers, and is more socially reserved than her business partner. She continues to do some client decorating work for store customers, she undertakes all the major display changes, and she keeps the books. She is tall, slim and blond, always very fashionably, yet conservatively, dressed in solid brightly colored dresses or slacks and heeled pumps. Her perspective is visual and spatial. She attends to the physical appearance and arrangement of the store, and can locate a specific item in inventory with uncanny ease, indicating that she can "see" or envision the item in the storage area. Sarah is constantly rearranging items in the selling area, or getting items or permutations of items not currently on display from the storage area.

Judith, the other owner, is very outgoing, chatty and witty. She has dark, shoulder-length, permed hair and wears fashionable, but more outrageous, clothing than her partner. Before opening the store, she was the executive director of a community mental health association. She closely attends to costs, cashflow and profitability, as well as employee, customer, and vendor relations. When wrapping gifts, for example, she repeatedly stresses the importance of conserving boxes, colored tissue (and padding the item with less expensive white tissue) and ribbon. She admits that her knowledge of retailing has grown significantly in the eight months since the store has opened. This first Christmas/Hanukkah season precipitates some concern with regard to cashflow and inventory. She indicates that many vendors do not extend credit to

new businesses, but that their business has not been in a position to pay cash for all of their pre-holiday orders. She refuses to do business with vendors who will not extend credit, and many vendors relent to her demands. The owners complete the season without infusing additional cash into their business. To do this, Judith demonstrates her ability to get people to do what she wants them to do. An employee comments, "She can get people to do anything." Most of the ordering and delivering of the merchandise for holiday gift-giving is done in September and October, but the store does not have the revenue to pay for orders until November or December. Judith realizes after the first Christmas season that there is the possibility of needing an additional \$15,000 to \$25,000 of working capital for pre-holiday orders. The first holiday selling season is characterized as "very successful" in terms of profitability, although there exists no historical baseline against which to measure success. Since Hanukkah is early this year (December 8), "Baubles" does not experience a cash shortfall. They characterize themselves as "lucky" and realize that they may suffer cash shortfalls in subsequent years.

Personnel

In addition to the owners, there are six female employees who work in the store. The remainder of the year there are three or four employees. All of the sales women work part-time, and thus have no fringe benefits, yet all evidence involvement in and commitment to the success of business. The commitment that the employees have to the success of this business is exemplified by Susan, who is a lifelong friend of Judith. She has worked in the store for three weeks before becoming an informant in this study, but her level of knowledge of procedures and merchandise and involvement in the store is substantial. She perpetually makes substantive display changes in the course of her time at work, apparently as a result of understanding the owners' strategy of constant change and as a way to keep herself amused and occupied. She characterizes herself as bright, very industrious, and creative.

The motivation for Susan's and other employees' work in the store is not financial need. While the owners and clients tend to be from the upper middle class, most employees are from the lower-middle class. Each engages in this employment as a type of "hobby" job. Each purchases significant amounts of store merchandise at a 20% discount, is paid \$5.00 an hour, and receives no benefits. On two separate observation afternoons, employees ring up and pay for purchases that they have brought home as gifts for others the previous day they have worked at the store.

The employees appear to enjoy their jobs and their working environment. They exhibit interest in what is happening in each other's lives, and verbally acknowledge each other's arrivals and departures. They spend some idle time chatting, but are generally industrious, in both the presence and absence of customers. Without instruction, employees with free time begin inventorying merchandise, rearranging the

placement of items, putting out new items for display, preparing boxes and wrapping materials to be used during busy times, and repairing damaged articles. On occasion, one employee does calligraphy to customize items.

The owners perceive that the employees have "fun" when the store is empty, and approve of this. There are candy and snacks available to employees at almost every observation. This first holiday rush is characterized as a team effort, with everyone working hard together. There is a general feeling of being short-handed. The emotional involvement of the owners and staff with each other and with the business is evident. Notes one informant:

"It was so crazy in here Saturday that when we finally closed, everybody hugged one another."

The Importance of Place

The owners characterize "hot" and "cold" spots in the store; there are physical locations where placement of merchandise appears to accelerate or decrease in its selling rate when compared to an expected average. The "value" of a particular location within the site has been discovered by the owners through informal experimentation and intuitive correlation of sales to location. The researcher confirms that the areas around the Greek Ruin and the Renaissance temple appear to be a source of fewer sales, while merchandise near the store entrance, adjacent to the cash register and along the back wall appears to sell more quickly. The disparity is so great that the owners consider removing the Greek Ruin area, but hesitate due to the cost of such demolition. Resignedly, one owner sighs, "I can't sell a thing in there."

The owners and employees continually rearrange merchandise in the course of a selling day. The owners "totally take apart" the entire store every two weeks, moving the display pieces into different areas, and constructing new displays. This is motivated, so say the owners, in part to compensate for the unevenness in the attractiveness of selling areas. The owners say that customers report perceptions of a myriad of new merchandise following such rearrangements; an illusion of novelty is created by having the same items displayed in new locations and in the contexts of different adjoining items. Observations indicated that these arrangements were also made for the owners and sales staff, who become bored with their retail surroundings more frequently than do the customers.

One massive rearrangement takes place eight days before the store's first Christmas. The owners say they "could not stand the way things looked," describing the displays as "shopped out" and "not tight." They begin moving merchandise and display pieces at 4 p.m. on a Monday evening and finish, with a radically different appearance, around 10 p.m. the same evening. New items are in the "hot" and "cold" spots. One owner remarks that there is some new merchandise in the store, "but, in general, we fool them."

Merchandise

The merchandise in the store may be characterized as eclectic. The owners strive to carry unique merchandise in a variety of textures, shapes, and colors, without a predominance of either country or modern styles. Many pieces are handmade, one-of-a-kind porcelains or handicrafts. Examples include baskets in unusual shapes woven from roots, handwoven woolen throws, woven wall hangings, masks, copper trays and cookie cutters in unusual shapes, glitzy art-deco jewelry, terra cotta framed mirrors, painted wooden bowls, poseable figures of human shapes constructed of wood, geese shaped from moss, and paper-mache human sculptures. Several items, such as paper mache sculptures and wall hangings, are on consignment from local artisans.

Generally the merchandise is colorful, aesthetically pleasing, and non-functional. One customer described it as "all the things you can live without, but don't want to." There are some towel and pot-racks, stools, bookmarks and scissors that are usable, but it is their form (animal shapes, abstract designs, unusual colors), not their function that makes them appropriate as merchandise in Baubles. For example, toilet plungers in the shape of flamingos and geese are stocked at a comparatively high price (\$17 each), which reflects both the unique design and the inability of the consumer to find similar merchandise elsewhere. Such camp kitsch (Soskin and Ellison 1988) is discussed by Dorfles (1969), Greenberg (1957), McMullen (1968) and Schroeder (1977).

Ambience

Judith characterizes the atmosphere of the store as "fragile, but deliberate." She is initially reluctant to allow the researcher to question customers because they might get "a strange or pushy view of the store." Appropriate customer interactions are carefully planned to reinforce the themes of "fun" and illusion. Each customer is usually greeted at the door by an owner or salesperson. The customer's need for assistance is assessed either by direct questioning or by implication. The customer who indicates a desire to browse is welcomed, and a salesperson stays at the side of the person, but in a quiet, low key manner. If the customer poses a specific gift-giving dilemma, the staff member suggests a gift item. In general, the function of the staff is to listen to and affirm the customer, and to provide background information about an object or an artisan. A staff member will often reinforce a choice with a comment like, "That's wonderful!" or "I love that!"

Lorraine, a clerk who was hired at the time of Baubles' opening, exhibits a way with customers that typifies the style of the store. She seldom leaves the customer's side once she starts to talk with a person about an item. Her voice can be quite loud, but with a customer she becomes very soft spoken. (Both owners independently comment to the researcher about the change in Lorraine's voice modulation since she began working at the store.) She assumes the role of communicating information to customers about artisans who crafted a piece, the geography of the area from which it has come, the materials from which it is

staff before being granted access to this area. It is in this region of each store that conversations involving gossip, teasing or suspicion may take place, where employees may reveal their "real" feelings about a customer or an object, and where disarray, dust, and disrepair are tolerated so as to be hidden from the front-stage area. The backstage area serves as a clubhouse of sorts for the staff members who vacillate between the role of observers of and participants in the gift buying experience of the customers.

A distinguishing characteristic of these stores is an imprecise articulation of corporate philosophy and creative concept. Rather, the emphasis is on constant attention to and preoccupation with details. One-of-a-kind items, not categories of merchandise, fill the store; their unifying theme, both from the etic and emic perspective, is the designation "gift". The perceived uniqueness of the merchandise and of the store aid in this specification, as does the constant activity of giving service. Altering displays, stocking, wrapping, dusting, returning phone calls, conversing with customers about personal lives as well as gift giving dilemmas, and managing relationships comprise the round of life in each store. Some of the principles advanced in quaint post-Depression era "how to" manuals on female entrepreneurship and the management of a female salesforce (e.g., Keir 1939, Peel, 1941/1953) have been reinvented or rediscovered by our owners. Intuition tempered by experience has produced common patterns, suggesting once again the singularity of the gift store as a retail enterprise.

The stores and their attendant activities are almost exclusively gender-specific activity areas. The conscious positioning and preoccupation with gifts is a culturally constructed female domain of responsibility (Caplow 1982; Cheal 1986, 1987). The perceived and elaborated importance of relationships, notably among staff and customers, and the feelings of comfort and pleasure associated with contextual, holistic (rather than linear and direct) shopping behavior we construe as feminine. Each store is a feminine domain, with the presence of males becoming more notable and desperate as the holiday approaches.

Considered as a product, the gift store experience is a complex and multi-leveled offering. The ambience of the store setting is a predominating marketing theme at both sites. The augmented product assortment (Kotler 1984, 473), a collection of offerings deemed suitable by both owners and customers as "gifts," includes the perceived "good taste" of the owner-buyer of each store, and it is this halo effect of the store's reputation that accompanies the gift object as it leaves the store. A second important part of the extended product offered by each store is the perceived pleasure found in the shopping experience, distinguished by customers from their experience in other stores. Customers are held in the embrace of the store setting which is perceived as a gift, and as a form of packaging which even configures merchandise obtainable in other retail settings as "unique." Immersion in the setting results in sensually experiencing (e.g., touching, smelling, etc.) objects

as a kind of foreplay culminating in the gift purchase. The packaging of this experience is a design feature we will consider in detail directly.

The connectedness between persons and objects and between persons, relationships and objects (Belk 1988) is highlighted in the observed consumer behavior of these gift shop settings. Gift choices by customers are often emotional and intuitive, with prospects--most notably females--often needing to "fall in love" with an object prior to purchase. This erotic love response to gift objects is distinct from the relational agapic love that exists between the giver and the receiver of the gift prior to the search. Customers construct or perceive a link between the object and its prospective recipient, quite frequently in-store. The object, which is "loved" by at least one of the exchange partners, will form a link between the two individuals. Following the process model proposed by Sherry (1983), the shopping behavior and gift choice which we observed in this study occurred during the Gestation phase of the gift-exchange process. This consumer behavior is a patterned repetition of the buyer behavior of the store owners who have already negotiated an earlier phase of Gestation (a meta-Gestation), during which they first registered a positive emotional response and an intuitive attraction toward an item before purchasing it as appropriate merchandise for their respective stores. The behavior of the store clerks is also mirrored later by consumers: the thrill of surprise upon initially seeing the merchandise, of touching it, and of choosing its context for display are commonly experienced.

Differences in the two stores are both mundane and dramatic. The Mouse House boasts a wider variety of merchandise and price ranges. Pricing merchandise deviates less from a standard formula based upon a constant multiple of cost at Baubles. The Mouse House has a longer history, and something of a heritage tied to its franchise roots. Because each store is a projection or institutional personification of its owner or owners (Belk 1988), the differences in the family life cycle and age of the owners are mirrored in differences in each store's staff, contents, and clientele. Marilyn, who is older and has grown children, tends to focus her life on the store, constructing a role for her husband's participation as well. Sarah and Judith shape the store within their larger lives, which include a shared preference for boutique shopping and the negotiating of the many roles involving their families and their community. These two women depend upon each other, rather than on spouses or children, and tend to hire friends (who tend in turn to resemble them in age and social standing) to support their efforts in the store.

One important contrast involves the ethno-religious differences of the owners and staff of the two stores. At the Mouse House both owner and staff fully participate in the Christmas convention as buyers and sellers, givers and receivers. For them, this becomes a working holiday season, and Marilyn and the Mice grapple with their personal gift-giving decisions while dealing with those of their customers. There is a holiday excitement in their decorating and planning

both at home and in-store. Personnel juggle their work schedules to partake of personal celebratory events. At Baubles, the personal involvement level of the staff is lower, and the business mission--profitability of a commercial enterprise engaged in its peak season--is less submerged. The Jewish owner and staff had participated in the Hanukkah celebration early in December, and while there was a mild personal involvement with a few traditional end-of-year gifts to be given (to secretaries, teachers, or service personnel), the principal concern was the staffing of the store at a level commensurate with the accelerated customer traffic. Decorations are nontraditional, nonreligious, and sometimes inappropriately displayed, due as much to miscomprehension and inexperience as to intentional ecumenicism or neutrality. We suspect that the owners of Baubles will become more commercially literate in liturgical codes as their familiarity with market segmentation grows (McGrath 1988a).

Those classes [haves and have-nots] have been replaced by the Bored and the Entertained. The difference between them is the quality of shopping they are able to do. The bored buy cheap and boring things that look the same. The entertained buy expensive and unique-looking things. Andre Codrescu, *A Craving for Swan* (1986)

SOME INTERPRETIVE PROPOSITIONS

Whether or not we accept Codrescu's (1986,98) acerbic assessment that in America shopping is life, the ritual dimension of gift selection appears undeniable. The totemic circuits (Plath 1987) of contemporary American culture through which such seasonal gifts as we have described must flow ensure that the significance of the search extends beyond immediate gift exchange relationships. These circuits--the semiotic channels that transmute artifacts to object codes--hallow search itself. Unlike Barth (1972), who feels that the key to the treasure is the treasure, we have construed the odyssey that is search as paramount: it is one manifestation of the magical search for authentic experience so critical to contemporary consumer culture (Stewart 1982). This extension applies as well to the investing of the gift with meaning. Gift giving is a striking illustration of the merger of symbolic and commercial economies. According to Baudrillard (1981, 64-65) the gift itself has neither use value nor exchange value. It does have symbolic exchange value, and paradoxically, is arbitrary and singular. For Baudrillard, the gift as "object" has little significance. Rather, the gift as "given" is supremely meaningful. Something of this semiotic import is evident in the imprecision and ineffability of our informants' choice heuristics. Further, Baudrillard regards the gift as ambivalent, a medium of relation and distance: love and aggression are embodied in the exchange. This ambivalence is apparent as well at the institutional level of the retail outlet. As part of the social expressions industry, the gift store embodies and engenders what Hochschild

(1983) has called the commercialization of feeling; it shapes and reflects the sacralization of consumption (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). It remains for us to interpret the significance of this merger of symbol with commerce.

A number of themes emerges from a comparison of our baseline ethnographies. In recognition of the exploratory nature of our project, we present these themes in terms of five propositions deserving more systematic investigation. While these propositions are offered as an interpretive summary of our ethnographic work, they are intended as well to be guidelines for future research. The propositions apply to gift giving behaviors centered around gift stores, and are not alleged to have universal application.

1. Sense of Place is a Retail Strategy

In a recent set of essays bridging humanistic and social scientific traditions of inquiry, Hiss (1987a,b) has sensitively described the ways in which people experience places. In particular, he identifies simultaneous perception as a critical determinant of such experience. Simultaneous perception entails utter watchfulness, split-second reaction to innumerable variables, and a fluid body boundary (1987a, 53). This "evenhanded, instantaneous and outward-looking flow of attention" (1987a, 53) is displayed by many of our informants, and is elicited by the retail environment; the stores are designed to alter and disrupt mundane perceptions and assumptions by enriching stimulation. Mystery and legibility, as well as prospect and refuge (1987a, 63), characterize each of our gift stores. The built environment (Rappaport 1982) of the stores, from structural design and decor issues to object placement and rearrangement strategies, delivers a powerful message to all who enter. The experience of the store--its essentiality of place--is a gift, albeit at the level of compliance technique, from proprietor to prospect. The situation defined by the store is so persuasive that informants often feel constrained to purchase despite any particular initial intention. Notes one informant:

"It's [the store] small, intimate, personal, friendly and nice. It [the merchandise] looks like it's all picked out special. It's such a contrast from other places I shop; the service is so great. I couldn't go back for *months* at least if I didn't buy something. It's like I'm insulting them [the staff] if I don't buy. Like they're saying, 'What's the matter? Didn't you like any of my stuff?' They appreciate you so much."

Just as in good poetry, where the "sound must be an echo to the sense," so also must the experience of the shop reinforce the spirit of the gift. This is the retail inscape. By creating such delightfully fantastic environments, the owners impart an added significance to the merchandise, which consumers then appropriate and intensify, as the purchased object completes its transformation to gift.

The overall importance of retail ambience to impression management, and in particular to shaping impressions of quality developed by consumers, is

widely recognized (Mazursky and Jacoby 1985, Jacoby and Mazursky 1985). Marketers are routinely advised to construct appropriate social environments for their prospects (Darden and Schwinghammer 1985). Noting the paucity of research into such a managerially significant topic as ambience, Kotler (1974) coined the term "atmospherics" to describe the intentional design of buying environments to influence purchase behavior. While the architectural spirit of this concept is fundamental, both the term and its application can be broadened to include a more overarching set of consumption phenomena. For example, "atmospherics" denotes noise and interference, which, while arguably characteristic of buying environments, does not capture the calculated impression management Kotler has in mind. Secondly, the specific focus on purchase masks a more pervasive structuring of consumption itself. Finally, the reduction of atmospherics to just four sensory features--visual, aural, olfactory and tactile dimensions are noted by Kotler (1974)--blunts the exploration of simultaneous perception and synaesthesia which more accurately characterize ambience. Our study suggests that a more precise and higher order rendering of atmospherics is necessary.

In his eloquent appeal for enhanced topistic consciousness, Walter (1988) has observed that a true sense of place--the expressive intelligibility resulting from our ability to feel the essence of a place and grasp its meaning--has been diluted by systems of design and management that separate affect and cognition, and which fail to regard the imagination as an organ of perception. For Walter, place is a container of experience that has a specific way of being in the world (1988, 72; 117). His exhortation to rebel against the "keepers of the obvious world" who erect barriers "segregating features of experience" (1988, 3) has clearly moved both our gift store proprietors and most of their clientele. Noting that we have neither a theory that adequately comprehends the obvious world, nor a chorography that captures and harnesses the spirit of the place, Walter proposes the launching of a discipline he calls "pathetecture," which would explore the ways in which emotion is constructed through building (1988, 9; 119; 143). Pathetecture would extend beyond mere architecture to encompass all structured human-object interactions. Recent explorations of "natural design" (Norman 1988), "sacred" dimensions of consumption (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), corporate semiology (Gahmberg 1987), and cultural brandscapes (Sherry 1986) are just a few possible manifestations of a pathetectonic perspective. Such a perspective would enable consumer researchers to study the contextual essence, the literal grounding, of phenomena with unprecedented thoroughness. It would also permit marketing managers to approach "design" humanely, as a feature immanent in all elements of transaction. A gift store field site is a congenial natural laboratory within which to begin to elaborate pathetectural principles, given its privileged embeddedness in moral and political economies.

2. Gift Giving is the Work of Women

The ethnographic record suggests that women are the principal actors in gift exchange relationships. Hyde (1979, 108) remarks that in a "modern capitalist nation, to labor with gifts (and to treat them as gifts, rather than exploit them) remains a mark of the female gender." The etymology of the word gift shows the word itself to be a feminine noun, whose original meaning (Common Teutonic) is equivalent to "bride price" (the plural form equating to "wedding"); as a neutral noun (Old High German) it also denoted "poison," perhaps highlighting the ambivalent essence of the gift noted earlier. Bailey's (1971) work is instructive in regard to the latter rendering. Recent work by Cheal (1987), Garner and Wagner (1988) and McGrath (1988b) has demonstrated a strong gender linkage to gift giving. The ritual transactions necessary to the maintenance of the domestic economy in traditional American society are conducted principally by women. Gift giving is among the most important of these rituals, especially during the calendar period of the present study (Pollay 1986), and Cheal (1987, 151) construes the practice as the social reproduction of intimacy: the gendered nature of displaying love in American culture takes the form of "networks of love" (1987, 155) constructed in large part through gift exchange. That our gift stores are owned, operated and chiefly patronized by women, then is a significant cultural artifact. Of special import is the successful commercialization of this ritual responsibility. As meta-givers (i.e., those that sacralize the objects that will be resacralized as gifts) our shop owners establish the bounds of propriety for consumers selecting a gift. Coupling ritual expertise and responsibility with the rise in female entrepreneurialism, it may be safe to predict an increase in the number and success of gift stores opened by women in the near future. A more controversial prediction would posit that a gendered mediation between gift exchange and the market--between eros and logos in Hyde's (1979) scheme of things--might provide the model for a more personalized political economy and more humane workplace cultures.

Indications of just such a pacification or domestication of the workplace have arisen in the wake of the feminization of our society. If we accept Freud's (1961) assertion that work and love are life's principal motivations, their merger should be mutually enhancing and life-enriching. This merger is being catalyzed by the articulation of feminine with androcentric cultures so cogently described by Lenz and Myerhoff (1985). Adaptive characteristics attributed to women--a nurturing impulse, a need for relatedness born of a refined capacity for intimacy, a resistance to hierarchy and an affirmation of egalitarian relationships, a secular spirituality, a preference for negotiation and an antipathy to violence coupled with women's ancient repetitive devotion to process that orders the everyday life of a culture (Lenz and Myerhoff 1985, 4-9) are having an increasing impact on the contemporary workplace. A reintegration of domestic and political economies

characteristic of preindustrial societies (where, significantly enough, gift economies figured prominently), and a blurring and diversification of the gender roles rigidified during industrialization are outcomes of feminization. A redefinition or repositioning of the concept of business "success" is another such outcome, which Lenz and Myerhoff (1985, 94) find especially characteristic of female entrepreneurs. This redefinition occurs in informal sector activities as well (Landman 1987).

Work by Wilkens (1987) confirms the link between entrepreneurship and the actualization of feminine values. Wilkens believes entrepreneurship to offer women escape from "the hall of mirrors" (i.e., the distorted image of femininity) created by androcentric work conventions: *working* in the business world may reinforce the negative messages that encourage women to emulate, ultimately imperfectly, imperfect masculine models, while *running* an independent enterprise subverts such reinforcing, and leads to self actualization (1987, 34). The shifting of feminine identities posited by Lenz and Myerhoff (1985) from the new feminine woman to the masculinized woman to the hybridized woman, in response to the pressures of contemporary culture change, is reflected in the range of workplace engagements, from the newly minted, corporate-bound MBAs to the bootstrapping entrepreneurs described in our study (see also Sherry 1988). While the giftware industry would seem to be a quite readily exploited niche by culturally "preadapted" female entrepreneurs, we suspect that the dynamics underlying gift economies are also strategically manipulated to great effect in other entrepreneurial ventures held in higher esteem by the culture at large.

A concluding comment on the darker side of female mediated gift exchange is warranted. As the epigraph from Codrescu would suggest, consumer behavior in contemporary culture is often trivialized in its very exaltation. Recreational shopping, itself potentially a symptom of alienation, has an unexamined half life. For some consumers, such shopping becomes ritualistic, and may potentiate the experience of transcendence (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), or merely stave off the effects of withdrawal. The former transformation is at worst an occasion of false consciousness. The latter transformation is at best a compulsive disorder that threatens integration and autonomy. Like other disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, kleptomania, or agoraphobia, such ritualistic behavior is rarely examined by consumer researchers (see Faber and O'Guinn (1988) for a notable exception). During our study, we encountered a number of female consumers who were driven by the principle of "shop 'til you drop." Overconsumption can be emically justified if it results in gifts to self or others. Fieldwork with confirmed "shop-aholics" is urgently needed if such compulsions are to be adequately understood and addressed.

3. Eros and Agape Move the Gift

The gift store is a curiously commercial hybrid of collection and museum (Belk, Wallendorf and

Sherry 1989). The superfluous stuff of consumer culture is fetishized within the shop (Debord 1983, 67). Employing the semiotic perspective latent in Baudrillard's (1968, 1981) work to insightfully revisionist ends, Sebeok (1987) expands the concept of fetishism beyond the realm of erotic aestheticism to consider a fetish as a supernormal sign. The ritualization by which an individual becomes imprinted by some object, and by which a cultural reproduces its critical structural categories is evident in our gift stores. Clifford (1988, 220) cites "collecting" and "display" as crucial processes of Western identity formation. To these we would add "consuming," to incorporate all experience of the object from acquisition through disposition. The objects our proprietors have collected and displayed are consumed by store personnel and clientele, by browsers as well as by purchasers. Meaning imputed to and through these objects by all of these stakeholders creates and reinforces a particular ideology. The objects our informants have chosen to "preserve, value and exchange" exist within an elaborate system of symbols (Clifford 1988, 221; Baudrillard 1968), which specifies that the stuff of "gifts" should be demonstrably "unique."

The abiding rightness of this stuff as affirmed by proprietor and prospect is its propriety as a gift. Recognition of this propriety is frequently couched in the idiom of "love culture" (Cheal 1987, 153-155). Not only are gifts sought for loved ones, whether kith or kin (the agapic motive), but the seeking itself has an amorous component (the erotic motive). Not only do our informants "love to shop" (or "hate to shop," despite or because of the holidays), but they also "fall in love" with the items they select. The bonding that occurs is not merely, or even chiefly, between gift exchange partners, but rather as well between consumer and object. The creative adaptation of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love to consumer-object relations by Shimp and Madden (1988) hints at the significance of this bonding, but is a bit too timid and reductionist in nature to capture the phenomenon entirely. Fixed at the level of psychological process, and stunted by the omission of cathexis, hedonism and sacralization as dimensions of relationship management, this conceptual framework nonetheless draws attention to the impoverished technical vocabulary that characterizes much consumer research.

Drawing upon the work of G.H. Mead, Richardson (1987) has provided a useful ethnoarchaeological account of the artifact as a "collapsed act." Richardson construes material cultural objects in part as symbols whose "meaning" emerges from whatever social interaction those objects help constitute. The sociality of the artifact has only recently begun to engage researchers, and the framing of questions has quickly outstripped any systematic search for answers. For Richardson (1987, 399), the artifact provides a preliminary definition of situation, and its evocative potential must be thoroughly probed if social reality is to be adequately interpreted. What is collapsed in the gifts singularized and circulated by our informants is multiplex: relationship

management (Levitt 1983) between levels of self, producer and consumer, patron and client, donor and recipient. Fantastic and rational economies (Stewart 1982) are polarized and condensed in the gift.

The bonding that eros and agape facilitate between consumer and object requires much more empirical investigation before persuasive interpretations can be advanced. Neither the psychology nor philosophy of human-object relations (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochbert-Halton 1981; van Imwagen forthcoming), let alone the sociology of stuff (e.g., Appadurai 1986) has been sufficiently plumbed by consumer researchers interested in the experiential dimensions of consumption. Of signal importance to the development of such a subfield is the work of Elaine Scarry (1985). Speaking of our philosophical divestiture of objects, that discrediting of the significance of material objects with which we surround ourselves, Scarry advises us to trust our impulse to cling to objects. It is this clinging impulse that provides a clue to the true significance of objects, and which can impel a description of that significance; it can also alert us to the "revenge of things" (Artaud 1958) that is part of our consumer heritage. Of importance to the argument advanced in this chapter, Scarry undertakes an analysis of the interior structure of the artifact. Artifacts are a making sentient of the external world. An artifact is a "fulcrum or lever across which the force of creation moves back on to the human site and remakes the makers" (1985, 307). Thus, an artifact is a vehicle of projection and reciprocation. The "aliveness" of the artifact (that object-awareness is the implicit or covert norm, and object-unawareness the aberrant and unacceptable occurrence is brilliantly revealed and persuasively argued in her discussion of product liability litigation) and its constructive effect on consumers is effectively documented in her analysis. That gifts embody as well as facilitate bonding is stressed by our informants, and has been observed by other researchers in a variety of consumption settings (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). If gifts are vehicles of behavior or embodied initiatives, and if they comprise a significant bulk of the stuff through which and in which selves are made (Arnheim 1987, Childe 1951), then much of their meaning resides in this communicative power; it resides as well in the stability and visibility of cultural categories that gifts make possible (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Our study suggests that future consumer research might profitably concentrate upon the constituting role of objects, whether focused upon sociality (Appadurai 1986) or self (Belk 1988), and that gifts above all other consumer objects would be an expedient vehicle for such investigation.

4. Choice is Imprecise or Ineffable

The selection of a particular item is most often the culmination of a search that specifies the store as the questing ground but which envisions no specific grail. Informants know that if an appropriate gift exists, it must be concealed somewhere within the walls of our stores, and that it will reveal itself to them

if they root diligently enough through the aisles. "I'll know it when I see it," "It has to feel right," "This is just right for ____," and "I have to have this," are among the observations made by informants. A "knack," an "intuition," a "sense," and a "feeling" are the ultimate arbiters of propriety when it comes to identifying gifts. Few of our informants could articulate with much clarity the rationale for this propriety. This reinforces Hyde's (1979) conception of the gift as mystery, as well as the notion that many consumer goods exist largely as projectible fields that reflect the "blurry and fleeting images" consumers cast over them (Leiss, Kline and Jhalley 1986, 242).

That gift giving behavior violates standard microeconomic principles (Thaler 1985) suggests that interpretation might better be served by exploring the ludic or hedonic dimensions of this activity. Search behavior described in our ethnographies appears to be driven in large measure by what Campbell (1987) has called "modern autonomous imaginative hedonism." In such search, "longing" and a "permanent unfocused dissatisfaction" work in tandem to shape behavior: "the desiring mode constitutes a state of enjoyable discomfort, and wanting rather than having is the main focus of pleasure-seeking" (Campbell 1987, 86-87). Our informants often report enjoying the treasure hunt and the fantasies engendered by the gift objects as much as the discovery of the appropriate gift itself. The "imaginative enjoyment of products" (Campbell 1987, 92) and the recreational shopping experience, are as much a part of the gift shop ethos as is the sheer availability of the gifts itself. Future research into hedonic motivation might well focus on such retail environments as appropriate fieldsites.

5. Process Model Guides Institutions

The comprehensive model of gift giving behavior proposed by Sherry (1983) to account for dyadic interaction or behavior exchange at the micro level can also be applied at an institutional level. That is, the model is useful in describing behavior that occurs within an institutional or organizational setting. For example, we have shown how owners effect the first transformation from object to gift, and how store clerks experience a vicarious gift exchange relationship with owners (as do consumers with the store itself). At an organizational level, Gestation occurs as owners search, Prestation occurs as store personnel display and sell merchandise, and Reformulation occurs as consumers increase or attenuate their loyalties to the shops. The model can be used to detail systematically within organizations the nature and frequency of gift giving behaviors so apparently essential to the commodification of ritual.

When applied to an institutional setting such as a retail outlet, the model foregrounds the kind of token gift exchange (Blehr 1974, Sherry 1983) that undershores more overtly celebrated giving. That is, informal infrastructural modes of exchange form an ongoing pattern that integrates social relationships and reinforces the formal structural ties individuals have to one another. This informal or undesignated gift giving, so routinized an interaction ritual that it is "remarkable to participants primarily in the breach"

(Sherry 1983, 162)--as in the seasonal lulls between peak activity periods in our stores, when deliverymen bring fewer packages and customer traffic slackens--contributes significantly to whatever organic solidarity an organization is able to evolve. The breadth and depth of such informal ritual activity within organizations, and the harnessing of this ritual to strategic vision, are topics worthy of much additional investigation.

CONCLUSION

Using ethnographic method and extended case study approach, we have tried to plumb the significance of the gift shop in contemporary consumer culture. In the absence of comparable studies, this paper is presented as a baseline ethnographic record, clearly delineated and restricted in location, calendrical season, and social class. Despite these limitations, the complexity of the institution and the behaviors associated with it are replete with specifics that are well suited to such thick description. Through the comparison of two retail sites, we have generated several propositions that capture our present understanding of gift store activity. While the limits to generalizability are clear, we present our baseline ethnographies and interpretive frameworks as both a resource and challenge to future researchers to probe more widely and deeply into the institutional parameters of gift exchange.

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Interpretive Consumer Research

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