

The shop window has a double nature—it is both glassed in and extroverted at once. It speaks a language of enticement, or what we might recognize as the basic give-and-take of flirtation. As manifested in the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, the shop window interested Walter Benjamin as the site where he first saw art “enter the service of the merchant.” It comes as no great surprise that the shop window became a point of convergence between art and commerce. On a formal level, it was indebted to both the still life and the proscenium “window” of Alberti’s perspectival schema. Tapping artists to design window displays became de rigueur in the twentieth century as a means of energizing flagging markets: think of Dalí’s dressing of the Bonwit Teller windows, or Rauschenberg and Johns’ surreal arrangements for Tiffany’s under the code name Matson Jones.

Another history runs parallel to that of art’s “service” to commerce. Throughout the twentieth century, artists have recalibrated Benjamin’s initial formulation, claiming the shop window as an object of not only aesthetic but nearly anthropological contemplation—a kind of metonym for the market at large, where symptoms of urban transformation concentrate. This is the history that In vitro, an exhibition staged in a storefront gallery (a former nail salon), considers.

Two photographs from 1902 by Eugène Atget, among the earliest photographers to document the modernizing streets of Paris, and the first to take interest in the shop window, tether the exhibition. A sampling of subsequent moments follow: Jindřich Štyrský’s diminutive photographs of 1930s streetscapes, shot in Paris and Prague; a dance by Mary Overlie (like a tableau vivant) performed in 1977 in the windows of Holly Solomon Gallery on West Broadway; a video from 2000 by Silvia Kolbowski conceived for Seven boutique—a harbinger of Orchard Street’s transformation—that glances critically at the comingling of facade, fashion, and gentrification; and a photograph by Sara Deraedt from 2016. In this filmy portrait of a Rowenta vacuum caught behind glass, Deraedt captures the unlikely persistence of the shop window’s peculiar theater—its tension between stillness and animation, scrim and depth. Through its use, reuse, or vacancy, the shop window has served as a screen upon which shifting tastes and powers are broadcast. Its eclipse by more contemporary screens pending, it is now also an obsolescent space—a holdover from waning habits of desire that remain, nonetheless, built into the bones of the city.

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