

We are the fresh food people: The Supermarket as a performance of happiness [1]

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The value most characteristic of the society of consumers, indeed its supreme value in relation to which all other values are called on to justify their worth, is a happy life ... in short, an *instant* and *perpetual* happiness. (Bauman, 2007: 44)

This paper examines *Wondermart* (2009), an interactive audio performance by British company Rotozaza, which premiered in Australia as part of the first season of 2010 at North Melbourne's Arts House. Accessed as a downloadable mp3 file and listened to alone in a supermarket, *Wondermart* is a performance for one. This performance raises critical questions about the choices we make as consumers, the ethics of shopping, and how a simple trip through a supermarket may support what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls 'an ideology of privatisation' (2008b: 20). If, as Bauman argues, affluent Western society 'represents the world as a warehouse of potential objects of consumption, and individual life as a perpetual search for bargains...' (2008b: 21), is the supermarket an ultimate expression of our contemporary pursuit of happiness? This paper will discuss how the *Wondermart* performance brings about reflection upon current consumer habits and argues that the ways in which we are encouraged to consume, far from promoting a 'happy life', actually limit our capacity for happiness.

Wondermart

Wondermart, written by Silvia Mercuriali and performed in collaboration with Matt Rudkin and Tommaso Perego, is a performance piece from London-based Rotozaza. The performance begins when a single audience member downloads the mp3 file from the Rotozaza website, or from a link provided by a supporting institution such as Arts House. Once installed on his/her mp3 player, the audience member is instructed to listen to the audio track while in any large supermarket. *Wondermart* begins with a series of beeps and

then a female voice (Mercuriali), speaking in softly accented English, leads a headphone and sound check:

This should be your right ear and this, your left. If this is not the case, swap the earphones around.

You are about to journey through the world of a high-density retail environment. There will be things to see, things to do, and people to meet. If anyone you know approaches you to greet you, don't let them stop you and keep following my instructions. (2010: Audio file)

What follows is a thirty-minute audio tour of the supermarket composed of instructions for the audience member who is now simultaneously the solo performer. Along the 'journey' the shopper-performer is encouraged to reflect upon the organisation of the space and environment, the products and their branding and display, the relationship between primary production (the cow and the farm) and its relationship to the final commodity (the cartons of milk in the fridge), and observe the other shoppers, what they buy and how they interact with the store. Mercuriali's voice is prominent, but at other times male voices (Rudkin) provide historical information about supermarkets, as well an in-depth look into the contents of the milk fridge and the afore mentioned dairy production process delivered in the thick accent of a Yorkshire farmer: 'Now, have you ever found yourself face to udder with a cow...' (2010: Audio file). Accompanying the voice track is a soundtrack (designed by Perego) composed of ringing cash registers, the chatter of check-out chicks, bleeps of product scanners and upbeat background music. The fx-sounds frequently correspond with the voice track such as when the performer is instructed to take three steps forward, for example, the sounds of footsteps can be heard (2010: Audio file).

Though primarily engaged in exploring the everyday banalities of shopping for groceries, *Wondermart* is also quietly anthropological, sociological and occasionally anti-consumerist in

its content (Woodhead, 2010: 21; Power, 2010: 17). At the start of the work, the performer is asked to always obey the instructions, but not to stand out and to 'move naturally'. As the voice reiterates:

You're just a shopper, shopping around, listening to your music. You haven't promised to buy anything. You won't necessarily undergo the conversion process from shopper to buyer, but it must look like everything is normal. (2010: Audio file)

The anonymity of the shopper-performer, as described here, is a key element of *Wondermart*. The work is produced as part of Rotozaza's 'Autoteatro' series in which participants are given instructions, often through headphones, and move from being a passive spectator to an active performer (2010: Rotozaza website). However, in contrast to other Rotozaza pieces such as *Etiquette* (2007), the original version of *Wondermart* is an explicitly solo act. [2] This is telling, for the introduction to the work also makes clear that the common experience of being a supermarket shopper is already singular, anonymous and one that we – as Western consumers – take for granted. Furthermore, in an essay on theatre and the 'walkman effect', Christopher Balme notes that works of 'audio theatre', which filter instructions through headphones and often negotiate 'specific, pre-existing spaces', change the perceptions of the performer/spectator (2006: 122-123). In *Wondermart*, the audio performance works to estrange the seemingly natural pastime of shopping for groceries and brings to the fore the solo act of consumption as an unexamined aspect of the contemporary shopping experience.

For Bauman, the contemporary consumer – here the performer of *Wondermart* – is part of a radically individualised society, the ideology of which is perhaps most aptly summed up by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her oft-cited statement to *Women's Own* magazine: 'There are individual men and women and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first... There is no such thing as "society"' (Bauman, 2008b: 20; Thatcher, 1987). As Bauman argues, we can refer to this

apparent truism about the individual as part of the 'ideology of privatisation' for the ways in which such a society calls not to community, to institutions or to nation, but for the ways it addresses individuals. As Bauman contends: 'Consumption is a supremely solitary activity (perhaps even the archetype of solitude), even when it happens to be conducted in company' (2007: 78). The ideology of privatisation calls to individual desires, needs and wants, individuals providing solutions to individual problems, individual buying habits, individual choices and the individual pursuit of happiness (2008b: 20-24). The lone supermarket shopper then, with his/her headphones blocking out the rest of the world, provides an interesting study in the importance of the supermarket as a site where individual choices, needs and wants are performed and, in turn, the analysis of which illuminates Bauman's characterisation of contemporary society as a 'society of consumers'.



Figure 1. An anonymous shopper-performer in the high-density supermarket world of *Wondermart*

Wondermart, as a performance that relies on the use and ubiquity of mp3 players and headphones [3], is from the outset a work that both reflects upon and gently critiques contemporary patterns of consumption. As a product itself, the performance is eminently

transferable and disposable. The performer may download and listen to the work at the time and place of his or her choosing, though of course the place must be a supermarket.

Consider also the ubiquity of the retail space known as the supermarket. At the start of *Wondermart*, the performer is instructed to 'look at the building' at which point the female voice is replaced with a male who provides a brief historical introduction:

According to the Smithsonian Institute the first true supermarket in the United States was opened ... on August the 4th 1930 inside a 6000 square-foot former garage in Jamaica Queens in New York City. The store ... operated under the slogan 'Pile it High. Sell it Low.' (2010: Audio file)

Indeed, participating in *Wondermart* encourages the performer to wonder about the origins of the many millions of supermarkets *just like this one*. The performer might also reflect upon their own actions, as a shopper moving through the aisles navigating the stacked brands and the product specials, endlessly engaged in the repeatable gestures and slogans common to contemporary existence. For Bauman, because the act of consumption requires no lasting bonds, new connections or community, the contemporary individual is 'bent on solo performances and only solo performances' that take place in the 'privatised utopias' of the consumer world (2007: 50, 78). The values of 'choice', 'free space' and 'freedom to choose' are important elements of the ideology of privatisation, though this also breeds a certain type of sameness. Indeed, the sameness and omnipresence of the supermarket in a 'society of consumers' means that *Wondermart* has almost equal relevance throughout much of the developed world.

As the work continues, *Wondermart* illustrates many of the constituent features of the supermarket. The performer is encouraged to note how the fruit and vegetables are located close to the entrance of the store, often accompanied by fresh flowers, 'to give the feeling of ... goodness and nature. As if you're strolling through a garden of Eden, selecting nature's class-one bounty as you go' (2010: Audio file). Here *Wondermart* recalls an oft-cited

description of the supermarket entrance in Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise*. As the characters move into the 'ultra-cool interior' the narrator, Jack Gladney, notes:

[W]e walked past the fruit bins ... The bins were arranged diagonally and backed by mirrors that people accidentally punched when reaching for the fruit in the upper rows. A voice on the loudspeaker said: "Kleenex Softique, you truck's blocking the entrance." Apples and lemons tumbled in twos and threes to the floor when someone took a fruit from certain places in the stacked array. There were six types of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels. Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright. People tore filmy bags off racks and tried to figure out which end opened. I realized the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (1986: 36)

The supermarket, in DeLillo's work, is the archetypal and sublime marker of consumer culture. [4] As Jeffrey Ebbensen notes, the giant supermarkets and TV advertisements described in *White Noise* demonstrate the 'logic of endless capitalist production and consumption, which exists for its own sake' (2006: 153-154). Further, the notion of 'choice' is ironically and repetitively reinforced through the constant reference to brand names and jingles: 'coke is it coke is it coke is it' (DeLillo, 1986: 51) – jingles not unlike Woolworth's 'We are the Fresh food People' which figures heavily in the Australian supermarket experience. Yet, where *White Noise* is often discussed for its vision of the supermarket as an overwhelming simulacrum (see footnote 4), almost apocalyptic with its 'dull unlocatable roar', the experience of *Wondermart* is far more temperate and tactile. Later in the performance, the shopper-performer is asked to 'scan the shelves' and find the placement of the most popular, colourful brands. Then, standing back and trying to see the shelf in a wider perspective, the voice invites he/she to note how newer brands are regularly placed just to the right of the familiar ones so that:

[O]n your way to picking up the usual choice you might find your right hand brushing the new pretender. People shop with their hands. They like to feel things ... to hold them. (2010: Audio file)

As such, and without the heavy irony and menace of *White Noise*, *Wondermart* requires close investigation not only of the space of the supermarket, but also how consumers interact with the space in identifiable ways. As shoppers we make individual (free) choices, picking up and examining products and choosing them carefully, but these choices are closely monitored, arguably limited and in many instances manipulated.

Moreover, in a latter section of *Wondermart*, the shopper-performer is given the task of locating all of the visible CCTV cameras and security guards and imagining what it would be like to steal a product from underneath such surveillance. As the voice of *Wondermart* instructs the performer to visualise secreting a product under their jacket and walking from the store, the work contrasts a playful note of civil disobedience with the sheer improbability of committing such an act in the regulated shopping space. There is an ethical dimension here: What does it mean for a performance to instruct the audience to consider shoplifting? And what does it mean for a supermarket to present goods through display?

Indeed, *Wondermart* is a performance that demands active spectatorship – its central requirement is to follow the instructions given – yet this is also a performance for one and as such it collapses the relationship between the spectator-performer or audience-collective that Helena Grehan discusses in her work on ethics (2009: 4-5). As Grehan notes, the distinctive theatre going experience involves a subject becoming both ‘an individual spectator and part of a collective’ and as such able to ‘negotiate’ his/her response to the work, from both an individual perspective and by gauging the reaction of others in the audience (2009: 4). However, in contrast to the theatrical works analysed by Grehan, during *Wondermart* there are no ‘others’ in attendance. Therefore, if the shopper-performer were

to disregard the instructions of the performance there is no collective oversight, in the form of theatre company staff/performers or other audience members, to keep them in check. As reviewer Jana Perkovic writes, in work such as *Wondermart* 'the audience experience is the event itself: tactile, immediate, immersive, anti-ironic' (2010). The result is that the individual spectator/performer is implicated in a work that, while not overtly political, does require a degree of necessarily reflection on the responsibilities of their own actions in real time.

Nonetheless, by directing the performer to recognise the many surrounding cameras, *Wondermart* is prompting less a Situationist-like intervention than inviting an affective reaction from the performer's body.

Look at the item in your hand again, where would you hide it? Notice that your heart is beating a little faster and that the room temperature has changed slightly, making you feel uncomfortable, just a little too hot or too cold for what you're wearing ... swallow visibly. Close your eyes. Do you feel guilty? (2010: Audio file)

There is no call for the unlawful act in *Wondermart*, and nor should there be, but it is telling that the mere suggestion of the subversion of law is enough to increase the pulse rate for the shopper-performer and provoke the question: Do you feel guilty? Indeed, the space and organisation of the supermarket, in this case the security measures, reflects upon a shopping experience but also a contemporary world where surveillance – in both private stores and public space – is commonplace.

In a corresponding, though earlier, section of *Wondermart* the performer is encouraged to follow and spy upon a fellow shopper. Here the notion of in-store surveillance is inverted as the voice instructs them to: 'Find somebody that looks slightly more powerful than you' (2010: Audio file). Without being detected, but keeping the subject in sight at all times, the performer 'tracks' the person around the store. 'See them trying to make their mind up,

concentrating hard. Are they bigger than you? Are they fitter? Are they smarter? Follow them'. Here, the panopticon is reduced to a relationship of individual stalking and prompts the question of whether this is an ethical action. Eventually, the voice encourages the performer to look inside their trolley and note what this person is planning to purchase. 'What kind of person would shop for these items? Which items suit them? Which ones are surprising?' (2010: Audio file). As the performer considers the shopping habits of their fellow shopper, judgements about race, class, gender, physicality, appearance and, most importantly, what the items placed in their basket 'say' about the person, come into play. As *Age* reporter Liza Power suggests, by provoking these questions, *Wondermart* transforms the 'innocuous, fluorescent-lit space ... into complex psycho-social terrain' (2010: 17). During my experience of *Wondermart* I followed a roughly forty-year old woman, of Asian descent, wearing a smart black overcoat. She carried a matching black handbag in her trolley, paused in front the spice shelf for some time, but finally chose a mixed packet of frozen corn and peas. In turn, the performer may consider what his/her own buying habits say about them.

Consequently, *Wondermart* illustrates shopping to be both a tactile experience, as well as one that is controlled and scrutinised. Yet this performance also raises questions: What do I buy? How do I shop? What does my shopping say about me? What do others buy? Moreover, such questions provoke ethical considerations of the responsibilities of the shopper-performer. How do I shop *correctly*? Could I shoplift? Do I feel guilty? In the following discussion, analysis of the work prompts examination of Bauman's contention that our buying habits are vitally important to both the formation of our identity and our pursuit of happiness.

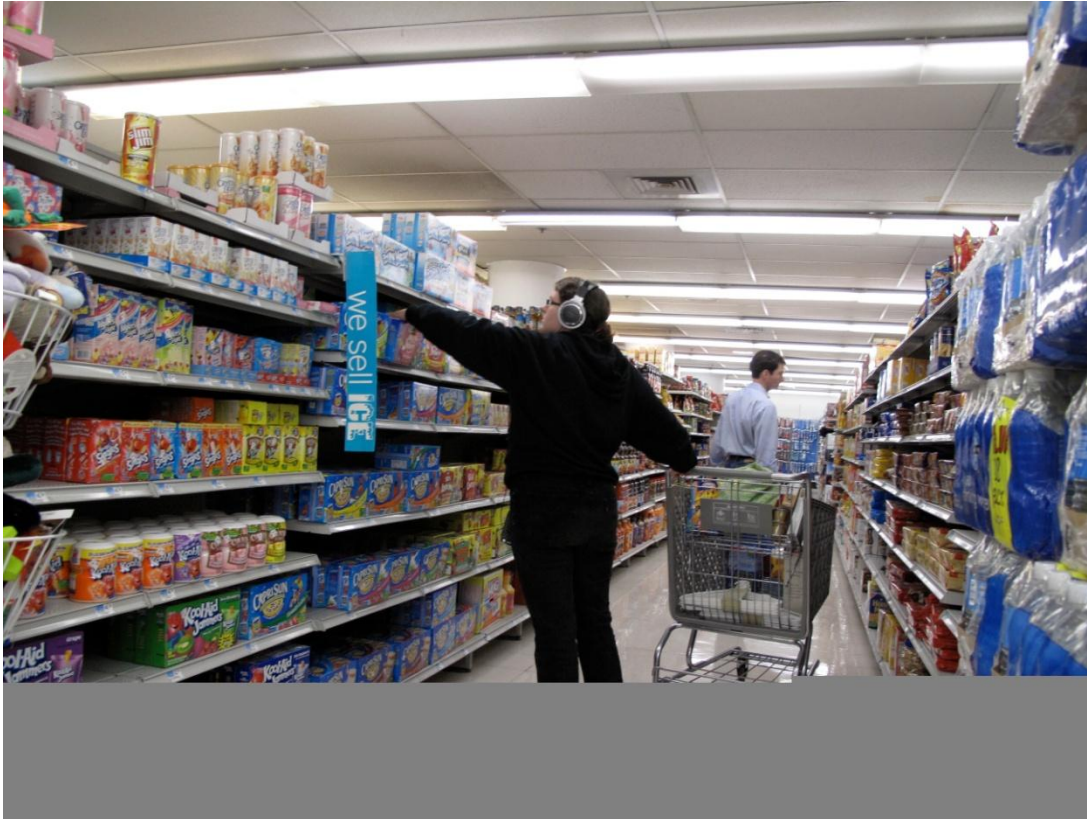


Figure 2. A shopper-performer shopping incorrectly in *Wondermart*

Happiness and the supermarket

In simple terms, happiness refers to a state of ‘subjective well-being’ or in the words of economic theorist Richard Layard: ‘feeling good – enjoying life and feeling it is wonderful’ as opposed to ‘feeling bad and wishing things were different’ (2003: 4; Bauman 2007: 42; Martin 2007: 172). Happiness is, obviously, our preferred state. However, the question of how we achieve happiness and its relationship to our contemporary society and culture, to economics and public policy, is a far more complex and frequently paradoxical concern.

According to Bauman, Western modernity has seen the transition from an emphasis on *production* – of large-scale industry, factories, institutions and armies expressing the values of security and durability – towards *consumption*, whereby bulk and permanence are replaced by values of speed, mobility and an increasing demand for new commodities (and

their swift inbuilt obsolescence) in order to meet the requirements of 'choice', along with new needs and desires (2007:28-31). [5] Bauman subsequently argues that the resulting 'society of consumers' 'promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative options'(2007: 53). Moreover, in a society of consumers, subjectivity and the construction of identity takes the form of the ultimate commodity, as 'flexible, free-floating, unattached' subjects are highly valued by a privatised and deregulated labour market (2007: 9). Consequently, flexible individuals 'shop around' for self, transforming *themselves* into commodities and readjusting their identities through consumption as needed (2007: 108-116).

However, in doing so, they also engage with what Bauman locates as the 'supreme value' of the age, the search for individual happiness. For Bauman, 'the society of consumers stands and falls by the happiness of its members – to a degree unknown and hardly comprehensible to any other society on record' (2007: 44). Bauman notes that the contemporary experience of happiness is not a static one – it is not so much a *state* as it is the *individual pursuit* of happiness that is the ultimate prerogative of current Western subjects, and the 'prime engine of human thought and action' (2008: 30). The concept of happiness is intrinsic to contemporary Western society not because in previous modern or premodern eras happiness was unsought, but because the *pursuit* of happiness underpins a consumer society that *promises* to gratify human needs and desires (2007: 43-46). A free-market society, which promises rising wealth, more competition, new commodities, lower prices and increased leisure time in which to spend income, all point to a *freedom* from the traditional constraints of government, institution and religion, and ultimately to an increased chance of happiness (Binswanger, 2006: 370). Happiness, this suggests, is now bound up with values consistent with the ideology of privatisation: individual choice, free (private) space and movement, what Bauman calls the 'promise of happiness in *earthly life* ...happiness *here and now* and in *every successive "now"*' (2007: 44). In the lives of contemporary subjects, therefore, happiness is the *expected* outcome.

Near the beginning of *Wondermart* the shopper-performer is told to push his/her trolley and given two minutes in which to familiarise themselves with the space and pick up a few items, choosing things that 'best represent' them.

Don't resist the techniques put in place to sell you stuff, but become aware of them.

Sixty to seventy percent of supermarket purchases are unplanned impulse buys. If you ever find yourself being attracted by something then pick it up and put it in your trolley. Be impulsive. Indulge yourself. Enjoy. (2010: Audio file)

In following these instructions, the performer of *Wondermart* enacts a self-conscious version of the revised dictum 'I shop therefore I am'. This is a light-hearted beginning, but one that nonetheless highlights the level to which our consumer habits are seen to define us. [6] Just as observing the selected items of a fellow shopper may provide hints as to the 'kind of person they are', choosing items that 'best represent you' casts light on how our identities are formed (and transformed) through consumption. As Bauman notes, 'consumer goods are seldom if ever identity neutral' and the work of constructing a 'public' identity in the society of consumers 'requires primarily shopping skills' (2007: 112). However, for Bauman, it is not just what we buy, but our very repeated act of consuming and the movement towards defining ourselves as first and foremost commodities that truly marks us as contemporary subjects. New needs, new wants and new products require in turn the formation of *new identities*. This identity is now recast as one programmed in the pursuit of happiness.

In a society of shoppers and a life of shopping *we are happy as long as we haven't lost the hope of becoming happy*; we are secure from unhappiness as long as some of that hope is still ticking. And so the key to happiness and the antidote to misery is to keep the hope of becoming happy *alive*. (Bauman, 2008a: 15)

The search for happiness then, is a perpetual supermarket visit and one we must keep making to keep the search alive. Unfortunately, whilst the requirement of shopping

permeates our world, there is no guarantee that greater wealth and an increasing volume of consumption coincides with a concurrent rise in happiness. As economic theorists such as Layard point out, paradoxically, rising wealth, life expectancy and leisure time has had little impact on levels of happiness in the affluent West (2003: 14; 2005; 2006; Binswanger, 2006: 366-367; Martin, 2007). As Layard notes, citing empirical studies conducted in the US, Japan, the UK and in most European countries, 'despite massive increases in purchasing power, people in the West are no happier than they were fifty years ago' (2006: 24). According to Martin Binswanger, this well-known paradox of happiness is often due to subjects overestimating the joy brought by income, status and rising aspiration levels. Yet he also contends that an increase in choices – of goods for consumption – and time-saving devices – such as faster transport, email, mobile telephones and *supermarkets* – are in fact hindrances' to potential happiness as well (2006). As Binswanger argues:

When we enter a supermarket and we want to buy a yogurt, we have to choose among an overwhelming number of flavors consisting of fruits, berries, nuts, chocolate, vanilla and, of course, all kind of mixtures between them. If we want to invest our money we can choose among countless options... (2006: 370)

Freedom of choice and an increasing variety of ways to consume and spend time, bedrocks of the ideology of privatisation, allow individuals no longer dictated to by institutions or tradition to fashion and reform his/her identities straight from the supermarket shelf. As the voice of *Wondermart* intones:

Look at the other products on the shelf all waiting to be chosen ... right on the edge of the shelf, almost perching on the edge, ready to be picked up. Everything is competing with everything else so the onslaught comes from every direction. (2010: Audio file)

However, as Binswanger suggests, more options do not mean more happiness, indeed once a threshold level of options is reached happiness can often decrease (2006: 370). Further to

this, time-saving innovations such as the supermarket, where shoppers can purchase everything efficiently in the one place, have not historically guaranteed actual amounts of time-saved. On the contrary, people spend more time shopping and travelling than ever before (2006: 374). There is a disjunction then, between the expectations of the society of consumers – to be happy – and the very values of speed, movement and free choice that characterise our era. Instead of the promised happiness, consumer society produces instead chronic and perpetual non-satisfaction (Bauman, 2007: 46). Indeed, the supermarket space: with its items lined with their colourful labels facing outwards; with the continuing stream of new brands or rebranded ‘old favourites’; with product specials and discounts; with its emphasis on constant forward movement; is the physical manifestation *par excellence* of the paradox of contemporary happiness. Namely that the more income we have, the more time we have, the more choices, does not automatically constitute a happy life. This disjunction, for Bauman, ‘reflects the unresolvable inner contradiction of a society that sets a standard of happiness for *all* its members which *most* are unable to match’ (2008b: 27). This paradox of consumer culture and happiness is made manifest in the paradox of the supermarket space that is so packed with goods it becomes overwhelming and disorientating.

The supermarket space, then, is no longer simply a place of consumer choice, but a place devoted to providing the promise of happiness. Once again recalling Dellilo’s *White Noise*, it is no longer important that the contemporary consumer actually receives happiness from goods bought, but rather that they will feel happy just through the process of *buying*. Indeed, their identities will be scaffolded by their acts of purchasing. As the character of Jack Gladney says:

I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for my immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it ... I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. (1986: 84)

In *White Noise*, Gladney's shopping spree satirises not only the notion of achieving happiness through consumption, but also that consumption begins to take over Jack's whole being. According to Ebbensen, 'Jack is larger because Jack shops; but Jack is also gone in terms of self. He simply represents the whole consuming population' (2006: 154). Following Bauman, an individualised, privatised society impacts on the formation of identity and encourages subjects to take on identities based primarily on their role as consumers: we are deemed successful if we accrue wealth and purchasing power; and if we portray ourselves as valuable commodities. Conversely, those subjects who lack the capacity for consumption are *failed individuals* and *failed consumers* (2007: 124). Yet, whereas in *White Noise* Jack Gladney subsumes his identity in the act of consuming and as a result 'grows' and flourishes, in the final section of *Wondermart* the promise of supermarket-style happiness is questioned.

Nearing the end of the *Wondermart* the voice guides the performer to stand near the tills and observe the moving shoppers and their trolleys, 'ships passing under the fluorescent glow of perpetual day, their pilots pausing to scrutinise shopping lists, last lines of defence against the threat of impulse buys' (2010: Audio file). Here, they are directed once again to note the people around them: the teachers, tennis players, gamblers, commuters and impulsive types; all lining up 'packing their bags, inputting their pin numbers, swiping their fidelity bonus supercards that store all the details of their shopping history' (2010: Audio file). The performer is given time to consider the movement and lines of the crowd, all at a small distance from the tills, where the repeated ringing present in the sound composition is echoed in the actions of the supermarket check-out staff. Lastly, the voice instructs:

Look at your shopping inside the trolley. Do you feel an urge to actually buy something? Are you itching to grab something since you're here? Not this time. You're not going to buy anything. You have one minute to put everything back. Ready? Go. *(sound of a ticking stopwatch)* As you put each item down, remember what attracted

you to it. Why did you pick it up? (*sound of stopwatch mixes with muzac, ringing tills, and so on*). Stop for a moment. Have you finished putting all the products back? If not, just abandon your trolley. Leave it somewhere out of the way of the other shoppers. Make sure nobody notices you do that. When you have finished. Leave the store.

(*silence*)

Leave the store behind you. Stop. Turn around. Look at the building. (*background audio of 50s style radio advertisement: 'It's the 8th Wonder of the World...'*) Look at the people as they enter. They're going in. Out of the weather. Out of the outside and into the inside. They are penetrating the egg, so to speak, at pace. No dawdling at the entrance, or they might not make it through... (2010: Audio file)

Thus, the performer empties his/her potential purchases – the very ones which 'best represent them' – leaves the trolley and leaves the space. Arguably, in *Wondermart*, the subversion of the supermarket space is not reached through shoplifting or vandalism or the choosing of a new, ideal product which happens to be on special, but rather the letting go of the trolley and putting the items to one side. By putting aside the products that best represent them, so they might move slowly to the exit, the shopper-performer can gently contradict the *raison d'être* of the supermarket: they don't have to choose or buy anything, instead they can knowingly act the role of the flawed consumer. This performance, instead of portraying the shopper-performer as an unthinking or passive consumer of products, shows the complexity of the contemporary shopping experience. Consuming may be primarily associated with happiness, as Bauman suggests, but *Wondermart* also shows it to be a matter of participation, ethics, and responsibility. Choosing where we shop, what we buy and whether we follow a fellow shopper, steal a product, demonstrate brand loyalty, or buy those products which arguably make us happy, these are not unthinking actions. As *Wondermart* reveals, in Bauman's society of consumers, the radical act is finally to walk away with nothing.

Closing comments

Wondermart is a performance piece that, while not overtly political or ironic, prompts reflection upon our actions as consumers and our interactions with the supermarket space. Yet, when read alongside the work of Bauman, such work also points to the supermarket as an eminent manifestation of the paradox of happiness in our world – that happiness is expected, can be enhanced by consumption, and that our identities can be transformed by our purchases – yet the values of contemporary society: increasing speed, greater choice and rising wealth, directly undercut the pursuit of happiness. Lastly, *Wondermart* shows that while our society may associate consumption with happiness, shopping is not a simple experience: it requires participation and consideration of an ethics of consuming. It also makes clear that contentment is not often found in the cereal aisle.

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Endnotes

[1] This is the well-known slogan for Australian supermarket giant Woolworths, prominently featured during advertising jingles and in-store muzac.

[2] In 2011 a new version of *Wondermart* for two people: simultaneously performed tracks for one Tall Person and one Short Person; has recently been made available <http://www.wondermart.co.uk/Downloads.html>.

[3] Further discussion of the strategic use of headphones in Rotozaza's work can be found in: Paterson, Eddie. 'Paperless and Penless: Headphone performance, audio-scripting and new approaches to writing for performance' (AAWP, 2010) <http://aawp.org.au/strange-bedfellows-or-perfect-partners-papers-refereed-proceedings-15th-conference-australasian-asso>

[4] The centrality of the supermarket in *White Noise*, as a sign of American commodity culture, has been extensively discussed by literary and postmodern theorists such as: Baker, 2006; Barrett, 2001; Boxhall, 2006; Ebbensen, 2006; Keeseey, 1993; Lentricchia, 1991. It is not my intention to repeat their arguments here, suffice it to say that notions of the sublime, the simulacra and the invasive nature of commodity culture are reoccurring in critical writings on *White Noise*.

[5] Key to Bauman's discussion of modernity is his theorisation of the 'solid' and 'liquid' states of modernity. For Bauman, the society of producers is associated with the former and the society of consumers exists in the era of the liquid modern, what others frequently refer to as 'postmodernity', and which Bauman describes as an 'individualised, privatised version of modernity' where both at the macro level of society, politics, economics and the micro level of identity and labour, notions of fluidity and speed are dominant (2000:7-8; 2007:28-31).

Bauman's distinction between the society of producers and the society of consumers is also outlined in his *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1995:23-42), however for this paper I am drawing on an updated version of this argument in *Consuming Life* (2007).

[6] This may apply both at the level of individuality and the macro level of nation – consider George W. Bush's famous urging of American's after the events of 9/11 to fly and go shopping: 'Get down to Disney World in Florida...Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed' ('He told us to go shopping. Now the bill is due' Bacevich, Andrew (Washington Post October 5th, 2008):

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/10/03/AR2008100301977.html>).

List of Illustrations

Figure 1 An anonymous shopper-performer in the high-density supermarket world of *Wondermart*. Photo: Ant Hampton

Figure 2 A shopper-performer shopping incorrectly in *Wondermart*. Photo: Ant Hampton

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