

From:

*Albrecht Schäfer - Ein Tag*, exh. cat. Museum Morsbroich, Bielefeld/Leipzig/Berlin 2010, p. 97-100.

Ben Carter

## **Black Sun**

A dark shape hangs at about head height in the middle of the room, resembling the surveillance units that watch over department-store checkouts where the cameras, several of them, are concealed behind a globe of dimmed glass. But whereas these tend to be highly reflective, reflecting the shopping aisles etc., suggesting that everything is under surveillance, the object you are examining is entirely matt, absorbing light: a blind eye. There is also a similarity to the globe lamps found in halls and stairwells that provide a series of stations to guide you on your way. Here, however, a reversal has taken place, so that what was once light and bright is now dark and aloof, emitting no light, though, on approaching it, a certain warmth.

On the counter next to the newspaper is a small puddle of coffee. With the tip of your finger, you draw eight slender lines radiating out from the centre. When opening the newspaper over the counter, the design seeps through slightly, but blurred. It forms the middle of a constellation of rings left by coffee cups placed in different positions on the page. Indeed, there are a number of signs that this newspaper has been read by others before you: the partly-filled-in crossword; a telephone number jotted in the corner.

With the palm of your hand, you wipe the condensation from the window to form a circle that is both darker and more reflective than the rest of the window. A series of images overlap: the dimming light of the square outside; the neon strips of the café where you are sitting drinking coffee; and beyond your faint reflection, on the far side of the square, the façade of the department store, now partly obscured by scaffolding. The rest of the window has become almost completely opaque, veiled in a fine silvery layer of condensation, filtering only the vaguest of shadows.

The square is enclosed on all four sides; the corners, however, are open, providing access to the adjoining roads. The north side is dominated by the department store, in an earlier style than the other buildings, though from the same century, separated by the war. The original façade is still visible in places, though mostly covered by scaffolding to which a vast printed screen has been attached depicting an idealised version of the same façade: a rough grid of concrete segments jutting out at different angles.

You borrow a biro from the man behind the counter to jot down a telephone number from one of the notices stuck to the door. To start the flow of ink, you make a series of figures of eight over the

crossword on the page spread out in front of you. Despite the ink now flowing, you continue these looping shapes until the crossword grid is almost entirely filled in.

You wipe away the condensation and look out at the square, now covered in a thin veil of snow. A vast screen is being attached to the scaffolding of the department store, the loose end billowing slightly. It is still possible to see part of the old façade made up of concrete panels forming an irregular mesh of lines like a tangle of branches. The concrete has begun to crumble away in places revealing the reinforcing steel behind.

The sign reads open so you enter. Apart from the man sitting at the window, the café is empty. You brush the snow from your coat and go straight to the booths at the back. The booths are roughly assembled from large segments of a fibrous board, all approximately the same size, and numbered with orange stickers on one side. The inner segments of the booths form a cross from which a rough wooden lath emerges, rising to about half the height of the room, at which point it meets a bundle of cables descending freely from the ceiling. These are attached to the lath with gaffer tape and plastic tags at short intervals before fanning out to the computers at the bottom.

The walls have been tiled with white polystyrene tiles that jut out at different angles, resembling the façade of the department store on the other side of the square. The tiles are delicately gradated into different shades of grey according to the angle of light. Some of the tiles have fallen off completely, revealing the grey flaking paint behind and the scrawled residue of the brown glue originally used to attach them.

At the centre of the square is a fountain in an earlier style than the surrounding buildings. The basin is covered in ceramic tiles with a design in relief depicting the original or proposed construction of the square, now partly obscured by a scrawl of graffiti and rendered more or less illegible. A concrete column or obelisk emerges from the middle of the basin with eight bronze spouts ejecting eight slender jets of water, eight pale filigree lines against the dark façade of the department store behind. A gull descends in a spiralling motion, alighting on the central column.

You take a newspaper from the pile next to the door and spread it out over the counter, first moving your cup and then placing it on top of the outspread newspaper. You pour in cream from a small plastic container, stirring it to form a delicate spiral that becomes increasingly diffuse. You remove the spoon from the cup and place it on the counter, leaving a small residue of coffee.

The page is dominated by a black and white photograph of a town square. The buildings are now restored or rebuilt and there are few traces of the earlier destruction. Nothing unusual: people standing or strolling, alone or in small groups; three children with their mother waiting to be picked up; at their feet, plastic carrier bags with the logo from the department store opposite.

The café is twice as long as it is wide and divided into two parts. The back is given over to the computer booths while a counter runs the full length of the window at the front. Three children are sitting with their mother waiting to be picked up. One of the children is drawing a rainbow in the condensation. In the lower corner of the window next to the door is an illuminated sign that reads open in reverse.

There is a sound of the computers coming on like the sound of gathering static. The screen remains blank, but the dust accumulated over the surface flickers with a phosphorescent glow. After a brief pause, the screen begins to load section by section. With the palm of your hand, you wipe the dust from the screen while a series of windows open automatically. You begin to feel the first warnings of a migraine.

A story has been removed making it possible to see part of the photograph on the adjoining page so that the text no longer corresponds to the image and vice versa. Also, the colour and typography is different suggesting that a page from another newspaper has been inserted into this one. Similarly, a page from this newspaper might well be folded into one of the other newspapers in the pile next to the door.

You occasionally glance up to observe the scene in the square. Nothing unusual: people standing or strolling, alone or in small groups. Three children are standing with their mother waiting to be picked up. On the ground next to them, a newspaper is turning to mush in a puddle. One of the children peers through the window into the café illuminated by the sign in the window running through the different colours of the spectrum.

A gull appears in the circle of the window. The circle now resembles an eye. The eye follows the gull without the muscles registering the movement. The square itself seems to float around the gull, the black circle of its eye forming the centre of rotation.

The man behind the counter is bent over a small radio fiddling with the dial. Instead of running through the different channels, there is a gradual accumulation, one channel on top of another, the waves of information becoming denser and increasingly illegible.

A spider moves tentatively across the counter before reaching a small puddle of coffee. Apparently caught, it fans out its legs, extending them just to the edge of the puddle, forming a star with eight points.

The walls are lined with polystyrene tiles that jut out at various angles. A few tiles have been painted in different shades of the spectrum in pastel tones, resembling parts of a puzzle. Towards the back of the café are four booths made from a fibrous wood-like material, and in the middle is a lath wedged between the back of the booth and the ceiling to act as a support for the cables. On opposite

walls, two clocks represent two different time zones exactly twelve hours apart, and thus identical to the eye.

The floor is fitted with synthetic carpet tiles in various shades of grey, some newer to replace those that have worn out. Like the booths, the shelving at the front is made from a fibrous wood-like material that has been painted white approaching grey. The tiles on the ceiling are occasionally painted in different shades of the spectrum in pastel tones. A metal bracket runs along the centre of the ceiling to which a group of cables is attached, which then fan out to the neon strips fixed to the metal frame and the sockets below.

The polystyrene tiles cover the walls to about three quarters the height of the room, with grey flaking paint above. Here, a meter or so below the real ceiling, an aluminium frame is connected to the ceiling with metal brackets. The frame once supported the panels that were subsequently removed and reused to build the booths at the back. One of the neon strips attached to the aluminium frame has begun to flicker, variegating the shadows cast about the room. Above is a labyrinth of cable shafts with cables crudely attached using thin strips of gaffer tape and plastic tags. Many of the cables from previous fittings are now obsolete and hang down freely half wrenched from the shaft.

Because of the poor print quality, your finger leaves a trail of smudged ink as you read. A similar effect, but reversed is produced by a printing error on the next page. Here, each letter is followed by its own shadow, just a fraction behind. Scattered over the page is a series of coffee rings. Indeed, there are a number of signs that you are not the first to read this newspaper: the half-completed crossword puzzle; a corner of the page torn away. While leaving the old newspaper outspread on the counter, you take another from the pile next to the door and open it over the top. The new newspaper is smooth to the touch. Due to the perforations running down the outer edge, it is difficult to separate the pages.

In one area, the condensation has been wiped away from the window and it is possible to see into the café. Apart from a man behind the counter, the café is empty. Nevertheless, the sign reads open so you enter.