

Paradise Row

THE BASEMENT

JOHANN ARENS



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INTERNET CENTRE & HABESHA GROCERY

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Internet Centre & Habesha Grocery

In 2007, the Japanese government published a study on a new wave of homeless individuals. Net café refugees or cyber-homeless lived and slept in 24 hour internet cafes. These transient tech-filled spaces were their homes.

When the report was published, there were an estimated 5,400 people living in these cafés. Less than a decade later, it's hard to imagine these spaces still existing. Technology has moved us increasingly away from the real, the physical. The internet exists on our phones. The ephemeral has become even more transitory. The cyber café has moved from empty to defunct.

Internet cafes still exist but often on the outskirts of cities, providing a form of infrastructure to the less wealthy. A place for the marginalized. They are spaces for truly international, transient communities to access technology. The internet café is a dusty library, a post office, a bank, an office. A public institution in miniature.

It is this interesting space of change that forms the focus for Johann Arens' exhibition. Inside the gallery, the artist has recreated a deteriorating 'Internet centre & Habesha Grocery'. The room is filled with the leftovers of a functioning social space — Ethiopian paintings, pre-paid telephone cards, dated PCs, hand written notes, lo-fi screensavers. The artist treats the internet café as a readymade. A space for thought on the passing of time, the changes in society, the technological divide.

Arens' installations often touch on how spaces function or highlight the remnants of function. Office workers, public institutions, gallery staff and the audience all become figures within the wider performance-scape of Arens' work. The dynamic between consumption and production shifts. Labour is exposed. It is intriguing that artists' background is less interesting to him. Instead the focus is on the set. To examine real space, Arens creates a staged world.

The concept of the stage is particularly relevant in the context of technological perception. How we create our virtual selves and are reflected in our screens. Arens' installation becomes a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of the internet. How despite the archives of Facebook or Google, technology dies. Not necessarily with a bang, but a dusty, uncanny whimper.