

TRADING PLACES

ART AND GLOBAL ECONOMICS

Barry Drabble

FOR YEARS WE thought of ourselves as a production-oriented company, meaning we put all our emphasis on designing and manufacturing the product. We've come around to saying that Nike is a marketing-oriented company, and the product is our most important marketing tool."¹

Remember the days when a shoe used to be shoe? Well, I'm afraid that just isn't the case anymore. Just as Nike is now stirred into our consumer-culture as an issue of "lifestyle," artists are re-assessing the idea of critical artistic practice in reaction to fundamental changes brought about by the information revolution, and the ever-quickenening movement of capital around the globe.

It's early March in London, Carey Young is in a training room at Virgin Megastore on Oxford Street talking to staff about her interest in the shared ground between art and business. She is preparing a site-specific project at the store entitled, quite simply *My Megastore*, and is spending twenty minutes

plays and find their way onto receipts. A video of products streaming off a conveyor belt in the packing room will take center stage at the exhibition's opening, filling the store's central bank of video screens. US style self-motivation tapes will boom out positive messages over the in-store speakers and the invisible mechanism of win-win economics will be explored through Virgin's promise to bulk buy any publication that covers the event. Back in the training room, Young informs staff that she is filming herself as she speaks and that the taped presentation will eventually be shown in the store's video department.

March the 9th in Bilbao, Hinrich Sachs is pulling on a brown, pin-stripe suit in preparation for a busy day. The press and public are gathered at a central auction house for the "International auction of the "Euskara typefaces," an event he has organized in collaboration with the cultural institution Consonni. The "Euskara" is synonymous with Basque regional identity. Existing in several forms it is an immediately recognizable font to be found everywhere: from matchboxes to street signs. It has been part of the fabric of Basque life since the middle ages, and in recent months Sachs has been tracing the history of the font to its present day digital existence, as a piece of software under copyright to a Biarritz-based firm. Discovering that the owners planned to sell, the artist has persuaded them to let him make the sale the center of a public event in Bilbao. At the auction later in the day, the "Euskara" is set to sell to the highest bidder, whether they represent an American software company or a Basque public body, asking price 65,000 Euros.

Three months earlier, Matthieu Laurette is in the US, launching *Help Me to Become a U.S. Citizen!* as part of an exhibition at the Artists Space in New York. This is just one part of the ongoing "Citizenship Project" in which Laurette and his lawyers are attempting the painstaking process of gaining the artist as many legal nationalities as possible. Unselfishly, the artist styles this work as a "how to" project, the web-site is set up to help like minded passport collectors by providing links to various governmental sites on immigration. To realize the aim of multiple nationality the artist uses the tools of the exhibition, the public

media, and the Internet to seek assistance, and his publicity states unconditionally: "All offers will be given serious consideration."² Those with keen eyes at Venice this year will have seen the project's latest manifestation as part of Harald Szeemann's "Plateau of Mankind." Pasted up at the entrance to the Giardini are copies of a letter drafted by Laurette and Harald Szeemann, approaching the 111 countries currently unrepresented at the Biennale. The letter talks of inclusion in the next Biennale, and the offer is simple: Laurette will represent them at the event in exchange for citizenship.

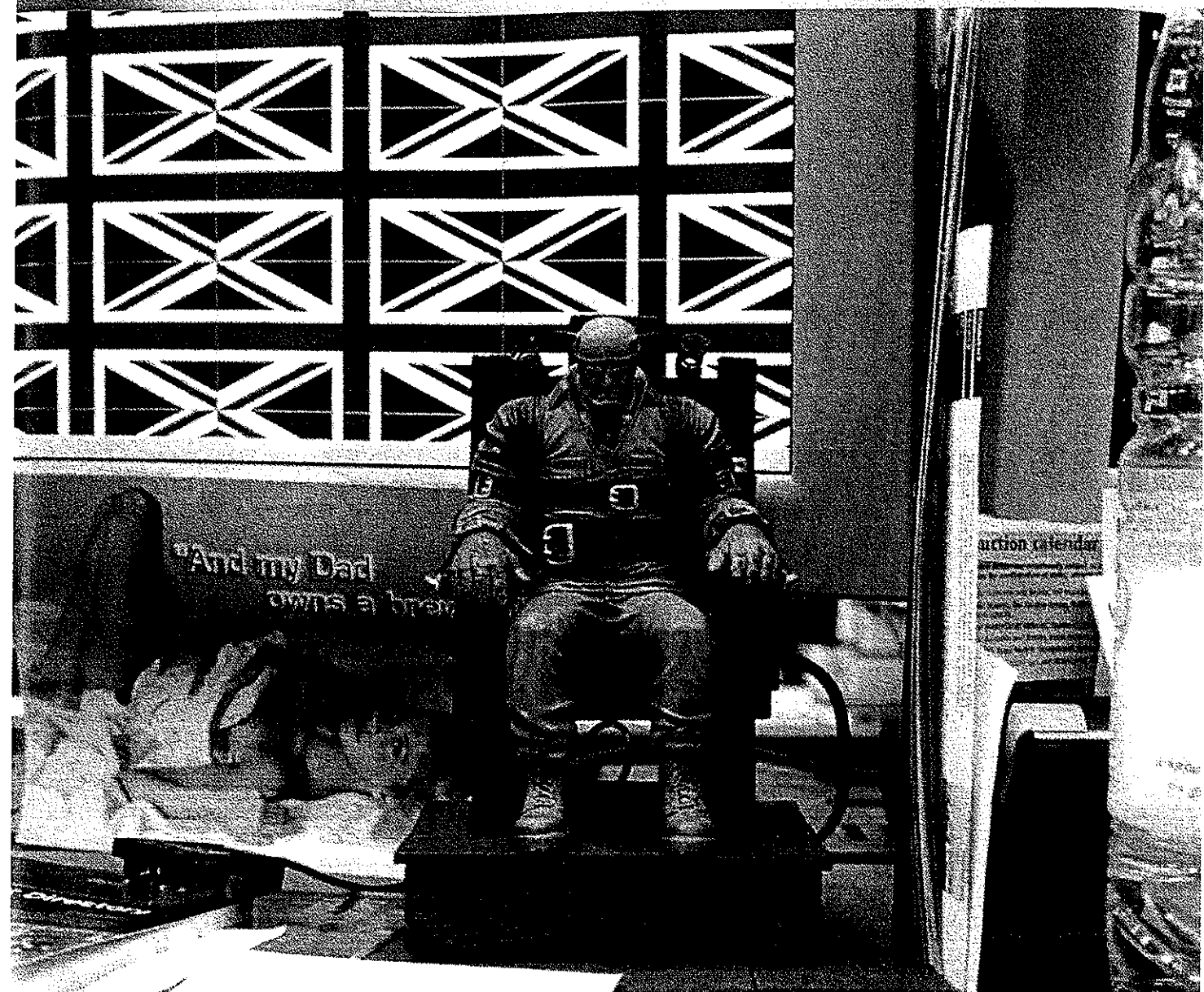
In the early 90s Ekkehard Altenburger sold his first large work and decided to invest the money in stocks and shares of an energy provider. Some months later, with the arrival of the annual report he discovered that the company he had invested in were operating nuclear power plants and he quickly sold the shares, making a good if problematic profit. It was as a result of these oddly politicized experiences as a small trader that in 1999 he took a particular interest in the hidden world of London's trading floors. He began with the intention of filming several of London's 800 or so floors, and as the project began during the 1999 Internet boom, for a while his aims seemed realistic. However, with the slump that accompanied the bursting of the dot.com bubble, the artist soon found the situation turning from feasible to impossible. As the situation worsened, share prices plummeted and companies began to off-load staff, anxiety amongst the traders ran high and as happy as they were to talk with him, no-one wanted an artist putting a video-camera in the works. Fortuitously he managed to persuade a couple of companies to allow him to take photographs, but only after the floors had closed and the employees had all gone home. The resulting images show these familiarly stressful and high-speed environments in repose; lights on but no-one home. The artist picks up on signs of life amongst the hardware: beneath the space-age rows of hi-tech screens, is the more down to earth world of framed family



CAREY YOUNG, *Study for Personalization*, 2001. Installation at Virgin Megastore, London.

leading the staff through a short history of her own work, and a description of what she plans to do in their working environment. Young's strategy here is to hijack the electronic infrastructure that underlies the store's effectiveness as a Mecca of entertainment consumerism. Snippets of advice from Virgin's staff manual such as "always smile at the customer" and "raise your passion for product" will appear on the electronic fill dis-

Opposite, from top: EKKEHARD ALTENBURGER, *Desk of a Marketmaker (Electric Chair)*, 2001. CAREY YOUNG, *Buy-In*, 2001.





Help me to become a US citizen!

www.citizenship-project.com/usa

From left: HINRICH SACHS, International Auction of the "Euskara" Typefaces, 2001; MATTHIEU LAURETTE, Help me to become a US citizen, 2001. Courtesy Jousse Enterprise, Paris.

photos, cracked coffee mugs, and (much needed) lucky charms. There is symmetry to the fact that the medium format camera he uses was bought with money from his first "unethical" investment.

Young, Sachs, Laurette, and Altenburger are joined by their interest in systems; those at work in the superstore, the immigration office, on the trading floor and at the auction house; grammatical, legal, economic, cultural and commercial systems. Talking about *My Megastore*, Young uses the term "insertion"³ in preference to "intervention," stressing the fact that inserting something into a system does not by definition break the flow. At Virgin, Young "inserted" material that roughened the super-smooth edges of the consumer experience, causing leakage that revealed on the one hand the seductive simplicity and on the other the machine-like predictability of the capitalist logic we are all part of. In the case of the auction of the "Euskara," Sachs prefers the term "implementation," in relation to the way the project functioned through the system of regional media and economics, commandeering the occasion to open up public debate and participation around the critical question: What happens when culture becomes commodity and commodity becomes culture?

On March 9th he was surprised, but not disappointed when all interested buyers pulled out of the bidding, and the hammer came down to mark a "no-sale." The "work," if it can be described as such, was not the sale, but the act of leading all involved, including those of you reading this, to the whole mountain of questions that stem from examples like that of the "Euskara."

Laurette's idea and the straightforward way he presents it seem at first sight to be a "Guinness book of Records" style prank. But, like Sach's auction, the complexities and even-

tual ramifications of the work turn from publicity stunt to cultural critique. Surfing the links from his site provide an interesting if depressing insight into the bureaucratic and xenophobic way that western nation's proscribe their future populations. His quest to make an artist the first legally "global" citizen functions as a futile ideal in a world where national characteristics and differences are being ironed out by the steady progress of western capital in pursuit of new markets. The Citizenship project as a whole is ironic and poignant, at once feeding off and commenting on the gradual reduction of citizenship to the status of luxury commodity. Nowhere is this irony more developed than in Venice, where the politely naive letters set about revealing the exclusivity of multiple citizenship on the one hand and the Biennale on the other. Played with Laurette's trademark straight face, it packs a bitter punch.

Over the last two years Altenburger has added to his photographic study of trading environments by filming interviews with some of London's most interesting financial figures⁴. He talks candidly with amongst others, the chairman of London's largest privately owned trading floor and a senior adviser to the Financial Services Authority, the industry's independent watchdog. He is now in contact with Meryll Lynch, the company building what will be London's biggest trading floor, housing 1700 traders, managing assets worth 1.6 trillion \$US. With this kind of figure in mind, the interviews show the artist exploring the idea that, increasingly, the world's key political, economic, and technological shifts have their counterpart in the actions of buying and selling on the trading floors. To clarify this he poses questions about the shift of power from the public (government) sector to the private sector (global multinationals), the influence of focus groups (from animal rights ac-

tivists to Greenpeace), and the "mediation" of the field with the arrival of the Internet and the increase in public interest. What he digs for, and what his interviewees seem to fully (if not altogether happily) confirm, is that governmental democracy is on the way out and is rapidly being replaced by a global decision-making apparatus that only share-holders have a chance of influencing.

On the eve of May 1st, as they boarded up London's Niketown in expectation of the following day's anti-capitalist demonstrations, I couldn't help but realize how ghettoized the call for debate over the implications of capitalism had become. Equally clear was how impotent and misinformed the "us against them" school of thinking truly is. The good artists working on critical production today, like so many before them, seek to explore the complexities of contemporary reality without proscribing a single, polemic interpretation of what they reveal. Their work is critical in so far as it raises questions and scrutinizes cultural shifts, recognizing in the process itself a symptom of the condition it is diagnosing. ■

www.careyyoung.com
www.citizenship-project.com/usa
www.laurette.net
www.consonni.org

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Notes:

1. Geraldine E. Willigan, "High Performance Marketing, an interview with Nike's Phil Knight" *Harvard Business Review*, July 1992, 92. Quoted from Naomi Kline, "No Logo," *Harper Collins*, London, 2001.
2. Internet quote, Barbara Hunt, Artists Space, New York <www.artistspace.org>
3. In reference to Cildo Meireles, *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*.
4. Ekkehard Altenburger's photographs and interviews are work in progress, and the artist is yet to decide how and where to exhibit them.