

Barney Drabble

Trading Places. Art and Global Economics., 2001

'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-quickenning movement of capital around the globe.

Its 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 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 till displays and find their way onto receipts. A video of products streaming off a conveyor belt in the packing room will take centre 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 organised in collaboration with the cultural institution Consonni. The "Euskara" is synonymous with Basque regional identity, existing in several forms it is an immediately recognisable 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 centre 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.

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.

Three months earlier, Matthieu Laurette is in the US, launching 'Help me to become an American citizen!' as part of an exhibition at the Artist Space in New York. This is just one part of the ongoing 'Citizenship Project' in which Laurette and his lawyer are attempting the painstaking and risky 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 realise the aim of multiple nationality the artist uses the tools of the exhibition, the public media and the Internet to seek assistance, as his publicity states unconditionally: 'All offers will be given serious consideration'.²

Young, Sachs and Laurette are joined by their interest in systems; those at work in the superstore, the immigration office, and the auction house; grammatical, legal, 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. The term seems apt in all three cases.

For Sachs, his 'insertion' into the sale of the 'Euskara' was to use the occasion to open up public debate 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'. 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. 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 eventual 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. While in a world where increasingly nation states hold less power than the elite multi-national corporations, Laurette's quest to make an artist the first legally 'global' citizen shares with 'My Megastore' a mixture of celebration and ironic poignancy.

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 realise how ghettoised the call for debate over the implications of capitalism had become. Equally clear was how impotent 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 scrutinises cultural shifts, recognising in the process itself as a symptom of the condition it is diagnosing. Don't worry readers, Art is still Art (approximately) but the tools available for implementing it and the economic system it might attach itself to have changed beyond recognition.

² Internet quote, Barbara Hunt, Artists Space, New York <www.artistsspace.org>

³ In reference to Morellis, Insertions into Ideological Circuits.