

If contemporary art is to have any purchase on shaping culture – rather than simply affirming it – it must be able to deal directly with the dominant ideas of our age. The monolithic presence of global, free-market capitalism is pushing every other concept of social organization into the shadows. Economic rationalism is presented more as a force of nature than a political and social choice, and to imagine different ways of doing business, exchanging culture or even surviving is increasingly difficult.

It is in the face of such rigid closure that Michael Blum's work operates. One of his earlier video works, *Wandering Marxwards* (1999), takes us on a journey through North American retail splendour to the accompaniment of a voiceover, spoken by the artist, who wonders how we can extract Marx from the trash-can of capitalist history. In the process, he seeks to uncover a poetic, even soulful, Marx from a supposedly dry economic text. Another video work continues to touch on economic globalism but this time in a more overtly personal and traumatic way. *My Sneakers* (2001) starts with a beautiful description of the artist suddenly glancing down at his sneakers in wonder at their absurd colour. From this epiphany, Blum embarks on a journey to Indonesia to find the people and conditions under which they were manufactured. This ultimately forlorn quest mutates into a process of education and dawning understanding. Meeting factory workers, especially women, whose relationship with sneakers is totally different from that of any European consumer, draws us close to the marginalized community that underpins Western affluence. The final sequence, when the sneakers are returned for recycling to the streets of Jakarta, is strangely moving, as though we are saying goodbye to an old friend.

It is not only in video that Blum explores the personal implications of globalization. His public work *400 years without a grave is a long time to shut up* (2002) is a simple gravestone to a somewhat forgotten Dutch explorer, Cornelius de Houtman. From speakers hidden inside, a deathly monologue echoes, as if Houtman were speaking from beyond the grave, telling of his bitterness and his lack of renown. Funny and arrogant, de Houtman emerges as the prototypical grey-suited CEO.

The element of historical research continues in other works such as the text installation *Piety, cleanliness and punctuality are the strength of a good business* (2002), and his collaged publication *potlatch.doc*. The latter seeks to illustrate Bataille's description of potlatch (ritual gift-giving and destruction of goods by the leader of a tribe) with a collection of historical and contemporary images that was freely distributed in waiting rooms in Amsterdam and Paris.

These and other works intercept and confront us with carefully controlled information about the unrecognized environment around us. It is this technique of disclosing images and signs from the underbelly of capitalism that marks Blum out as an artist working in the interesting field of engaged autonomy – locked into the system while using art as a way to provoke new ideas about its future.