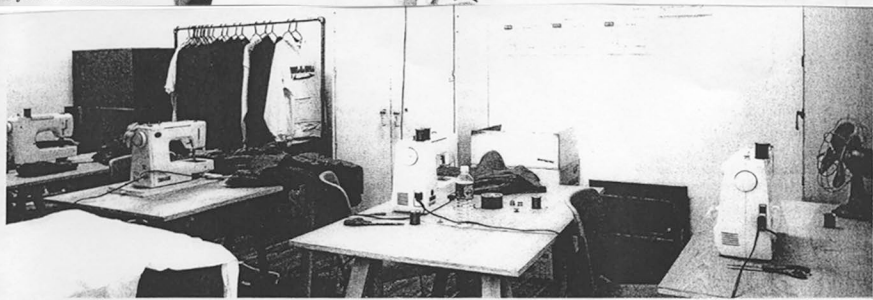


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Sometimes observing artists commenting on the global economy is rather like listening to a Catholic priest talk about sex. They suspect it may have some virtues, but, having little clue what they are and sounding out of their depth when trying to extol them, they prefer to stick to a winking, 'you-know-and-I-know' attitude.

Predictably, then, there is plenty of nudging and winking in the show João Ribas has curated for Artists Space about the rise of the West's new, or information-based economies. And there's at least one loud complaint: Harun Farocki's film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) starts from the interesting observation that the first publicly screened piece of cinema was an eponymous film of the Lumières' employees leaving their factory in Lyon in 1895, before going on to comment on how the cinema has offered us little further insight into factory life since. Maybe it's a problem about constructing narratives out of the working day, or a more complicated issue of genre and audience, but Farocki seems to conclude glibly that it is because cinema is 'repelled' by factory life, and he happily commences a dirge about working-class misery.

There is a sense in which, like the West's out-moded manufacturing capabilities, outsourced to the rest of the globe, the left finds its old methods of critique ill-suited to the challenges of the new economies. Sometimes it's simply the academizing of Marxism that presents the problem. In her video *Writing Desire* (2000) Ursula Biemann examines the vastly networked horrors of the sex trade made possible by the Internet, but then she muffs it with

a high-minded, didactic voice-over. The trouble is larger than the academy, though, a fact amusingly illustrated in Milica Tomic's video *Reading Capital* (2005), in which affluent Texans are seen reciting Marxist principles. Because the narrative cuts from speaker to speaker, it's quite impossible to follow the doctrines being espoused, and one can simply marvel at the very distinct styles of wealth being played out (the Minimalist new money versus the opulent old). It's not the economy any more: it's the culture, stupid.

Deep suspicion, if not outright condemnation, is the show's prevailing attitude towards the consequences of the new economy. It's understandable: free trade and global capital have effected a magical vanishing act in making the old economy relocate itself to distant poorer corners of the world seemingly overnight. Some artists want to make actual labour visible once again: Kader Attia installed a *Halal Swearshop* (2007) that produced a lovely line of blood-red T-shirts, making great play of the West's stew of fears about Islam, and Mike Bouchet tried his hand at manufacturing soda pop. Meanwhile, Santiago Sierra presented photos documenting the project *586 horas de trabajo* (586 hours of Work, 2004), in which he had the number of man-hours spent constructing a massive cubic monument emblazoned on the side. Others, meanwhile, addressed more local discontents: among a veritable bounty of work Joe Scanlan presented a re-imagining of Marcel Duchamp's *Boite-en-valise* (1941) as the nomadic contemporary artist's box of tools.

Much of this is troubling, but it isn't new. The tired academic jargon and a generally

Kader Attia
Halal Swearshop
2007
Mixed media
Installation view

over-simplistic and cynical perspective in Ribas' show ultimately sour it and leave it less powerful than it ought to be. As with all historical shifts, the new economy in all its complexity has created promise and opportunity as well as inequity and upheaval. One of the few artists of recent years who sometimes characterizes that new energy and peril – to my mind, at least – is Rirkrit Tiravanija. Projects such as those in which he has doled out free food have always seemed to be as much about co-operation as about opposition. And yet he captures the false promises and disappointments of the new order as well: for 'new economy' he presented *Untitled 1991 (Artificial Flavour)* (1991), in which he came along to the opening of the show with two suitcases chock-full of packets of crisps. It is as though he's your corporate uncle: he's been travelling and making big deals overseas, he's called in advance hinting at gifts, and when he shows up, all you get is tooth decay.

Ursula Biemann
Writing Desire
2000
DVD still

Morgan Falconer



New Economy