



the human element: the art of labor the labor of art

Curator's Statement

The artists in this exhibition have made it their life's work to examine, chronicle, and celebrate the lives of working people, particularly the unseen, the unrepresented, the perpetual underclass that do the work in this country that no one else will do. This is not merely a journalistic or documentary presentation, although several of the artists have won awards for their work in these fields. Instead, we hope to delve with them beneath the surface of the news story, behind the image, to the pulse and imagination, the aspirations of the new workers in our midst and the changing nature of work itself.

With this exhibition, we have set out to experience the artist's imagination and critical eye when turned to the human consequences of globalization – the human subject as economic collateral damage.

The technological revolution of the last twenty years has given today's corporations unparalleled access to sources of cheap labor and markets for their goods. For those of us fortunate enough to live in the US or Europe, we've watched the all-too-brief Clinton economic bubble collapse into a headlong "race to the bottom": the lowest possible wages, the lowest cost of resources, the least skill needed to complete an assembly line task, the least regard for the environment or sustainability beyond the next corporate board meeting, the least regard for human rights. Meanwhile, in the developing world, the marginality of existence for the working poor has become ever more perilous, creating the basis for the greatest mass migration of human beings in our species' history. Those who cannot find work in the relocated factories are making their way to the developed countries to do the work that no one else here will do. At the other end of the class spectrum, our corporations and hospitals cherry-pick the best and the brightest minds from the universities of India, Pakistan, and the Pacific Rim.

In this exhibition, we are also turning our attention to *the labor of art*, the actual labor of the artists and cultural workers who are struggling to survive and create within a society that increasingly values art only as a commodity, in an international market that now reaches into the most remote Third World village to extract artifacts for the decoration of corporate boardrooms. More than ever, artists in the US are confronted with stark choices: create for and compete within the market or fight for their own integrity and vision from the economic margins. The artists in *The Human Element* have made a clear choice for the latter.

Globalization is a great leveler for the vast majority of those who bring their labor to the marketplace. As many in the US are only beginning to realize, most of us are no longer just spectators to the race to the bottom. Yet herein we can also discover the basis for real solidarity, our shared humanity. And perhaps, just perhaps, we might also get a glimpse of the real strength, dignity, and creativity that allows villagers from Oaxaca to survive and support their families in Mexico by mowing lawns in Englewood, washing dishes in Bergenfield, cutting hair in Ridgefield Park, or caring for babies in Teaneck. We might then be able to imagine the strength of character we collectively possess — all of us, together — to move on to a different, more humane future.

Tim Blunk

Director/Curator

The Human Element: The Art of Labor, the Labor of Art

The Puffin Cultural Forum