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The Age of Labor

What fascinated Esther Shalev-Gerz about the collections of the Wolfsonian is that they present, not so much a collection of art objects, but a segment of history. And that is why *Describing Labor* sets before our eyes what could properly be called the age of Labor. The expression may seem odd. The Bible, after all, tells us that men have been working since the expulsion from Eden. We also know that, notwithstanding all the talk about the disappearance of labor or its becoming immaterial, men continue to go underground and mount scaffolds up to the heavens, to extract and refine materials, to build and maintain machines. But labor is a bit like other seemingly banal notions, such as action, for instance. These are notions that, not satisfied with designating the assembly of gestures and the intentions that govern them, outline an entire distribution of the sensible universe. For ages, action was the category that raised a minority of men—men capable of pursuing great goals, or even of acting simply for the pleasure of acting—above all those beings doomed to the repetition of gestures required by their daily needs. When labor challenged the empire of action two centuries ago, it was not as an efficient expense of physical force or as a sum of useful gestures, but as an organizing category of common experience: as a division of times and spaces; as a mode of the visibility of actions, their causes and effects; as the matrix of judgments and values; and as the principle for the hierarchy of social powers. The age of Labor is the age when labor was posited as the principle for the generation of social wealth, when it came to be embodied in a class that saw itself as the bearer of a world to come and labor as the paradigm for noble and efficient action. It is also the age when the lines of its buildings and products, or the gestures and rhythms of its exercise, came to be identified with those of a new world and a new art.

The age of Labor, however, does not form a single uniform sequence. It splits into different moments, where what comes to the fore might be the workers' misery or their revolt, the power of

production or of the workers, the spectacular gesture or the obedience to the rhythms of the machine. Against this background, the sequence of images chosen by Esther Shalev-Gerz reveals its singularity: even if the years covered by that sequence—the 1920s and 30s, basically—are those of the Soviet Revolution, the Great Depression and of immense Nazi or Fascist parades, we do not see in these images the miserable masses or the raised fists of struggling workers, Futurist exaltations of the machine or socio-realist exaltations of the shock worker. What the characters gathered in a circle around a newspaper in *Strike News* manifest is not a militant attitude of one sort or another, but simply their attention to the news. That's why, some years later, Minna Citron's painting could illustrate something else under the title *War News*. The images from Soviet Russia are equally reserved or understated: the propaganda illustrations from the periodical *USSR in Construction* show us a production line where workers are calmly handling gramophone arms, or the back of a tractor driver testing the machine at the factory, far from any evocation of conquered virgin lands. And the textile factory workers illustrated by Aleksandr Deineka are, as is often the case in his work, lightened of any substance: the two characters in the forefront are clearly discussing the quality of the thread, but they seem more like two gossips happily chatting away; nor can anyone gauge the weight of the chest the barefoot young woman is carrying on her shoulders. It is, paradoxically, an American image—Dean Cornwell's *Work for America!*—that here gives the worker the leather apron and the heroic, chiseled body of someone who fights for his country, and the steelworks its blazing colors, evocative of Hephaestus's furnaces or Vesuvius in eruption, and reminiscent of the era of Wright of Derby.

But even this final excess is resolved in the harmonious adaptation of form and content. This was the age when politically committed artists sought out techniques and modes of figuration that were close to popular traditions in order to paint industrial and urban life. Murals, which many of the artists represented here painted, may be missing from this panoply of American figurations of labor, but the concern with such techniques or modes of figuration is still well represented by serigraphy and, still more, by the tradition of woodcut engraving that arrived with certain artists from Central Europe, and that an American artist carried back home with him after he discovered, during a trip to Europe, the work of a politically engaged artist, Frans Masereel. This "popular" tradition is also that of a multi-purpose mode of figuration. Thus, the arcades in the background or the soaring palm tree in Lynd Ward's *Workers straddling pipeline* are less evocative of a South American scene than of Piranese-style drawings or the neo-Exoticism prized by Brücke artists. They are also reminiscent of those loose-leaf engravings in which the same setting served as the background to various scenes. For their part, the twisted skyscrapers vibrating to the rhythm of the drill in Charles Turzak's engraving,

Man with Drill, evoke depictions of jazz bands just as much as of the city in transformation. But more than engraving techniques, what seems especially suited to the representation of the age of Labor is a new machine, the photographic camera, which is represented here in a privileged way by someone who, from 1910 to the 1930s, was indefatigable in his use of it to show labor in its objectivity and workers, men and women alike, exercising their skills: Lewis Hine. Already, though, the five- or seven-year old children he filmed in 1910 to draw attention to their scandalous exploitation showed a painless adaptation to their tasks that ran against the grain of the denunciation. Somewhat differently, the construction workers of the Empire State Building, balanced on beams and showing no visible signs of being secured or harnessed, would seem like acrobats—if only the geometry of the horizontal black beam and the backlighting didn't inscribe them in the calm symmetry of the image, where the two workers counterbalance a pulley whose anchor point we cannot see. Elsewhere, what prevails is the focused attention on a tool or task: that is what characterizes the young woman filling up bottles of hair tonic, or the one trying out her hand at the sewing machine under the watchful eyes of her older colleague. The relationship of complicity between the individual and the machine culminates, of course, with the "mechanic in his shrine," where one commentator sees the perfect symbiosis of man and machine.

This perfect symbiosis, incidentally, casts a certain suspicion over the images: these work places are quite deserted, the pearl necklace on the sewing apprentice a bit out of place in a factory, the attention to the task at hand a bit too aware of the presence of the photographer. What is being represented, then? The act of labor, captured in its concrete reality, or figures posing to symbolize its power? As it happens, that question does not come up. Hegel teaches that a defining feature of classicism is that it renders singular existence indiscernible from spiritual symbol. And what the images of *Describing Labor* capture is the classical age of Labor, the moment when, in capitalist America as in Soviet Russia, in Europe's democracies or dictatorships, labor appears under one fundamental figure, viz.: as the organizing force of a common world. It was the moment when the mine, the steelworks, the factory, and the scaffold appeared as the centers of an economic life identical with the life of production. It was also the time when, behind the epic journeys of the conquering proletarian or the regenerated nation, the heart of labor appeared to be very much the same everywhere, as if it were the balance of human skill and mechanical power.

This identity between the lines of a visible spectacle and a principle structuring the common world is certainly what seems irremediably remote to us today, when financial capitalism is exiling production further and further away from our cities, even if to transform the deserted sites into artist residences

or contemporary art centers. And that is precisely what the *dispositif* adopted by Esther Shalev-Gerz shows us. This *dispositif*, which obeys the general principle of duality of her installations, inscribes an image, an object, a text that attests to such or such a moment of our common history into a new community: a voice comments on the images, someone listens to the commentary, two images or faces share the screen, a specific *dispositif* for seeing and listening draws the spectator into the play of exchanges. In the present case, the artist, after selecting forty-one artworks, asked twenty-four people from the art world to choose one or two to comment on. We are reminded of the *dispositif* used in *MenschenDinge* [The Human Aspect of Objects], where different people at the Buchenwald Memorial Museum comment on the rings, combs, goblets, or mirrors that camp prisoners had forged by repurposing objects. But the people in *MenschenDinge* talk about objects that they have known for a long time and, significantly, the photographs that accompany the videos show us hands manipulating these objects. Here, conversely, the split screen, which presents on one side the commentator and, on the other, the work commented on, reveals a radical separation. Consider, for example, the recollections of the commentator who chose a lithograph of a stonemason because his great-grandfather was a stonemason by trade. Everything he knows about the quarry where his great-grandfather worked, or about the Herculean strength that allowed him to bend nails with his bare hands, he learned from the stories his grandfather used to tell him when he was a child. As another commentator says about the strange engraving of workers straddling a pipeline in the shade of a palm tree and Renaissance arcades: the moment when these images made immediate sense—the moment when the realistic precisionism of a Charles Sheeler, for example, went hand in hand with Marxism’s all-encompassing historical and political explanation of the world—is behind us. At that point, the commentary splits in half: on one side, it speaks about working conditions and evokes, by personal association, all the workers who died, as a result of accident or illness, during the construction of Henry Flager’s railway line from Miami to Key West; on the other, it zeroes in on pictorial details and approximates the arcades to the “metaphysical” settings of Giorgio de Chirico’s cities.

This split actually runs through most of the commentaries. On one side, the commentators try to locate on the surface of the image what they have learned elsewhere about the glory and suffering of labor in those days, at the risk sometimes of advancing questionable interpretations; on the other, they stick to the more familiar ground of the appreciation of the texture or composition of the works. Looking at the bare feet of Deineka’s women workers, the commentator hesitates between sensual evocations of bare feet pressing directly against the ground and the idea that, maybe, these women didn’t have the money to buy shoes. Another surprises us when she sees, in the angular silhouette

of a worker bent over his grindstone, a glorification of physical force in the wake of the bloodshed of the Great War. So too does another, who sees an image of community in the arms that a reader of strike news throws over his comrades' shoulders, when it seems to us that his hands are needed to hold up the newspaper. And another, beholding these workers calmly straddling a pipeline, their faces devoid of any visible emotion, perceives a gloomy symbol of the Great Depression, a crushing of man under the machine, before concluding, inversely, with remarks about the greatness of men who pursue a goal. Another confesses her inability to imagine what was on the mind of the young girl filling up bottles of hair tonic. And another, who sees in the striking colors of *Steel* the glorification of industrial America and an evocation of Genesis, pauses over the enigma of the silhouette—man or shadow—pictured against the brick wall on one side of the image, a silhouette that seems, precisely, to be as withdrawn from reality as from the symbol.

Esther Shalev-Gerz's *dispositif* systematically accentuates this gap. And here, the law of two that governs all of her *dispositifs* takes on an extreme figure. Whenever the commentator ventures either to give a comprehensive meaning to what he or she sees, or to translate the overall impression of the image, the camera's mechanical eye appears to take a mischievous pleasure in thwarting the speech by describing a curve that captures every peripheral detail while concealing a view of the composition as a whole, or by slowly scanning the length of a body while the commentator is describing a facial expression. We would be tempted to protest against the artifice if we did not think that the *dispositif* was there precisely to denounce the usual artifice of PowerPoint presentations, in which speech can stroll leisurely over the details of the image that the machine obediently puts at its disposal. Here, however, the harmony between verbal description and image is brutally called into question. Description can take two different paths, depending on whether it materially crosses the space or attempts to convey its feeling. When the mechanical eye starts moving to the rhythm of speech, the movement it describes can only underscore the heterogeneity between the course of speech and the trajectory of spaces.

The gap between the speech that describes and the visible scanned by the mechanical eye ultimately mirrors the gap that separates the speakers from the moment when the images they are commenting on seemed able to "speak" for themselves. The demonstration would be of little value if all it wanted to do was to confirm that saying is not seeing, or to lead us to acknowledge the incommunicable. But its tension stems, on the contrary, from the fact that it is inscribed at the center of a *dispositif* geared entirely towards the communication of experience. Time and again, Esther Shalev-Gerz shows us that things never speak for themselves. They speak to us, that is to say, they

tell us about the community that is formed between us through them—provided we try to speak to them, albeit at the risk of approximation, to listen to their speech, to confront it with what our eyes see and with what our own words can say. A labyrinthine process, in a sense. Which is why it is just as much at home in the labyrinths of the floor the camera walks us through, the floor where the selected work appears as we browse through the rows of shelves on which are piled various collections of objects waiting to be exhibited someday, to be placed in a new community of things and images, viewers and speakers. The museum that shows is likewise the archive that hides. But the archive, where texts and objects are ranged separately, is also the place that keeps the signs and traces of the common history that holds together the “works” the museum shows. We are together, not because of any ecstasy in the relation to the other or to things in their nudity, but in this tension between mute things and the labyrinth of experience that contains their possible speech.

Translated by Emiliano Battista