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The Factory Is Outside

In my work I use what is usually omitted: voices, images, and stories that were neither listened to before, nor included in our shared representation. So I also summon and include the difficulties people have in articulating a subject and how powerful it is when speech becomes a moment of sharing, when something is said aloud to another. That is an act of democracy.

– Esther Shalev-Gerz¹

For more than three decades, Esther Shalev-Gerz has pursued a creative practice that explores questions of memory, trauma, and ethics in the contemporary world. In it, she focuses on objects as repositories of emotions and events – living things that revive and personalize history, making the past come alive to people in specific and subjective ways. Working in multiple media, from photographs and video installations to large-scale public commissions that merge architecture with landscape design, she makes art that is often participatory, engaging distinct individuals and communities in processes of self-definition and dialogue by incorporating their spoken responses as part of her art-making process. Profoundly concerned with acts of communication – between self and other, past and present, individual and collective – her work explores the embeddedness of historical events in language, sound, vision, landscape, and material objects. And by absorbing her audiences in deeds of remembrance, Shalev-

Gerz points us toward the collaborative process of building a future, one in which collective needs are balanced with individual requirements, where speech is combined with silence, and in which the visible is connected to that which has disappeared.

At the Serlachius Museums in Mänttä, Shalev-Gerz presents a series of installations that deal with the question of labor. One incorporates the history of Mänttä and its famous paper mill, which was established in 1868 by Gustaf Adolf Serlachius and currently operates under the name of Metsä Tissue. The other installations, which reprise earlier site-specific participatory works that Shalev-Gerz created elsewhere, represent historical events and conditions that relate to Mänttä's identity as a small industrial town, a place where daily life has been shaped for many generations by distinctive types of work practices created by the mill and its environment. In this way, labor becomes a thread that guides an open-ended exploration of Mänttä, where the mill takes raw materials from the natural world, transforms them into industrial products, and provides a context for art that can help the town's inhabitants and visitors reflect upon this situation. By suggesting cycles of transformation and development that link nature, industry, and culture, Shalev-Gerz advocates that we view human production in a very broad way, a perspective that acknowledges today's "post-industrial" condition in which the production of goods generates less wealth than the provision of services, and where manufacturing becomes dwarfed by burgeoning service sectors – everything from tourism, hospitality and waste management, to finance, health care, technology, education, telecommunications and culture.



Describing Labor (Työn kuvaus), 2012
lasiveistos / glass sculpture
80 x 22 x 6 cm

Through the creation of an interval or gap between factory production and its representations, the installations – which include videos, photographs, and objects – produce a space for reflection upon industrial work, inviting visitors to verbally respond to what they see and experience. Speech, the artist believes, is in certain ways the most important material in her work. Unlike reading and writing, it is not something that has been consciously taught; and, for this reason, the spoken word is the closest thing to one's own personal creation or unmediated understanding of the world.² By questioning her subjects and visitors, and asking them to articulate answers, Shalev-Gerz responds to the trust that others have placed in her art – a faith that is evidenced by people's willingness to exhibit it, experience it, or become parts of the works themselves. Thereby, the artist trusts them in turn to develop the implications of her installations, and to believe in the importance and significance of their responses.³

Human labor – as even its sharpest critic, Karl Marx, acknowledged – is a profoundly double-edged sword. On the one hand, by allowing us to realize our imaginations in the material world, transforming nature into goods, technologies and art, work is a powerful means of self-realization on both an individual and a collective level.⁴ On the other hand, when alienated through the division of labor that is essential to capitalist-industrial economies, our jobs can become tools of enslavement and self-destruction. More recently, philosophers of work have encouraged us to explore labor's ambiguities, questioning all established interpretations and reflecting on what employment could or should be.⁵ By excavating a

few of labor's specific histories while simultaneously provoking an examination of its diverse characteristics, the installations that Shalev-Gerz has created in the Serlachius Museums encourage their viewers to reflect upon work's potential for both good and evil. How is employment changing in today's neoliberal economies, a time in which nationalism are growing and globalization is increasingly coming under attack? And what role will computers, the media, and automation play in the development of our lives – and in the lives of the generations to come? What is good work today? And how does labor destroy us? As Shalev-Gerz puts it, "I try to create an encounter where people have the space to talk."⁶ By inviting visitors to discuss questions such as these, the artist encourages us to collectively imagine the forms of life that will define us in the future.

Through these installations, Shalev-Gerz transforms the Gustaf Museum, the former headquarters of the paper mill, into a space for reflection. Fulfilling its mandate to exhibit local history, the Serlachius Museums has, since its opening, preserved the original company's administrative headquarters – the director and his secretary's offices and the boardroom – in their original condition. Notably, these rooms have been filled since their heyday with art describing different types of occupations that have defined Mänttä since the mill's mid-nineteenth century beginnings. Paintings on the walls and wood carvings on the director's desk and sideboards portray activities such as cutting and transporting wood to the mill, processing it once it had arrived, and the attendant jobs of the townspeople such as fishing, farming, and clearing land. Inspiring us to

think about the history of these interconnected types of work, Shalev-Gerz has incorporated this carved furniture into her installation *Describing Labor*, elevating the pieces, which were created in 1934, allowing viewers to see these utilitarian objects – now devoid of functionality – as metaphors that provoke larger discussions. Noting the depictions of women from the scenes carved in the furniture, the artist has arranged large simulated wooden pearls on the floor, new sculptural elements derived from one of the *Describing Labor* photographs, an image depicting a woman at a sewing machine wearing a pearl necklace. Punctuating the installation, these unstrung pearls function as mementos, indicating that women’s work – despite its omnipresence throughout history – is often overlooked. In addition, Shalev-Gerz has added the work bench of Hannes Autere, the sculptor who carved the director’s furniture, reminding us that the artist used the same raw materials as the mill, and that art has been employed to celebrate industry for many generations. The factory is situated just across the street, disclosing the close physical proximity between workers and management that characterized most of the mill’s history. Through these various interventions into the physical space of the Gustaf Museum, the everyday life of Mänttä – as revealed through the work practices of its townspeople – has been given a new prominence in the museum; and, through the lens of *Describing Labor*, we are asked to reflect on the modes of life that were formed by these types of employment.

Two other works have been added this installation. *Les Inséparables*, 2000, a double clock whose hands run both clockwise and counterclockwise, has been installed outside the secretary’s office. This striking object suggests an experience of time moving simultaneously in two directions, or an instant in which the forward progression of history stands still. In addition, *Potential Trust*, 2012, is installed in the former boardroom. This work consists of a blue, yellow, and red neon sign affixed to a rectangular black ground of painted wood. Two hammers appear to strike a nail back and forth through a centrally located yellow “zip” that bisects the picture field. A transformation of the iconic (and now removed) signage of the Carpenter’s Union Building in Midtown Detroit, Michigan, *Potential Trust* marks an industrial action that remains forever unresolved: a moment of temporal suspension between the past and the

future.⁷ In the writings of the philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin, whom Shalev-Gerz sometimes cites in her work,⁸ stoppages of time like the ones evoked by these artworks create “a constellation saturated with tensions” allowing for “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” to emerge.⁹ At such turning points, Benjamin believed, the course of history could change. And through the introduction of these artworks into the space of an historical museum, Shalev-Gerz raises questions about what sacrifices to the labor process were made in Mänttä in the past, and whether other work practices and modes of existence are now possible today.

The other installations resonate with this open-ended presentation of Mänttä’s labor history, connecting the existences of the town’s inhabitants to different nations in Europe as well as the United States. The original installation of *Describing Labor*, 2012, reprised here, was a participatory project that Shalev-Gerz created to explore the Wolfsonian-Florida International University collection in Miami, Florida, a repository of approximately 180,000 objects dating from the 1850s to the 1950s.¹⁰ After selecting forty-one historic artworks depicting industrial workers, the most popular heroic symbol of proletarian class-consciousness and solidarity of the early- to mid-twentieth centuries, the artist invited twenty-four people related to art and the discourses that surround it – including an art handler, collectors, an exhibition designer, a registrar, the director, curators, artists, art students, writers, art historians, and the collection’s donor – to choose a favorite work, describe it on video, and then spontaneously reinstall it in the museum’s storage annex. Shalev-Gerz’s photographs, which juxtapose photographs, paintings, prints, furniture, and other objects, document the displacements; and the two-channel video presents a record of the participants’ understandings of the meanings of the works, which often reveal very personal investments. Contrasting the cultural workers of today with industrial workers of the previous century, most from the 1920s, 1930s, or 1940s, *Describing Labor* perhaps suggests that labor’s heroic era lies in the past, that shared factory employment is no longer a means to form a collective historical consciousness able to shape societies, and that the world of goods is slowly being supplanted by a realm of spectacle.

Glass hammers, made in Toledo, Ohio, in 2012, are also part of the installation. Contradictory objects

that would shatter if they were used according to the dictates of their form, they remind us of the philosopher Martin Heidegger’s famous insight that it is when the tool breaks down that we initially become aware of the more general conditions – the primordial networks of significance – that allow it to function in the first place.¹¹ These systems of meaning, projected by the human being who is using the tool, are historically-constructed “worlds” of instrumental relations, a common heritage inherited by the working person that becomes internalized in specific configurations tailored to his or her particular job and activities. In relation to Shalev-Gerz’s presentation of labor history as filtered through the Wolfsonian’s historical collection, the hammers suggest that we should attend to the transcendental conditions that make specific forms of employment possible. In addition, they intimate that while we should explore how labor improves our lives, we must come to grips with the ways in which work disrupts and fails our societies as well. As in her other installations, the artist does not present answers to these thorny questions; but rather, through questions that we never hear directly in the videos, she invites imaginative communities to form themselves and present insights gleaned from the specific lives and histories of their members.

The Last Click, 2010, was a commission by the Museum of Photography in Braunschweig, Germany, at the time of the closing of the city’s Rolleiflex factory in 2010. Commemorating the shift from analogue to digital camera technologies, the installation consists of photographs, a video projection, and wooden crates with old cameras. The photographs – shot with a Rolleiflex camera with a digital back – represent the factory and its offices, now empty of workers, in which Shalev-Gerz positioned an old Rolleiflex film camera on a tripod in a series of staged configurations. Anthropomorphized through its arrangement and “movement” through the different floors, it seems to investigate the desolate spaces, which are still filled with the objects and machines that were used to produce this famous brand of cameras. The accompanying video presents twenty-five interviews with people who responded to an advertisement that Shalev-Gerz placed in a German photography journal, inviting interested participants to bring cameras that they no longer used and discuss their histories and the last pictures that they ever took with them. Soliciting meditation on the role that cameras play in our

lives – for example, to remember friends, family, and events; to express ourselves on social media; or, for some, a mode of employment and source of income – they remind viewers that, as technologies change, they transform not only our existences, but also the ways we remember them.

As numerous scholars and writers have noted, the camera is a technology that augments and extends our fundamental human capabilities to discover, understand, and remember people, things, events, and processes; but as a machine that supplements our vision, it is not neutral. The camera, in other words, both reveals and conceals, possessing an ambiguous nature that the artist emphasizes by using a new digital camera to shoot an old film camera – a doubling that evokes the analogue-digital divide as well as the camera’s ability to both discover new truths and obfuscate old ones.¹² As Shalev-Gerz notes, “the camera shows more than our eyes can see or remembers more than we are able to. That is why I use photography with its limitations, to expose, to *surface up* what is potentially there and what is not there and to symbolize that there are, in the midst of our knowing, unknown places.”¹³ And by presenting this fundamental technology of vision as both an industrial commodity and a tool that serves a multiplicity of different subjective goals and intentions, a device that leads to new insights as well as novel falsifications, the installation solicits input on the changing roles that cameras play in our lives.

Like cameras and video recorders, audio recorders both augment and distort what we perceive.¹⁴ They help us construct our memories and histories, but they also aid in the production of false narratives that obscure a past that can never be made present again. *Sound Machine*, 2008, a collaborative project originally created for the city of Norrköping, Sweden, raises these issues, while also examining the ways in which work imprints itself upon the body and the mind.¹⁵ Consisting of two six-minute video projections, six text panels, and a thirty-six-minute sound installation situated outside the building, it explores the decline of the Swedish textile industry and the roles that family, sound, and memory play in the reproduction and transformation of forms of labor. The video presents five pairs of mothers and daughters seated side by side who were interviewed while they listened to processed sound recordings of industrial looms. The mothers were previously employed by

the local textile factory and were pregnant with their daughters while working there, while the now-adult daughters who sit next to them came of age long after the factory closed. A simulated factory floor – populated with animated, computer-generated textile machines that were based on historical blueprints – is incorporated into the footage behind the pairs of women and mirrored without figures in a second projection to their right. As the women respond to one another, the machines subtly mirror their interactions, a doubling that suggests that as our bodies and psyches are transformed through industrial technologies, humans and machines are becoming more alike. Like Marcel Duchamp, whose work remains a reference point for her, Shalev-Gerz is interested in exploring the condition of the industrial worker in her art as a way of understanding how human beings have changed since the industrial revolution and how they will continue to transform in the future.¹⁶

The text panels from *Sound Machine* present excerpts from the interviews and a description of the project as a whole, while the soundtrack outside the building replays the processed mechanical noise that the women heard while being videotaped. Significantly, the interviews are projected silently, and the only access to what was said is given through the text panels, which talk about the din of the factory and how it exists in the mothers' recollections. By separating the sound of the machines from their images, and the language of the interviews from the actual speakers, Shalev-Gerz's installation foregrounds the gaps and blind spots that occur in our memories, histories, and acts of communication, opening up a space for a discussion of stories that until recently have remained overlooked.¹⁷ A consistent strategy in her work, this technique of separation is intended, as the artist states, to "simultaneously create openness and acknowledge distance and possible loss."¹⁸ What did factory work do to women in the last century? Did the factory owners worry that their workers were pregnant? Can the mothers communicate the experience – and significance – of modes of life and work that have now disappeared? Can the daughters remember a sound that they only heard in the womb? Do the daughters experience effects from the work in which their mothers engaged before they were born? And how do we preserve history and memory in the face of absences and silences? By raising these questions, the installation complexly suggests that our

work affects the "private" lives that we lead outside our places of employment.

Dead Wood, 2016, presents two thirteen-minute videos on monitors that face one another. The two screens consistently juxtapose people with nature, creating a situation in which the human and the non-human are always in dialogue. A series of shots unfold depicting scenes from a forest in Pont-en-Royans in southeastern France. We see trees, paths, streams, and the mountains that border the woodlands. Briefly, a stag wanders through the terrain; and at another moment the ruins of a stone dwelling appear. Confronting these scenes from the forest are interviews with four different men – a hunter, a forester, an historian, and a local inhabitant – who explain what the woods mean to them. They are filmed within the confines of the trees, and occasionally while moving within them, following paths that lead them out of the frame and away from our perception. Reminding the viewer of how the same forest signifies different things to different people, the installation shows us that what we see and experience depends on the knowledge and expectations that we bring to it. Emphasizing this disparity, the videos mix shots made with two different cameras – one old and one new – with contrasting color temperatures and different depths of field, a strategy that reminds viewers of the idea of different perspectives. (As was the case with *The Last Click*, Shalev-Gerz juxtaposes technologies from different eras, once again suggesting that these tools of representation are never neutral or transparent.) Despite the variety of viewpoints, however, the interviewees seem to hold certain beliefs that are complimentary. The forest – they suggest – transcends human beings, both spatially and temporally, encouraging us to forget ourselves, and to transgress established social and political orders. A site of alterity and difference, it exists as a place where the trees speak and communicate with one another over long periods of time, a context in which contradictions and aporias rule. As one interview subject reveals, it is the dead core of wood at the trees' centers that allows them to remain standing long after their individual lives have been extinguished. The woods, the video implies, is a place of perpetual combat, a location of struggle between dark and light, and of strife between the human and the non-human.

By returning our attention to the forest, moreover, *Dead Wood* brings us full circle back to Mänttä,

and the woods that provide the context for the mill and the town. For Heidegger – who seems to have anticipated some of the responses of the interviewees, and to have assembled this contradictory vision of the woodlands into a broader theoretical framework – even the thickest forests possess "clearings," where the trees thin out, and light pierces the darkness.¹⁹ Here, "earth" and "world" struggle with one another, and beings appear in terms of larger and interconnected networks of significance. In these open spaces, which both reveal and conceal, things emerge in their fullness – not as objects, but as evolving beings with a past, a present, and a future. As is the case with the other installations that Shalev-Gerz has assembled for this exhibition, *Dead Wood* is intended to reveal the richness of its subject as it exists for a community of individuals united by their common humanity – a space of labor that is also much, much more. And by thinking through the ways in which nature, industry, and culture develop and change into one another in the heart of the forest, viewers in Mänttä are invited to reconsider the factory and to reimagine the different types of spaces – both human and non-human – that lie outside of it.

- 1 Jacqueline Rose and Esther Shalev-Gerz, "In Dialogue," in Jason E. Bowman, ed., *Esther Shalev-Gerz: The Contemporary Art of Trusting Uncertainties and Unfolding Dialogues*, Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing, 2013, 204.
- 2 Telephone conversation between the author and Esther Shalev-Gerz, November 28, 2016.
- 3 On the role of trust in her work, see Esther Shalev-Gerz, "Foreword: The Trust Gap," in Bowman, ed., *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, 7–13.
- 4 As Marx understood it, our labor fundamentally defines both the worlds in which we live and who and what we are. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, and in particular, 31–32.
- 5 See, for example, Mari Lindman, *Work and Non-Work: On Work and Meaning*, Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2015, 389, whose reflections on labor Shalev-Gerz read while working on the exhibition.
- 6 Rose and Shalev-Gerz, "In Dialogue," 196.

- 7 John Gallagher, "Hammer-and-Nail Sign Coming Down But Will Be Saved," *Detroit Free Press*, January 22, 2015.
- 8 See, for example, Shalev-Gerz's multimedia installation, *Inseparable Angels: An Imaginary House for Walter Benjamin*, 2000, which includes the double-faced clock as one of its components. For a discussion of that installation, see Matthew Biro, "Esther Shalev-Gerz," *Artforum*, October 2016, 274–275.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940/1950), translated by Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938–1940, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 396.
- 10 On *Describing Labor*, 2012, see Esther Shalev-Gerz, *Describing Labor*, edited by Matthew Abess and Marianne Lamonaca, Miami Beach, FL: The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, 2012.
- 11 See *Martin Heidegger, Being and Time* (1927), translated by Joan Stambaugh, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996, 62–71.
- 12 On photography as a technology that can reveal the truth, see Roland Barthes, who connects its veracity to its indexical – or causal – connection to that which it represents, and argues that photography's essential characteristic is its ability to reveal this connection. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. For important critiques of photography as a medium of truth, see Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977; Fred Ritchin, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (1990), 2nd Revised Edition, New York: Aperture Foundation, 1999; and Ritchin, *After Photography*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2009.
- 13 Rose and Shalev-Gerz, "In Dialogue," 200.
- 14 On the use and significance of sound in Shalev-Gerz's work, see Nora M. Alter, "Sampling the Past: An Aural History," in *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, Lausanne: Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 2012, 137–140.
- 15 For an excellent analysis of *Sound Machine* – as well as *Describing Labor*; discussed earlier – from a feminist perspective, see Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 193–220.
- 16 See Jean-François Lyotard, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, translated by Ian McLeod, Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990, and in particular, 13–19.
- 17 On the general importance of gaps and silences in the recorded testimonies of Shalev-Gerz's subjects, see Georges Didi-Huberman, "The 'Blanc Soucis' of Our History," in *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, Lausanne: Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 2012, 57–62.
- 18 Rose and Shalev-Gerz, "In Dialogue," 200.
- 19 Heidegger's term for clearing is "Lichtung." See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935–1936), in Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1–56, and in particular 30–31.