

Esther Shalev-Gerz

**The Contemporary Art
of Trusting Uncertainties
and Unfolding Dialogues**

Editor: Jason E. Bowman

Graphic design: Sandra Praun

Translations: Emiliano Battista, "The Age of Labor" | Judith Hayward, "The 'Blancs Soucis' of our History" | David Ingram, "The Work of the Image" | Bettina Schultz, "Sharing Stories"

Copy-editing: Bettina Schultz

Artist's assistant: Julia Bastard

Printing: TMG Sthlm, Sweden 2013

Acknowledgements

The following individuals and organizations have generously contributed to this publication, the development of the *Trust and the Unfolding Dialogue* research project and to the production of Shalev-Gerz's artwork *Describing Labor*, which was commissioned and produced by the Wolfsonian—Florida International University:

Matthew Abess, Marianne Lamonaca, Cathy Leff, and the participants in *Describing Labor* at the Wolfsonian—FIU, Miami Beach; Valand Academy at the University of Gothenburg; the Swedish Research Council; Stefanie Baumann, Jason E. Bowman, Georges Didi-Huberman, Anna Eriksson, Christopher Fleischner, Amy Gilman, and Jeff Mack at the Toledo Art Museum, Lisa Le Feuvre, Andrea Phillips, Bo Rothstein of the Quality of Government Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Jacques Rancière, Jacqueline Rose, Nicole Schweizer at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts, Gary Wasserman, Annika Wik, Yannig Willmann, James E. Young, and Johan Öberg.

© 2013 Esther Shalev-Gerz, Art and Theory Publishing, and the authors

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-91-980874-7-5

Published by
Art and Theory
Erstagatan 26
SE-116 36 Stockholm
www.artandtheory.org



Art and Theory
Publishing



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
VALAND ACADEMY

Art-Work

Andrea Phillips

The artist, the institution

How might the temporal and spatial residency of an artist in a museum or gallery be understood in ways that are differently productive, or additionally productive to that which such activities normally presuppose, i.e. the making of an exhibition or some other form of aesthetic summation? I ask this question both generally, and with specific reference to Esther Shalev-Gerz's 2012 installation at the Wolfsonian Institute, *Describing Labor*, and I am led to the question by the work itself. It is true that there are many different types of residency offered to artists around the world, and many of them demand nothing of the artist, understanding instead that the space and time to think, to research, to experiment, to follow circuitous routes of material and structural experimentation, is the work of the artist—indeed it is this that divides the artist from us, from those whose labor is bordered by more mundane or qualified concepts of production. But here I want to shift the term “residency” from this common understanding to one that is more socially and politically inscribed. What does it mean to be and to work in a place over a period of time, what happens to the artist and what happens to the institution through this working residence? Two things make *Describing Labor* interesting to me within this context, each of which seem simple but will be examined here in a way that hopes to unpick unusual intensities and dynamics: first, the Wolfsonian Institute itself, which seems a very singular and precise location for a residency; second, the specific method of the artist, through which the meeting of artistic labor with other forms of labor within the institution is extremely precise.

The concept of labor here is to be understood through a number of contemporary and historical paradigms. Chief among them is the labor of the artist before, during, and after her residency, contrasted with the historical forms of labor exemplified in the holdings of the Wolfsonian Institute itself, wherein images and objects of work and material production from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century are manifest. To this I would add a third category, a category that forms a central element of *Describing Labor* itself, and this is the labor of the people working in the Wolfsonian—the curators, archivists, invigilators, educators, and librarians whose careful and intimate connection to and protection of objects forms an important, even pivotal, element of the scene I want to describe.

The Wolfsonian Institute, Miami Beach, founded in 1986 to house the collection of Mitchell Wolfson Jr., contains an extensive and as yet incompletely catalogued collection of images, books, papers, and objects intended “to illustrate the persuasive power of art and design, to explore what it means to be modern and to tell the story of social, historical, and technological changes that have transformed our world.”¹

The collection is extraordinary, containing a broad sweep of design and propaganda artifacts mainly from 1885 to 1945 Europe and America, but with many areas of special focus such as early twentieth century German design reform, the British Arts and Crafts movement, Japanese Second World War military propaganda, Soviet children’s books and objects, artworks and documents related to Roosevelt’s New Deal and the Works Progress Administration program in the US. As such it appears as a sophisticated and perhaps paradoxical intervention into global museum culture, one founded on an ideological commitment to social history, to the pedagogical investigation of propaganda and, or as, design; to the idea of manmade objects not simply as conveyers of stories but as mediums of and participants in historiography.

This commitment to the idea that history is (and perhaps should be) written by the makers of objects, to the image-makers of modern life, is embodied by a deeply inscribed attention to these objects on the part of the workers, visiting researchers, trustees, and associates at the Institute, whose role and commitment is to locate within the object (be it a poster, a tourist brochure, a book cover, a sculpture, or a photograph) its social, aesthetic, and even economic narratives and communicate these both within the ontological history of objects generally and specifically to the Institute’s physical and increasingly virtual publics. But who are these publics and how might they understand the objects in ways that are more than simply as elocutionary devices within a narrative of previous, political modernisms? I will return to

this question of publics, and the work of public relations or interfaces between and for the objects in the Wolfsonian collection below, but suffice to say here that the publics of these objects are both multiple and layered; that the objects' coming into the collection is sometimes an ascension and sometimes a deposition, that their publics are primarily their collector and carers and much of their previous lives, as is demonstrated by *Describing Labor*, has been lost or fictionalized. In locating the workers and associates of the Institute themselves at the center of a working methodology, and in asking those workers to speak about the objects—to describe them in personal terms—Shalev-Gerz has of course made *Describing Labor*, not only an important part of any such fictionalization or rewriting, but also of making the things public in themselves. That the objects are made public in ways that are relatively closed, that are personal, that are only partially related to any form of art historical truth, might be understood as a different form of making public, one in which the public is not subservient to the object but instead inquiring of it, and one in which the workers might be understood as translation devices, in which objects are communicated through a newly enfranchised process of description. It might even be possible to go so far as to say that here the standard semiotic capital of the museum, its ordering and delivery, is undone through a series of ponderous, variously informed, associative assertions of (alternative) value.

In 2011 Shalev-Gerz was invited to visit and explore the Wolfsonian Institute with a view to a possible commission. A research-intensive institution affiliated with Florida International University, the Wolfsonian had only recently begun to commission artists to work with its collection and, in the words of Director Cathy Leff, "sustained access to its collection" had never been offered before.² Following a number of visits in which the artist talked to many members of staff, board members, and others associated with the Institute, a methodology emerged in which objects, images and staff were called on to play a role within the final installation. Shalev-Gerz chose forty-one works from the collection, ranging from photographs documenting workers in America and the USSR in the interwar years, to paintings and small sculptures of workers (building the Eiffel Tower, ending a mining shift, working on the railroad, bottling hair tonic); some symbolic, others documentary, some professional, some amateur. Working closely with a curator, Shalev-Gerz then researched the history of these images. Some were taken by artists now celebrated for their work (for example Lewis Hine, the American photographer, sociologist, and social reformer) and others were found to have virtually no trace (a lithograph by Garvin Wilson of two men sanding a huge propeller of which there is no information on the artist).³ A carefully staged, at times highly theatrical, process then ensued. Twenty-

four participants were recruited by staff at the Wolfsonian each of who had a connection or affiliation with the Institute (whether through work, locality, patronage, use) and asked them to come to the Institute's annex—in which is stored a huge range of the collection not on show—to choose one of the works. The participants were then filmed describing the image or object that they had chosen, saying why they had been attracted to it. The participants were asked to place the image/object somewhere in the archive, where the artist proceeded to photograph it. The journey that the object made from selection to placement was also filmed. The main body of the final installation consists of the objects chosen (not all of them were chosen and some were chosen twice), the photographs of the objects *in situ* in the annex, and the films of the participants describing their object and their motivation for choosing it, alongside the journey the object made.

We invited the artist to *intervene* in our institutional outlook. She responded by inviting us to *re-articulate* what we see and know. Some may argue that this is merely a matter of words. But as *Describing Labor* reminds us: sometimes semantics are everything.⁴

In the annex

A cool repository of historical expertise, seemingly dropped from the sky into the environment of Miami Beach, the Wolfsonian sits at odds with its environment. Outside the atmosphere is laid back, people walk slowly through the heat to Ocean Drive two blocks away. On the mainland, in downtown Miami, a new MOCA is being built, designed by Herzog & De Meuron: along with its December art fair (an offshoot of Art Basel), Miami struggles like many metropolises to keep up in the competition of cultural capital. Inside the Institute Wolfson's unruly collection is set into delicate and carefully contemplated order by dedicated and committed experts.

The warehouse annex of the Wolfsonian is a functional—even nondescript—building a few blocks away from the beach, set back from the road. Ranging over 28,000 square feet, it contains many items from the collection that are currently not, never have been, or may never be on display in the Institute. I'm driving to this external annex with Matthew Abess, the assistant curator who worked closely and intensely on Shalev-Gerz's exhibition, to meet two of the Institute's workers who know the annex contents intimately and who feature as two of the human protagonists in films made by the artist for her exhibition. The curator whose car I'm in is also a protagonist in one of the

films, so I am about to be surrounded by people whose function is complex: guardians, specialists, organizers, and now actors assembled in particular and irregular form, translated by the artist from behind the scenes into public light, describing objects.

If the Wolfsonian Institute houses the public-facing object and image collection then its annex contains a set of objects that are freer, less confined than their displayed relations but bound to that, to which they have been appended. In the sense of a collection of accessioned objects, this binding is to the order of the museum, within which they do not (yet) sit. Annexation might be of territories, conditions, attributes, and consequences. Working between site and non-site, therefore, the staff at the Institute negotiates between the objects in the ever-growing collection, moving them between these statuses as displayed and at play. These workers are experts at pulling things from the archive into a public zone, experts at making things public, negotiating these shifts in value and attention.

Shalev-Gerz has asked of twenty-four of the Wolfsonian Institute's workers, supporters, and associates that they put themselves, as well as the objects to which they attend, in various direct and indirect ways, on display.⁵ She has also asked them not to rely, or perhaps to only partially rely, on their expertise. In asking these people to describe an object or image picked from her larger selection of works, the artist circumscribes the conditions of choice that these participants may make, but also demands that they then consider how to describe a selected work. Thus the theater is made. The annex is a scenography in which the experts to some extent need to forget their expertise and describe the object they choose using another part of themselves, like actors learning to unmake themselves in order to take on another role. The deliberative structure and careful and controlled movement of the actors from one place to the next, manipulated by the artist whose exactitude requires hours and hours—sometimes days—of re-running, re-photographing, is also part of the play. The players are shy, surprised by their roles, surprised by what they say, by what it reveals about them to their colleagues and their friends; concerned about how they appear to another public in the Institute (as they sit at their desks, or go about their business in the annex, these others of them are talking elsewhere).

When I meet Kimberly Bergen (Senior Registrar) and Richard Miltner (Exhibition Designer) I ask them to describe to me exactly what happened on the days that Shalev-Gerz came to the annex to film. The process seems intricate and elaborate, highly resolved (this is the way the artist works, with intense precision, with a singular eye for detail and craft). The two floors of

the annex building that I visit are open plan, each filled with a basic floor to ceiling shelving system, each room-length shelf divided by a passageway and filled with all sorts of objects; furniture, ornaments, architectural salvage. There does not appear to be an ordering system; for example, there is no section for chairs separated from lamp stands or remnants of building façades; rather the objects form mystic and ambivalent accounts of the collector's interests. There seems to be a range of things here, an account of (or perhaps an insistence on) an inclusive sense of value, an assertion of the value of many things that might normally fall outside of a museum's catalogue and acquisition policy; mundane objects, things from everyday life that might otherwise go unnoticed.

On the first floor I am shown, Kim, Richard, and Matt describe to me the process of filming. Here is the long table, covered in black cloth, upon which Shalev-Gerz arranged the forty-one objects chosen from the collection. This is the walk around the table that Richard made in order to choose his object. Here is the area where Kim had her make-up done in preparation for filming. This is where I was asked to stand to describe the object I had chosen. This is what the artist said, "Don't look at the camera, look at me," before reciting an excerpt from *Description without Place* by Wallace Stevens. This is where the camera was, where the lights were. This is where I described labor—the labor of the maker of the object I chose; the conditions and context of which I guessed at, or half-knew. Here is the path that the camera took as the object was taken to the place in the assemblage of objects where I had chosen it was to be photographed. This is how we waited, and waited, while the artist took the photograph, re-took the photograph, as she worried about the reflection from the black lacquer surface, as she noticed and adjusted the chair next to the table that obscured something in her view. This is how we observed the artist working in our place of work.

Art work

If I take up Jacques Rancière's thesis about contemporary art (or what he calls "art in the aesthetic regime"), I might affirm with him that there are types of artistic practice that demonstrate, not simply through their content but through their formal relation, a different possibility of understanding and asserting oneself in the sensible world, then I might say that what *Describing Labor* does is to open up the idea and reality of work to speculation. This it does not simply to an audience (who arguably might have that done via any engagement with the Wolfsonian archive), but between the workers and the artist themselves, both as figures of the contemporary and figures of history.

And, rather than through the conceptual framework offered to us by many contemporary philosophers of workerism, in which the concept of labor is understood in its deconstructed and immaterial sense as a consensualized and co-opted particle of capitalization, it is done with an attention to the skill and detail of labor, to what might be called "the art of work." The residency, this use of space and time in which the artist's labor meets the daily labor of the museum and archive worker, is key to this idea, and specifically the ways in which the artist staged and drew on that relation in the composition of her work. Something is shared between the artist and the staff of the Wolfsonian; the precision of daily labor, the skill of attention, and the temporality of craft, which suggests that the art of work, whether carried out by a miner in the 1900s or an artist in the 2010s, has a remarkable and political specificity.

In the final chapter of *Aisthesis*, Jacques Rancière describes the book written by James Agee and illustrated with photographs by Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, first published in 1941. This book, made famous for its unusual combination of Evans's stark images of southern US poverty and Agee's descriptive, poetic, and collagist prose, was commissioned and researched in 1936, initially for a *Fortune* magazine article, but clearly broke the bounds and length of journalistic reportage of the time. Focusing on three sharecropping families in Alabama, their lives, their possessions, their education, and their beliefs and aspirations, the book was researched at the end of, and published after Roosevelt's New Deal and, in Rancière's reading, symptomatizes both a deliberative attempt on the part of the authors to reconcile the "double proof" of horrific detail and the transcendental universalism expected, even required, in poverty reportage, and is a final experiment in the relation between the words and images of historical modernism. The book's form, which according to Rancière's account was outrun by more popular misery literature of the time, juxtaposes Agee's often startling and highly opinionated prose with not only Evans' photographs of undernourished sharecroppers, their children, and their homes and meager, dirty, possessions, but also with surrealistic and illusionistic passages by the writer, as well as Agee's own criticism of the reportage tradition in which he was embedded.

Rancière's interest is in the political form of the publication in terms of its use of words and images together, but also in its place, at the end of the New Deal, when heads are already turning from the Dust Bowl to the Second World War, where conscription is providing new work for poverty-stricken southerners, and when Clement Greenberg is writing "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (first published in *Partisan Review* in 1939). This is the pivot between the collage described by Agee of poor children's possessions—broken dolls

and china ornaments, gloves with holes and clothes ridiculed at school because they are made of sackcloth—and the kitsch that Greenberg so despised; the loss of authenticity, the rise of mass culture, and the risk of leakage between depoliticized populism and high art. Rancière describes this transition as follows:

All the time James Agee spent writing and rewriting this article, which had turned into a book, was aimed at reversing the play of relations between the art of the poor, elite culture and the trash that the latter exported to the territory of the former. Yet this spiral of the impossible book, comparing the art of the poor with its own dispossession, was itself isolated and annulled in the circle where [Clement Greenberg] the brilliant *Partisan Review* critic had situated the place and the role of the political and cultural avant-garde. For him, it was necessary to stop indulging the art of living of the poor. For that is where the root of the evil threatening art lies: in the access of the poor to cultural abilities and aspirations which had never concerned them in the past.⁶

This motif of access and entitlement runs through Rancière's philosophy, whether it is in the making of time and space to read and discuss amongst proletariat working communities in nineteenth century France, or the fight for—and consensual ruling over—aesthetic determination by young Muslims in contemporary French banlieues.⁷ The philosopher's understanding of the aesthetic regime of artistic production being neither a confinement of styles or methodologies, nor a temporal segmentation, but instead a formal recognition that some artistic products are aimed at disfiguring a regular relation between elements (words, images, sounds, speech) in order to demonstrate another way of putting things together, literally and figuratively, usefully reordering not simply approaches to art history but also to the work of the arts. The specific example of Agee's "impossible book" relates directly to the work of the Wolfsonian, and Shalev-Gerz's work within it. If, according to Rancière, Agee is attempting to demonstrate "the only serious attitude, the attitude of the gaze and speech that are not grounded on any authority and do not ground any" in order to "refuse any specialization for itself" and "also refuse every right to select what suits its point of view in the surroundings of the destitute sharecroppers," then *Describing Labor* attempts to do something similar with the objects in the Wolfsonian.⁸ With her camera Shalev-Gerz values everything equally but with specific attention. She makes out of this collection of objects a visual and oral manifestation of value redistribution.

But like the author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the artist and institution of *Describing Labor* must also deal with her and its formal authority. Whereas in 1936 this issue of authority—of authorial selection and presentation—was an issue only on the horizon of art in general (notwithstanding the attempts of William Morris or the Bauhaus, even Dada to renounce artistic authority in favor of collective craftsmanship), now it is a common gesture on the part of many artists and curators. It is here that the precision of Shalev-Gerz's photographic and filmic methodology comes to play a large role in the shaping of the material. For, if the commonality of the anti-authoritarian in contemporary art can be described broadly as a loose aspiration for participation within an assumed common culture, then in *Describing Labor* the artist makes extremely strict demands upon her participants. She assumes nothing but expects trust. She values skills learnt historically and institutionally. What all participants have in common is work.

The pivot of the exhibition, that which connects the objects displayed with museological respect to the large format photographs of them in situ in the annex, are the films of the participants describing their objects. Here, in various states of ease, people describe the objects to camera using their own words. Many start with personal connections, "I chose the one of the worker with the mallet because my great-grandfather worked in a stone quarry in Bloomington, Indiana—or near Bloomington"; "It took me back in time to when I was a little kid and my uncle used to work in a power plant like that"; "That this was made from iron, or that it is made from iron, which is what my career has been all about—but I didn't come to that easily." Others adopt a more analytical or objective starting point, "Well, these tractors have a very significant, symbolic meaning in the Soviet Union at this time, when they were seen as one of the key technologies of modernization in a country that was extremely eager to catch up and surpass western European countries in terms of production, both agriculturally and industrially"; "I chose it because it's a young woman"; "He is drilling fiercely into the ground. He is strong, he is in profile." Then there is a very direct approach with some, "I was just drawn to it"; "It's very dark"; "I chose it because it's powerful." These descriptions continue, they are not long, the speakers hesitate and think, some are quite emotional, some guess and enjoy guessing, others have lived alongside the image or object they chose for a while and know about it. Sometimes, people see things they had not previously been aware of, ("At his feet are very muted colors—very brown-faced, brown-uniformed soldiers in rows. There are three rows of these soldiers. They look exactly alike, all in a row, all wearing the sort of doughboy hats you associate with the First World War. I never noticed the first time I looked at it. And I was like, "How could I have missed it?")⁹ It is these films that viewers linger over, enjoy.

They make me go back to the objects again—so as not to miss the detail, or to look again after a personal story, seeing things in the images that I had not seen, then blindly trying to find the rationale for the choice of placement the same participant, who described so movingly the outline of sweat on the back on a female welder, made for the image on the side of what looks like an old ornate iron stove. Of her initial choice from the collection, all of which contained figures, Shalev-Gerz says:

In images created more explicitly as propaganda, there is already something dictating what one can and should think. As I knew people would have to describe the artworks without any prior knowledge of them—what they are, who made them, when and why they were made—I wanted to select items that would allow these people to see and speak intuitively. The images are very beautiful and not particularly dogmatic. This inefficiency of the images in communicating a clear, ideological content means that something else must take over, and that this something else will not succumb to dictation, but rather come from the passion of an encounter with a human figure. It is the human figure that takes you in.¹⁰

All the human figures involved in this complex of bodies work around each other, making the divisions of each into his or her position—subject, object, artist, author, viewer, maker—difficult to discern. Not in the sense of dissolution (there is not here the aim to dissolve boundaries between producer and participant in the name of some false utopia of artistically produced community), but in the sense of the intelligence of voices winding themselves in and out of each other. From the past and the present. Here there is another connection with Rancière's description of James Agee attempting to find ways to show the poor "in their own dispossession." Both projects engage with modernity's narrative of progress, and its palpable failure both in the form of the poverty of sharecroppers and in the aspirational photography of Soviet machinery. As Shalev-Gerz reminds us, once there was a project to document labor in the West. Now, rather than immaterialized, that work has been exported to places where it is not visible and certainly not heroic.

Public objects

As a visitor to the exhibition at the Wolfsonian Institute, understanding the process and eventual choices of the artist responsible for *Describing Labor* (and there are many other elements of the exhibition that have not been touched on here) is hard; it requires thought, time, and space of members

of the public, of viewers. It makes a demand. The objects—paintings, sculptures, photographs, sit between us and the artist's thoughts, but they are also modulated through the thoughts of the participants, who are also like us: experts in our own fields of knowledge, venturing momentarily, experimentally, into another. The objects modulate all our experiences. It is, in this situation, difficult to retain a clear relation between the authority of the objects, the artist, and us. The subjects here—the viewer, the artist, the participants on film, as well as those original makers of the objects on display—are not so easy to subjugate to the authority of either a narrative of expertise or historical truth. As the curators and the librarians of the Wolfsonian know, histories of design fall into this ambiguity rather often. We might recalibrate the relation of the subject-viewer to objects exhibited. To return to the metaphor of theater, as publics we are not being seduced into a collapsing field of interactivity but rather a formal arrangement, a masque, say, where we know we need to play our part with intelligence and wit. Here the role of being part of a public is a significant political choice. But, as actors, we are clear that Shalev-Gerz is in charge. This is contentious but important, for it raises the stakes in a game of artistic charades in which recently there has been a great deal of debate concerning the equality between objects and subjects. *Describing Labor* demonstrates the difference between making space for the equality of intelligence (which might otherwise be described simply as trusting the intelligence of your viewer) and making space for equal participation. In this, more broadly, two forms of democracy can be considered to be at stake.

In *Making Things Public*, the catalogue of an exhibition by the same name he curated with Peter Weibel, Bruno Latour summarizes Actor Network Theory, the sociological method for which he has become well known, in terms of the exhibition of objects he is introducing. "Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute. Each object may also offer new ways of achieving closure without having to agree on much else. In other words, objects—taken as so many issues—bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label 'political.'"¹¹

Latour's thesis is based on a rejection of the concept of the "social" as a preordained site of imposed evental activity. This rejection of the figure-ground relation that still substantiates art is useful. But what happens if the field of things is a mobilizing "assembly" rather than a preordained set? Actors for Latour and ANT practitioners are things—objects, inanimate and animate; this for him is the stuff that needs to be taken into account when

reassembling the shifting “flow” of any form of “social.” Latour says “it is counter-intuitive to try and distinguish ‘what comes from viewers’ and ‘what comes from the object’ when the obvious response is to ‘go with the flow.’ Object and subject might exist, but everything interesting happens upstream and downstream. Just follow the flow. Yes, follow the actors themselves or rather what makes them act...”¹²

However, there is a presupposition to all this public acting of equality between objects and subjects, objects and humans. It is the presupposition of democracy as a stable and consensualized basis for a progressive and effective gathering. It is a presupposition of objects and their authors as democratic participants in an argumentative whole—an assemblage of the social, as Latour puts it, in which equality is the supposition. *Describing Labor* is the opposite of this. Whilst the treatment of people and objects is equal, there is no supposition of equality. This is a critical difference. In terms of Latour’s thesis regarding making things public, it does not suppose that things reveal themselves in the same way or that people and things are able to be equal, even want to be placed into a form of equality based on consensus. There is no consensus between the objects and actors of *Describing Labor*—there is tension, uncertainty, naivety, disagreement, and contradiction. In another text that returns to the fear of people getting their hands on too much of the wrong material, Rancière returns to the nineteenth century:

When, in the middle of the manifestations of heightening inequality, our intellectuals become indignant about the havoc wreaked by equality, they exploit a trick that is not new. Already in the nineteenth century ... the elites of France ... were alarmed at the “democratic torrent” that prevailed in society. Banned in public life, they saw democracy triumphing in cheap fabrics, public transport, boating, open-air painting, the new behavior of young women, and the new turns of phrase of writers.¹³

These intellectuals, following Plato’s initial hatred for democracy, rationalize democracy—allow it to occur in certain areas (the market for example, where anything can be bought), rather than give in to “an anarchy or an ‘indistinction’ more formidable than that of streets encumbered by insolent children or stubborn asses”:

Democracy is first this paradoxical condition of politics, the point where every legitimization is confronted with its ultimate lack of legitimacy, confronted with the egalitarian contingency that underpins the inegalitarian contingency itself.¹⁴

Rancière has this to say about the choice that artists and curators face today in the light of such a reiterating paradox:

[I]t seems as if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their in situ or other provocations, a substitutive political function. Knowing whether these "substitutions" can reshape political spaces or whether they must be content with parodying them is without doubt an important question of our present.¹⁵

Instead of demanding that the subject performs differently (by "participating" or becoming "engaged") Rancière suggests that we have misrecognized the actuality of the spectator. Instead of seeking emancipation through forms of freedom delivered by changing the object of view, he suggests we understand the "emancipated spectator" on his or her own terms, wherein the division between the knowledgeable object and the dumb viewer is overturned: "We have to recognize the knowledge at work in the ignoramus and the activity peculiar to the spectator. Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story."¹⁶ He defines emancipation as "the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body."¹⁷ Thus leaving the viewer to look, he says, "an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators"; those people, in other words, who are given the place to look on their own terms.¹⁸

What Shalev-Gerz brings together is in fact two regimes of aesthetic belief, or a praxis that has been divided. The one is the belief that only certain people can make art and only certain people are entitled to decide upon what takes place and is seen in public. The other is the knowledge that many people make things public in ways that are both sanctioned and unsanctioned, remarked and unremarked. If Shalev-Gerz herself represents the first belief in the figure of the commissioned contemporary artist, then the Wolfsonian, despite its institutional categorization system and its engagement with the milieus of the Miami Basel Art Fair each December, represents a belief in—and a record of—the other. Further, the Wolfsonian represents an insistence on the making public of the equality of images and objects made by workers, by amateurs, by Sunday and night-time experimenters with the image-making of their age. Rather than attempt to smooth over their contradictions, Shalev-Gerz brings together these two regimes in *Describing Labor*. The work not only celebrates the work of artists, curators, and archivists alongside welders, miners, steeplejacks, and machinists, but supposes an equality of image

production between the artist and the amateur. In supposing equality where there is none outside of the walls of the museum, in a city full of literal and psychical, institutional and social violence, Shalev-Gerz gives new meaning to the institution as a space where equality can be imagined and rehearsed. This is one important aspect of her artwork.

1. <http://www.wolfsonian.org/about/mission-statement>, accessed 06/15/13.
2. Cathy Leff, "Director's Preface" in, *Esther Shalev-Gerz: Describing Labor*, ed. Matthew Abess and Marianne Lamonaca (Miami, FL: Wolfsonian Institute, 2012), 7.
3. Details of a selection of the images initially chosen are published in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition (ibid.). Wilson, for example, has the following entry: "Untitled, date unknown/Garvin Wilson/Lithograph/United States/The Social Security Death Index contains three entries for the name Garvin Wilson./ There is no definitive information to indicate which of them, if any, may have been the artist." In the art deco elevator in the Wolfsonian Institute a sound work consisting of Micky Wolfson reading these texts greets the user.
4. Leff, "Director's Preface," 7.
5. Participants in Shalev-Gerz's films for *Describing Labor*, apart from those described above, included: Tori Arpad-Cotta, Bhakti Baxter, Kim Bergen, P. Scott Cunningham, Sean Donaldson, Steve Forero-Paz, Griselle Gaudnik-Gibon, Alastair Gordon, Niki Harsanyi, Eric Jacobson, Jacek Kolasinski, Marianne Lamonaca, Rosa Lowinger, Frank Luca, Richard Miltner, Jon Mogul, Lea Nickless, Jaime Odabachian, Michelle Oka Doner, Ruth Sackner, and Gary Wasserman.
6. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 261.
7. Jacques Rancière, *Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; Reprint edition, 1991) and Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006).
8. Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 250.
9. All quotes from participants' film scripts as reproduced in the catalogue, Matthew Abess and Marianne Lamonaca eds., *Esther Shalev-Gerz: Describing Labor*.
10. Esther Shalev-Gerz in conversation with Matthew Abess in *Esther Shalev-Gerz: Describing Labor*, 75.
11. Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik" in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT and ZKM, 2005), 15.
12. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 237.
13. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, (London: Verso, 2006), 93.
14. Ibid., 94.
15. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 60.
16. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 17.
17. Ibid., 19.
18. Ibid., 23.