

Hard Labor

This exhibit spotlights the stultifying existence of those at the bottom of the job market in Israel and abroad.

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"Equal and Less Equal," an exhibition curated by Raphie Etgar. Catalog published by the Museum on the Seam, 144 pages, \$15

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Jerusalem's [Museum on the Seam](#) is one of the few museums in Israel whose focus is social issues. On the cover of the "Equal and Less Equal" exhibition catalog is a worker ant against a bright red background (an allusion to the contemporary worker's precarious status). The catalog itself seeks to weave together ethical and aesthetic perspectives on work in the late industrial period.

Political works of art are primarily perceived as one-dimensional posters devoid of real artistic value. This exhibition displays works that have obviously been chosen with great care and which have been executed by an impressive number of well-known international artists. In the catalog, an attempt has been made to intermesh the elements of work, status and identity. The various works featured reflect the changes that have taken place in the job market, and thus examine the concept of work along three axes: gender, race and nationality.

"All Employees" by Yoshua Okon (Mexico) points to the economic reality of "late capitalism." Okon presents the apathetic portrait of a female employee in a fast-food outlet. The portrait gives visual expression to a new breed of workers, whose occupational activity has been dubbed by

Naomi Klein "McJobs." The concept merges two words - the first alluding to McDonald's fast-food chain, which employs millions of low-paid workers, and the second to the world of temporary employment, whose very essence is diametrically opposed to the stable working world that offers employees tenure and social benefits. McJobs have become a permanent situation for many workers in Israel and the rest of the world.

The disconcerting works of Sebastiao Salgado (Brazil) expose the lowest rung on the global employment ladder in all its degradation. Salgado photographed thousands of workers in the gold mines of Serra Pelada, trudging through quicksand at the top of a slippery cliff as they carry on their backs heaps of dirt. His work focuses not only on the oppression of human beings, but also on the brutal exploitation of the earth's resources.

In her video, "After the End," Dana Levy (Israel) documents humanity's looting of its surroundings as an aggressive technological invasion of virgin territory. The rape of the earth parallels the squeezing out of the last ounce of strength from the bodies of mass production-line workers.

Innards of industry

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Physical work of a different sort is carried out in giant manufacturing workshops that have been dubbed "sweatshops." Andreas Gursky (Germany) exposes the guts of a Siemens plant, thereby also revealing the innards of supposedly sophisticated industry. These huge halls reflect the modern version of the theories of "scientific management," which introduced discipline and monitoring into the manufacturing plant.

The classical work of Tehching Hsieh (U.S.) studies the repressive "organizational culture" that manages the modern workplace by means of focusing on time. The clock represents the cyclical, stupefying, time-

confiscating repetitiveness that seizes control of the individual's privacy.

The female counterpart of male slavery has nested itself in sex parlors. Marie Jose Burki (Switzerland) has photographed foreign women looking out from behind the display windows of the massage parlors that employ them. The power of her work lies in its muteness. Burki's video deprives women of their voice in both senses of the word: She creates a silent video that emphasizes the counterfeit, false radiance surrounding sex slaves.

In her disturbing work, "Shivat Zion," Shula Keshet (Israel) exposes Israel's red-light district, which is devoid even of counterfeit radiance. Most of the women working in Israel's sex industry are foreigners and this fact makes them even more vulnerable. Most of the foreign workers are stateless, defenseless and deprived of their basic human rights. Some of them are hunted down as criminals; others are kidnapped, sold or forced to work against their will.

The work executed by Adrian Paci (Albania), who positioned unemployed Albanian men on the dark steps surrounding a city square, is dedicated to those who have lost their source of livelihood and can no longer provide for themselves and their families. It reintroduces their distress into the public discourse from which it is almost totally absent.

The metaphorical light that Paci casts them in, by means of electrical generators activated in sequence, adds a morbid personal touch to the entire scene and illuminates what Viviane Forrester has termed "L'Horreur economique." In her book, which bears that title, Forrester speaks of the lie inherent in the economic discourse that scatters empty promises of a better employment future. Millions of people who lack an education, training or access to the centers of power have never had the option of truly integrating into the job market.

The various works of art in the exhibition shed light on the different ways

in which the economic discourse has shaped the national one. For example, the Israeli job market attacks the Palestinians' low social standing. Fouad Agbaria (Israel) presents the image of a young, sallow-complexioned Arab man, who is reclining on thin air and whose economic existence apparently lacks any solid foundation. In "Derech Hevron, Under the Bridge," Oskar Abosh (Israel) documents the daily "slave market" that exists in various places throughout Israel. Palestinian laborers patiently wait for contractors to hire them for a day's work that will provide them with no social benefits, no job security and a salary that is below the minimum wage.

Faceless workers

Boaz Arad and Miki Kratsman (Israel) also choose to look into the faces of Palestinian laborers who exist in Israel's reality as a faceless, transparent presence. The threat embedded in the Palestinian's image drives a mighty security and defense industry. Vered Nissim (Israel) chose to photograph herself wearing the shirt of a Modi'in Ezrahi security guard. She easily slips into this job thanks to the ethnic similarity between her Sephardi facial features and the employment status of Sephardic Jews in Israel. Nissim's work highlights not only the growing racial orientation of Israel's job market, but also its gender orientation: 70 percent of all Israelis who receive a minimum wage are women.

In her powerfully expressive photographs, Aliza Auerbach (Israel) documents a waitress and a woman who cleans public toilets, both of whom give the impression that they were taken from Barbara Ehrenreich's book, "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America." The two women symbolize Sisyphean jobs that require obedience to one's employer, and which are characteristic of occupations that lack all prestige or status. We all require the services of maintenance people, repairmen, cleaners and babysitters. Yet how many of us stop to consider who the person was who cleaned the toilet seat for us, swept the

sidewalk or erased the blackboard in the classroom?

The daily struggle for survival of those who are on the lowest rung of the employment ladder is pushed to the bottom of the agenda of public discourse in Israel. Moreover, the unemployed are perceived as being responsible for their situation and are summarily sent off to low-status jobs in the context of such programs as the Wisconsin (welfare-to-work) Plan. "Equal and Less Equal" directs a powerful spotlight on the backyard of the job market in Israel and the rest of the world. A visit to this exhibition is a truly unsettling experience.

Ketzia Alon and Dalia Markovich are art critics.