"Everyone has a job"

Devin Fore

It isn't clear what exactly the people in Thomas Eggerer's latest work are doing. When asked in an interview for clarification, the artist replied simply: "Everyone has a job."[1] The reference in Eggerer's response to the soft-focus notion of *job* is exceedingly apt. For unlike the high-contrast concept of *labor*, an analytic category indispensable to rigorous political economy, the very indistinctness and plasticity of the word *job*, which is etymologically related to the noun *gob*,[2] reflects the historical erosion of the boundary between productive employment and free time. The story is a familiar one: in the second half of the previous century, the activities of work and recreation began to intertwine and exchange properties, eventually arriving at a point today where the spontaneous practices of self-fashioning known as "lifestyle" have become effectively indistinguishable from the work skills being cultivated in the service industry. Now there is no longer any meaningful contrast between labor and leisure, just a series of jobs to be done.

Eggerer's massive painting *Grey Harvest* (p. 19), the linchpin of his recent work, takes its cues from depictions of the collective farm, a *locus classicus* of Socialist Realism, although in Eggerer's version the farm teems with figures whose purpose has little to do with labor that is recognizably productive or valorized: some of the people pause in repose; many drift and wander; others observe the enterprise unhurriedly; still others reconnoiter the landscape in a state of distraction. If it is an episode of work that we have before us, the figures are certainly far too casual, relaxed, and absentminded; but if, conversely, we are looking at a scene of recreation, the atmosphere is far too glacial, hoary, and lifeless. Like the woman scanning the ground in a bikini top and the child running into the foreground, the misplaced hipster with long hair and a trucker's cap is better suited for the informal beach scene of *Sand* (2007) than for the collective labor enterprise of the harvest. But the point is that these figures are indeed at work. Despite the appearance of freedom and spontaneity, the practiced choreography of prefabricated diversions such as camping and sunbathing—two "pseudo-activities," Adorno once called them[3]—in fact mimics structural conditions of objective unfreedom and coercion. At a time when even the most anticonformist improvisations of self-expression can be readily monetized, the individual becomes the simultaneous subject-object of exploitation, an entrepreneur of himself. The result in Eggerer's work is an anomic sublation of the respective utopias of Socialist Realism and Pop Art, a convergence between the fantasy of limitless production and that of perpetual consumption.

Grey Harvest presents a comprehensive breviary of the gestures, attitudes, and postures that recur across the recent paintings. Despite their obscurity of purpose and appearance of hermetic solipsism, the solitary movements that each of the figures carries out are neither personal nor idiosyncratic. Their withdrawal and interiority are not

1 Interview with Thomas Eggerer, May 18, 2013.

2 The *Oxford English Dictionary* proposes an etymological connection between *job* and *gob*, meaning "mass or lump." See "† job, n.3" and "gob, n.1," *OED* online, June 2013, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/101395 and http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79579.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, "Free Time," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 170. According to Adorno, the camper's fantasy of "sleeping under the open sky" is designed merely to "compel people to buy tents and trailers, along with innumerable accessories." Similarly, he observes about sunbathing that "those who let themselves roast brown in the sun merely for the sake of a tan … become fetishes to themselves."

signs of individuality. To the contrary, this fixed gestural repertoire, drawn from a standardized lexicon of movement that cuts across the figures and connects them to one another, denies the individual's semblance of autonomy and instead gives the entire social ensemble a rigorously schematic and anonymous quality. Their activities appear meaningless. It is not surprising, then, that so many of Eggerer's paintings depict adolescents, creatures on the developmental threshold between the anarchic sexuality of childhood and the regulated-drive economy of the adult: theirs are bodies on the cusp of cultural territorialization, bodies in which the awkward gap between social code and physical performance still remains all too glaring. In *The Ruins* (p. 15), for example, Eggerer contrasts the maladroit functioning of the adolescent hands with the rigid frame-packs worn by the boys. At this stage of human development, the mapping of social comportment onto the body is still a shoddy and makeshift affair, obvious in its utter arbitrariness. By focusing on this interval of non-correspondence between body and code, Eggerer exposes the lack of content, indeed inexpressiveness, of gesture, so long considered the signature of individuality, especially in painting: "You can have children do things in paintings that you couldn't get away with an adult doing," he notes. "I had one child sticking out an arm in a weird pose—*if a child does that, it doesn't mean anything, if an adult does that, it will be surreal or narrative.*"[4] Although the people in Eggerer's paintings concentrate intensely on their respective jobs and seem to be immersed in a space of psychological interiority, they execute their movements compulsively and with a mechanicity that recalls the empty formalism of phatic consumer ritual far more than the Taylorized efficiency of industrial production.

4 Morgan Falconer, "New York: Thomas Eggerer," *Art World* (December 2008): 72. Italics added.

It's hard to imagine, then, that these empty reflexes are aimed at producing any results. They do not envision a possible future, but are instead oriented retentionally, in the phenomenological sense: they are memories or vestiges of past activities. Indeed, the scenes depicted in paintings such as *Grey Harvest*, *The Connoisseur* (p. 23) and *Carousel* (p. 11) are suffused with belatedness and retrospection: these people are not agents of history or heroes of labor, but the maintenance crew that has arrived to clean up after the main event. This pervasive sense of belatedness finds an apt iconographic vehicle in one particularly anachronistic gesture that is repeated across a number of Eggerer's paintings: gleaning. Depicted most famously in Jean-François Millet's *Des glaneuses* (1857), the activity of gleaning—its gesture of crouching and collecting—is a practice that belongs to a premodern time rendered obsolete with the advent of industrial production. However, despite its defunctionalization, the gesture still persists, transformed in its afterlife into an empty muscular reflex, an echo that continues to resound in the body. "Gleaning may be extinct," Agnès Varda explains in a film essay on Millet's painting, "but stooping has not vanished."[5] Having outlived its original social motivation, the once-purposive activity of gleaning is demoted to the conditioned reflex of stooping, a movement without content, no longer guided by, or even bound to, the intentions of the conscious subject. Transmitted across generations, such obstinate gestures take on a life of their own, Brecht once observed: "I often see, says the thinking man, that I have the stance of my father. But my deeds aren't those of my father. Why are my deeds different? Because what is necessary is different. But I see that the stance endures longer than the form of action: it resists what is necessary."[6]

5 *The Gleaners and I*, dir. Agnès Varda (2000).

6 Bertolt Brecht, *Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, 30 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988–98), 28:34.

The figures in Eggerer's painting inhabit a state beyond readiness and laxity, beyond vigor and enervation: they hunch and kneel, folding limbs one over the other; they bend and contract, slouching to reveal a particular curve of the back. Not quite upright, but also not exactly supine, they instead inhabit a culturally unmarked zone between vertical and horizontal. This suppression of the valorized and familiar axes of the human frame allows more creaturely, less recognizable aspects of the body to emerge. Like the figures in Valie Export's photographic series *Body Configurations in Architecture* from the 1970s, the flexible and metamorphotic people in Eggerer's paintings readily accommodate their environment, receding into the surrounding space. For Export and Eggerer alike, the mitigation of the overtly anthropomorphic qualities of the body and its assimilation into the space around it suggest a technique of camouflage and survival. Many of the figures crouch and turn away to evade the eyes of the spectator; the refraction of the body in works like *Triple Constellation* (p. 17), which recalls multiple-exposure chronophotography, confuses the viewer, who doesn't know which of the figures to focus on; some of the figures, mere outlines, are on the cusp of vanishing entirely.

These evasions—strategies to set the viewer's eyes in motion—establish a third painterly space beyond figuration and abstraction. Here Eggerer's technique proceeds in two phases: first, by slackening the human frame, by diminishing its heroic and narrative qualities, Eggerer compels the spectator's eye to slide off the body, to the side, where it alights on a space that, in the words of philosopher Paul Virilio, is neither figure nor ground, but "a third, formed by their conjunction, the void, the transparence [that takes] shape between them, the interform"; then, to capture and give material density to the fugitive "interform," Eggerer thickens this local field through the superaddition of more paint, often applied coarsely and spontaneously. This secondary inspissation, added after the basic values of figure and ground have already been articulated on the canvas, can be seen in almost all of Eggerer's new work, whether in the vertical mantle of black in *Rodeo* (p. 5), the blue miasma that emerges at the right of *Waste Management* (p. 7), or the dark swathe that contours the group of figures in *Carousel*. The function previously performed

by an architectural cage in works like *Atrium* (2003), *The Wisdom of Concrete* (2004), or *Trinity* (2005) is now taken over by this thickened, pressurized atmosphere. Eggerer contours what Virilio calls the "isthmus" or "peninsula of emptiness" between the figures, giving the negative space of the canvas a palpable presence, which, while not being figural per se, can no longer properly be called background either. Instead it represents a tertiary painterly space that, paradoxically, utilizes the figures themselves as its ground. The result inverts the traditional model of space, understood in the Cartesian analytic as an empty, homogenous, and stable container of infinite extension that preexists the figures, objects, and events contained within it. In Eggerer's paintings, it is not a static space that occasions the moving figure, but the figures that occasion a space that is "nothing more than a series of edges." More than just destabilizing the "abusive hierarchy of form over ground," this strategy, to quote Virilio again, interrogates the longstanding exclusivity between "the figurative and the abstract."[7]

Eggerer's project to reallocate the values of figure and ground fuels a second current within his work as well, the series of abstract paintings based on details of alphabetic lettering. The visual convention used here, that of typography, also troubles the traditional hierarchy of container and content, but now with different means. For the relationship in printing between the letter and the paper beneath it, while superficially homologous to the relationship in painting between figure and ground, in fact shares nothing with the latter: rather than projecting an illusion of perspectival space, letter and paper, inscription and support, are differential and co-constitutive. The page does not contain or antecede the words on it in the same way that a picture frame is conventionally said to "contain" that which it depicts. Rather, the white of the page is occasioned by the black of the printed letter in the same way that sound or noise, in a Cagean account, can be said to produce the surrounding condition of silence. And although the paradigm of letter print, with its differential logic, is referenced most explicitly in Eggerer's abstract paintings based on typography, it also surfaces in mimetic works such as *Grey Harvest*, where the formalized postures of the gleaners recall a hieroglyphic code. Here the landscape, striated by receding orthogonals, is invaded by graphemic elements that transform the painting from a depth image to be perceived into a flat frieze to be read. This metamorphosis of the landscape into a data field is consummated by the arrival of two tractors whose windows puncture the scene like two luminous computer screens, perforating the plenitude and presence of embodied vision with the sign of absence, a transmission from elsewhere.

7 Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, trans. Michael Degener (New York: Continuum, 2005), 32, 33, 30, 33, 28.

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