



Esther Shalev-Gerz,  
*Potential Trust*,  
2012–14, neon on  
wood panel,  
37½ × 60".

decorative objects, figurines, and artworks depicting laborers, the artist invited twenty-four people associated with the Wolfsonian (including an art handler, the institution's director, its registrar, and multiple gallerists and curators from nearby venues) to choose a work and then advise on its reinstallation in the museum's storage annex. Shalev-Gerz's photographs document the installation process, and the two-channel video presents recorded interviews in which the participants describe and interpret their choices. An institutional consideration of industrial design, the decorative arts, and their histories, "Describing Labor" contrasts art professionals of today with industrial workers of the past through a mixture of archival and contemporary images and sound.

At the back of the gallery, Shalev-Gerz assembled a collection of objects, photographs, and a video that examines one of the darkest examples of human effort and expenditure—systematic genocide—under the title *Inseparable Angels: An Imaginary House for Walter Benjamin*, 2000–2008. Video footage of a cab ride between Weimar and nearby Buchenwald, once one of Germany's largest concentration camps, captures banal sites along the route (as described by the taxi driver) that bore witness to Nazi brutality during the Holocaust, revealing the close proximity of German genius to German barbarism. (Long renowned as a site of culture, Weimar was home to some of the country's greatest writers, artists, and composers—including Goethe, Schiller, and Liszt—and later gave birth to the Bauhaus.) The video's sound track alternates between the cabbie's observations and excerpts from texts by Benjamin, Kafka, Gershom Scholem, and Paul Klee concerning angels. Klee's oil transfer and watercolor drawing on paper *Angelus Novus*, 1920, the subject of which, according to Benjamin's famous reading, faces the past screaming while being blown backward into the future by "the storm of progress," is a clear point of reference for the work. Surrounding the video were four combination-printed photographs of overlaid and spliced Weimar buildings—the artist's renderings of imaginary homes for the German-Jewish philosopher, who, facing deportation to Occupied France, committed suicide in 1940. Memorials to a martyred critic, the photos signify presence through absence and a collective wound through an individual tragedy. A double-faced clock hung from the ceiling, its hands rotating in opposite directions, one moving backward and the other reaching forward to the future. Transported to the Midwest, the storm of progress once again seems to hang in the balance: Will Detroit's revitalization succeed? Or will forces of racial and economic stratification undo its development afresh?

—Matthew Biro

## DETROIT

### Esther Shalev-Gerz

#### WASSERMAN PROJECTS

Walter Benjamin never visited Detroit, but his thinking is applicable to the city's contemporary condition. The critic's melancholic fixation on ruins—as well as his desire to unearth revolutionary possibilities in frozen moments of time—resonates with this postindustrial metropolis as it struggles to rebuild itself. The Motor City is, thus, an apt site for a survey of Esther Shalev-Gerz's work, which seems permeated with concepts drawn from German philosophy. "Space Between Time" brought together a selection of work produced between 1998 and 2016, including some of the artist's best-known projects. A philosophical meditation on power, labor, knowledge, and history, the show pointed to the fragility of human endeavor and, like Benjamin's seminal essay "On the Concept of History," to the liberatory potential of the obsolete.

Shown in their current context, Shalev-Gerz's *Describing Labor: Glass Objects*—a subset of her 2012 "Describing Labor" series—a suite of works made by artisans in nearby Toledo, Ohio, evoked the precarious condition of many of the Midwest's once-thriving industrial hubs. Arrayed in open, mirrored cases, these alternately black-and-clear glass hammers (and one black-glass glove) were pointedly unsuited to the uses dictated by their form. The nearby *Potential Trust*, 2012–14, is a blue, yellow, and red neon sign on a rectangular black-painted wood panel featuring six hammers that light up in sequence so that they appear to strike a nail back and forth through a yellow "zip" that bisects the picture plane. An homage to the iconic (and now removed) Carpenters' Union signage of the Professional Plaza in Midtown Detroit, *Potential Trust* remains forever unresolved; it embodies a moment of temporal suspension in which opposing forces oscillate between past and future.

Labor was the theme of many of the other works on view as well. A set of eight large-scale photographs and a two-channel video, also from "Describing Labor," document Shalev-Gerz's explorations of the design collection of the Wolfsonian-FIU museum in Miami Beach, where photographs and a video were also paired with the glass hammers made in Ohio. After selecting forty-one historic photographs,