

COMMUTER'S LIFELONG WAIT ENDS IN VAIN

Franz Kafka's story 'Before the Law', told within his novel *The Trial*, (1) is one of the great tales of waiting. Over the course of this short parable, the act of waiting becomes a lifelong vocation for the "man from the country" who requests admission to the law – for what precise reason we do not know, perhaps to prove his innocence, to make his case – but whose way is barred by a "door-keeper".

What at first appears to be a limited inconvenience - "the door to the law stands open ... the man asks if he will be able to pass through at a later time, to which the door-keeper says, "it is possible... but not now" - turns out to be a situation weighted absurdly against the traveller. He waits interminably, but is never granted entry.

Two elements of the story are especially noteworthy. Firstly, the man waits alone. In his final, dying plea to the door-keeper, the man says that "everyone strives for the law," so "how is it that in all these years nobody except myself has asked for admittance?" To which the door-keeper, "realising the man has reached the end of his life" (that is, his wait is nearly over), replies, "Nobody else could gain

admittance here, this entrance was meant only for you. I shall now go and close it." The door resembles a personal contract, and its closure indicates the individual's failure to meet some never-specified condition.

The second crucial factor is the contrast between the ageing traveller and the apparently eternal, impassive figure of the door-keeper. The man's life ebbs away during his vigil as he becomes weaker and the futility of his wait becomes apparent. "He curses this unfortunate chance, loudly in the first years and later, as he grows old, he merely mumbles to himself". Finally he becomes "infantile", helpless and dependent upon the door-keeper (who tells him he is "insatiable", like a parent to a pestering child). The door-keeper, on the other hand, remains untouched by time, at once both powerful and a mere servant of the law.



Initially we are told of the door-keeper's own fears of other, more imposing door-keepers behind him. But near the end, after the years of waiting, the inequality in physical stature between the two is emphasised. "The difference in size between them has

changed, very much to the disadvantage of the man from the country." The door-keeper embodies the timeless impermeability of the law itself.

These elements contribute to the story's contemporary resonance. A person waits for a whole lifetime to gain the approval of an apparently

eternal, unwavering but invisible authority; not so much the law in a narrow judicial sense, but a moral law, a law of normal or respectable behaviour, or an economic system presented as a law of nature.

Being represented by a fellow human like the door-keeper, this authority appears at first reasonable, humble even; but over time, as more unseen forces are evoked and the consequences of transgression are imagined, this authority becomes tyrannical. However, this is an internalised tyranny. The door remains open, and the barrier is one of suggestion rather than physical force.

Today's version of the door-keeper, contrary to appearances, is not the uniformed official nominally attending the gateways to transport and communication, a worker who is subjected to the same individual, life-consuming act of waiting as the commuter. No; in

Kafkaesque terms, the door-keeper has now been integrated with the door in the form of the automatic barrier, electronic screen or announcement system equipped with a series of programmed responses - 'ticket invalid', 'insufficient funds', 'login failed'; 'all our operators are busy', 'this train has been delayed', 'unexpected item in bagging area'.

Often a human voice is built into the machine, and having been extracted from its original owner this voice, like Kafka's door-keeper, does not vary or age. Hour after hour it carries on, meeting the weariness of its queuing customers with the same bright tone of affirmation. Although its cadences are designed to capture a particular cultural moment, it is also in a sense timeless.

The philosopher Nina Power has argued that these technological voices which increasingly populate urban space are instruments of "soft coercion", their "brusque, sensible ... firm, bureaucratic" intonations conveying a significantly gendered discourse of security. (2) Beyond these niceties, the voices and messages suggest, there will be no engagement with the abstract authority, with the law itself.

When communication becomes snagged in call-centre circuitry or a train is inexplicably cancelled, the latent oppression of such machinery comes to the surface. An automated device presents itself as human, apologising for any inconvenience caused. An extortionate new ticket-pricing scheme is

introduced and a commercial algorithm is presented as a rule of law. The virtual door-keeper has a disciplinary role too: in the overcrowded train with an empty first-class compartment the door swooshes open but still

excludes. One either stands outside and waits, or risks punishment for crossing the threshold.

At first the passenger is annoyed; then, like Kafka's doomed protagonist, as the delays mount up, the fares continue to rise and the overcrowding intensifies, she becomes resigned to her fate. She just waits. Every incident merely highlights, like a sharp jab in the ribs, one's helpless position.

Everything becomes part of one continuous act of waiting.

As in a Kafka fiction, even once the immediate barrier is passed, there is another one, then another... Waiting to get to work, waiting for a document to load, waiting for a phone call, waiting for a customer, waiting to go home. Waiting to be

An automated device presents itself as human, apologising for any inconvenience caused.

recruited, waiting to be promoted, waiting to be laid off, waiting to retire, waiting to die. As anthropologist David Graeber puts it, “it’s as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us working” (3) - and keeping us waiting. A lifetime spent on hold, in obeisance to an infinite hierarchy of virtual door-keepers, each more terrifyingly banal than the last, until the door is finally closed.

Once again these gateways are individualised in the form of aspiration, competition, PINs, passwords, social media profiles. As he waits the traveller in Kafka’s story gives all his worldly possessions to the door-keeper in the hope of gaining admittance. The door-keeper, like the functionary of an immense corporation, gradually drains the individual of his resources without offering anything in return or any comment beyond mere formality.

Another rush-hour standstill, another hundred commuters each stuck at their own virtual barriers, trying to appease their own door-keepers, venting their frustrations on their smartphones, trapped in their own cellular miseries. Everyone strives to gain admittance to the 7.14am to Birmingham Moor Street, but each journey remains an individual transaction, subject to the privatised conditions of a privatised railway, enacted in a privatised space on the way to a privatised workplace.

In Kafka’s *The Trial* this story is told by a priest to K., the novel’s central character, and afterwards the pair embark on a long discussion of its meaning. The priest corrects K. on the role of the door-keeper. His words to the traveller, he says, should not be read as speaking any sort of truth but rather as conveying a necessity. “One does not have to believe everything is true, one only has to believe it is necessary.” For K. this is a “depressing thought”.

“It makes the lie fundamental to world order,” he says.

In official statements which echo their automated announcements much as the parable echoes K.’s predicament, transport and energy companies insist that ‘customers’, rather than executive salaries and shareholder dividends, are their priority. These statements are similarly born of necessity rather than truth, designed to maintain order. If these illusions were removed, would the rule of law break down? Is the lie of a privatised life rewarded by privatised property, transport and work - the necessary foundation of an ordered, law-abiding world?

What stops us from rejecting this corrupt law, with its endless, life-sapping demands, and walking away from the personalised purgatories it has assigned to us? What are we waiting for?

By Ivor Southwood.

Manual Labours : *The Complaining Body*

Curated by Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards

With new commissions by

Sarah Browne, Hamish MacPherson and Ivor Southwood

21 - 25 April 2015

Ivor Southwood

The Complaining Body Complaints Office

MOVEMENT : Waiting Room, Platform 2

Worcester Foregate Rail Station

Open 21,22,24 & 25 April, 12- 3pm

Come Visit and Share Your Complaints

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Manual Labours *The Complaining Body*

Public Film Screening featuring:

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25 April, 7pm

Sarah Browne *The Complaining Body*

Public Film Screening featuring:

Sheffield Film Co-op *A Question of Choice* 1982

Joyce Wieland *Solidarity* 1973

Laura Kipnis *Marx: the Video* 1990

MOVEMENT

Platform 2, Foregate Street Railway Station, Worcester

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TEMP WORKER IN 'LOOKING BUSY' SHOCK

Office cleaning from 5-8pm. The supervisor's shift runs from 12 to 8pm; the minimum shift for which the facilities company can hire staff is three hours; but the office which hires the facilities company also has a rule that no vacuuming can be done before 6pm. On reporting for duty one is therefore invariably sent to perform some arbitrary non-task for an hour; ordered to walk up and down the aisles of the open-plan office brushing all the horizontal surfaces or chair legs around the remaining employees, or shuffling along the walls with a cloth wiping non-existent dirt from the window sills.

As casualised staff, by definition, we are here because we cannot afford to turn down work. The agency calls and, as if by magic, we appear. The rules dictate that we must start at this time, the rota dictates the tasks to be done. The rules and rota cannot be questioned by the workers, or even by the managers who draw them up. Corporate servitude is projected onto us and embodied in us. The effect is a display of demeaning otherness: the outsourced worker is forced to perform these absurd rituals, among, yet apart from the rational professionals sitting at their desks, like an

obsessive patient in an institution or a criminal subjected to a public humiliation.

This is not of course to denigrate the actual work of cleaning, which should be valued at least as highly as those duties it mops up after. Indeed, the longer one spends cleaning in a large office the more compelling becomes the case that if administrative 'teams' were required to clean up after themselves, as well as create motivational wallcharts, the amount of unnecessary litter (and wallcharts) would reduce dramatically, while I could get on with the housework I've been neglecting instead of being stuck here carrying out these ridiculous chores.



Nevertheless, despite such revolutionary insights, here we are. In this first hour we are not closely monitored; the surveillance is mainly internalised. In this glass-panelled open-plan

prison everyone is visible, from headsetted customer service agents to trolley-pushing support staff, giving off an impression of collective hard-working transparency. An outsider looking in would see conscientious administrators and cleaners overlapping in an early evening scene of quietly bustling activity; data being filed, surfaces being smoothed, business as usual.

Similarly, our work during this first hour is rarely inspected. As it is mostly unnecessary to begin with, it would be impossible to determine whether it has been completed or not. The standard is measured not by the results of our work but by the appearance of it being done. The appearance *is* the

result. The important thing is that we look busy. The ambient presence of the cleaning staff during this time reassures the host company that a service is being provided, and the facilities company managers are in turn reassured that their contract is safe.

Another periodic first-hour task is cleaning the glass walls of the 'meeting rooms' situated to the sides of the open-plan work areas. Again, the illusion of transparency must be maintained. One day I was assigned this task and went through the motions of spraying and wiping every section of panelling, erasing tiny smudges, whether real or imaginary, ensuring that no sign of human contact remained.

It took all my willpower not to smash the glass.

A week later the rota was consulted and again my co-worker and I were assigned meeting-room glass-cleaning duty. To raise the absurdity of this would be tantamount to asking to be fired, so we followed

our orders, imagining scenarios that might justify such extreme hygiene.

Perhaps the mysterious meetings that occurred in these spaces were such explosive and visceral affairs that they required regular wiping down afterwards. The walls might have been spattered with inspiration during an especially vibrant ideas session, or if some performance target was not met, a glass cubicle could become a slaughterhouse...

On this occasion I decided to approach the task critically in order to bring out its latent ritual and performative elements, and to distil the activity down to its real purpose: the work of looking busy. With my co-worker I went to the cleaning cupboard, where we picked up the cloths and spray bottles, and took up our respective positions. I

entered the first unoccupied meeting room and set to work.

With one hand I aimed the bottle at the glass wall, but did not pull the trigger. I then mimed the repetitive polishing motion with the cloth while being careful not to touch the wall itself. Creating a semblance of flatness by holding the cloth between my thumb and palm, I waved the cloth across the air a centimetre or so away from the glass. Then I moved along to the next panel and repeated the spray and polish action.

I moved on to the next room, and the next. I tried to be as systematic and comprehensive as I would if I were actually cleaning. As last time however (when I was actually cleaning) in the absence of any obvious dirt it became difficult to keep track of which walls and rooms I had 'cleaned' and which I hadn't. Nevertheless, I put an equivalent amount of physical effort into the task. It was important for the act to look convincing to any employees

observing from a distance, or to the CCTV. The deputy supervisor was probably in another building but could pass by at any moment and, unlike my co-workers, he was not aware of my experimental performance.

At one point I found myself inside a cubicle looking out through the glass at a couple of employees at their workstations nearing the end of their working day. As they typed and chatted away my circular waving motion, divested of its solid alibi, became a signal directed to them from the margins of the office. Immersed in their shared project, they were oblivious to this silent message. Of course it could be that, under the professional facade, their keystrokes and spoken phrases were just as empty as my own busy gestures.

It took all my willpower not to smash the glass.

From start to finish the simulated cleaning exercise lasted about thirty minutes. My co-worker, whose own apparently authentic labours I had observed on the floor above, re-appeared and we abandoned our duties and drifted into conversation.

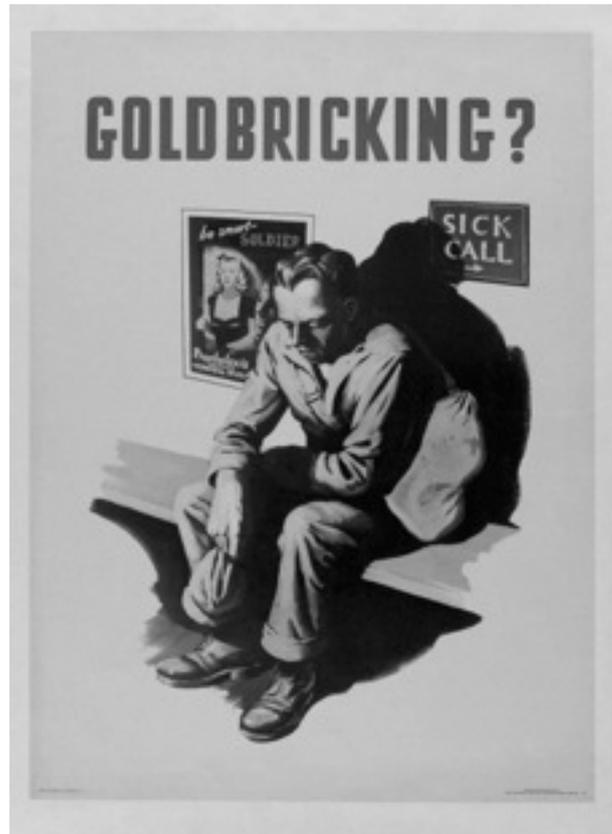
The next day I was instructed to spend an hour cleaning the glass balconies in the atrium. I had by now developed a certain skill and confidence in my performance, and I worked my way assiduously and methodically around the area, finishing near the lifts. Office employees stood behind me, waiting and bidding each other goodnight as I swiped at thin air.

Again I continued the performance for thirty minutes, after which I allowed myself a moment to stand back and admire my work. Two floors of glass gleamed back at me and my hands and elbows ached from the effort.

As per the rota, I returned the fake spray and fake cloth to the store cupboard and pulled out a vacuum cleaner from a gaggle of battered Henries. Dragging the involuntarily smiling machine to the section assigned to me, I prepared for the next task, which would take up the remaining two hours: hoovering up

office detritus, both material and immaterial.

By Ivor Southwood.



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Are you feeling disillusioned about work but are not in a position, at the moment, to change it?

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Notes:

¹ Franz Kafka *The Trial* (Penguin, 1994 [1925] pp166-7). 'Before the Law' is republished in *The Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka* (Vintage, 2005)

² Nina Power 'Soft coercion, the city and the recorded female voice', Talk at UCL, 14 September 2014 <https://www.mixcloud.com/UCLurbanlab/nina-power-on-soft-coercion-the-city-and-the-recorded-female-voice/>.

³ David Graeber 'On The phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs', Strike Magazine, 17 August 2013 <http://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/>

Image credits:

Page 1:

- Ticket gates by Ivor Southwood (2015)

Page 4:

- Male window cleaners in pink uniforms at the Addis international airport waiting areas, Ethiopia. by Sasha Andrews, Wellcome Images (2006)

Page 6:

- An American soldier waiting to see a doctor. (1940s) "Goldbricking" means malingering, to exaggerate or feign illness in order to escape duty or work. (Wellcome Library, London)

- A Hand of Sabazius from Bernard de Montfaucon's *L'Antiquité expliquée* (1722) (British Museum)

Back cover:

- A family is discovered dead from starvation after waiting for welfare assistance. Colour photomechanical reproduction of a lithograph by N. Dorville, c. 1901. (Wellcome Library, London)

About The Source:

This free paper is part of '**Manual Labours: *The Complaining Body***', an exploration into the world of workplace complaints led by Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards with artist Sarah Browne, choreographer Hamish MacPherson and writer Ivor Southwood. The smile which has become the required uniform of workers in coffee shops, classrooms, care homes and call centres hides and stifles our ability to complain and collectivise around our working conditions. I. Southwood, S. Hope and J. Richards will be working with commuters and the local public from the *Complaining Body Complaints Office* located on Platform 2, Foregate Street, Worcester to gather and discuss your workplace struggles. Drop in 21, 22, 24 & 25 April, 12-3pm 2015.

Manual Labours is supported by Arts Council England's Grants for the Arts, The Elephant Trust and Birkbeck University Widening Access.

To keep up to date or contribute to the project email manual.labours@gmail.com Or visit www.manuallabours.co.uk

FILL IN AND POST IN THE COMPLAINTS BOX IN MOVEMENT GALLERY:

I can't complain about _____

I can't complaint to _____

When I can't complain my body feels like _____

I last complained about _____

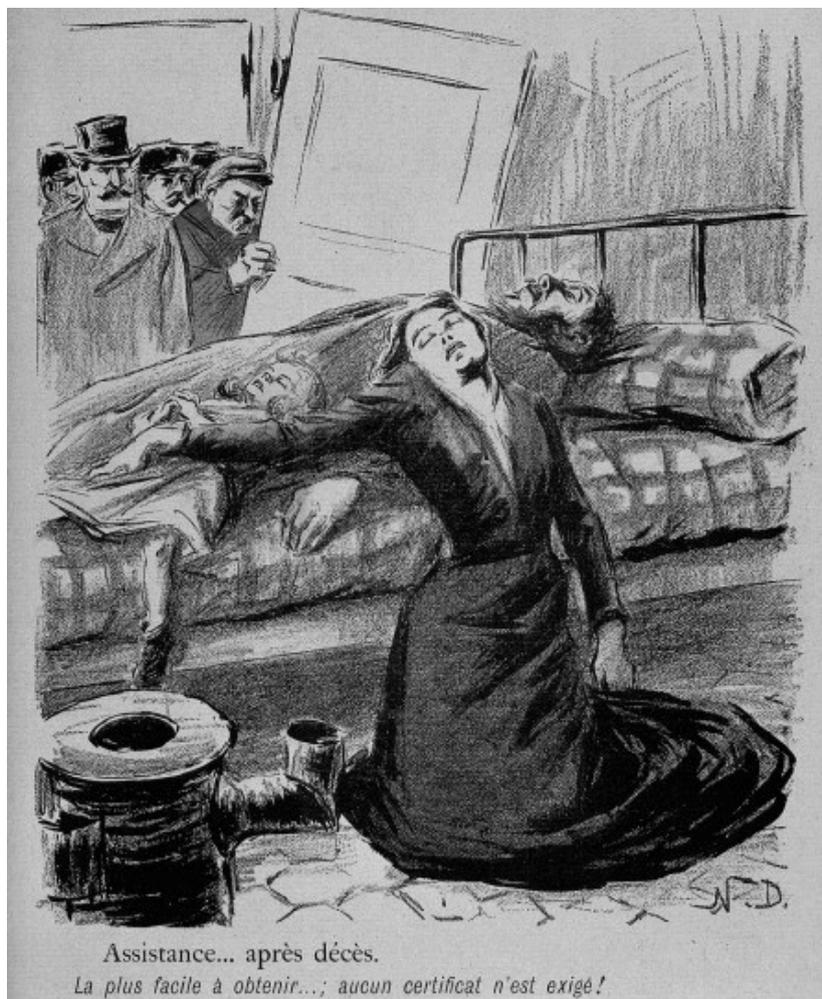
I complained to _____

When I complain my body feels like _____

The last complaint I received was about _____

I received the complaint from _____

When I am complained to my body feels like _____



Priority page
for hard working families