

Notes on a Long Garden Leave: The Work of Nicolas Manenti

by Sunshine Wong

Leaving a job may not mean that all ties with your company are neatly severed. To ensure confidentiality of company information, you can be subjected to a paid but workless period upon resigning, a so-called "garden leave" during which you are only an employee by contract but do not render any services. Berlin-based French artist Nicolas Manenti worked the graveyard shift as a security guard in an office block, as if he were put on perpetual garden leave: a member of staff only nominally, without the opportunity to produce anything.

To be in a place depleted of activity with only the traces of absent colleagues (empty chairs, mute telephones, tea-stained mugs) as company, Manenti began to perfect the art of killing time. Absurdly posturing in the deserted space, the tragicomic white-collar antihero emerges for the first time in the short video *Interludes* (2001 – 2002). The bureaucentric vein has since become a staple his work, with an ever-expanding cast of characters. Each of the 9-to-5ers in the *Save our Jobs* composites (2008 – ongoing) have been resketched by hand from stock photos and re-imagined in impossibly perverse professional situations. In a fell swoop of light, ironic gestures, he transforms the office – ordinarily regulated by hierarchy and constant performance anxieties exerted from the top down – into a parody of itself.

Extending beyond the camp interpretations of our modern day work environs, Manenti also delves into the mind-numbing repetition of labour as a method of contemplation. Company holidays stamped chronologically on an endless roll of fax paper (*Betriebsferien*, 2011) clearly hearkens to On Kawara's iconic devotion to timekeeping. Where Kawara's statement of date and time are grave, the stamped durations in Manenti's piece are, despite his best efforts, imprecise and prone to error, undermining the idea of exactitude by its very attempt. A similarly arduous and futile attempt is found in *La société du spectacle copied over itself* (2008 – 2010); written over word by word, the book is reduced to an illegible reproduction of itself. Debord foretold that replicated imagery would far exceed authenticity, as embodied in Manenti's *Angenagelt* (2008), a cruel attempt to flatten and reduce reality. This artistic process that simultaneously relies upon and subjugates reality is a tension that reappears in many of Manenti's installations; regulated spaces are turned upside-down, expected components are present but amok, believable but irrational.

Summarising Manenti's practice was never going to be a simple task. His work could be mistaken for being an easy punchline attacking our workaholic sensibilities when in fact it offers a layered, dialectical critique on social order. Parrying our perceptions on greatness, authenticity, and industriousness with wit, the joke's ultimately on us.