



Sleep

Marcus Verhagen fears that sleep, which for the surrealists was a motor of creativity and for Georges Perec a form of refusal, is today an object of both biopolitical regulation and commercial exploitation.

Artists and others have long maintained that sleep catalyses creativity. Sleep has at times also been seen as a form of refusal, a deliberate shutdown in the face of waking life. This mix of associations has made it a charged motif in art and literature.

The creative potency of the sleeping mind was famously affirmed by the surrealists. Armed with Sigmund Freud's 1899 book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, they regularly pictured sleep as a gateway to the unconscious. René Magritte's sleeping figures are surrounded by objects that ask to be interpreted as symbols of partially repressed thoughts, the sleeping

female figures in Man Ray's photographs are hieratically posed, Salvador Dalí's dreamscapes are dotted with animals and liquefying objects. For these artists, sleep revealed truths beyond the reach of the conscious mind. And inasmuch as they aligned art-making with psychoanalytic treatment, they were themselves exemplary sleepers and analysts.

This vision of sleep as an interval in which vital ideas may take shape is one that predates Freud's work and resonates beyond the world of art. The structure of the periodic table apparently came to Dmitri Mendeleev in a dream after several sleepless nights. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is said to have originated in a dream she had while staying near Lake Geneva in 1816. Keith Richards claims to have composed the opening bars of 'Satisfaction' while half-asleep in a hotel room after a concert in Florida. The idea that sleep, or states between sleep and waking, can bring startling insights

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and imaginative leaps is one that has long seemed plausible. And it has continued to inform art-making in recent times. Franz West, also a keen reader of Freud, made numerous couches, beds and chairs and was often photographed lying down, awake or asleep. Ilya & Emilia Kabakov (Interview *AM411*) extended the surrealist investigation of sleep in their *House of Dreams*, 2005, which turned the Serpentine Gallery into an environment resembling a dormitory or hospital ward. Their installation was made up of beds, some facing windows, others in dark cubicles with animals and plants circling overhead, projected by magic lanterns. Visitors were invited to lie down and let their eyes and minds wander in a work that plainly associated sleep and rest with imaginative licence.

In another conception of its wider significance, sleep is a respite from the waking world and so has the potential to signal a rejection of ordinary constraints and impositions. For adolescent late-risers, sleep may be a form of rebellion. For activists at sleep-ins, sleep and rest are not reducible to inactivity: they are ideologically significant acts of abstention. A similar view was articulated by Georges Perec in his 1967 novel *A Man Asleep*, which tells the story of a student who stays in bed on the day of a university exam and then drops out, cutting off his social ties and dividing his time between his tiny bedsit and the streets of Paris. Opening with a description of what he sees when his eyes are closed, the novel is an account of the protagonist's efforts to cultivate indifference, passivity and stasis. When walking in the city he has no fixed destination; when he goes to the cinema he picks a film at random. He is never in a hurry, he makes no plans, his alarm clock is broken. Without goals or obligations, he brings a sharp, unhurried attention to his surroundings, minutely observing the fissures and stains on the walls of his room and, outside, the structures of natural forms.

Sleep is for him a central sign and cause of his apartness. Its place in his life is an expression of his opposition to an instrumental understanding of time, to time viewed as a productive resource. The missed exam is crucial. In choosing sleep, he rules out a host of other priorities – academic attainment, social and professional advancement, the next step on the ladder. Throughout the novel sleep serves as the emblem of a time that is not used or misused, stored up or spent, but just left to pass.

The significance of sleep in art has in recent times largely been determined by the interplay of these two conceptions, the surrealist and neo-surrealist view of it as creative motor and the tendency, in the work of Perec and others, to see in it a form of tacit refusal. The two can coexist, as they do for instance in Mladen Stilinović's *Artist at Work*, 1978, a collection of eight black-and-white photographs of Stilinović himself lying on a bed. In the images we see him wrapped in blankets, on his side with his face turned away in some, face up on his back in others, his eyes open in one. Branka Stipančić has suggested that he may have wanted to provoke those in Yugoslavia at the time who denigrated Conceptual Art on the grounds that

it demonstrated little hard work or craft. But the title is not just a tease. On some level the work really is a representation of artistic labour, of sleep or rest as a prelude to creative activity, a means of honing ideas, or waiting for them to come. In his 1993 text 'In Praise of Laziness', Stilinović expanded on his vision of art-making, disparaging the careerism of some artists ('in the West'), their internalisation of institutional priorities and the market ethos of efficiency: they are, he wrote, 'not artists, but the producers of something'. Laziness, on the other hand, is genuinely fruitful. It is, he explained, 'sheer stupidity, a time of pain, of futile concentration. Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practised and perfected'. Here Stilinović gives an account of artistic labour that strikingly recalls Perec's dropout, his rejection of ordinary striving, his unconcern and acute receptivity. Reading *Artist at Work* in the light of Stilinović's later text, it becomes clearer still that the artist's recumbent figure is charged with creative potential while also standing, like Perec's protagonist, against conformity and goal-directed action.

In more recent times artists and curators have shown renewed interest in sleep. In one indication of that interest, Stilinović's *Artist at Work* was on display at the 2017 Venice Biennale, alongside a number of other artworks featuring sleeping figures. This sharpened concern is fuelled by the degradation of sleep and commonness of insomnia – and by the perception that the forces damaging our sleep are indivisible from the processes of capitalist accumulation as they operate today. This view powers the show currently on at Somerset House in London. Curated by Sarah Cook, it is bookended by projects revolving around sleep, principally disturbed sleep, while in between appear works examining new workplace rituals and cadences and the pressures they exert on workers, their bodies, families and wider communities.

The exhibition carries the same title as the study that inspired it, Jonathan Crary's 2013 book *24/7*. In his account, Crary points to the marginalisation in contemporary economic life of circadian and seasonal cycles and to our tightening subjection to the rhythms of markets that now operate around the clock. And he consistently stresses the human costs of these developments, many of us remaining on call or working at home after-hours, checking our phones at night and suffering from sleep deprivation. Meanwhile, the accelerated tempo of innovation and the permanent functioning of devices similarly release consumption from temporal limitations, commercial enticements intruding on every waking hour. In Crary's searing analysis, this new chrono-economic regime erodes not just the patterns of work and rest that maintain us in health but also the feasibility of long-term projects, processes that call for collective engagement and offer only gradual change. For Crary, sleep is a point of resistance to this ruinous culture of speed. It is, he argues, an interval that serves as a reminder of pre-modern cycles grounded in the cadences of the body, seasonal growth and communal interaction.

And it is the only remaining brake on ever-quicken- ing processes of production and consumption. In his more speculative concluding thoughts, Crary also suggests that sleep and the longing for it carry utopian impulses as the 'nightly hope for the insensible state of deep sleep is at the same time an anticipation of an awaken- ing that could hold something unforeseen'.

The show at Somerset House takes many of its cues from Crary's book, which is repeatedly quoted in extensive wall texts. As befits an art show, even a thesis show like this one, it is messier than the book, more upbeat at times than Crary's assessment but at others darker still: in places it queries the view that sleep can act as or symbolise a resistance to accelerat- ing processes. What the show reveals is that the two poles in the recent cultural understanding of sleep no longer attract.

If sleep's cultural connotations of stoppage and defiance now seem more problematic, it is because they no longer sit easily with the notion of sleep as a wellspring of creativity, which does not carry the same charge today as it did for the surrealists. Douglas Coupland makes the point succinctly in one of the slogan-bearing posters he has in the show at Somerset House: 'INSOMNIA IS BAD FOR BUSINESS' (*Slogans for the 21st Century*, 2011-). In a post-Fordist economy, creativity is a vital professional asset, one that is sharpened and exercised in the production of data, images and affects. As such, it is nurtured and pro- tected. Productivity depends on it, though the nurtur- ing and protecting are more usually carried out in the name of wellbeing. So as a support of creativity, sleep has been instrumentalised. It is not just a path to a hallucinatory world, as it was for the surrealists and later the Kabakovs, but beyond that to the optimal performance of professional tasks.

The neuroscientist and sleep expert Matthew Walker reports that when he lectures to business leaders they are chiefly concerned with 'key performance indicators' and these – so Walker intimates – are determined in large part by the abilities of staff and in particular by qualities such as creativity and motivation, which are adversely affected by poor sleep. The view that adequate sleep makes for productive workers is gaining ground – and companies are acting on it. In Japan some businesses have sleep pods in which tired employees can rest. Ben and Jerry's has a nap room at its head- quarters that can be used by workers in need of a brief break. Ensuring that workers get enough sleep is now widely if not universally perceived in the business world as a crucial step in the effective management of a workforce. Sleep pods and nap rooms are like motiva- tional training or ergonomic office design: they are ways of fine-tuning bodies and minds as work imple- ments and hence of extracting further value from them.

The instrumental treatment of sleep as the support and continuation of work is one of the themes that run through '24/7'. It is, for instance, rehearsed by Alan Warburton in *Sprites I-IV*, 2016, a large lenticular

print showing, from one angle, two workers sleeping at their desks and, from a different angle, another two workers also asleep. All are in gradations of chromakey green. The print was apparently made in response to a brief spell in a visual-effects studio in Beijing, where Warburton observed workers napping at lunchtime in preparation for afternoon stints long enough for them to communicate with collaborators at studios in London, Los Angeles and Vancouver. These cubicles, with their desks and paired computer monitors, where the feats of action heroes are contrived, are also make- shift nap rooms. The colour is significant: chromakey- ing involves filming figures against a green or blue studio backdrop that can be removed and replaced with another, more dramatic setting in post-production. In alluding to it here, Warburton is asking us to consider the workers sleeping in their cubicles as a disposable vision. He is highlighting the contrast between the drama of the action film and the slow, sedentary digital labour that underlies it and suggesting that the first is predicated on the effacement of the second.

The technicians Warburton saw in Beijing had to operate in multiple time zones, adapting to the circa- dian rhythms of others higher up the food chain. In his account of their labour, he traces their habits from an external perspective, but inasmuch as the all-green scenes come across as dreamlike visions – as claustro- phobic, almost nightmarish projections – he also views their sleep from within, aligning himself with them. In the catalogue to '24/7', Warburton speaks of his own past experience as a digital worker in the film industry in terms that resonate with the images in *Sprites I-IV*: 'When I was rendering something for a deadline, I'd often work 20-hour days ... As I drifted off, I'd dream of digital interfaces, and I'd never quite fall completely asleep.' To the extent that Warburton's images come across as oneiric visions, they carry distant echoes of the surrealist conception of sleep, yet what sleeping reveals in his print is not an exotic corner of the mind but the toxic regimentation of digital labour. In his conception of sleep, Warburton retains sleep's associa- tion with creativity but downgrades it to a professional necessity and hence severs its connection with refusal and stoppage. Indeed, sleep is fully absorbed here into the cycles of production: it has become a sign of the total colonisation of the body as an instrument in the service of capital.

While Warburton reflects on the place of sleep in processes of production, the show at Somerset House also touches on its absorption into cycles of consump- tion. Sleep is attended by a host of commodities, some designed to facilitate it, others to deepen or prolong it. Clinics specialise in the treatment of insomnia and wellness gurus in relaxation techniques, while high- tech mattresses cater to different body types and sleeping styles. In recent times a vast sleep aid indus- try has developed, with revenues totalling \$69.5bn. And it is present on the margins of the show at Somerset House. A venture called MetroNaps has

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EnergyPod designed for 'napping in the workplace' by MetroNaps

Mladen Silinović, *Artist at Work*, 1978



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created a bed-like pod with a visor that can be lowered to isolate the napper, speakers that emit relaxing music and lights that flicker soothingly. Two of these EnergyPods sit near the entrance to '24/7', where visitors can lie on them and sample their comforts. It is clear – not just from the EnergyPods but also from the merchandise and sleep-help books in the gallery shop – that sleep has to some degree been recast in lifestyle terms, as an experience that can be honed as part of a given pattern of consumption.

Among the artists in the show who comment on this development are Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, whose *Somnoproxy*, 2019, presents an ironic vision of the high-end commodification of sleep. A dark, enclosed space with a large mattress on which the visitor can lie down, the work includes a Dreammachine, a rotating stroboscopic light made in the 1960s that was thought by its creators, Brion Gysin and Ian Sommerville, to induce a sleep-like state, activating the imaginative resources of the unconscious mind. But this attempt to renew and democratise the surrealist vision of sleep is accompanied in Forsyth & Pollard's installation by an audio component that sketches a more corrosive view. Written by Stuart Evers, it is the story of a conman turned sleep consultant who works for wealthy insomniacs, testing hotel rooms for compatibility with their sleep requirements, writing detailed reports on each, including the dreams he had there, and hence lulling (or conning) them into sleeping soundly in those rooms on their business travels. Forsyth & Pollard set the techno-surrealism of the Dreammachine against the grimness of a story in which sleep becomes a luxury and dreams themselves an element in an expensive service, the work tracing an arc from the embrace of sleep as an activity with a creative pulse to its cultivation as a key element in an indulgent lifestyle. *Somnoproxy* retells in self-reflexive terms what visitors may also gather from the EnergyPods: to the extent that sleep is under pressure in a high-tempo environment, the longing for it can be monetised. By the same token, it suggests that the commodification of sleep is keyed to privilege: the installation hints that in today's context the perception and experience of sleep are conditioned by class, an insight that would come as no surprise to the digital workers who inspired Warburton's *Sprites I–IV*.

So there are passages in '24/7' that point to the instrumentalisation of sleep in both production and consumption, as a biopolitical tool in the optimisation of productive energies on the one hand and an experience that can be enhanced as part of a lifestyle on the other. The two are linked: the vital importance of sleep as a factor in productivity has surely spurred its commodification. Together these developments suggest that the power of sleep to signify a willed abstention, advanced with ingenuity by Perec and fierce rigour by Crary, has ebbed. But the show also points to at least one way in which creative sleep can defend itself against the loss of that power.

Sleep can be envisaged as a collective experience. Susan Hiller's *Dream Mapping*, 1974, displayed near the close of the show, presents sleep as a communal activity and so inhibits its conceptualisation as a means to another end. Hiller invited seven acquaintances to sleep for three successive nights in a 'fairy ring', a naturally occurring circle of mushrooms, on farmland in Hampshire. The participants made diagrams illustrating their dreams and talked them over before Hiller superimposed the diagrams to create composite 'maps'

with the intention of revealing recurrent patterns. As she wrote in her invitation to participants, she wanted 'to produce, describe, and document a shared group dream'. With its instructions, diagrams and photographic records, the project mimics the protocols of the scientific experiment, but the site's mystical overtones and the paranormal conceit of the collective dream transform it into an exercise of a different kind. The work parodies scientific inquiry and renounces its practical ends, replacing them with a contrived magical outcome that has no benefits or applications other than affirming the process that led to it – that is to say, the value of pooling time and creative effort. Hiller imitates a form of rational, goal-directed thought while recuperating the surrealist vision of sleep as a means of scrambling it. And by involving others she lifts sleep out of the private sphere. There are echoes in *Dream Mapping* of two then-recent events, Yoko Ono and John Lennon's bed-ins of 1969 and the 1971 protest organised by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, during which protesters slept for three nights on the National Mall in Washington DC in defiance of a Supreme Court injunction. By turning sleep into a collective project, Hiller harnessed these echoes in a bid to tone down its association with personal wellbeing and instead foreground undertones of protest and refusal.

While asleep we are to all appearances socially disengaged. And yet sleep and attitudes to it are powerfully revealing. This is the great strength of Crary's book: it draws out in urgent tones the social significance of sleep today. As he demonstrates, the experience of sleep is one that brings the more harmful effects of the current socio-economic order into sharper focus. And yet for him it remains a pole of resistance to that order: as a bodily necessity, it is a drag on accelerating processes. Crary's book is valuable in reaffirming and updating the view that sleep can serve as a symbol of refusal.

The show at Somerset House builds on Crary's work by examining the other pole in the cultural understanding of sleep. While the exhibition is not exclusively focused on sleep, considering it, like the book for that matter, alongside other symptoms and effects of the culture of speed, it showcases a number of projects that dwell on sleep and in particular on its implications for creativity. Where early 20th-century artists understood the creative force of sleep in largely non-instrumental terms, seeing the sleeping mind as a generator of proto-artistic ideas and images, that view has come under stress.

Sleep today cannot be viewed independently of either work or economic power: it is an object of both biopolitical regulation and commercial exploitation. So a gap opens up between the book and the show. Whereas Crary sees sleep as the final line of resistance to what he calls the 24/7 society, it is also a way of adapting to it. The force of sleep as a symbol of withdrawal from instrumental action is unavoidably lessened by efforts to instrumentalise it. But the show also proposes a startling way of realigning creativity and refusal. When sleepers are pictured together, sleep becomes a vehicle both for being in common and for opting out, for sharing time and space without sharing a distinct purpose. If, as Crary contends, the sleeper has the power to anticipate a release from the present order of society, it is the sleeping crowd that most clearly embodies that power.

Marcus Verhagen is an art historian and critic.