

To Disturb Somnolent Birds

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A dim glow describes the outlines of the familiar. It demarcates and assures us not only of the continuity of domestic space, but of our place, still, within it. Though the verges of sleep are many, their common site is that of childlike vulnerability; the fear of a falling into the unknown and what may await us there, hopeful or unsettling assemblages drawn from the matter of our waking lives.

It seems impossible now, more than ever, to conceive of rest except as a corollary of work, but even this binary distinction is growing as hazy as its one-time assignation to the rhythm of day and night. Cults of overwork coexist in unnerving harmony with cults of wellness and corporatized self-care in their insistence that we are equally obligated to ‘get up and grind’ as we are to ‘make a little time just for you.’ This industrialised portioning of our days has innovated beyond the mere pushing of certain working days into the night time to facilitate unending production, towards a complete fragmentation of labour on-demand, 24/7. At the pling of a device our immediate world falls away against the bright outline of a wider world that never ceases. Rota changes, booty calls, shortened deadlines, and snivelling assertions that late payment is standard industry practice dissolve the borders we have placed around the sovereignty of our downtime, the home, and the psyche itself.

Marco Giordano’s audio-visual installation evokes not only this hallucinatory border but the voice attends it; the song of mothers, sisters, nursemaids, carers, lovers, and everyone who performs the work that facilitates rest – the lullaby. In doing so, he marks a shift in register from past works that have enacted the poetics and disjuncts of communication by splitting the body into quasi-inanimate elements. Where the fragmented body couches its frustrations in the terms of an inadequate machine, this oral tradition positions itself as an alternative to this mechanical analogy where transmission is re-established as a communal practice that occurs between bodies and the realm of experience. Multiplied through a social body rather than fragmented within the individual subject, the practice of this tradition can also act as a kind of corrective to dominant historical narratives, in which the omission of the marginal or eccentric voice is justified in the name of objective clarity. If we attune ourselves to the voices typically left out of the record, it is clear that the encroachment of labour into the home is not a particularly contemporary development. After all, as Silvia Federici has argued,ⁱ the supposed binary of work and leisure is complicated when we recognise that the rest that supports the operations of capital has itself always been contingent on the hidden labour of creating and maintaining domestic life. At the border not only of rest but of sleep itself, the lullaby, then, is perhaps foremost in an oral tradition that not only gives voice to the subjected body, but in which forms of isolation and marginalisation are reshaped as a mutable and collective narrative practice.

In his 1928 lecture ‘On Lullabies’,ⁱⁱ from which the title of this show has also been drawn, Federico García Lorca remarks on precisely this quality in the varying character of European lullabies, whose lyrics do not express tranquil adoration, but rather the exhausted grind of the reproductive labourer. Rhythmic, repetitive and nonsensical, soothing, cajoling and threatening by turns, the lullaby is the song of a worker that must put the child to sleep in order to be able to return to other tasks. If, as Lorca wrote, these “wet nurses, with the maids and other domestic servants, have, for a long time now, carried out the important task of bringing ballad, song, and stories into the homes of the bourgeois and the aristocracy” how should we view the role of these traditions now that the verges of sleep are equally crowded with podcasts, celebrity bedtime stories, white noise machines, apps playing variously aggressive recordings of rainfall, and Peppa Pig?

Certainly, the array of voices and sounds now available to the would-be dreamer is greater than ever; an array in which most of the elements by which lullabies have been categorised can still be found. The question hardly seems to be why the oral tradition was swiped wholesale from the realm of reproductive labour and repackaged as a handy commodity, but how it took so long to capitalise on. Perhaps it is a sign that, as Jonathan Crary has suggested, a new human subject is in the making, one disciplined to be more malleable within the untiring global infrastructures of work and consumption.ⁱⁱⁱ Disembodying the role of the carer and offering a self-administered product in its place enforces this malleable state by displacing the capacity to reflect directly on shared experience. What, if anything, remains of the subversive potential of narrative in this depersonalised paradigm? Far from being a negative judgment, ‘something to fall asleep to’ now seems to characterise in fairly ambivalent terms a swathe of the media landscape so vast that we must assume it features, with equal ambivalence, in a non-zero number of corporate reports.

This ‘falling’ into sleep, properly termed hypnagogia, is, more so than dreaming itself, the state from which fears of the night spring. As the body disconnects motor function from will, the real and imaginary, memory and sense perception all slosh together in an indistinct but vivid experience. With it comes the suggestibility on which the power of the lullaby has always depended. In amalgamating, only half-consciously, a semblance of continuity from partial images, we might consider the hypnagogia as a site of ideological affect, in which it seems only pertinent to question what narratives now saturate the field of our distracted consumption and re-consumption. The illuminated totems at the heart of Giordano’s installation manifest this dissolve; night-lights by a fashion, their bright, runny resin forms flicker between recognisable aspects. Now bird-like, now vegetative, they promise to liquefy and reform at any given moment. It is uncertain whether the wide-open eyes with which these totems are dotted are ecstatic or fixed in vigilance against the dark, where even the mundane outline of a coat can take on a momentary and terrifying significance at the periphery of vision.

Sing and sink / Sing and sink, run the couplets that repeat across the span of Giordano’s looping lullaby, *Sink and sing / Sink and sing*. Although its voice weaves through an ambient track that more immediately evokes the contemporary than the traditional, its tradition is one that has survived by adapting to new conditions and its site remains that of a collective and temporal experience. A site from which it is imaginable that its reverberations will carry on through memory and find expression in some other place, between some other bodies. In Lorca’s phrase, to “disturb somnolent birds” is not to distract or anaesthetise, but to “animate, in the exact sense.” Giordano’s works, though they cannot alone realize the radical potential of the margin or more equitably resolve the economies of care, share in Lorca’s ambition. They form the conditions through which the oral tradition lives on, inviting us to act as its continuous body and reclaim the threshold of consciousness as a place of poetic resistance.

Sing and sink
Sing and sink
The world shrinks
Sink and sing
Sink and sing
Nest of everything

ⁱ Federici, Silvia, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (California: PM Press) 2012

ⁱⁱ Lorca, Federico García, 'On Lullabies: A Lecture, Given in Madrid in 1928', trans. A.S. Kline, 2008, URL: http://uploads.worldlibrary.org/uploads/pdf/20121106211836lullabiespdf_pdf.pdf (January 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ Crary, Jonathan, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso) 2014