

Educators' Guide

Figures of Sleep

Curated by Sarah Robayo Sheridan

Art Museum at the University of Toronto

January 17 – March 3, 2018



Gabriel Orozco, *Sleeping Leaves (Hojas durmiendo)*, 1990. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Works by:

Francis Alÿs, Rebecca Belmore, Louise Bourgeois, Chris Burden, Sophie Calle, Chris Curreri, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Rodney Graham, Tehching Hsieh, On Kawara, Hassan Khan, Liz Magor, Ron Mueck, Bruce Nauman, Gabriel Orozco, Jasmeen Patheja, Jon Sasaki, Mladen Stilić

Exhibition Info

Figures of Sleep, a major international exhibition, considers the cultural anxieties manifest in the popular and critical imagination around the collapsing biological function of sleep under economic, social and technological transformation. If the night was the space of mystic quandary, and a creative catalyst and spiritual and cultural resource, today's globalized capitalism and market and military demands for 24/7 service hours are stretching human body and mind in unprecedented ways. Is sleep in crisis? Exceedingly, artists have adopted the motif of sleep as a cipher for material, aesthetic, existential and political considerations of these urgent cultural concerns.

Key Points:

- Sleep
- Figuration
- Anxiety
- Endurance
- Ephemeral Art (i.e. Happenings)
- Time
- Counter-Resistance
- Boredom
- Sisyphean futility
- Past vs. Present

Curator's Essay

“And I entered into sleep, which like a second apartment that we have, into which, abandoning our own, we go in order to sleep.” — Marcel Proust

The classical separation of sleep and wakefulness would have these two spaces bounded by separate conventions, ethics, perceptions, and gravitational rules. Given the particular sleeper, the passageway between these rooms might look like an effortless entry by automatic door, the plunge through an unexpected hatch, or the continuous pacing through an endless hallway.

It is the difficult crossing that is invoked by Louise Bourgeois's *Insomnia Drawings* (1994-1995) and by writers like E.M. Cioran who professed “I have never been able to write except in the melancholy of insomniac nights.” More recently, anxiety over sleep has transferred from the quandary of the lonely philosopher into the rhetoric of fast capitalism, with a sleep “recession” widely being reported by popular media. Is sleep in crisis? A differential politics of access between subjects emerges, supported by attendant architecture—contrast the luxury of the airline first-class sleep pod to the aggressive landscape design of serrated benches expressly built to reject the weary. At the margins of the protected 9-5 workday, we find the disjointed relationships of night shift labourers, sleep-deprived parents of young children, jet-setters, elective night owls, and eager partygoers.

Few states are as ambiguous as sleep, a scientific enigma that has produced widely different theories—a hangover of an obsolete evolutionary impulse, the foundation of complex brain function, or the seat of dreaming in psychoanalysis. By turns, sleep has been decried as useless, purposeless and surplus, while on the other hand defended as a precious inalienable human right. Lately, it is subject to detailed quantification, with various self-monitoring health apps adding to the inventory of big data mapping human consciousness. Cultural theorist Jonathan Crary argues that sleep, once a former safe haven from commerce and last substantial hindrance to capitalism, is now increasingly colonized by the imperatives of global markets and military aims. To the list of contemporary preoccupations, the territory of sleep seems to be another natural resource in jeopardy. Speaking to the fraught comingling of humans in the landscape, Liz Magor's sculpture *Burrow* (1999) features a sleeping bag asphyxiated by a tree stump, a provisional shelter of last resort which is both compelling and disturbing.

Artists have inhabited the paradigm of sleep as rest, as protest, as withdrawal and a radical expression of a will to live. On Kawara's *I Got Up* (1968-1979) postcards are time-stamped to demarcate the artist's entry into consciousness as he travelled the globe, place-marking his position by mailing tourist cards to the art world. Lawrence Weiner described that the postcards “step out of the line of history as we know it.”

Some of the most poignant artworks in the exhibition explore the visibility of bodies in the street. Rebecca Belmore's *Dream Catcher* (2014) pivots on the agency and visibility of a subject occupying sidewalk space while Tehching Hsieh's *Outdoor Piece* (1981-

1982) charts the artist's self-imposed directive to spend a year living and sleeping on the streets of Manhattan, a place he had entered without resident status in 1974. A feat of endurance is also the basis of Jon Sasaki's *A Rest* (2016), a collaboration with dancer James Phillips that catalyzes the photographic records of depression-era dance marathon hopefuls slumped over their dance partners for support. In the solo performance, removing the secondary body as a buttress, the performer succumbs under the strain of the contrived poses.

Collective sleep actions have served the aims of protest, most famously with John Lennon and Yoko Ono's *Bed-Ins for Peace*, and by contemporary social movements like the *Meet to Sleep* campaigns in India organized by Blank Noise that call for women to nap in parks as a means to shift the fear-based relationship with public space into a dialogue about trust. Sophie Calle crosses a divide between private chamber and collective site in her photographic series *Les Dormeurs* by inviting acquaintances to sleep in her bed, transforming it into a convivial site of intensified intimacy. A different disruption in propriety was performed by Chris Burden's *Bed Piece* (1972) where he lay in a single bed in a gallery for 22 days straight.

Endurance, boredom, counter-resistance, Sisyphean futility—all these themes emerge in the works presented here. If we understand sleep as a type of technology, we might wonder if increasing angst over its demise signals a cultural shift. If McLuhan argued that a new medium “never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them,” then we might ask what new forms will sleep find in the future?

Sarah Robayo Sheridan



Jon Sasaki, *A Rest*, 2016. Video, 10:20 min. Based on a choreographed solo performed by James Phillips originally commissioned by the Toronto Dance Theatre. Courtesy of the artist and Clint Roenisch Gallery, Toronto.

Discussion Topics

1. The exhibition addresses the potential for sleep to mobilize social and political change. In this light, how does a sleeping figure become a visual symbol of counter-resistance rather than a sign of vulnerability?
2. What are some of the ways that the exhibition challenges the binary between sleep and wakefulness?
3. Considering Jon Sasaki's *A Rest* (2016) as a visual dialogue between past and present, has our notion of sleep actually changed overtime?
4. Does the exhibition address issues of economic precarity and uncertainty? If yes, consider any artworks in the exhibition that might articulate this issue.
5. Among many works in the exhibition, Rebecca Belmore's *Dream Catcher* (2014) raises the visibility of bodies in the street through an activist stance. As a result, how might the exhibition give a call to action among viewers?
6. Overall, the works in the exhibition highlight these themes—"endurance, boredom, counter-resistance, Sisyphean futility"—while we question whether is sleep in crisis. Does the exhibition propose a remedy for this crisis? If not, can we consider any takeaways?

Press

Kaur, Rachna Raj. "Women are napping in public to protest street harassment." *NOW Magazine*, January 23, 2018. <https://nowtoronto.com/art-and-books/art/women-napping-in-public-protest-street-harassment-blank-noise/>

Levine, Romi. "Hart House all-nighter: Night of Ideas, international art party, comes to U of T." *News@UofT*, January 23, 2018. <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/hart-house-all-nighter-night-ideas-international-art-party-comes-u-t>.

Wiens, Mary. "Hart House throws its doors open to insomniacs for 'Night of Ideas'." *CBC.ca*, January 25, 2018. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/hart-house-throws-its-doors-open-to-insomniacs-for-night-of-ideas-1.4503901>

Whyte, Murray. "At U of T Art Museum, a look at the paradox of sleep." *Toronto Star*, January 25, 2018. <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2018/01/25/at-u-of-t-art-museum-a-look-at-the-paradox-of-sleep.html>

Exhibition Locations

Art Museum at the University of Toronto

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery
7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3
416.978.8398

University of Toronto Art Centre
15 King's College Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7
416.978.1838

Gallery Hours

Tuesday to Saturday 12-5pm

Wednesday 12-8pm

Sunday and Monday closed

Admission is FREE to all exhibitions.

The gallery is wheelchair accessible.



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