Strategies of resistance at work 2/2
Writing in someone else’s night

A TALK BETWEEN TYLER COBURN AND CAMILLE RICHERT

On Mon, Oct 9, 2017 at 6:31 AM, Camille Richert wrote:

Good morning, Tyler!

I hope you have spent a quiet night. At the time I am writing this email, you are probably just beginning to sleep whilst I am beginning my workday. I hope this industrious digital fluid sent from Paris to New York will not affect your sleep. Asking you to work on our interview while I am aware you are sleeping at the moment makes me feel a bit guilty. But in a way, maybe we are freer by answering during one other’s sleep. In my opinion, there is always something very liberating in writing in the night: in one’s own night, or in somebody else’s night. During the past year, I used to write during the night when I had nothing to do early in the morning, because of this feeling of freedom: I went to bed around 4 or 5 or sometimes 6am, then I woke up at 10am and went back to my desk from 11:30. A short nap of one and a half hours in the afternoon helped me continue until 4am...and so on. That was a perfect rhythm for my body and soul. As of this year (and because of new professional activities), I have had to radically change the way I am working. Or the way I am sleeping. Truth be told, when I picture work and sleep, they’re two sides of the same coin.

I am writing this email because I have been commissioned for an essay about sleep and fantasy in contemporary art as ways of fighting against current and worldwide work conditions. I am deeply and personally convinced of not being the only one who experiences this confusion. And I guess we share the same impression, since you once produced a tiny wall painting of a sleeping boy, Professional Nonproducer (2011), that is related to the artistic tradition of representing the overlap of somnolent and productive time: for instance, I am thinking of the many sleepers of Millet, of the ironing girls of Degas. (NB: Degas focused on the yawn of one of them in Repasseuses, or Women Ironing). By creating this work, I imagine you wanted to amend this tradition, by suggesting that sleeping can be a real professional activity—that being able to stop working is a real productive skill. I believe that Millet would not have been able to affirm this idea in his time.

Perhaps your work is also considering a more modern tradition of art exhibitions featuring sleeping artists. I think, for instance, of Andy Warhol filming John Giorno sleeping in 1963; of the performance of Sophie Calle in 1979, inviting people to sleep with her; of a series of pictures by Mladen Stilinovic of the artist lying in bed (Artist at Work, 1978); and of Tilda Swinton sleeping at MoMA in 2013, which resembles her collaboration with Cornelia Parker from 1995.
Still another tradition is that of artists not doing anything, such as the French performer Abraham Poincheval, who spends lots of time in the exhibition spaces: jailed in a rock, lying in a stuffed bear, or sitting at the top of a post. His performances can be read as attempts not to do anything, to be present in and for the moment, not for the future. By this I mean that he is stopping the wish to produce something.

You and I have never talked before of Professional Nonproducer, even if it is part of my PhD corpus of artworks. Maybe I am projecting onto you work. Maybe not. Either way, please tell me why you think it is still important to deal with sleep as an artist, and in art.

On Wed, Oct 11, 2017 à 4:54 PM, Tyler Coburn wrote:

Camille,

Rather appropriately, I’ve just woken up from a nap. (When I work from home, I find it impossible not to stretch out after lunch.)

Returning to my desk, at this time of day, is always more difficult than approaching it in the morning. It’s likely because my naps are never ends-in-themselves: never siestas, but always rechargings between intense periods of work. I lay down, I put my head beneath a pillow, yet my temples continue their caffeinated throb, keeping me from total slumber.

I used to feel guilty about these midday naps. I suppose it’s never easy to shake the templates of productivity you learn, and which you continue to see performed around you, even when the supposed liberty of the artist comes in defining alternative forms of production and nonproduction—other intervals of work, rest, and play. This is a romantic conception, of course. The time needed for artistic practice often renders the artist inassimilable to any but the most part-time of jobs, giving us excellent training in the flexible entrepreneurship that now serves as the professional norm.

We know this narrative. I’m dwelling on it, because I used to feel guilty about my midday naps when I was in graduate school. At the time, I sought validation for what I feared might be utter laziness.

There’s always a scientific article somewhere on the Internet to help your cause, so I took inspiration from the (admittedly numerous) studies showing the benefits of taking breaks during the workday: shifting away from an analytical mindset to allow time for the topics to passively connect, and for the points to constellate.

I also became interested in hypnagogia, which is premised on the belief that the adult human’s most creative state come in the transition between waking and sleeping. (Apparently, these are moments rich in theta-wave patterns, which pre-adolescents have in abundance, but adults do not.) So I looked to practitioners over the centuries who attempted to mine this liminal space, including Poe, Jung, Blake, and Edison.
Some say that Edison slept three-to-four hours a night; others claim that, like da Vinci, he napped at regular intervals throughout the day. My favorite account finds Edison placing pie platters on either side of an armchair. He would then relax into the chair, a ball bearing in either hand. As he approached sleep, his hands involuntarily dropped the bearings into the platters, causing such a noise that the inventor would shoot up and get back to work. This is what the mining of the hypnagogic looks like in practice: startling yourself into creative labor. I’ll admit that I tried to work this way for an afternoon in 2011, and that was all I could handle. I took a photo of my ball bearings and the pie bird sold with my platters—evidence of my unsuccessful crime against sleep.

In a way, Professional Nonproducer was the culmination of this period of thought. It was the only thing I “made” in my MFA studio that year, though in reality, I hired a muralist to create it for me. In brief, it’s an image of a sleeping shepherd boy based on a 19th-Century painting by Franz Von Lenbach. Lenbach was considered a realist, in the line of Courbet and Millet, though this painting has always fascinated me for sustaining a Neo-Classical idea of rural labor: all leisure and pastoral affect. I started to think about the paradox at the heart of the pastoral genre, wherein painters labor away to produce images of leisure, rest—the absence of work—for a cosmopolitan viewership.

By naming the mural Professional Nonproducer, I hoped to call attention to how immaterial labor is still not given proper due (nor remuneration) within certain spheres of art production. Perhaps it’s the equivalent of a “gone fishing” sign: the artist’s handicraft is missing (the artist may be passed out in a pasture), yet the work is thick with intellectual facture...

On Mon, Oct 16, 2017 at 2:39 AM, Camille Richert wrote:

Dear Tyler,

Good morning! How are you?

I would like to respond to the idea you mentioned: of the artist who would experience, more than any other person, the freedom of his or her time. This is a romantic idea, as you said. In his 2013 book, 24/7, Jonathan Crary quotes several modern artists whom he sees as figures of resistance against the capitalization of time. Amongst others, there’s the French poet Robert Desnos, who was able to plunge into a deep sleep. These moments were precious, since they gave him the material of his written work. André Breton was calling for a close collaboration between work and dreams to “sweep away the capitalism.”

In our time, the sociologists of the arts are interested in the figure of the artist as an entrepreneur, which you mentioned. This idea has been precisely theorized by Svetlana Alpers Rembrandt’s Enterprise, from 1988, where she explains that, in the context of the early capitalism, Rembrandt had developed his studio as a company, outsourcing the production of some works to his assistants. In the essays of Pierre-Michel Menger, we can read that the professionaliza-
tion of artists, in the 20th Century, puts them in the position of managers. Menger claims that such professionalization is largely due to the institutionalization of art education.

Beyond these points, I have some questions for you:

1. I want to know if the production of Professional Nonproducer has had an effect on your life. Did the realization of this work change your guilty relationship to sleep? Did it provide any relief?

2. Why did you ask a muralist to complete the painting? Why this delegation of the production?

3. About the romantic vision of the artist: Don’t you think that the flipside of the artist’s free time is uncertainty? That the artist is always dealing with uncertainty? And do you really believe that the artist’s status is still different from the status of other workers? What were (and are) your part-time jobs?

4. I love your anecdote about Edison. In fact, when I was younger, I used to see old Spanish men doing this with a spoon in one hand, so that they didn’t fall asleep completely. I guess everybody has already experienced the big difference between a short nap and a deep sleep. (Personally, I sometimes prefer the energy of hypnagogia to the long journey of a deep sleep, which is sometimes exhausting.) Still, we should not forget that Edison was the inventor of one of the main tools that enabled the development of new work rhythms, as the diffusion and democratization of electricity allowed bosses to demand that people to work throughout the night. So, don’t you think we have to criticize Edison for what he did against our sleep?

5. Do you sleep well?

On Mon, Oct 16, 2017 at 8:42 PM, Tyler Coburn wrote:

Camille,

1. Hmm, I’m not sure if making Professional Nonproducer has done much to improve my guilt, though I have kept a facsimile of the painting beside my desk for the past several years. The boy looks like a younger version of me, so it’s easy to imagine that his blissed out slumber was something I once experienced myself.

In anything, Professional Nonproducer made me painfully aware of how rarely leisure, rest, and sleep are valued in contemporary society—and how, for that reason, they’re ever vulnerable to colonization. Though I formulated these ideas two years before Crary published 24/7, his book does an excellent job of summarizing this trend. The U.S. military’s attempt to create a “sleepless soldier,” Crary notes, like many “war-related innovations,” will be “inevitably assimilated into a broader social sphere, and the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker or consumer. Non-sleep products [...] would become first a lifestyle option, and eventually, for many, a necessity.”
When a trend becomes an imperative, when an option becomes a necessity, what happens to the other facets of a person—to the contours and qualities we believe define us as individuals, subjectivities, selves? Three years after making Professional Nonproducer, I explored these ideas in another project called U, which is based on my fieldwork in Songdo, South Korea. Beyond being one of the largest and most expensive development projects in the world, Songdo advertises itself as an “ubiquitous” or “U-city,” implementing smart technologies at every tier of urban design. This city, in short, has been reconceived as an information network.

During the summer of 2014, I lived in Songdo, where I conducted interviews with employees of the Integrated Operations Center, which monitors the surveillance and sensor data generated by the city. Several employees were experiencing psychological duress from the relentless monitoring work, and their supervisor was thinking about introducing therapy sessions. I was incredibly taken by this anecdote, in revealing that even in a high-tech, futuristic city, one sometimes needs to wheel out “vintage” techniques to deal with the human problem. In the end, I scripted a video that imagines a series of Gestalt therapy sessions for such employees. Far from serving to improve the lives of these workers, the sessions are a means of building better monitors. Technology’s remaking of the world, the video implies, extends from the scale of the built environment to the most intimate notions of self.

2. I figured that if I was only going to make one thing in my MFA studio that year, it should be in the medium that commands the greatest market value (painting), but then it should also push back on that valuation: in being a mural made not by the artist, but by a friendly hired hand.

You can chalk this up to my being aggressively cheeky at the time, not unlike how many students behave in response to the pressures and prescriptions of art school. In my MFA years, I thought a lot about the conventional narrative of the studio: of a site where “creative process” supposedly concretizes as immanent form—where the artist’s practice becomes visible and legible. My way of handling this was to make a work so embedded in my studio that one would have to cut out a portion of the wall to remove it. I wanted nothing to do with my studio, yet I also left an indelible signature, which can be painted over, but not removed...

3. I don’t think the artist is that different from other workers. If anything, my previous statement was meant to suggest that the artist, according to one line of post-Fordist theory, becomes the model for much contemporary work. That said, I do think there are the matters of self-entrepreneurship and self-management (the management of one’s time, of risk, of uncertainty), and then there’s the matter of the content of that time, content as risk, content as uncertainty. Calling the artist a “culture worker” allows for potential solidarity with other types of workers, but should not, in my opinion, diminish the distinct value of the content produced by the artist, nor how it may challenge and even widen society’s optic.

As for part-time jobs... Well, I’ve worn lots of hats—most of them in the art world. I’ve been the assistant in the artist’s studio; the freelance critic who juggles exhibition reviews, artist
profiles, and interviews; the desk boy at commercial galleries of questionable repute; and, currently, the fine art professor rich on theory and poor on benefits.

4. I’m not sure that Edison could have anticipated the profound effects of his invention: particularly, on our relationship to sleep. Certainly, his own relationship to sleep says much about his mindset, in that he seemed to view sleep as little more than an instrument for creativity. Hypnagogia, in his case, was sleep delayed if not denied.

5. Do I sleep well? It’s a question I would answer differently each and every night. Last night I woke up multiple times to use the bathroom, which is quite unusual. Still, rather than be annoyed, I found immense pleasure in sliding back between the softness of my sheets. Each time felt like the first time.

On must nights, sleep holds in abeyance my worries and anxieties about the coming day. I’ll snooze for ten, twenty, sometimes sixty minutes in the morning, as if more time in bed would soften their edges—as if a problem could be slumbered to death, or enchanted to sleep forever.

On Sun, Oct 29, 2017 at 10:49 AM, Camille Richert wrote:

Dear Tyler,

Here is one last question:

In a performance you recently wrote and performed yourself near CNEAI in Paris, each time only for one person, you developed a narrative about the corresponding vibrations of your body and the body of the person sitting next to you—I have been one of these bodies. Based on Nicola Tesla’s theory of resonance, you and the “performed” person share a bench for thirty minutes, which includes time to dialogue (or monologue, in my case); to contemplate the surrounding landscape; to breathe; to stay quiet; and also to discover that, thanks to the ephemeral concordance of your vibrations and mine, we have been briefly but deeply in love. I was not aware of what was happening to me at the time, but upon reflection, I have to say that I have sincerely enjoyed this improductive and oneiric moment. I guess a strength of your practice is that your theoretical background allows you to create open works, easily appropriated by people. Can you tell me a bit more about this performance?

On Monday, Nov 1, 2017 at 05:37 AM, Tyler Coburn wrote:

Camille,

I also enjoyed spending time on that bench with you. Though I performed for twenty-four people in total, each performance was absolutely different: in the ebbs and flows of attention, in the concatenations and dissipations of energy, in the vibrations that can draw two bodies into
resonance—briefly, as you put it, but deeply. The fact that I fell briefly but deeply in love with twenty-three other people shouldn’t diminish the love I briefly but deeply shared with you :) The performance was part of The House of Dust exhibition at CNEAI and figures into a larger project of mine, called Resonator, which explores the phenomenon of resonant frequency. Supposedly, most things in the world have one or more resonant frequencies; if exposed to these frequencies, they’ll vibrate in sympathy, at greater and greater amplitude, to curative or destructive effect. In a famous demonstration, Nicola Tesla once affixed a pocket oscillator to a building under construction in Wall Street, threatening to bring it crashing down. Tesla’s experiment was cut short, but when viewed allegorically (and somewhat whimsically), it shows the capacity of resonance to destroy capitalism—or at least, to beleaguer its infrastructure.

As is common with my projects, I did a lot of research into the phenomenon of resonance, and I found the one-on-one performance to be an ideal format to communicate this information—to make my theoretical interests the foundation for something more experiential. And so, as I deliver a scripted monologue about resonance to a single person, I gradually call attention to our interpersonal dynamics. Which of my stories, I ask at one point, might pluck a memory of theirs, making it sound, time and again, each vibration larger than the last? What makes them resonate? What resonates with them?

Resonance, as I mentioned, can be curative or destructive. It can instill sympathy with another, and it can also prey on the vulnerabilities of another. It’s a complex, contradictory force, much like love. With this performance, I wanted to stage these complexities and contradictions; to that end, I chose to be candid with the other person about how I’m tuning myself to find their resonant frequencies: I’m instrumentalizing myself to instrumentalize them. Nonetheless, the emotions that result are often genuine, and I’m usually as affected as my partner. The best analogy I can make is with Penn & Teller’s famous ball trick, where they explain how the trick is done at the outset, yet by the trick’s end, the audience is still astounded and enchanted.

If I could connect this back to our previous discussion, then I guess I’d say that this performance (in a humble way) is an attempt to re-enchant the world: to acknowledge the means by which magic can be manufactured, and enjoy that magic, if only for a moment.

Translation by Matthew Cunningham

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