

STOCKHOLM

“Insomnia”

BONNIERS KONSTHALL

The distinction between sleeping and waking is probably one of the most important in the history of modern art, dating back at least to the time when psychoanalysis exerted its influence on avant-garde movements such as Surrealism. Now, with our 24/7 society, the nonstop demands of work, consumption, and even social media are becoming harmful to our health. “Insomnia,” curated by the departing director of Bonniers Konsthall, Sara Arrhenius, presented itself as an attempt to map “the mental and cultural state that this constant accessibility creates.”

What kind of navigation points did this exhibition-as-map offer? In the first place, some usual suspects. Iconic works by Maya Deren, Andy Warhol, and the Croatian Conceptualist Mladen Stilinović delineated a kind of historical horizon. The photographic series “Artist at Work,” 1978, showing Stilinović sleeping, has often been read as an act of resistance to work—a polemical statement that laziness is the real truth of mankind. Warhol’s movie *Sleep*, 1963, becomes in this context an illustration of the dialogue between the human body and the wakeful camera eye. Deren’s dreamlike films *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943, and *The Very Eye of Night*, 1959, function as mirrors of a time when people looked to the unconscious for the strength to escape capitalism—often by way of drugs—in contrast to the present situation, in which more and more people seem to take so-called smart drugs to become hyperconscious and perform better at work.

Seen from this perspective, the more recent works in the exhibition could be understood as responding to a contemporary moment when sleep no longer represents rest, escape, or revolutionary dreams, but is the site of a power struggle. Some of these works simply mirror and affirm the technological mainstream of today, for instance Kate Cooper’s images of perfectly computer-animated women, *Rigged*, 2014, or Rafaël Rozendaal’s perpetually shifting web animations, presented both in the exhibition and online. Contrasting with the acceleration of the death drive that the end of human sleep would imply, Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson’s neo-Surrealist sculptural installations and Leif Elggren’s exploration of the space underneath different couches, one of them being Freud’s own, are still trying to find a place of human autonomy.

Carsten Höller’s installation *Two Roaming Beds (Grey)*, 2015, can be read as an attempt to take part in this current colonization of the night, but it is also an ironic reflection on the desire to make sleeping productive. The work offers visitors the opportunity to spend the night in the museum at the price of 4,600–11,000 kronor (about \$500–

\$1,200), with cheaper tickets for “students, unemployed, members and seniors” available on certain nights. The motorized beds, with pens attached to them, slowly drift around the space, drawing on the floor. If contemporary art is sometimes idealized as one of the few places left for autonomous thinking, Höller’s work seems to suggest that this role can be extended to sleeping—but only if you have the cash.

Katarina Löfström’s video *Downhill*, 2015, was, surprisingly enough, one of the few works in the exhibition presented in a black box. It takes the viewer on a roller-coaster ride in the dark, and even if the concept of the work is almost banal, the visual effect is much more abstract, scary, and beautiful than one might imagine. In affirming the idea of the cinema as a site of visual pleasure, Löfström is also using it as a way to move the viewer from one pleasure (that of riding a roller coaster) to another: that of abstract lighting effects without predefined horizons. The productive contradictions found in Löfström’s and Höller’s works helped make “Insomnia” an unusually thought-provoking exhibition.

—Fredrik Svensk

Carsten Höller, *Two Roaming Beds (Grey)*, 2015, mixed media, each 51 × 82¼ × 39". Installation view. From “Insomnia.” Photo: Jean Baptiste Béranger.

