

Chemical Compounds: Acceleration and Hyper-production in Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens' Visions of a Sleepless World

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Visions of a Sleepless World

Michael DiRisio

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Visions of a Sleepless World*, 2014-2015. Two-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artists and the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: RIML.

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Visions of a Sleepless World*, 2014-2015. Two-channel video installation. Video still.





In a darkened room, a woman sits at a large table. Her surroundings are obscured in darkness, and the heavy table—with its pale wood surface and solid metal legs—is the kind you might find in an office or university. There is a small pile of paper, single sheets that she can be seen reading, sorting, folding and manipulating. At one point the sheets are laid out in a grid covering the surface of the table. The content of the pages is not clear, but this is not really the point anyway; it is the repetitive, mundane acts the woman performs that matter, her movements and gestures, and the state of focused, yet slightly detached attention with which she completes these actions.

This is the subject of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens' *Visions of a Sleepless World* (2014–2015) in which performer Andrea Saemann portrays the woman. The two-channel video installation is framed as the product of a pharmaceutical company promoting drug-induced wakefulness, while a smaller black and white monitor shows the location of the Basel-based pharmaceutical company that inspired the work. The projected video depicts the effects of sleep deprivation, through actions indicating the drug's impact on the subject's perception of time, memory and cognition; from the performer's subdued disposition, this is certainly not a heightened or sharpened sense of perception. Yet her focus remains steady and appears determined, almost disciplined, despite apparent exhaustion that seems to creep in at certain points.

This discipline is indicative of Ibghy and Lemmens' sustained interest in the contemporary logic of labour, where productivity and efficiency are paramount. With the rise and intensification of neoliberalism, this logic seems in many contexts to be reaching a fevered pitch, with the promotion of almost perpetual productivity, hindered only by the need for sleep and other biological requirements; limits that are continually tested, and to which *Visions of a Sleepless World* attests.

The relation between drug use and perpetual production runs deeper than may at first appear, however, and is fraught with social dynamics that often operate in tandem. This is one of the theses of Jonathan Crary's recent *24/7*, a brief book that moves quickly through its material, with writing that is often as charged and fractured as the accelerating digital media that it seeks to address. He emphasizes the way in which "patterns of consumption generated by current media and communication products are also present in other expanding global marketplaces—for example, in the ones controlled by major pharmaceutical companies."¹ In both digital media and pharmaceutical production we are witnessing an accelerated tempo in the release of "supposedly upgraded products," driven by the "fabrication of pseudo-necessities, or deficiencies for which new commodities are essential solutions."² This can be seen in new media, where devices become quickly outdated and are increasingly networked within the

emerging *internet of things*, as well as in prescribed drugs, within an expanded sense of what is deemed prescribable. For drugs in particular, Crary argues that "fluctuating textures of human affect and emotion that are only imprecisely suggested by the notions of shyness, anxiety, variable sexual desire, distraction, or sadness have been falsely converted into medical disorders to be targeted by hugely profitable drugs."³

It is clear in *Visions of a Sleepless World* that the production of this wakefulness-promoting drug addresses no apparent health condition or pressing need. The novelty of challenging biological limits is likely one motivation, though a less obvious factor is the more foundational alteration of the subject's consciousness—the very way in which her subjectivity is produced is itself shifting. If she appears disciplined, persevering despite her fatigue, it is no accident. This shift from autonomy to dependence occurs within a disciplinary regime that employs seemingly endless manipulative techniques to foster social control and self-exploitation. As Crary observes:

Of the many links between the use of psychotropic drugs and communication devices, one is their parallel production of forms of social compliance. But emphasizing only docility and tranquilization bypasses the fantasies of agency and enterprise also underpinning the markets for both these categories of products. For example, the widespread adult use of ADHD drugs is often driven by the hope of enhancing one's performance and competitiveness in the workplace...⁴

There exists then the twofold, seemingly contradictory sensation of both independence and compliance, where the *fantasies of agency* that Crary writes of appear to contrast with the individual's subdued disposition. Yet as Crary notes, the experience of independence or autonomy is merely a fantasy, and its illusory nature only serves to reinforce and further the compliance that might at first appear to be a contrasting state. Thus in the end these visions of a sleepless world are simultaneously visions of workers' self-control and visions of the control of workers, depending on your perspective. Again there is no real contradiction, since it is through this perceived self-control that social control is achieved.

The apparent contradiction is an integral component of this social order. Although Crary does not reflect on the contradiction for long, for a clearer understanding we can turn to Isabel Lorey's *State of Insecurity* in which she critically reflects on the nuances of this tension. Considering the relation between precarious labour and liberal governance, Lorey argues that post-Fordist working conditions promote forms of individualization and segmentation that "demand permanent availability while cutting labour rights and social rights at the same time."⁵ This individualization can be read as both independence and isolation, along with the competing positive / negative implications of these readings. This independence is framed within a modern, male, bourgeois sense of self, care work is "feminized, domesticated and devalued"⁶ and self-care "serves almost exclusively to (re-) produce a profitable and productive body."⁷ While this is positioned as the ideal, the reality is marred by isolation and fragmentation within a brutally stratified social order. The contradiction appears caught in a feedback loop, with supposedly successful, hyper-productive independent workers perpetuating their own self-exploitation.

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Visions of a Sleepless World*, 2014–2015.
Two-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artists and the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: RIML.

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Visions of a Sleepless World*, 2014–2015.
Two-channel video installation. Video still.

Although we have been focusing on the exhausted subject of Ibghy and Lemmens' video, if we turn to the darkened surroundings a further dimension of this social dynamic is brought to light. The plain table, solid grey floor and characterless environment are all reminiscent of an overtly institutional or bureaucratic setting—even the repetitive actions that the subject performs with the standardized sheets of white paper can at times be described quite literally as *paper pushing*. In the highly ordered and regimented bureaucratic world of the post-Fordist 'West' with its fear of that which is not calculable and the "culture of measuring the immeasurable,"⁸ this disciplinary regime finds its home. Bureaucracy is after all intimately connected to steep hierarchies and administered forms of violence—whether through the allocation of resources that deprive some or through the exploitation of others—which though often unseen, obscured by the supposedly 'neutral' institutions, are nevertheless harshly felt.⁹

If the subject in Ibghy and Lemmens' video appears to be not entirely comfortable in her environment, an institutional setting, which is the location chosen by the fictitious pharmaceutical company that produced the video, this is because modern bureaucracy was never intended to promote comfort. It is rather through productive discomfort that it perpetuates its logic; comfort does not, after all, promote profitable hyper-productivity. Add to this the muted intoxication and immense lack of sleep that she is experiencing, and her apparent discomfort becomes even more intensely felt.

In relation to modern bureaucratic governance, Lorey argues that individuals are supposed to actively "arrange their lives on the basis of a repeatedly lowered minimum of safeguarding, thus making themselves governable."¹⁰ Discomfort then becomes an inherent component of this precariousness, fostering both Crary's *social compliance* and Lorey's *governance*, which are really two sides of the same coin. The darker reality is that just as addiction promotes actions that the drug user knows to be self-destructive, this administrative logic is internalized and leads to a form of self-governance. In contrast to older liberal orders, Lorey argues that this self-governance marks one of the defining features of neoliberalism, motivated by talk of "excellence and evaluation"¹¹ and contributes to making the hyper-productive worker view a sleep-suppressing drug as desirable, regardless of the inevitable discomfort and long list of side-effects.

This is only furthered by the normalization of drugs that promote continuous work and consumption. Crary begins *24/7* by reviewing recent tests that the US military has conducted to achieve extended periods of wakefulness, arguing that, as with other military technologies, including those that led to the internet, this innovation would eventually be put into much wider use, where "the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker or consumer."¹² He writes that

pharmaceutical companies would in all likelihood aggressively promote non-sleep products, initially positioned as a lifestyle option, but gradually becoming a necessity for many. Much of *24/7* is concerned with the profound shifts that occur when conventional rhythms of life and work are overturned, replaced by near-constant activity. However, the experience of this activity inevitably would become less intense, less acute.

Like the glassy-eyed subject in *Visions of a Sleepless World*, continually active but achieving nothing, the sleepless would labour to no apparent end. Time would not stop, but neither would it seem to advance; without rest this perpetual activity under the influence of psychotropic drugs could easily become unbearably monotonous (at least for all but the wealthiest individuals). When not at the table, the subject in the video can be seen on the hard floor, moving on or around a bare mattress and pillow. These objects seem to have lost their meaning, their association with rest and relief, becoming instead deflated, sagging objects. Yet this odd scene is emblematic of the logic of labour; the use value of these objects is lost, and they become worthless when not put to work. As these materials are devalued, consumed and exhausted, so too are we within this pharma-fuelled neoliberal paradigm.

1. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Brooklyn/London, Verso, 2014, 55.
2. Ibid., 55.
3. Ibid., 55.
4. Ibid., 55–56.
5. Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, Brooklyn/London, Verso, 2015, 95.
6. Ibid., 5.
7. Ibid., 96.
8. Ibid., 2.
9. See David Graeber's *The Utopia of Rules*, Brooklyn, Melville House, 2015, for an insightful and eminently readable analysis of the social, political and economic dimensions of modern bureaucracy.
10. Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 70.
11. Ibid., 71.
12. Jonathan Crary, *24/7*, 3.

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens,
Visions of a Sleepless World, 2014–2015.
Two-channel video installation. Video still.

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