

Against Inertia - Los Angeles Review of Books

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By Perwana
Nazif

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I'VE HAD TROUBLE distinguishing dreams from waking life from my screens lately.

In *Palermo Palermo*, Pina's dancer slips a ring off her finger and puts it in her mouth, proceeding to drink from her coffee cup. She takes another ring off and sips again, swallowing her coffee with iron as aftertaste.

Sergei Parajanov says, I spent my childhood swallowing my mother's jewelry.

The silver-starred earring I lost to a hug in a Paris train station dreamt to stardust in my intestines, burped to manifestation.

I sent a photo to J of my necklace with the gold P that dangles. I've always thought tenderly of J in the mornings, lost to thoughts, always with his gold chain between his lips.

I get all these moments confused, like déjà vu (I often dream of banal but foreshadowing phrases I hear from particular people or random assortments of cause and effect scenes; or of watching a performance that was canceled, making me question if I actually did watch it; or of an eccentric, dreamlike filmmaker speaking to me of my own childhood) when inclined to feel with my tongue the pair of dice threaded through my necklace (recently purchased, undoubtedly psychically motivated by the above moments). A strange, erotic sensation — jewelry in the mouth as well as dreams, reality and film and video scenes rendered fungible. The paranoia, anxiety, alienation, and confinement of our contemporary moment undoubtedly contribute to this blurring. My chronic insomnia further blurs the line between the day's events, the scrolling of my phone in bed revitalizing the insomnia, then the eventual closing of my eyes.

Perhaps it is the passivity I see around me now that mimics the (more cathartically inclined) passivity with which I dream, surrendering myself to my mind (never have I lucid-dreamed with agency nor attempted to). The passivity of dreaming that has become the passivity of the everyday, where cleaning oneself of the other is normalized. While I am in no way advocating that we break these standardized rules of washing hands, sanitizing, and keeping safe distance, I find alarming the ease with which I have accommodated myself to these rituals. I am afraid of getting used to the routines, having to clean myself of

the “other” after they touch my card at the grocery check-out line, to swipe it for my store-branded ginger-cayenne shot, turmeric root, chard, Have’a Corn Chips, and tofu. Negotiating my unease at having to sanitize ferociously after any human contact, indirect or direct (often with an essential worker), with inadequate profuse apologies mumbled behind a mask. I still experience a disturbing ease as I shop online for neoliberal-sanctioned self-care products, submit to FOMO while watching my virtual graduation the whole way through (with trustees congratulating us into this “new world”), or buy blue light-protecting glasses while overdosing on melatonin as I continue to watch my life play out behind and through screens and consumption.

David Wojnarowicz similarly writes of the passivity of consumption and the acceleration of dreams in sleep. *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* is a collection of dream journals, collages, and other writings on politics, religion and spirituality, civil rights, ants, eyes, locomotives, and Wojnarowicz’s experience of living with HIV. The photocopied zine and artist’s book, with an introduction by Felix Guattari — who in fact never met the artist — accompanied an exhibition of the same name in 1989 at P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York. Wojnarowicz, well known as a photographer, painter, filmmaker, writer, musician, and performance artist, particularly within the subcultures of 1980s and ’90s New York, persistently gestures toward the systemic and deemed-as-natural power dynamics that oppress people of color, women, and those with non-normative sexualities. The images in this book consist of mockups of his finished works as drawings, collages, and newspaper clippings. Reissued from the original 50-copy run by Primary Information, a press known for reissuing artists’ books and writings, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* offers diverse, yet succinct notes on Wojnarowicz’s political ideas and his scattered thoughts on dreams, death, nature, and childhood memories.

The artist calls these typed-out notes “vague gesturing” — motion toward some “frame of reference” for his works on display at the gallery. They are close to my own scattered thoughts about today’s crisis, about our collective wakefulness that is a kind of sleep. As Wojnarowicz writes, in a section entitled “1. Fear of Evolution”:

[S]eeing how sleep slowly has quietly become an extension of the day. It’s that moment of recognition of an entire society being asleep for a very long time and the dreams becoming so tiresome. It’s the moment of recognition of an entire civilization driving forward at a faster and faster rate of speed and the moment of realization that we are asleep at the wheel.

We can see what (invisibly) powers that vehicle motioning us forward in scholar Lisa Nakamura’s essay “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture,” on the commodification and exploitation of digital labor, particularly Navajo women who, for racial and gender reasons, were perceived as mobile, cheap, and flexible labor. Their “flexibility” — i.e., disposability — is reminiscent of the situation of so much of the “essential worker” population today. As we fall asleep at the

wheel, we (refuse to) see not only how “cheap, female labor is absolutely taken for granted as a precondition of digital media’s existence” but also how race and gender are commodified in seamless, hidden, and flexible ways — ways that encourage our drowsiness, our passiveness, and thus reinforce such oppression. Nakamura’s engagement with Baudrillard’s critique of Marx is not far from Wojnarowicz’s activation of Paul Virilio’s writings on technology and war. In both cases, we see the alienating effects — and affects — of production (including cultural production) and consumption. In “UNTITLED: (Falling Buffalo),” Wojnarowicz writes of

a sense of impending collision contained in this acceleration of speed within the structures of civilization; speed of consumption; speed of transportation; speed of transport and mixing cultures [...] the structure of everything revealed in the simple immobility of the legs before the red of a traffic light and the whole street rushing with humans.

Rushing with shut eyes, refusing to accept reality and instead consuming it at great speed, as if it were a dream.

Wojnarowicz’s own dreams, however, are not of a passive nature. Guattari, in his foreword, talks of the artist’s plastic works, his semiotic links and images, as powerful catalysts that seek “to create imaginary weapons to resist established powers.” A “revolt against death,” Guattari calls it, against inertia. The mixture of media, the collaged writings and images, emphasize the material, almost haptic nature of the semiotic — much like Nakamura’s attendance to the materiality of digital labor and cultural production. The sensory force of Wojnarowicz’s work resists and counteracts the inertia of consumption through a dreamlike, incantatory repetition of phrases and images.

Friends tell me of dreams that begin where others have left off. One friend spoke of a dream where a comedian takes a short person to the doctor to get his legs extended, culminating in many broken promises by doctors. N tells me of his recurring dreams, persistent since childhood. Time is coming on hard, I wrote a couple days ago after exchanging and saving more dreams sent to me. Wojnarowicz talks of the accelerations, and rupturing, of time in our histories: “17. TIME,” he writes, as if the capitalized word itself is enough.

In her 1990 analysis of Wojnarowicz’s work, “Out of the Safety Zone,” art critic Lucy Lippard echoes Guattari on the catalytic nature of the artist’s works:

He has learned to use, as he puts it, his “sexual energy as a tool against the state.” In one of his brilliant diatribes against governmental neglect (it appears in the painting *Untitled*, 1988), he says: “I’m carrying this rage like a bloodfilled egg ... and the egg is starting to crack. ... I’m a thirty-seven foot tall one thousand one hundred and seventy-two pound man inside this six foot frame and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release.”

The breaking of this bloody egg returns to me in the phrase “splitting open of the image” that Wojnarowicz returns to again and again — one of his oft-repeated phrases. The pressure of my own dreams and those of ones I love I hope crack and release. A release like: “Gimme a dozen angels; sweet sexy angels; little creatures that fly around like dumb bugs in the wind outside the windows coughing in the exhaust of the buses that stop below.” As Lippard writes: “Wojnarowicz maintains in his art an overwhelming vision of the energies that connect everything to everything else.”

My oneiric review of Wojnarowicz’s oneiric book, a form informed by his writings, is also an attempt to connect everything to everything else. I’ve always found it silly to read about the relevance of certain writings to our contemporary moment when it is a given that everything is always connected. Thus, it goes without saying how relevant *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* is to the collective gestures and systemic exploitations we presently suffer under. So rather than marking the obvious connections, let us instead release the angels, Wojnarowicz’s “sweet sexy angels,” so they can continue to fly around — and maybe, as in my dreams, cough up the rings and necklaces and rubies they have swallowed.

Perwana Nazif is an independent writer and curator in addition to her work as the art director for the Los Angeles Review of Books