

Let all them brains be wicked places

Reality is such a fragile affair. There's never just one to begin with. Every single sound that reaches the ear, sight that meets the eye, stimulus that excites any one of the senses has the power to change the key the world presents itself in. A twig breaks, there is motion, behind me, it flips the switch, this place is different now, before it felt safe, as of this instant it is ripe with danger. There is no measure to just how dull life can be under certain conditions. Blue Mondays are unhappy throughout. A mood is a fact. Even if it may only take a single song on the radio, smile or pill, to make a nervous system snap out of one, into another. "Personal", "individual", "subjective" some people call such sensations, and tend to do so with great assurance: particular social positions (doctor, administrator, kitchen psychologist) are indeed stronger than drugs in how they elevate the place speakers occupy, from pedestrian to top of the world. It's real. What can you do? Stop saying it's not. Anxiety is a world. So is bliss. There's no end to the divergences among the worlds we hence factually inhabit, on a single day, in one brain, or, next to one another, in a family, city, country, or however far you want to zoom out, or in. So the question is less: Alas, where's objectivity? But more: what means are there to alter the nervous states that worlds of experience arise from. Who has the power to use them, on whom, and how?

In *Hypnagogia* Ann Maria Healy throws these questions open. The show is more than simply a trip. It mobilizes different means to rock worlds, layers, and blend them: quivering feathers, spotted screens, giant eyes with no faces, but motion tracking markers on their fleshy lids, watching over the show like sentinels at the portal to other dimensions, moving images with accounts of Zopiclone abuse around town, and tales of self-driving cars on the West Coast, as well as skull caps from science labs where brain function today posits the final frontier. Casually, as in a dream, one world folds into a next, like a set of tunes that each pluck your heartstrings in a markedly different way, but when conjoined in a seamless manner, may, in concert, give you a strong sense of what wickedly intricate soundscapes that harp in your chest is capable of producing. The manner and mode in which *Hypnagogia* thereby creates awareness steers clear of invoking the powers of clinical diagnostics. Instead, it induces a state of critical *clairvoyance* fit for an age when digital, pharmaceutical, and recreational industries align the moods governing our worlds with the interests corporations have in ruling them.

Clinical and clairvoyant insights indeed are worlds apart. Doctors operate on higher planes. Soothsayers live under the same skies in which they read the birds' flight. This is where Healy too puts you, as you enter the show: under the influence of the forces that move bodies, minds and money on a planetary scale today.

Tech's big, pharma's getting bigger, transportation is electric, whether it be physical, in smart cars, or mental, into realms of perfect sedation. The system is nervous. Wired to it, souls tremble. Where to start? Amidst it, says Healy, yet not at the mercy of the powers that be. Contrary to much art and analysis that begins and ends its account of the present on a conclusively apocalyptic note, she keeps moving pieces moving. In the picture puzzle her show presents, she won't have parts conveniently click into place, to spell disaster, and disaster alone. Neither Tech nor Pharma get to have the final word. The power of giving a twist to fate, is just as tangible. Demons of all kinds abound: Living eyes, digital serpents (do you spot them in the field from inside the car?), and a flamboyant bird named George. To sway one of these genies should after all be totally possible. Tap into your imagination. What offering would win you the wondrous spirits' favours?

True, the overall air *Hypnagogia* creates is *eerie*. Faceless eyes follow your every motion around the space. With ominous authority, they stand towering. Meanwhile, the video ride on a self-driving car leaves you anxiously wondering: Is this the tech-lullaby to gently rock overly taxed drivers to sleep, in a cradle of cybernetic omniscience, no path, no switch-back being alien to the all-seeing eye of the vehicle's radar brain? But if so, who *is* the pilot? What if the AI steering lost the plot, or worse, what if it concocted and concealed a roadmap of its own design? I once got picked up in a bullet-proof SUV. Calming that wasn't. On the contrary, the upgrade to car glass the thickness of my thumb got me shakily wondering what I was in for, and what was out there for me, to require such protection? Back in the show I see yellow skull caps invitingly suspended from a cavity in the gallery roof. Were I to don one, would it give surprising clues as to where my head is at? Or would it only confirm what any ad on my browser already reveals? Our desires are no secrets to the demons we daily feed with our searches. We know they know we do. So why not cut the second-guessing, and summon the demons for a heart to heart? This is the lead Healy is taking, convoking the spectres of Tech and Pharma, so in her house they take on mortal forms, for a casual meet and greet. Walk up to the eyes in the sky and say hi to the AI incarnate: Hey Brains, whassup?

What inspires such confidence I can't say for sure, but I would hesitate to put it down to a sense of demonic humour alone. While this sentiment no doubt also grounds *Hypnagogia*, what equally prevails, however, is a profound feeling of troubled compassion. George, the trembling peacock, sets the tone. Star of the video *When dealers are shamans*, he is quick to welcome visitors to the show with a crescent of erect feathers replete with iridescent blue colour patches resembling eyes, eyes, eyes, and more eyes. But despite this majestic display of the power to hypnotize the onlooker's gaze, the video shows his feathers to be vibrating ever so slightly, yet rhythmically.

Like sizzling hi-hats they underpin the audio of the piece, a voice speaking softly of Zopiclone, hypnotic agent, pill against anxiety and insomnia, addictive as hell, and, after the financial crash and ensuing heroin drought flooding the streets, as the drug that can make you sleep the pain away, and replace the threat of no future with the solace of comatose rest. My mom has been on some such Z too, ever since the bombs dropped over Hamburg, when she was young, started blowing up again in her limbic system, as she hit 80. I can vouch for how frightful it is to connect to this deep distress, in another person. Contact sends shock-waves of high-anxiety-voltage from their soul into yours, leaving you raw, or numb, awaiting the next electrocution.

Frankly, in this state I look to birds like George for guidance. Fully alert, feathers up, out and trembling, it would seem he's channeling all the vibrations his surroundings transmit, responding with the plethora of eyes in his plumage to say "I see you". Yet, nonetheless he does not do what empathic people are prone to, namely enter a zone in which limits — where you end and I begin — become blurry, and no boundaries also means no defenses. Not so with this bird. Ultra-receptive, George still stakes his own ground firmly, chest ablaze with his signature peacock blue, he signals unmistakably: "Here is *me*. Where do *you* think *you* are?" It appears to be in his powers to strike the vital balance between being fully attuned, yet equally rooted in his own here and now. I may be imagining things. But some birds seem to know best what it means to be a real witness.

How then to make heads and tails of this apparent contradiction: When each mood seems like a world closed upon itself, why might someone engulfed in a certain state still be hypersensitive to their surroundings, much more so than people in a neutral state of mind? OK, when in fight or flight mode, all senses are wide open, and on high alert, while the mind is narrowly focused on action, peaking on adrenaline. It's also easy to see why one can get hooked on this state. Anxiety is the original amphetamine of the soul! Yet, none of this means that someone tripping on angst didn't get an accurate read of the situation. Do we need more studies to prove that hyper-competitive societies in emotional free-fall today raise stress-levels to those of war-times, or above, as nervous systems are sent reeling day in, day out? Or do you put out your feelers, sense the angst in the air, and quiver, when you find local street corners littered with empty Zopiclone trays? Dare we admit that this is a common condition?

Hypnagogia indeed seems to make a case for that to be so, but, in going beyond mere diagnosis, Healy sculpts several real (and) virtual entities who incarnate a common consciousness of the crisis. George is the first witness. By his side we find the giant upright eyes with motion capture marks on their fleshy lids. Like the evil eye in folk magic their power to ward off demonic forces is born from the fact that they partake in them.

Firefighting firestarters, they watch over you and look out for those bots who come looking for you, to drain your data, charm you, troll you, or evaluate your performance. They will keep the vampires from the door, but not out of nicety. As sentinels from data-hell, they may well be every bit as wicked. But fear them not (just observe protocol, and show respect) for, in this show Healy will have made the required introductions, for you, in her house, to freely mingle with the Eyes. See what happens when you make kin. If you arrive at an understanding, it might no longer be necessary to tape over your computer camera, as the Eyes will see to protecting the virtual door to your life, next time data miners, and spy agencies come knocking.

In the final instance, on the show's second floor, the plumed witness returns, this time, however, not in the guise of a bird, but a bigger body: the size of a Komodo dragon, this creature has many folds of yoga mats for scales, but don't be fooled by its languorous resting position. Like lizards it might go from utter stillness to lightning speed in the blink of an eye. Eyes indeed it boasts almost as many as George. In place of spikes, the yoga lizard's back is studded with peacock feathers parading luminous eyespots. Plated with mats, as this dragon is, it's hard to see its breathing. Only the plumes signal life. They surreptitiously quiver, lightly but non-stop. Mighty matted monster, what spirit mayest thou manifest? The devil of health, wealth, and stealth on whose behest devotees to the IT industries do yoga, keep a trim frame, and ceremonially cleanse their soul from screen-fatigue, before resuming the grind, the day after? Or the very demon to summon for fighting said devil, to dispell the call to work in the name of the lizard brain's aptitude for idling? In art, demonic orientation depends on the key of invocation. So if the overall tone of the show is anything to go by, I guess that this dragon, dangerous as it must be when awake, with all its might, guards the sleep of the over-exhausted, for now.

Sleeping beings are best spoken of in the plural. Wide awake and facing whatever troubles the new day brings, it will appear as if everybody had just their own battle to fight. When asleep, however, it's clearly a different story, for we do dream similar dreams. This may be because it's but a small army of demons that haunts, or guards those who sleep in one house, city or land. So if you do, you will have made their acquaintance, at night. The social sciences too research the subject (of how people process common fears and aspirations), and *quantify* results. Yet, the *quality* of the power they wield in the act of data collection is nothing short of demonic itself: summoning numbers to divine what goes on in people's heads. Why not try converse with the spirits directly who protect dreams, or make them nightmares? This in fact is what Healy does. Her works open up channels for close communication with demons that govern contemporary fates, when night falls on the soul. Psychic realism is the nocturnal science she practices. In this realm, Big Pharma and Tech are presences she engages in many incarnations. A nemesis she must confront on this path, however, is product development.

This branch of psychic realism has its spies out probing souls, in their sleep, for clues as to what fear to monetize and what dream to brand, and sell next!

In the video piece, *My Dreams Won't Resist*, Healy now indeed faces off with the agents of psycho-commodification over their access to the realm of collective dreams. She takes the fight to the foe, as she goes to The Valley and gets into (what we must assume is) a self-driving car. She does not come unaccompanied, however. The voice of her sister is with her. So are other allies you may spot when you look and listen closely: a cryptozoological supersidewinder in a field by the road, lucky socks, and the powers of deep breathing. Together, they embark on a trip into a zone of memories where the two sisters unearth a theft of the soul. Shot from inside the car, the video shows the Californian landscape drift by outside, while, guided by cybernetic vision, the driving wheel gently turns by itself. Synthesised sound sweeps engulf the images, and then you hear the two sisters talk. Both recall visceral dreams of being in a steadily moving car with no driver, able to reach neither wheel, nor pedals, enclosed in the cabin, at the mercy of a fateful force transporting them to an unknown destination. Aside from discovering their familiarity with this scene of abduction, they ask, how did developers steal this dream, make it real, and imbue it with the promise that the autopilot car shall cradle us now, rock us to sleep, and carry us dormant into the future?

Could we seek to wrestle back the dream? Would we not want to reclaim the primordial right to feeling unmedicated anxiety about not knowing what our fate will be? As a species, hell-bent on sucking every last bit of physical, and psychic energy out of our surroundings, we have cause to be terrified by the consequences of our doing. Yet, might we still confront them, not in clinical isolation, but as a coil of connected souls? *Hypnagogia* affirms that yes, we could. Taking the cues from Healy though, it is best done wisely, i.e. with the kind of demonic support that is actually up to the task of liberating you, instead of pulling you down further. So walk through her show again, enter the worlds it unfolds, say hi to the demons that dwell there, and ask them the vital question: Do we see eye to eye? Would you guard my sleep, and aid me in my efforts to be free? If, in return, I invested trust in all dimensions of your psychic reality, monadic, collective, and with or without plumage, dear demon, might we have a deal?

Jan Verwoert, July 2021

Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory. This text was commissioned by the LAB Gallery in response to Ann Maria Healy's exhibition, *Hypnagogia* running from 28th July to 30th September, 202