

Susan Aldworth: The Dark Self

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Sleep presents scientists, who deal in objective, repeatable facts, with a huge problem. Not only is being asleep a solitary act, even the person sleeping cannot give an account of it. What happens to the ‘self’ in this dark time of sleep when we are unconscious but the brain is in a state of high function?” Susan Aldworth 2017

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH:

I have been Artist in Residence at the University of York for three years working on an interdisciplinary project entitled *The Dark Self* primarily with Professor Miles Whittington, Chair in Neuroscience and more recently Professor Michael White, Head of the Department of Art History. Professor Whittington and his team are working on a Wellcome Trust grant researching into what is happening in the brain during deep sleep, a time when the our brain renders us unconscious. There seems to me to be a philosophical conundrum here – if our brains can make the ‘self’ unconscious, then what is the relationship between the brain and our sense of self?

We spend a third of our lives asleep and during that time - with the exception of transient periods of wakefulness and recalled dreaming - we are completely unaware of ourselves and our surroundings. Perhaps this is why there is little written by philosophers about deep sleep, rather treating it as a death-like, negative experience. However, science has shown that in deep sleep our brains are just as active as when we are awake. It seems therefore, that the brain actively switches the *self* off during sleep. Professor Whittington thinks that essentially we use sleep to decide what prior sensory experiences to keep in memory and what to throw away – our brains are sorting out our lives. In addition, those memories we keep need to be ‘filed away’ with appropriate associations so that we can make better sense of them later. It seems logical that such an editing process would work best without the distraction of new sensory input. What is less clear is why ‘the self’ must play no part in this. Deep sleep then is an experience of nothingness but one that is full of fundamental but hidden activity.

What is this transition from consciousness to unconsciousness? What can we know about it? What actually is it about these fundamental sleep-associated activities that are so ‘secret’ they demand we remain unaware of them? Sleep presents scientists (who deal in objective, repeatable facts) with a huge problem. Not only is being asleep a solitary act, even the person who is doing the sleeping cannot give an account of it. What happens to the ‘self’ in this dark time of sleep when the brain is in a state of high function? Is the very real perception of nothingness a critical component of the restorative power of sleep, or just a mundane consequence of the mechanical ‘sorting and filing’ that is required during sleep to keep us cognitively healthy? What is the nature of *The Dark Self*?

MAKING WORK FOR THE DARK SELF:

After many months of experimenting, I fixed on the pillowcase as a visual metaphor for sleep, and decided to use it as a recurring motif in the exhibition. Brains scans were too literal, and it seemed to me that the pillowcase is an object that contained the experience of sleep and also gets transformed during sleep. From being plumped up to becoming reshaped by the indent from the head of the sleeper. Susan Aldworth 2017

Deep sleep is an experience of nothingness but one that is full of fundamental but hidden activity. I have spent much of my artistic career exploring the complex relationship between the physical brain and our sense of self. Sleep offers me an intriguing new challenge - how can I make this experience of nothingness substantial? It was at this point, that I started conversations with Professor Michael White about sleep and nothingness. Artists have long considered sleep a resource for their creativity but this has been primarily in connection to dreaming. The dream state and the fantastical imagery it produces, was revered by the artists of Romanticism and, more recently, the Surrealists, to whom it offered a vision of an alternative reality. The project shares more with attempts in modern art to empty the art work of content completely and confront the viewer with a complete absence or void. I was interested in exploring the unconscious, subjective experience of sleep and confronting the viewer with ideas about this absent, dark self.

The way I work with scientists is investigative and interrogative. I became fascinated by what evidence there was for this deep, unconscious sleep - only brain scans and the outward appearance of the sleeper on the pillow. After many months of experimenting in the studio, I fixed on the pillowcase as a visual metaphor for sleep, and decided to use it as a recurring motif in the exhibition. Brains scans were too literal, and I thought that the pillowcase is an object that contained both the experience of sleep and also gets transformed during sleep. From being plumped up to becoming reshaped by the indent from the head of the sleeper. I decided to make a number of sculptures - **The Evidence of Sleep** – to capture this indentation left by the sleeper on the pillow: a manifestation of the unconscious nothingness of sleep and evidence left by the sleeper. I worked with Stephen Geddes to develop these sculptures.

York St Mary's is a deconsecrated medieval parish church which offers exciting creative possibilities to an artist showing there. The central nave is high and spacious, and demands a poetic and dramatic central installation. As sleep is a subjective state, and something that we all do, I wanted to make individual sleep experiences the central voice of the exhibition. Working on hotel pillowcases (which already had a sleep history) donated from a large London laundry, I found hundreds of people from all walks of life in the UK, to hand embroider their sleep stories and dreams for this central installation - **One Thousand and One Nights**. I have been bowled over by the design and sewing skills of so many people in the UK, and grateful for their commitment and enthusiasm for the project. The embroidered pillowcases are both aesthetic and deeply moving, and hung together, provide a unique testimony of sleep.

Dormez-Vous? is a moving image work which begins with a baby sleeping on a breathing pillow. It goes on to explore the different stages of sleep of three people in a series of dreamlike vignettes and ends with a long shot of an indented pillow. The soundtrack by composer Barney Quinton is based on recordings of his sleeping brain. This work will be projected on to the floor of York St Mary's, as Yeat's poem 'The Cloths of Heaven' has been much on my mind whilst making the work for the exhibition..

The Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light;
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W. B. Yeats

Finally, I made three suites of monoprints - **The Dark Self** and **Golden Slumbers**. I inked up vintage pillowcases with gold and silver ink and printed onto black paper to suggest sleep. The black paper provides a "nothingness" against which I could create portals for the sleeper to fall through into sleep. I also used the ephemeral imprint of human hair to suggest the sweep of sleep across the pillowcase, and to portray the sleeper, and feathers to suggest the journey into sleep. I worked with master printer Nigel Oxley in developing these techniques.