

JAMIE O'CONNELL: AGAINST GRAVITY

In 2014 the highly regarded but relatively obscure art historian Jonathan Crary released his *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, a zeitgeist-capturing book about the way that, in an age of the internet and labour precarity, we have lost our ability to switch off. We are now all on 24-hour call, living in a state of perpetual alert, best expressed – not only physically but poetically – by the thought that our lights are permanently on, that we are no longer able to turn them off and go to sleep. For to sleep is to be lost or to lose time, to fall behind, to drop out, to become unknown, not only to ourselves but more importantly in a world of mobile phones and twitter trendings to others as well. Not only the world but we ourselves, no matter where we live, are now permanently awake, switched on, unable to do anything but carry on the way we began, our faces held up against the light. As Crary puts it in a resonant turn of phrase: “An illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of the end of otherness that is the motor of historical change”.

What more powerful an expression of this ethos of permanent illumination than that world-spanning figure of self-made success and inexhaustible energy, the American pop singer Beyonce, as embodied by the adage “You have the same number of hours in the day as Beyonce”, now available on – what else? – a coffee mug, precisely full of all those artificial substances that will keep you up longer, working harder, making more of yourself? The coffee cup with its lettering is reproduced as a tall stack of posters almost like a religious icon, intended to be taken away by the spectators, in Jamie O’Connell’s recent show at Gertrude Contemporary, *More Day than Beyonce*. Indeed, the poster can even be folded over on itself to leave just red fingernails gripping the cup, which has now become a door, looking not unlike one of those photo-collages of Russian Constructivism, reminding us that the historical avant-garde was itself always part of this productivism, this maximal use of time and resources, as though these were ends in themselves, in an “accelerationism” equally shared by Communism and capitalism.

The other work in the show is much the same – although it is much more elaborately expressed. We see in a series of large-scale photographs a group of men and women holding a motorbike up off the ground on a wooden support, almost as if it were a religious procession. But what exactly is it they are doing? What could be the point of this strange ceremonial? O’Connell is in fact enacting in a first unrealised form the utopian project of one day racing this motorbike on a runway at Svalbard,

located on a Norwegian archipelago deep in the Arctic Circle and covered with almost year-round permafrost. (O'Connell has done his research and found out that Gertrude St in Fitzroy is the same length and orientation as the runway, so his worshippers were carrying the bike the same height above the road as the runway in Svalbard is deep in the ground.) It is at this attenuated latitude, apparently, that a rider on a good enough bike is able to travel at sufficient speed against the turning of the earth that they are able to remain in effect still, their shadow staying immobile under the gaze of the farway sun. It means that the earth is rushing by in a blur under the wheels of an unmoving motorbike, or put otherwise that the motorbike has to go at something like 300 mph counter-clockwise in order to remain perfectly motionless.

It is a beautiful emblem of the utter pointlessness of art, so far ahead of the rest of the world in consuming all of that energy while remaining in the same spot. But perhaps in another way art forms a kind of Archimedean point, a pivot or fulcrum around which everything turns and from where we can reflect as though in a magical bubble upon all of that relentless activity around us. And something of this utopian, restorative power of art is to be seen in another of O'Connell's works, the first one of his I came across, which formed part of his Honours project at Monash University, in which – just as implausibly as riding a motorbike at the speed of the turning of the earth down an Arctic runway – O'Connell recovered a fragment of a meteorite that once fell to Earth during the Ice Age and that he now seeks to send back into space using one of those new commercial flights that promise to put their passengers into orbit. From meteorite to meteor – does art not trace something of the same trajectory, allowing us to float free, if only for a moment, from the weight of the world below us?

Rex Butler