

# The Sleep of Reason

We cannot ask reason to take us across the gulfs of the absurd. Only the imagination can get us out of the bind of the eternal present, inventing or hypothesizing or pretending or discovering a way that reason can then follow into the infinity of options, a clue through the labyrinths of choice, a golden string, the story, leading us to the freedom that is properly human, the freedom open to those whose minds can accept unreality.

URSULA K. LE GUIN, *DANCING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD. THOUGHTS ON WORDS, WOMEN, PLACES* (1989)

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## THE SLEEP OF REASON

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES IN  
CONTEMPORARY ART

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	Prologue .....	9
I	Essays .....	15
	What Does It Mean to Be Human?	
	On the Artistic Allure of Time Capsules .....	17
	Do Bureaucrats Dream of Excel Sheets?	
	On Imagination and Administration .....	43
	Mycelial Metaphors. On Artist-Run Culture, Creativity, and Self-Organization .....	65
II	Approaches.....	79
	Policing the Police. On Forensic Architecture .....	81
	Opening Eyes. Grace Ndiritu: Experimental Pedagogies and the Afterbirth of Modernism.....	93
	Ain't No Mountain High Enough. Reflections on the Photography of Nick Hannes.....	101
III	Conversations .....	109
	Down the Rabbit Hole with Alex Cecchetti and Laure Prouvost.....	111
	A White Cube in the Jungle. A Conversation with Renzo Martens .....	121
	The Chorus of the Body. A Conversation with Otobong Nkanga.....	129
	Breathing, Improvising, and Listening. A Conversation with Tarek Atoui .....	139
	The Precarious Present. A Conversation with Gregory Sholette .....	149
	Annex: Images .....	161

To my mom, my dad, my sister and my other moms,  
and to my dear love Elen (time flies like bananas).

# Prologue



Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* [*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*], c. 1799. Etching, aquatint, drypoint and burin, 21.5 × 15 cm.

A great way to escape the endless downpours in Belgium is to visit museums. Nestled in the historic center of my hometown, Antwerp, there is a small private museum called De Reede. Dedicated solely to works on paper, its entire collection is on permanent display. The museum's name, while evoking a shipping company and Antwerp's maritime heritage, can also be translated as 'Reason'. The dimly lit, serene scenography revolves around three remarkable figures: Félicien Rops, Edvard Munch, and Francisco Goya. These artists share a profound interest in the human condition, particularly its darker facets, often reflecting their own tragic fates. Their work not only addresses existential themes, but also offers an incisive critique of the society in which they lived. On the first floor of the museum, I find a selection from Goya's series of eighty prints, *Los Caprichos* (1797–98), his satirical commentary on, as he put it, the 'extravagances and follies common to all society'. Shortly after their publication, the works were withdrawn from public view, probably under pressure from the Spanish Inquisition.

The best-known etching from the series is number 43, titled *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. I examine it closely with a magnifying glass that I received at the entrance. The etching portrays a man, possibly the artist himself, slumped over a desk with a brush and pen, his face buried in his arms. He is surrounded by nocturnal creatures: fluttering bats, screeching owls, and two felines, perhaps lynxes, their eyes wide open. One of the creatures even clutches a pen menacingly in its claws. What is the meaning of this composition? An inscription on the preparatory drawing for the print, housed in the Prado Museum in Madrid, gives us a clue: 'Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the

mother of all arts and the source of their wonders.’ Rather than simply reflecting Enlightenment ideals by denouncing prejudice, superstition, and ignorance, etching 43 deserves a more nuanced and intriguing interpretation.<sup>1</sup> The artist seems to suggest that it is *only* when reason is abandoned by the imagination that it falls into a state of sleep, plagued by feverish nightmares driven by irrational fantasies. In art, as exemplified by the etching in front of me, the two faculties converge in order to reveal the monsters that emerge when they are separated. These demons, however, are not easily vanquished. The lynx on the right side of the etching, with its wide-open eyes symbolizing pure rationality, seems blind to the creatures surrounding it. Goya’s work tells us that no matter how hard we try to eradicate them, the monsters will always remain with us.

This is a book about contemporary art, and I like to call Goya our contemporary, in that he ‘firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness’.<sup>2</sup> His etching still resonates with us today, which may explain why several artists, including Bill Viola, Damien Hirst, and Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller, have drawn inspiration from it. But that is not my focus here.

I write this at a time when AI-generated books are flooding Amazon, while the real rainforest faces rapid deforestation, the climate is changing drastically, war rhetoric is resurfacing amid sharply escalating geopolitical tensions, a global arms race is underway, human rights are being blatantly trampled, and societies are plagued by ever-increasing polarization and conservative convulsions. This catastrophic climate, or climate catastrophe, forms the deeply disturbing backdrop against which our daily lives unfold. These are the demons of our time. Anyone surprised by these developments simply hasn’t been paying attention. The polycrisis we face has been long in the making, and there’s no easy way out. Contrary to what populist voices claim, there are no simple solutions to complex problems. It is therefore

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1. I partly draw on the interpretation of philosopher Alexander Nehamas. See Nehamas, A. (2001). “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”. *Representations*, 74 (1), 37–54.  
 2. Agamben, G. (2009). What Is the Contemporary?. In G. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (44). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

important to remain vigilant and critical, to avoid slipping into some kind of dogmatic slumber or frenzied delirium.

This is where art comes in — not as a problem-solver, but as a critical dialogue with our times, offering a way to understand the world and our place in it. Much like in Goya’s view, the interplay between reason and imagination allows us to recognize the monsters that surround or even inhabit our existence. Art can provide us with a cultural diagnosis, so to speak, of the ‘great variety of morbid symptoms’<sup>3</sup> manifesting around us. In Donna Haraway’s words, it helps us stay with the trouble.

In this book, you will find a personal account of a range of contemporary artistic practices that articulate many ways of seeing and being. While the texts stand alone, an attentive reader will easily recognize how they are interrelated. Far from being mere eye candy or a financial asset, contemporary art has the power to provoke thought. By embracing ambiguity and ambivalence, the questions posed by artists are not always the easiest to answer. My aim is to situate these questions within a broader cultural context, and to foster a deeper understanding of the stakes involved in present-day artistic production. Addressing the viewer, the listener, and the reader, art serves as an exercise in attention and imagination — two of the most precious and critical human faculties. It makes us take the place of the other, to empathize, to dream, to envision how things can always be different, and to consider how society might be reorganized. Art is what keeps our minds awake.

Since this volume contains selected texts written over the past five years, which have been carefully revised and expanded for this occasion, I wish to express my gratitude to the directors and editors of the journals and magazines where they originally appeared. I am deeply grateful to the artists who have entrusted me with the task of writing about their work, and who have kindly allowed me to reproduce their creations in this book. I would also like to

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3. “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Gramsci, A. (1971). “Wave of Materialism” and “Crisis of Authority”. In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (275). New York: International Publishers.

thank my students, who remind me that teaching is a continuous process of learning. Furthermore, my gratitude extends to Tamsin Shelton for the solid copy editing of the manuscript, Heather Rawlin for the proofreading, to the publishers, Luc Derycke from MER. Books and Lies Poignie from Owl Press, for their unwavering belief in this project, and to Viktor Van den Braembussche for his outstanding graphic design and patience.

A special mention goes to my wife, the fabulous artist Elen Braga, whose love, talent, lust for life, and dedication have been a constant source of inspiration and support, and without whom this book would not have been possible.





# I Essays



# What Does It Mean to Be Human? On the Artistic Allure of Time Capsules<sup>4</sup>

You who have come here from some distant world, to this dry lakeshore and this cairn, and to this cylinder of brass, in which on the last day of all our recorded days I place our final words: Pray for us, who once, too, thought we could fly.

MARGARET ATWOOD<sup>5</sup>

On Valentine's Day 1990, the Voyager 1 spacecraft was instructed to turn its gaze towards its distant home, 3.7 billion miles away. Through its low-resolution camera, it captured an iconic image of Earth appearing no larger than a single pixel. The photo is part of the 'Family Portrait' series, a collection of images taken by the spacecraft since its launch by NASA thirteen years earlier. Looking at the image of the 'pale blue dot', as popular astronomer Carl Sagan described it, is a profound exercise in humility. Amid the eternal silence of infinite space, echoing Blaise Pascal's words, life on Earth shines like a precious gem in the cosmic expanse. Viewed through this lens, the ancient Greek concept of *kosmos* is aptly honored—signifying both universe and ornament, a universal order linking the infra- and supralunar, micro- and macrocosm.

In 2012, the twin Voyager spacecraft escaped the gravitational pull of our sun to venture among the galaxy's 250 billion stars, plunging into the interstellar darkness with only a tiny fraction of the computing power of a smartphone. Each spacecraft carries a time capsule, a golden phonograph

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4. An earlier version of the article (in Dutch) appeared in *HART* magazine, no. 209, December 2020, p. 10–13.

5. Atwood, 2009, p. 193.

record containing over a hundred photographs of humanity, our planet and civilization, along with ninety minutes of what is considered the finest music on Earth. Playback instructions are engraved in an abstract, symbolic language that is assumed to be universally decipherable and understandable. In addition, an audio essay entitled ‘Sounds of the Earth’ offers greetings in nearly sixty languages, including whale vocalizations and everyday sounds such as a thunderstorm, a whistling steam train, a crying baby, and a barking dog. It is astonishing and poetically resonant to realize that these seemingly mundane, almost meaningless, sound messages have been traversing the cosmos for decades in search of an unknown recipient. Sagan, the creator of the Voyager Golden Record, likened it to ‘a message in a bottle thrown into the cosmic ocean’ in the 1980 documentary series *Cosmos*. But even if the gold-plated copper disks were stumbled upon — a highly unlikely scenario — it remains uncertain whether their message would ever be understood. There is a profound brilliance in these quests for meaning and communication, but also a poignant absurdity in the disparity between human intentions and the unreasonable silence of the universe, to paraphrase Albert Camus.

Achieving a univocal representation of humanity is a complicated task. Sagan (1978) explains the challenges he and a small group of scientific advisors had faced in designing the mission. The renowned science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, for instance, recommended that the plaque contain a message to other life forms saying, ‘Please leave me alone; let me go on to the stars.’ Leslie Orgel, a chemist and biologist, suggested including a schematic representation in the form of wavy lines to indicate that Earth is a water-covered planet, along with symbols to represent the molecular basis of terrestrial biology. Astronomy professor Alastair Cameron proposed coating the plaque with natural uranium, as the decay products of this coating would provide recipients with a rough estimate of the time elapsed since its launch. Philosopher Stephen Toulmin cautioned against the tendency in time-capsule messages to portray human beings solely as individuals. He emphasized the need to include representations of humans in communities, working and cooperating together.

## The cosmic abyss

Ultimately, it was astrophysicist and biologist Frank Drake who suggested that a phonograph record be included because it would last much longer than other media, such as magnetic tape. Drake also designed a speculative map of the sun that was featured on the Pioneer plaques launched in 1972 and 1973 aboard the Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft. In addition to Drake’s visualization of Earth’s position in the galaxy, the plaques included schematic nude depictions of male and female figures.

This, in turn, inspired Brussels-based artist Marjolijn Dijkman to create a sculptural light installation in 2016 titled *Mirror Worlds*. In Dijkman’s interpretation, the cosmic map



is contained within the surface of a handmade Japanese magic mirror, which is traditionally revered as an object of worship in ritual settings, giving it a spiritual dimension. The image remains hidden until it is projected onto a white wall by direct sunlight. Drake’s map, however, later proved to be hopelessly inaccurate, making it impossible for the recipient to locate our planet. Of course, this also raises the question of whether humanity ever really wants to be discovered by alien life forms, especially considering that their motives may not be so benevolent.

Dijkman has long been fascinated by the concept of cosmic space and our position within it.<sup>6</sup> For her film installation *Remote Entanglements* (2020), she started with a photograph of giant satellite dishes taken by James P. Blair for the Voyager Golden Record. Upon further research, she discovered that the image was the Westerbork Synthesis Radio Telescope, an aligned formation of fourteen dish-shaped antennae located next to a former Nazi detention and transit

6. See Dijkman & Dittel, 2017.