



Leitartikel

Not getting up: Laziness and Resistance

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There is a story my partner tells about his late father's attempts to grow his hair long as part of his sartorial experiments of the 1970s. Returning from South Africa, and in his late teens, he had allowed his short trim to grow just below his ears; from the story I've heard it was barely long enough to count as bohemian but enough to incite his mother's deep disgust and outrage. Furious in the face of his refusal to cut it back to what she saw as a respectable length and embarrassed at his presentation in public, his mother decided to act and, manifesting her opposition, took to her bed. Refusing to give in, she maintained her protest for days until eventually her defiance won out and he went to the barbers to re-enter the world of 1970s Irish respectability. This story, though likely embellished and misremembered, has always appealed to me, particularly the mode of manifesting your distress at the behaviour of others by refusing to get up. The simplicity of the gesture in just retreating to bed and going on a solo strike, being visibly and defiantly lazy as a mode of either dissent or passive-aggressive control – depending on your perspective – is effective but not immediately so. It requires endurance, persistence, and a withdrawal that contains within it the acknowledgment of your own value within a structure. Having occasionally and amateurishly followed the example, it's also not just about punishment or defiance, it offers a break from those small things that you just can't accept; in my case being hit by an angry toddler, in hers breaking with social codes that defined so much of Irish life in the '70s. Physically manifesting emotional collapse, it is dramatically enacted in order to make clear to those intimate how something feels: I cannot go on as normal if you persist, the action implies, I can merely survive.

Laziness and refusal can be connected in multiple ways. Being lazy is a judgement on a kind of behaviour, not the behaviour itself. Being in bed, with its associations of sleep and rest, is something that is heavily coded. The right amount of being in bed at the right time for the right reasons is judged as moral: to those who care, early nights and early mornings indicate productivity and self-discipline; late nights, lie-ins and sleeping during the day demonstrate to some a lack of character, their association with indulgence both of our lazier instincts and perhaps also sleeping off the effects of drink and drugs adding to this. Staying in bed is the most fundamental form refusal can take. Even Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* who routinely refuses to work with the phrase 'I prefer not to' got up and went into the office. A failure to get up and dressed, let alone leave the house in order to engage with the public realm, and instead to linger in the private domestic setting of the bedroom points in our shared imaginations to either indolence or illness. Whether implying a moral failing or the inability to cope with the pressures of life, extreme laziness is always read as a symptom. When chosen deliberately it is the marker of something intolerable.

As an art historian, thinking about staying in bed brings to mind a number of examples of artists who have done just this as part of their practice. Probably the most famous instance of people staying in bed as a means of protest is Yoko Ono and John Lennon's *Bed-Ins For Peace*, staged in the Netherlands and Canada in 1969. Following their secret marriage in Gibraltar, and aware of the intense interest of the press and the likely frenzy that would ensue when news of their wedding emerged, they made the decision to use the opportunity to mount a protest against war. Calling for peace in the context of the Cold War, escalations in Vietnam, and massacres and famine in Biafra, Ono and Lennon allowed the media access to their suites at the Amsterdam Hilton and the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, Montreal for ten hours a day as they spoke about peace, inviting friends and antagonists in to discuss conflict and its resolution, and promoting their cause from their bed. A well-known photograph taken on the first day of the Bed-In shows the couple sitting closely together in the middle of a huge bed, propped up by pillows against sweeping views of Amsterdam through the large windows behind them, the bed is scattered with objects including flowers, gift baskets, a guitar and tape recorder. They are dressed demurely, Ono wears a long-sleeve white night-gown and Lennon a pair of white button-up pyjamas, seeking to subvert the media expectation of something salacious in their invitation to come to their honeymoon suite, especially after the cover of their *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins* had featured them naked and had been censored by distributors and impounded by some authorities. Instead they present themselves as quiet companions, it looks more like a pyjama party than a honeymoon, they clutch individual flowers nodding towards the Flower Power movement. With their punning handmade signs that read 'Hair Peace' and 'Bed Peace' framing the scene, an almost childish humour, characteristic of Ono's plays with words as part of her practice, is introduced to their performance and places it firmly within the realm of art-actions rather than the fraught and sometimes violent world of the New Left.

Whilst involved in the serious business of peace – and sincerely seeking to influence those who waged war, including the multiple politicians invited to come and speak to the couple in their bed – the action itself is slight and literally undemanding. It is framed in these terms by Lennon who portrays it as a means of putting the message across that is accessible to all: 'It doesn't cost anything, so anybody can do it. Give your holidays to peace—just lie in bed for a week. It will all help', he claims. But how it helps is left unresolved; the social benefit of lying in bed here remains unclear, it is doing something – or more accurately *not* doing something – but the change that this leads to, especially if you are an ordinary citizen rather than a world-renowned pop singer and conceptual artist at a moment of heightened fame, is left nebulous. Indeed, this was the focus of some criticism of the action: it hardly involved putting yourself on the line for the cause. A comparison to Bernie Boston's *Flower Power* photograph starkly reveals the difference between a bed-in and other forms of peaceful protest. In this George Edgerly Harris is putting carnations into gun barrels, the passive gesture is a deliberate resistance to visible violence, the extreme threat mounted by the polished uniformed military police who hold their rifles aimed at the crowds is undermined by a teenager in a thick, somewhat scruffy jumper and messy hair refusing to acknowledge the threat. Ono and Lennon, a wealthy couple who were, as journalists at the time pointed out, able to afford expensive hotels as well as the time off work to make staying in bed viable, suggest not a charge to the barricades, but a personal strike. Lie still until they stop, the couple implore, if enough people do it, then change is possible. Whilst not the revolutionary call to arms mounted by others at the time, the invitation is issued to the unmilitant, to people who quietly object asking them to simply remove themselves from the normal course of things, to manifest their disgust at war and hope for peace by refusing to engage, to launch a mutiny from bed.

A purist for the notion of taking to bed might argue the *Bed-Ins* do not fully count. After all, part of the gesture is about retreating into private space, not making the private public as Ono and Lennon do. The refusal here is part of their wider collaborative practice evidenced by the tape recorder and guitar, and the signs that use the lexicon of Ono's work. This is a media action designed to draw

attention to the discourse that they wanted to raise, not an out and out refusal to engage. In the celebration of heterosexual communion represented in the image of the couple luxuriating in a pristine bed, waited on by staff who bring them food and presumably clean up after them, it feels more like the next stage of a hotel room interview in which the participants have become so tired of the way things are done that they have climbed into a bed to deliver their pre-determined message. By contrast, staying in bed in reaction to an unacceptable haircut involves no such orchestration. Seeing something intolerable, (in)action is taken, although of course designed for an audience of at least one, it is entirely contained within the home, a familial reckoning wherein domestic structures and their normal operations are quietly upended. I'm presuming that this is the kind of protest that would be unlikely to be openly declared, there is an intimacy in it, requiring vulnerability and familiarity: it is slightly ridiculous and overly dramatic, a kind of behaviour that is only possible in close relationships. In Ono and Lennon's taking to their bed, there is undermined something of the proto-feminism I see in (or perhaps more likely assert onto) my grandmother-in-law's gesture, a refusal of domestic labour and the implicit approval expected of the mother. Perhaps staying in bed is, then, a feminist act, particularly if it is a woman who refuses to get up. Not performing those behaviours associated with prescribed femininity, neither in terms of domestic competence, nurture, enthusiasm or being sexually available and inviting –even if in bed, there is a denial of all activity implied – the expectations of the role are refused at the heart of patriarchy's stronghold, the nuclear family.

Tracey Emin's work *I Don't Think So* (2000) helps to develop the idea of what staying in bed might mean. In this black and white video which lasts nearly eight minutes, the artist is filmed sleeping, possibly with someone lying next to her, with the sound of an infant crying in the background coming through. It disturbs her rest, and she tosses and turns, but ultimately she rolls over and goes back to sleep. Emin's work is closely tied to a turbulent biography, drawing on both her difficult early experience in which she was subjected to sexual abuse and rape, poverty and difficulties with mainstream education, and her adult sexuality, misogynistic bullying, traumatic experiences of abortion, depression, drugs and alcohol, as well as close friendships, love affairs and intimacy. In line with this, *I Don't Think So's* refusal is ambiguous, tied in particularly to the complex picture of maternity as something conflicted and restrictive that runs throughout her practice. An ambivalence about motherhood is one of the key themes in her work, she has no children and has included frank discussions of her experience of abortion in her practice. Her 1996 work, *How it Feels*, for example, involves the artist emotionally describing the termination of one of her pregnancies to the viewer, including the obstruction of doctors, its visceral realities and its aftermath and effect on her mental health. Her mother's story too registers the complicated realities of caring, in spite of being portrayed as a nurturing, warm presence in Emin's life, the artist recounts in the opening pages of her autobiography *Strangeland* that she and her twin brother were nearly aborted due to her mother's fears for them coming into a world where they could be subject to racial discrimination on account of their Cypriot heritage. She also makes her mother's objections to her having children a part of the work in the video *Conversation with my Mum* made in 2001. In the film, Emin and her mother sit at a kitchen table drinking tea discussing how kids would restrict the artist and how having children influenced her mother's life. Emin argues for the difference between their circumstances, but still her mother is adamant: 'I just want you to have your mind free, free spirit, you are a free spirit and once you've had a child you're not a free spirit. Your mind is different. Your mind becomes a different thing'. Although she agrees with the premise of her mother's argument, Emin still pushes back wondering aloud if her decision not to have children is influenced by her mother's certainty that she should not, and asking 'but what if I get to the point in my life when I get tired and bored with the narcissism, bored with the selfishness and actually want to see the world through someone else's eyes?'

With this in mind there are multiple ways in which we could read Emin's refusal to get out of bed at the sound of infant cries in *I Don't Think So*. Art historian Lorna Healy has pointed to this, arguing that it could suggest the artist's trauma suf-

ferred after abortion, with the voices of babies standing in for the potential children who remained unborn, but at the same time, it also feels like it validates her decision not to become a mother as she is able to sleep, rather than dragging herself away from the comfort of bed in order to care for others. Either way, what is pictured is a woman who is definitively not getting out of bed, unlike other works which show performers sleeping, such as Andy Warhol's *Sleep* from 1964 in which John Giorno is filmed by the artist over the course of five hours and twenty minutes, lying still and sleeping peacefully. In Warhol's film, we watch the course of sleep and are rendered voyeur to a private act, a calm, restful intimacy develops over the course of the film as we look at close up images of the subject's naked skin, and his still body, but we are not asked to witness a refusal to be awake. By contrast, in *I Don't Think So* we watch Emin sleep through the infant's cries that go unanswered, this sleep is one in which the subject is not getting up; although disturbed, Emin makes the choice to stay in bed, to be asleep rather than awake, tired and tied to the labour of care.

This ambiguity also registers in one of her most famous works, *My Bed*, which was first made in 1998 and which offers another perspective on not getting out of bed. According to the artist it was produced out of a moment of breakdown in which she did not leave bed for four days, and when she eventually did bring herself to get up and out of the small bedroom, she looked back in saw 'this absolute mess and decay of my life'. Deciding to display the bed and the detritus that surrounded it in a gallery setting, the installation included crumpled sheets stained with bodily fluids, dirty underwear strewn on the floor alongside empty bottles, packets of cigarettes, packaging for the pill, cigarette butts, razors, used tissues, Polaroid photographs of the artist and soft toys. In its first iterations there was also included a rope tied into a noose hanging from the gallery ceiling, though this was omitted in its display at the Tate as part of her nomination for the Turner Prize in 1999. Transposing the grimy bed along with the rubbish and waste that had gathered during her collapse into the gallery with little intervention, *My Bed* offered the viewer an encounter with the literal site of this experience, seemingly unprocessed for presentation, they were brought face to face with a trace of the artist's indolence, itself a symptom of a turbulent and troubled moment in her emotional life.

The activities that are registered in the detritus that surrounds the installation are all things that are normally associated with beds: rest, sex, indulgence, comfort. However, each is shown at its excess, rest has become overwhelming; no longer luxuriating in a clean, crisp bed instead the sheets are dirty, presumably sweaty and visibly stained, the bottles and fag packets show the aftermath of a destructive binge. The sheets are piled on the left of the bed in a way that suggests a person throwing them off as they leave, the litter on the floor lies on one side too implying that despite the visible signs of sexual encounters, this is not a bed that is shared but is instead, as the title suggests, Emin's alone. Whilst none of this should receive criticism, the stereotypes that it invokes are those that rile the socially conservative, poking as it does at those myths of conventional femininity and creating a mise-en-scene of drunken excess, mess and casual sex. With this excessiveness, the kind of staying in bed it stages is not appealing, it does not invite the viewer to join in as Ono and Lennon do, it is not restful and intimate as in Warhol's vision, nor is it the ambivalent upside of not having children seen in *I Don't Think So*. In this version it is clammy and uncomfortable, it asks us to imagine that horrible feeling of being sweaty and greasy in sheets so crumpled that they bunch beneath us uncomfortably as we are made groggy and weak by sleep itself. Without the defiance of taking to bed, or the idealism of bed-ins, the emotional toll of feeling trapped by inactivity is pictured in this object that acts as a metonymy of this experience.

Although certainly not a taking to bed as a form of dissent, the critical response to Emin's work offers some sense of the specific potential of this kind of protest. Hers is a contentless refusal in that it records an unintended collapse, however it was the cause of ire and dismissal in the press, seen as either not really art, or art that was too forthright, too emotional in a way that critic for the

Telegraph Richard Dorment suggested ‘adds up to so little of real interest’. To my mind, it is the laziness perceived in Emin’s work that invites such censure. Part of the Young British Artists group that formed during the heightened commercial art scene in London in the late 1980s, it is work that is not complicated or formal enough for its critics, emotional but not in a way that is processed into an expressionist language, conceptual but not intellectual. Although absent, the central image of *My Bed* is in fact the lazy and lazing body of the artist who laid there passive for days at a time, with the aftermath of this on show we are left to imagine her in this moment of collapse, sometimes fucking or drinking, but mostly doing nothing at all. In creating this image of the passive body Emin introduces an irritant into the gallery space where normally women are posed and beautiful. Contemplating someone being inactive, deliberately refusing to engage with the public world and its base expectations infuriates its detractors, which seems to be made worse by this being explicitly framed as a woman’s bed, one that breaks with so many gendered norms.

Emin’s version is a long way away from the idea of taking to your bed as a way to ensure a tidy appearance; I suspect that my partner’s grandmother would not have appreciated being linked with someone who represents the breaking of so many conventions she would have considered moral, especially given that for her ear-length hair was apparently a transgression too far. However, taking to bed as a reaction to the behaviour of others similarly puts the passive woman’s body at the centre, acting as an irritant it is simply the knowledge of this inactivity that seeks to force the other’s hand: with everything they do, knowing that you are sitting there passive and unyielding in your bed works in their imagination and, if successful, makes them question whether their stand is worth it (after all it was no surprise to my father-in-law that she objected in the first place, his refusal to present himself within her standards came first). In saying this, I am not suggesting that taking to your bed is necessarily a productive or well-conceived way to work through a disagreement, but maybe that’s part of its appeal. It is pointless and petty, doggedly so, it requires a determination to do something that is over time uncomfortable and boring, to sacrifice in the smallest way to make visible the unhappiness caused by others’ choices. Maybe what we need from time to time is a chance to refuse the logic of activity and productiveness, of behaving ourselves and maturely and calmly facing those small frictions that aggravate on a daily basis. So as a challenge and an action for change I say let’s be defiantly lazy. Lie down. Close your Eyes. We’ll work through it later, we’ll be reasonable later, but right now, let’s wallow, let’s not get up, let’s stay in bed.

Illustrationen

Yoko Ono und John London im Amsterdam Hilton. Photo: Eric Koch, National Archives of the Netherlands/ Fotocollectie Anefo.

Link Tracy Emin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv04ewpiqSc>

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