

SEAN COOPER

#CasperNights

On my way off the patio I can't tell who's winning and who's losing here—the museum, the mattress company, or the guests.



Photograph via Casper.

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ON A RECENT THURSDAY NIGHT, a gig economy Hyundai Sonata, not yet robot-operated, drops me off outside the Institute of Contemporary Art, the University of Pennsylvania's modern museum, popular among the art/culture townies for its always free admission and topical, nearly irreverent exhibitions. Tonight the ICA is hosting an after-hours happening in collaboration with Casper, the three-year-old mattress and bedding startup headquartered in Manhattan's Flatiron District. Unlike evenings sponsored by a major bank or luxury automaker, where logos appear on brochures or the company name gets billing in the title of the event itself, this is what brand strategists refer to as an "experiential marketing event," a soup to nuts immersion in the values, aesthetics, and sales funnel of the Casper brand. The ICA's spacious atrium is sleek and cold. The tall windows, sterile white walls, and polished cement floors take the form of a perfect, empty vessel into which Casper can pour itself, like a blue laboratory liquid in a glass beaker. As I join the others I pull out my smartphone, which contains my zero-dollar ticket, and feel already a kind of underwater sensation at the beginning of my four-hour brainsoak in Casperness.

The Caspers are everywhere. They are all in their twenties: white, black, Asian, male, female; nice jeans, nice sneakers, smartwatches, each wearing blue and white striped T-shirts, like the waitstaff at a nautically themed restaurant. They float about the atrium weaving between the gathered guests, up and down the stairs, behind doors, into rooms, out of rooms, calm and low-key, their cellphones in hand and run of show paperwork on clipboards. With only a modest hint of distraction in their resting faces, they listen to guests' questions while mentally attending to the next five tasks they must complete to ensure the smooth coordination of the night's many activities. That everything is free and every staff member is smiling and accommodating and unburdened by any cash or credit transactions means that all of us, perhaps fifty or sixty guests now in the atrium, can indulge in the warm embrace of the startup's hospitality, in exchange for nothing more than our email addresses and the opportunity to be persuaded.

The QR code on my ticket is scanned by a smiling, gum-chewing employee who directs the atrium line to a table where three of her colleagues energetically distribute blue Casper tote bags and \$50-off mattress coupons. The line slowly makes its way up the stairs and out to the large, second-floor patio. All of the guests are to me as I am to them, as everyone in the building is now to one another: not a person but a participant. Our database records have been updated to reflect tonight's attendance, now marked down alongside what is already known: demographic information, purchase profiles, physical appearance, next of kin. Reflexively, I too begin to

categorize my fellow attendees in the manner of an algorithm, or a crime report. A white male, twenties, appears at the top of the steps w/ a catering tray. He wears the tucked-in black T-shirt and tight black jeans of a stagehand; he passes the guests gooey triangles of cheese quesadillas. He nods in response to the appreciative thank yous and offers guests thick napkins branded with the company logo: a thick, bland C, its top half altered to suggest, vaguely, a pillow on a bed. The paper goods are a not-so-subtle reminder that when we wipe the grease from the corners of our mouths we must do so courtesy of the company's largesse.

There is a low-grade panic leaching through the development and philanthropy departments of Philadelphia's museums and art institutions—a terror provoked by the troubling fact that as the 20th-century patron class dies off, no new monied generation has come forward to replace it. Forced to bypass the recession-hardened boomers, who could barely afford to put their kids through college as they pinched pennies for their own austere retirements, museums and art organizations in smaller cities now aggressively court younger, urban semi-professionals, who, though mostly broke (except, of course, for those in tech or finance) bring with us social media cachet and a tendency to photograph and share. This offers nothing in the way of earned revenue but can provide an Associate Director of Giving a wobbly glimmer of hope: among the millennial masses drinking away museum endowments on imported beers at dozens of weekly Young Friends and after-hours parties there might be—God, please let there be—a hashtagging art lover who one day comes into a good chunk of her family's money. Perhaps that same art lover, old soul that she is, will bore of the currently popular trends for Giving Back, like buying out local newspapers gutted by Facebook or bestowing a new computer lab to a nephew's day school. She will long for the philanthropy of generations past—to see her name up on a gallery wall, or on a plaque next to the museum library, the same one she once snuck off to with the after-work crew to puff tough on a vape pen and take selfies while everyone sung along to a local DJ's remix of "Big Pimpin'."

TONIGHT IS THE FIRST OF FIVE STOPS on the Casper Nights summer tour. In the coming weeks, the startup will bestow the Casper experience on cultural institutions in San Diego, Seattle, Houston, and Minneapolis. Mid-market millennial urbanites in these four cities will encounter evenings similar to tonight's: cocktail hour, cheese table, guided tours, and a screening of Michel Gondry's *Science of Sleep*, which is tied thematically to the Casper Nights experience with the barest of thread.

I post up at a high-top between the Casper DJ booth and the Casper Photo Booth, where guests voluntarily pose in small groups against a black, starry night backdrop. They hold branded pillows and lean their heads awkwardly into semi-sleep repose, some with eyes open, some with eyes closed, as an attendant in daisy dukes helps them navigate the touch screen, which emails them the photos. The machine takes a minute or two to print out a hard copy for every guest willing to wait; even the Polaroid has a thick, Casper blue border. There's a lovely breeze blowing in from the wide boulevard the museum shares with Urban Outfitters, and the bartenders pour heavy. The rosé and Midnight Mules are ordered four to one over the Peroni and virgin cucumber mint tea. Those with tattoos roughly outnumber the uninked two to one. Bearded males stand three to every clean-shaven face. The tanktop to non-tanktop ratio is about one to five, and of those in tanks one in two is neon. Converse is the most popular shoe by a factor of four, and every third person is in some way bespectacled, either in sunglasses or straight-up scripts. Tote bags are the dominant accessory, with guests who brought their own tote numbering three to those shouldering the door freebie. The patio is dotted by at least a half dozen of the tote du jour, the red one from the Strand.

The party photographer chats up guests and snaps voluminously, while the videographer strategically positions his tripod around the patio to capture the millennials and their mason jar cocktails in intimate proximity to something, anything, emblazoned with a logo. Both men are smartly dressed and skilled in the deferential gestures and easy smiles that allow them purchase of their subject's private space. They focus primarily on the dozens of guests lounging on the long series of mattresses, which—although they call to mind the sleeping quarters in an army barracks, glossy aluminum frames lined up neatly side by side, sheets bright white, pillowcases freshly laundered—fit right in here, tonight, in a modern museum. Everyone looks comfortable, though I feel compelled to avoid direct material contact. If I begin investigating the wares I'm sure I'll realize I'm well overdue for a new mattress at the same time as I realize I can't afford it, which will provoke inevitable depression. At the end of the beds a slim, blonde, ponytailed white woman in a V-neck T-shirt sketches the guests one by one, handing them the notebook page with a satisfied flourish. A self-described "product launch ambassador," she refers to these as fashion sketches: pencil lines with splashes of bright red and blue watercolor, the young and chic guests rendered into young and chic avatars to be taken home as art and pinned to the refrigerator.

Interspersed w/ enthusiastic shouts of "Hashtag Casper Nights!" the DJ hastily reminds us, in an obligatory tone, that the museum is also providing guided "Sleep Walks" of its collection. On my way off the patio I can't tell who's winning and who's losing here—the museum, Casper, or the guests. The museum preserves its street cred because of the hot beats and critical mass of social media cool kids but tarnishes its modern art pedigree by hawking discount mattresses in order to get said cool kids in the door; Casper shells out big bucks in staff hours and production costs but further seeps into the collective millennial consciousness as the de facto affordable bed company; the guests score decent snacks and mid-shelf booze and only have to fork over their personal information while participating in a Casper commercial as unpaid actors who look uncannily like people at a party we all know but who also coincidentally share a deep passion for one particular bedding manufacturer. By dint of being underemployed and drowning in student debt, and thus unlikely to fill the museum's coffers or spring for new bedding, my nod goes to the millennials, if only on account of the free almost-dinner and how hard they're currently hitting the open bar, everyone double-fisting beers and cocktails.

In the atrium I'm stopped by a Vietnamese male, 23, thick black hair past his shoulders and vintage, gold-rimmed glasses on his narrow nose. We talk about the camera I'm carrying over my shoulder, which I often bring when reporting to collect physical evidence that corroborates the reality that would otherwise seem to be an unconvincing fiction concocted in my head. Danny is a professional model and budding photographer, currently acquiring technical chops from the pro photogs who shoot him—mostly for urban lifestyle and clothing campaigns. He's just back in from Miami for a fall collection shoot. He's also a DJ, event promoter, and proprietor of an eco-friendly clothing line. In a few weeks he's producing a concert headlined by Cam'ron. He tells me his

clothing line, City and Country, “kind of put me in the hole. People don’t realize how expensive it is to source sustainable materials. Like Patagonia can do it because they’ve got scale. But once I get my financials right, make some more supply chain connects through the companies I’m modeling for, it’s going to be tight.” I ask Danny his opinion of the Casper event, from a production point of view, and he says it’s alright but the bigger corporate parties are better because they serve better food, and people care about food. Appreciative of his ability to move fluidly between the domains of entertainment, professional modeling, and clothing design, I ask him how he maintains his balance. “It’s a hustle out here man, you’ve got to eat.”

THE GUIDED SLEEP WALK is led by a museum docent, rotund and girthly bearded, blue plastic glasses, blue T-shirt, dark jeans, pink polka-dot Reebok hat flipped at the brim, and a massive carabiner clipped to his belt loop of a gauge thick enough to hold his house keys and also be useful for rock climbing at high elevation. As our small tour group makes our way into the loft-like exhibit space, the bass bump of the DJ’s four-on-the-floor recedes, and the quiet of the art space takes over, punctuated by odd sounds that escape from the headphones and small speakers that accompany many of the art pieces. The exhibit of about a dozen works, *Myth of Marble*, focuses on how, as the curators write in the program guide, the internet serves as “a way to image and imagine the world as both a site of possibility and a set of limitations.” As we walk, stop, listen, walk, stop, listen, this statement quickly fails its own ambition, like an aspirational, unachievable manifesto for a kind of contemporary art that makes sense of the accelerating disparity between the potential good our modern tech is capable of realizing and the actual boredom, alienation, and exploitation that define our daily felt experience.

Our group passes before a seven-foot-tall marble polygon and a flat-screen TV in a corner of the room bathed by can-lights in a soft magenta. The screen displays vivid close-ups of human orifices, ears, nostrils, and an anus. On-cue, our docent drops into his routine, isolating the human (soft flesh) from the artificial (the screen) and convincing me that he is terribly bored and trying to pass the time w/ a game of art speak chicken, tallying up how many times he can express his admiration for “the juxtaposition of x and y” before someone in our group asks if he’s fucking with us.

A large section of the exhibition is occupied by a bright blue carpet with white painted lines flanked by canvases of abstract imagery, clip art, and modified browser windows. A white female, mid-twenties, takes a break from shooting photos of the exhibit on her phone to nudge the elbow of her white male companion. He opens a yellow hardback sketchbook to take pencil notes on the docent’s commentary. The piece before us, *Of Defective Gods & Lucid Dreams*, contrasts the natural boundaries of the earthly world with the seemingly endless boundaries of the virtual. Unfortunately, due to a technical error, the 3D headset and accompanying hand controllers have been rendered useless. Once they’re back online, our docent tells us, we’ll be able to enter the art piece’s virtual realm, where, now inside, we’ll meet a giant black blob that tosses us random 3D objects culled from open-source libraries—staplers, park benches, coffee makers—that we can stretch, shrink, and bend with the controllers. Once the objects have been satisfactorily manipulated guests can toss them into a dark abyss that lurks somewhere in our field of vision. “We do ask though that you remove your shoes when you come back to participate in the experience,” our docent adds, confident the glitch will soon be resolved. “To keep the carpet clean but also to juxtapose being in the virtual world with your feet still feeling the tactile reality of the carpet.”

At the end of the tour the dutiful note taker leverages his expression of keen and careful interest by asking the docent if there are any internship opportunities at the museum—unpaid is fine. They head off to fetch an application, and I return to join a hundred or so guests on the patio, where the music is many clicks louder and the vibe is decidedly rich kid house party/parents out of town. I smell dulcet whiffs of very good weed and see empty mason jars and beer bottles everywhere. Postures are subdued and relaxed. Limbs hang loosely over the edges of the mattresses, occupied to capacity by the inebriated and satiated. A pair of young white dudes make out hard; on a nearby bed a group of girls pose for a duck face selfie.

I can’t tell if the party is a relief from the mediated art experience, or from a life lived online—a social escape from lonely digital chaos. I came to the museum to share in a moment with others who feel the creep of the internet slipping its way past the borders of work, commerce, and recreation and into the private space of thought and solitude. I had naively considered the possibility that in the spirit of an exhibit that spoke on paper about pushing against the nefarious elements of our favorite technology there would be a parallel spirit, in real life, calling out the brand sponsor as suckers. As if we’d so easily give ourselves over, congregate as consumers, pose for the photographs, product test the pillows for a video hit. I look around the patio wanting to see somehow someone saying all right, OK, I think that’s enough, look how far we’ve taken it, but once I hear the music and taste the sliced fruit I realize there are no words available to form that kind of resistance.

The DJ boosts up to max volume, and the bassline of Talking Heads “Native Melody” rumbles from his system, vibrating up my spine and into my ears. Some are now drunk enough to sing along, “I feel numb, born with a weak heart / The less we say about it the better.” As I head out to grab a seat for the night’s finale/film screening I see a slim guy, pale, forties, his white button-down shirt entirely unbuttoned, his smooth white chest well-exposed, his shirt tails tucked into tight, bright red and white checkered pants. He sits down on the ledge by the dessert table and slowly nibbles at a chocolate-dipped cookie; in his other hand he holds a fashion sketch of himself, the breeze drying the paint.

THE LINE INTO THE EXHIBIT ROOM is thirty long. Tall white doors part open as the Caspers flit in and out; we watch as the choice spots are quickly scooped up. There, on rows and rows of mattresses set atop floor rugs, pairs and trios of guests settle in, their shoes and tote bags placed in small piles besides tiny nightstands. A young couple, he in overalls, she in an Arcade Fire tour T-shirt, watch the trailer for the Gondry film on his

Samsung Galaxy. *The Science of Sleep* is about a man who suffers when his surreal dreams swirl with his objective reality. They depart the line once they're able to move up a bit and take an Instagram of a room exquisitely staged for social media.

All the beds are filled, so I'm escorted by an attendant to one of the side benches. Fresh popcorn is scooped from the theater-style red popcorn machine into logo-adorned, blue-and-white-striped popcorn bags and delivered to the bedded guests. Other employees pass out bottled water and candy from massive bowls. One guest tucks her extra candy under her pillow like it's money from the tooth fairy, to surprise herself when she wakes up. Behind me the docent from the tour is on a laptop DJ'ing a playlist of soft electronic music. On the screen, movie etiquette suggestions have been tweaked to stay on brand. "Please turn off your cellphone . . . unless you're tweeting about Casper Nights!" I'm joined on the bench by Monica, the leader of the Casper experiential marketing team.

Monica is cordial if a bit stiff, in that way of many communications professionals innately struggling to square private human thought with the abstracted first-person plural language of marketing they must use to evangelize on behalf of their employer's brand. I ask her if she considers tonight's experience a success. "This has been so much fun for us because we're opening up this space to the community and giving them access to things they might not get to enjoy doing during the day," she says. About 1,000 guests came through tonight, she adds. "And now we can build that relationship with them here, beginning their customer journey, giving them a great experience so that when they come to make that decision about their mattress they can consider us. You know, there are really only three things you do on a mattress, go to sleep, have sex, or watch movies. And we want to provide a great time doing one of those things tonight."

Monica excuses herself to tend to an issue at the door, walking past the photographer and videographer, who are capturing the fifty lucky guests eating popcorn on pillows and mattresses as the company logo fades out on the front wall and the movie's opening scene begins to play. A thorough wave of panic washes over me at this moment, a kind of anxiety attack that pins me to the bench and renders me immobile. Many minutes pass until I can look up again and focus on the film, and then the crowd. The skin on my neck prickles from residual surges of distress. My dialog with myself is a jumbled mess.

There's no reason to care about experiential marketing; yeah, big deal, some brand is mediating your experience of art, your public space, your intimate moments you used to have at home, away from the marketplace; yeah, big deal, a shared bed w/ a loved one is now a social media tableau, act natural sorry business casual for the camera; yeah big deal small price to pay for free food, free booze, a film ticket, yeah big deal plenty else to worry about, real-life corporal threats out of the White House, a domestic populace torn to halves, eating each other whole; climate, terrorists, climate, robots, climate, Jeff Bezos, how is this our President?; shooter black or shooter white?; half of all deportations end in dissipation; so this is the big deal?; this is what you want to care about?; sorry we sliced your interior landscape, it's eminent domain, just chew the fucking popcorn, places please; great, big deal, another whining urban millennial baroquely pontificating on the ills of modern commercial culture; yes let's hear more; what's yr Twitter handle?; sorry?—did you hear that?—mumbling something about late capitalism?; yes now please shut the fuck up; chew the fucking popcorn; yeah big deal, poor kids, master's degrees and now they have to suck on comped vodka cocktails, nice hat, love when prices drop after diplomatic snapbacks—just wait, the dollar rallies, don't be offended if the night turns out to be an ad-optimized website; the journey is yours, ten paces forward, the wall goes up, you never look back, when you're right you're right, attention geo-tagged collective experience sales-funneled; must be rough to stay alert, good fucking luck fighting off those bowls of baby Snickers.

I pull my legs under me and superimpose onto the room a vision of George Orwell's spikes from *Down and Out in London and Paris*, when he bounced around with the tramps documenting the musty, sweaty, sour flophouses of soiled wanderers desperate for a cup of tea, two slices of bread, and a night of sleep protected from raw elements. In one of Orwell's spikes he pays a shilling to climb some shaky stairs to a single bedroom. "It had a sweetish reek of paregoric and foul linen; the windows seemed to be tight shut, and the air was almost suffocating at first. There was a candle burning, and I saw that the room measured fifteen feet square by eight high, and had eight beds in it. Already six lodgers were in bed, queer lumpy shapes with all their own clothes, even their boots, piled on top of them."

I walk out into the exhibit hall, into a dark room set off from the other installations. It's a small square space with a low ceiling, in the middle of which stands a single column of mixed building materials. A pulsing stream of light dances up and down the column, laser lights and patterns that flow like liquid, pale greens and mellow purples. The walls and ceilings are mirrored, reflecting the lit column into smaller and smaller versions of itself, extending into the darkened mirrors toward a false horizon. Digitally altered gong sounds interrupt the high-tempo, hyper-layered soundtrack, which seems to reference multiple anxiety-inducing final boss video game levels. The low-grade tranquility afforded by the room's solitude is further deluded by the door's blackout curtain, which flutters under a ceiling vent and lets the light leak in. Two young women burst into the room, loud, drunk and laughing. "Damn Keri this is scary as shit," one yells. Their eyes adjust, and as I move past them toward the door I wave to avoid frightening them. "Oh wait are you in the mirror or are you a person?" Just a person, I say.

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