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Introduction to thematic issue on images of exhaustion. The point of departure is the distinction between tiredness and exhaustion and importance of the latter for the task of understanding contemporary social life.

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Images of Exhaustion

Exhaustion is, without doubt, a keyword of the contemporary moment. It aims to capture an entirely different condition than fatigue, which is a consequence of the effort put into an action, a temporary expenditure of energy, which serves the useful regulatory function of setting the limits of activity. After a hard day's work, feeling tired might even feel pleasurable. In comparison, exhaustion is not simply the sensation of more severe fatigue; its affective effects are more diffused, but also more surprising. The experience of exhaustion afflicts the subject's powers to initiate activity and recuperation. It is often experienced as something uncanny – an exhausted person may literally not know what is happening to them. One feels tired but cannot rest. One nods off standing up but cannot get a good night's sleep. One is dead on their feet but can't sit still. There seems to be a clear and consequential border between fatigue and exhaustion: repressing fatigue over a long period can lead to the uncanny state of exhaustion.

A tired person may forget to rest or neglect it. No one becomes exhausted by their own decision. Exhaustion occurs when long-lasting external conditions produce a constant barrier against the very possibility of rest. That is why exhaustion may lead either to desperation (when obstacles seem insurmountable, resulting in such extreme reactions as workplace suicides)¹ or to profound re-evaluations. One of its outcomes may be the radical decision of resignation. The wave of "great resignation"² reported by the media a couple of years ago has swept through fields of education (including academia),³



Dominika Olszowy, *Leucoma*, 2021. Photo: Tomasz Koszewnik © Gdańska Galeria Miejska

non-governmental organizations,⁴ as well as the innovation, startup, and IT sectors.⁵ All these areas call for a specific work ethos and engagement, which requires placing work before one's own well-being and social relations (including friends and family). Not without consequence is the structural pressure exerted on institutions organizing work, the politics of economization and optimalization. Such factors turn some of these sectors – especially those financed from public funds – into settings of precarious, poorly paid labor, where mobbing thrives and work is endlessly “evaluated.” At least since the Covid pandemic, the topic of exhaustion has also been prominently covered in relation to so-called “essential workers” (not only from the health industry, but also, for example, the logistics sector). Essential workers guarantee collective safety, but are themselves confronted with health- and life-risking practices. A broader context yet is exhaustion as a state exceeding individual subjecthood, describing the condition of the planet and its resources, such as clean air and drinkable water, already scarce in many places. Seasoned stock traders are already speculating on water prices, counting on the fact that it will soon become a rare good, one that can potentially generate huge profits for those willing to profit from human misery and social catastrophe.

As Franco “Bifo” Berardi noted a few years ago, “philosophy and psychoanalysis” (we would add cultural studies and the social sciences) “should assume the horizon of chaos and exhaustion as a starting point for their reflection.”⁶ That was our aim in this issue of *View*, as we invited authors to reflect on the myriad aspects of exhaustion – as an existential condition, an artistic tactic with political consequences, a state of body and culture, an image of the contemporary.

The issue opens with two artistic proposals, which we read as attempts to capture the state of exhaustion using visual tools. In the works of both artists presented here – Dominika Olszowy (on

the cover) and Gizela Mickiewicz (in the **Viewpoint**) – the effort to encapsulate the contemporary affective landscape takes the form of bizarre, sometimes clumsy, other times mysterious, objects and installations. Olszowy's *mise en scenes* of exhaustion are void of people – although the arranged settings, like the post-party *The Wake* (2019), consist of the remains they leave behind, the consequences of human actions. In the case of the installation titled *Leucoma* (presented during the exhibition *The Bare Belly* at the Gdańska Galeria Miejska, 2022), milk has already been spilled (and we might want to cry over it). The remains of a white cup lie on the floor in a puddle of congealed white liquid. The ordinariness of this minor yet inconvenient accident is undone by a strange, unnatural, but also beautiful turquoise stain. From its center, a disturbing black hole looks at us, standing out clearly from the background. Perhaps the measure of a subject's exhaustion is the distance between an innocent mishap and a feeling of an utter abyss.

The search for "exhausted forms" continues in the presentation of Gizela Mickiewicz's work, accompanied by Jagna Lewandowska's essay on the artist. In her sculptures and installations, Mickiewicz often uses modified body "casts," looking for the most suitable materials to capture the exhaustion of a body performing the labor of care. Lewandowska uses the technical term "material fatigue" to emphasize the acuteness of that state. Body parts are either immobilized in gestures resembling a homeostasis brought on by exhaustion (as in *The Weight of Concerns*, 2020), or tilted, rendered at the moment before falling, as if a body deprived of energy holds itself above the ground due to inertia, almost defying the laws of physics (*Falling Upright*, 2020).

The **Close-Up** section opens with Jakub Banasiak's analysis of Przemysław Kwiek's art through the opposition between cynicism and kynicism proposed by Peter Sloterdijk in the *Critique of Cynical Reason*. A cynic maintains a close relationship

with power. He is a man of institutions, an expert, a manager, someone who follows the rules of the game, even when he sees that the game is fixed. To the complaints of an exhausted worker, he will reply – at best – “I feel your pain,” and, at worst, that “no one complained in my day.” A cynic will prove far more useful in times of crisis – through often brutal interventions he exposes the scandal of reality, all the things accepted by the cynic as inevitable. As Banasiak shows, in his post-1989 artistic activities, Kwiek unmasked the violence of the transformation period, the emptiness of free-market promises, and the brutal dismantling of the state patronage system which previously enabled artists to make a living. According to Banasiak, Kwiek paid a high price for his actions. He became the repressed symptom of the transition, ignored by most critics and curators, who understand the importance of talking about the violence of the transformation, but not necessarily when it concerns the art world itself.

In the Polish translation of an excerpt from Anna Kornbluh’s *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism*, titled “Immediacy and the Imaginary,” the author examines the ways in which contemporary culture demands involvement, amplifies polarization, and activates intense affects (everything can only be “loved” or “hated”). Mediation is rejected for immediacy; quick reactions to visual images have become the dominant form of cultural engagement. Kornbluh traces the “style of too late capitalism” in a wide range of interconnected phenomena, all of which lead to the subject’s exhaustion and actively prevent the creation of stable, long-lasting social relations. But Kornbluh offers her readers more than just standard complaints about the temperature of political and social disputes. She takes the intellectual risk of criticizing “progressive” narratives, which – while aiming to reclaim traumas affecting minorities – follow the “hunger for the real” toward a strategy of affective shock,

leading to the traumatization (and not the emancipation) of viewers.

A counterpoint to Kornbluh's analysis of the contemporary is offered by Adrian Switzer's essay on Samuel Beckett's audio-visual work – a classic of exhaustion, understood as the effect of the strategy of combinatorial "completion" of the possibilities of speech. Switzer examines Beckett's minimalist television plays from the 1970s, seeing them as a logical continuation of his novelistic trilogy of the 1950s in the attempt to exhaust their chosen medium. Following Gilles Deleuze's distinction between tiredness and exhaustion, the author compares Beckett's novelistic and visual strategies, emphasizing the distinctiveness and creative force of visually representing exhaustion.

Aleks Wójtowicz's essay on two Polish artists – Adam Kozicki and Bartosz Zaskórski – returns us to the present day. Polish art criticism has used the phrase "reality fatigue" to describe the anti-realist tendencies of young artists. The phrase meant to capture the aversion toward commenting on political and social issues. Wójtowicz argues, however, that Kozicki's and Zaskórski's anti-realism is not escapist, but instead functions as a mode of auto-analysis, which results in the framing of exhaustion as a category of identity.

The final contribution to this section is the result of a team research project conducted under the supervision of Arkadiusz Póltorak. As part of it, research participants with a history of recent employment in "entry-level" positions in cultural institutions try to construct "realistic employment agreements," adding descriptions of the tasks actually required to vague and standardized legal documents. This allows them to capture the physical and mental exhaustion of a "performing" body, a body "animating" cultural activities or taking care of attendees as a festival volunteer or event organizer.

In the **Panorama** section we present two articles. The first, by

Jerzy Stachowicz, examines two contemporary works of popular culture – the film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and the TV series *The Peripheral* (2022) – presenting the connection between modern technology, which enables remote work, and a subject's peripheral condition, understood as physical and mental exhaustion and exposure to danger. The analyzed titles show that technology fails to mitigate poverty, suffering, and overwork; rather, it is perfectly aligned with a system in which the majority of the world becomes a reservoir of uncertain and easily intimidated cheap labor. In the second article, Paweł Drabarczyk aka Grabarczyk offers an insightful interpretation of Diana Lelonek's artistic practice. Lelonek creates archives of "botanical-artefact hybrids," "garbage-plants" which have come into being as a result of human expansion into nature. The author uses Georges Didi-Huberman's analytical tools to interpret Lelonek's projects as atlases generating knowledge about Anthropocenic reality.

A conversation between Chinese studies scholar Margaret Hillenbrand and Magda Szcześniak opens the **Perspectives** section. In her recently published book *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China*, Hillenbrand offers an insightful analysis of contemporary Chinese visual culture as a space in which intense – often brutal – class conflicts materialize. Delegated performances employing low-paid workers, extreme challenges performed by rural migrants on social media, livestreamed suicide-threat shows – in the author's analysis, these become a space of exerting domination or fighting for the visibility of the dominated Chinese underclass. Hillenbrand and Szcześniak discuss the role of visual culture in shaping class relations, and talk about the radical elimination of class language from post-socialist public spheres.

In the essay "Timing Modernity," Elaine Freedgood analyzes how modern time is constructed either as the feverish rhythm of factory work or its opposite – the empty time of those who are

incarcerated. The author shows that time (not only in the factory and prison, but also in modernist prose) functions as a crucial element of exerting power over the bodies and the time of others, whether a child, a woman or man laboring in a factory, or a Black person, stuck in the American “carceral archipelago.” Exhaustion, caused by “not being able to keep up with time” or by endless duration without punctuation, is enabled by a specific understanding of time, which traps the modern subject in a web that is complicated and reinforced by specific discourses and institutions. The essay also reflects on exhausted and lost time. As the author notes: “The time stolen from people’s lives in the Industrial Revolution – or in industrial revolutions – is inestimable, but we can probably think, not inaccurately, of millions of years of unlived life.”

The issue ends with the **Snapshots** section, in which we present three essays: Maciej Duklewski reviews Przemysław Strożek’s *Picturing the Workers’ Olympics and the Spartakiads: Modernist and Avant-Garde Engagement with Sport in Central Europe and the USSR, 1920–1932*; Małgorzata Grąbczewska writes about the Warsaw Museum exhibition presenting the work of Mosze Worobejczyk, placing the work in relation to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza; Piotr Kosiewski looks at the collected volume of the writings of Ewa Mikina, an inspiring art critic, who died in 2012.

The topic of exhaustion does not encourage rhetorical tricks and displays of brilliance. It is rather a condition which imposes a certain level-headedness, prompting us to look for hard facts and take into account the concrete experiences of those suffering from exhaustion. The articles propose analyses of particular cases; they do not propose a cohesive diagnosis of the state of exhaustion, nor do they offer a global synthesis. However, they show well that describing exhaustion presents us with a challenge, since a “lack of words” is one of the symptoms of the state itself. The essays prove that facing exhaustion can

help us go beyond contemporary, automatized models of thinking about work and creativity as spaces of “self-fulfillment” and affective engagement.

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This is the final issue of *View* that Magda Szczesniak will co-edit as a member of the editorial team. During its preparation, Pawel Mościcki also bade farewell to the team. Both of them have been engaged in the journal from its inception, bringing it to life and powerfully shaping its history, along with other activities of the View Foundation. We are hugely grateful to them for this and trust our collaboration with them will not end here, but transform, in exciting ways which we look forward to seeing in the near future.

Editorial Team

- 1 In the case of such deaths, the level of reporting and recognition as a problem varies significantly between countries: on this, see: “Suicidal Work: Work-Related Suicides Are Uncounted,” *Hazards Magazine*, January–March 2017, <https://www.hazards.org/suicide/suicidalwork.htm> (accessed April 22, 2024) and: “Work-related Suicides are Uncounted,” July 26, 2021, <https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/languages/news/article/1866/work-related-suicides-are-uncounted> (accessed April 22, 2024).
- 2 The discussion about the “great resignation” took place mainly in 2021 and 2022. It calls for a critical analysis which would take into account data connected to class and the centrality/peripherality of a particular economy. For an analysis of this trend in the United States, see: Vincent Amanor-Boadu, “Empirical Evidence for the ‘Great Resignation’,” *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2022/article/empirical-evidence-for-the-great-resignation.htm>. Almost in parallel with the discussion about as the “great resignation” was the practice of “quiet quitting.” For an article containing interesting data from Poland, see: “Minęła Wielka Rezygnacja, ale jest ciche odchodzenie pracowników” [The Great Resignation Has Passed, Workers Have Turned to “Quiet Quitting”], *rp.pl*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.rp.pl/rynek-pracy/art37077601-minela-wielka-rezygnacja-ale-jest-ciche-odchodzenie-pracownikow> (accessed April 22, 2024).

- 3 Colleen Flaherty, "Calling It Quits," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 4, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/07/05/professors-are-leaving-academe-during-great-resignation> (accessed April 22, 2024).
- 4 NGO employees can even check the level of their exposure to "burnout" on a special website financed by EU funds and Norwegian grants: <https://burnout-aid.eu/> (accessed April 22, 2024).
- 5 In this context, it is worth pointing to the work culture in Asian economies, where technology firms have benefited from the emphasis on high pressure and competition among young employees. In relation to China, see the discussion about the "lying flat" [*tangping*] movement in Margaret Hillenbrand and Magda Szcześniak's conversation, as well as: Zixuan Zhang, Ke Li, "So you choose to 'Lie Flat?' 'Sang-ness,' affective economies, and the 'Lying Flat' movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* vol. 109, no. 1 (2023), 48–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2022.2143549> (accessed April 22, 2024). Indian IT companies have also been analyzed in this context, see: "Why Indian IT industry is still facing the Great Resignation?," *techgig.com*, May 20, 2023, <https://content.techgig.com/leadership/why-indian-it-industry-is-still-facing-the-great-resignation/articleshow/100352082.cms> (accessed April 22, 2024).
- 6 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Third Unconscious: The Psychosphere in the Viral Age* (London: Verso, 2021).
- 7 Margaret Hillenbrand, *On the Edge: Feeling Precarious in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

