

Escaping the hamster- wheel



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Escaping the hamster-wheel. Some thoughts about the representation of stress, anxiety, burnout and depression in works by artists from Central-Eastern Europe


Cover picture: Lőrinc Borsos:
I Said You Are Gods I-II, 2019.
Photo: Dávid Biró

It is no longer a taboo to address the issues of mental health in contemporary art. The notions of chronic depression, anxiety and burnout are unfortunately symptoms we discuss a lot these days and most theorists and sociologists agree that it is not merely an individual problem but something which affects many of us. As philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes, the so-called “performance society” has replaced the “society of disciplinarity”. In other words, Foucault’s theory of the control of human bodies has been replaced since the ‘80 s by the control of our minds.¹ Practically competing with itself, the self generates a self-exploiting lifestyle that can easily lead to constant anxiety or burnout syndrome. It is owing to the expectation of constant standby and flexibility that the boundaries between work and free time are becoming increasingly blurred in today’s late capitalist system.²

The question arises: how can we discuss these questions within the realms of contemporary art? How can artistic practices help in creating a dialogue or a discussion about these often repressed topics? And, if contemporary art addresses issues related to mental health, could it be seen as therapeutic and if so, is that a problem? Moreover, can we point out any specificities which are present in the works of artists from Central-Eastern Europe or the representation of mental health as a more global phenomena? There probably won’t be any clear answers for these questions in this essay. However, what I will attempt, is to map out certain artistic practices from Central-Eastern Europe (obviously a subjective selection)

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Han, Byung-Chul: *The Burnout Society*. Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2015.

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Han: 2015. See also: Anne Helen Petersen: *Can’t Even. How Millennial Became the Burnout Generation*. Boston, Mariner Books, 2020. The summary about Byung-Chul Han’s theory in this essay was originally published in the publication for the exhibition *So Far, So Good*. (Budapest History Museum – Budapest Gallery, 09. 07. - 06. 09. 2020, edited and written by Flóra Gadó).



which are not only trying to open up a space of discussion related to mental health (and art as work) but also to present various coping mechanisms in order to understand these situations better and learn how to live with them.

Even though almost everyone can relate to certain mental health discomforts, to talk openly (and without judgement) about your mental state and the amount of stress you have to cope with, is still not that common. It is considered not only as a private matter but also as a weakness: tough people can fight stress. But luckily, over time as more and more support groups and communities where one can share their difficulties have appeared, these questions have started to be discussed outside of therapy and these support groups. Even though contemporary art has always found a keen interest in various mental states and the difficulties of the psyche, today it is clear that there is a new interest in addressing “our age of anxiety.” The first step is always to say things out loud – to feel that you are not alone and that you can articulate the confusion inside you.

Anxiety as a State of Mind

The whirlwind of anxiety, the obsessive-compulsive behaviors attached to it and the feeling of vulnerability is present in Polish artist, Adelina Cimochowicz’s intimate video, *Gone* (2018).³ The visual language of the video already evokes the hamster’s wheel of overworking: we see a looped film, where a figure is running in a forest. But because of the abrupt cut, the woman is constantly stopping, stumbling and restarting again. The simple gesture of repetition expresses the overwhelmingness of anxiety and the vicious circle of its loop, from which it is often very difficult to step out. As emphasized through the narration, sometimes it is impossible to stop worrying, overthinking and feeling that fear and anxiety are ruling our life. These feelings are

presented in the film in the form of a very personal narrative: the artist reaches back to the genre of confessions (confessional writing). A very straightforward yet intimate “free poem” unfolds, which lists all the things the narrator is worrying about. Often repeating the first line – I worry that... – the viewer can both identify and



Adelina Cimochowicz: *Gone*, 2018
Film still, courtesy of the Artist

empathize with the restlessness of the voice and the various, often irrational thoughts. It is a well-known definition that what differentiates anxiety from fear is that anxiety doesn't have a subject: often we find it hard to articulate why we are anxious. Adelina Cimochowicz's video confuses us by naming almost everything one can be anxious about producing an encyclopedia of our worries, highlighting that it is not necessarily the naming what is difficult (to name what we are anxious) but the overwhelmingness and paralysis it can cause.

As Cimochowicz's video presents very accurately what it is like to suffer from severe anxiety, Romanian artist Megan Dominescu's textile works reflect on the topic from a more global point of view: it is less based on personal experience but can be seen as some kind of overview within the context

ANXIETY HAS
MANY FACES



BUT THERE IS
ONLY ONE
XANAX

Megan Dominescu: *Anxiety Has Many Faces*, 2020
Courtesy of the Artist.



The desperation and hopelessness of young adults is also visible in artist duo Lőrinc Borsos's dark oeuvre. In their recent exhibitions (eg.: *Kill Your Idols* at Glassyard Gallery⁴) they presented mysterious, ritualistic, fetish-like objects which both served as tools to deconstruct the previously erected idols mentioned in the title, as well as creating cryptic messages often impossible to decipher. These often obscure works depict in their fragmentariness the crisis of our times: there are no clear answers, no positive futures ahead and nor even utopias anymore; only the depressive present in which we have to learn how to live. Their periphrasis (*I Said You Are Gods I-II*, 2019) of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous⁵ in the form of

<https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/about-aa/the-12-steps-of-aa>

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It is obvious that our relationship to work changed a lot in the past decades: not only that we have different concepts about rest and leisure, but the constant pressure to maximize our working capacities, to achieve more and thus become even more successful is present in almost every sector of our life. This topic is especially relevant if we think about how precarious the working conditions are in the art field: people mostly working freelance, flexible hours without contracts, or even taking multiple jobs at the same time, with little income and often no insurance etc. This is also underlined by the fact that with the presence of social media and our digital reality, we are constantly available and should be held accountable at any time. Han calls attention to the apparent freedom that is implied, owing to technological innovation and the expansion of the Internet, by the constant reachability and continuous access to information. Self-monitoring and constant competition with ourselves can also induce severe anxiety. He argues that often

in our work there is no real control, we are our own “bosses”. And without external control we get no feedback on our performance and work, which drives the individual into a state of constantly increased effort practically leading to an endless work cycle.⁶

Several exhibitions (e.g.: Apart Collective's exhibition *Art Is Work*⁷) from the past years already addressed these issues: how should we consider working as an artist as a job (art as work, pay artists when they exhibit etc.), what should be the fundamental rights for art workers, how should we approach the question



Balázs Varju Tóth: *Askholia*, 2020
Film still, courtesy of the Artist.

⁶
Han: 2015.

⁷
<https://apart.sk/product/art-is-work/>

of “free work” in the art scene (e.g. that of volunteers and interns), how should we dismantle the hierarchies formed by big institutions. Of course this is not to say that only the art field is affected by the issue, it is just that in this area the precariousness is especially visible, which can cause higher amounts of stress, anxiety and thus burnout.

In Hungarian artist's Balázs Varju Tóth's video piece titled *Ashkolia* (2020) – which is already a reference towards the Greek notion, meaning absence of leisure – the artist investigates the aforementioned topics through various interviews with people in the cultural scene of Hungary. In the interviews, curators, artists, cultural workers, journalists, mediators, graphic designers discuss topics such as what work means to them, how they would define their job, their motivation, what they do in their freetime, what is their work-life balance. How do they come to terms with being an artist and do other things besides it, or sometimes hack the art scene and in other cases quitting it altogether.⁸ In the three channel video installation (the way the artist usually presents it) we can hear various perspectives and viewpoints from the people the artist interviewed: the strength of the video is that Varju Tóth doesn't judge the participants (or takes sides), just presents these wide range of perspectives next to each other, creating parallels stories. We don't know the names (or the positions) of the participants, and even though they are recalling very personal stories and experiences, we get the feeling that what they describe is something which is relatable to many of us (e.g. what to do after you obtain a PhD, how to balance between your paid jobs and your passion, how to find a job which motivates you and what happens when this motivation fades away). The video's other interesting feature is that all the participants are situated in nature. While we observe them talking while sitting in beautiful meadows, forests and other natural sites, we experience a stark contrast with what they are saying and the environment they are in. Varju Tóth is playing with the romantic image of the artist: that of the wanderer, who is detached from society and solely living from their passion, which is art. Of course this image shattered a long time ago, still, the stereotypes (artists working alone in an "ivory tower", the artist as genius, nature as a shelter) attached to the figure of the artist exists even today, and have its origins from the 19th century. Balázs Varju Tóth revisits these traditional tropes and

opposes them with the often gloomy or pessimistic reality the interviewees share with him.

If we look at artworks which are trying to articulate our changed working conditions and what it means to make your living as a cultural worker in the 21st century, it is also important to briefly discuss works which are highlighting the importance of rest, leisure and sleep. Czech artist Barbora Kleinhamlová and curator Tereza Stejskalová's video, titled *Sleepers Manifesto* (2014)⁹ is a sharp and critical work in both its tone and form.¹⁰



Barbora Kleinhamlová & Tereza Stejskalová: *Sleepers Manifesto*, 2014
Film still, courtesy of the Artists

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[https://player.vimeo.com/
video/83172076](https://player.vimeo.com/video/83172076)

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Also worth mentioning the project Institute of Anxiety, connected to Kleinhamlová. The group organizes events, workshop, exhibitions, symposiums, podcasts are reflecting on the current crisis like climate change, mental health etc.

Deconstructing and rethinking the tradition of a manifesto, the one narrated in the video encourages us to finally do nothing, but sleep and rest. It understands sleep as a radical (and often forgotten and neglected) act which is necessary in order to leave the hamster's wheel of work and productivity. Emphasizing how sleeping is (falsely) accused of being not useful, the manifesto encourages us to leave the binary divisions of activity-passivity, productivity-rest and focus on the non-productive things. The manifesto highlights the fact that today we have to be constantly available and thus we can



Judit Flóra Schuller: *Towards Nothingness (Walks)*, 2015-2019
Courtesy of the Artist

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Fisher, Mark: *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*.

Winchester-Washington, Zero Books, 2014.

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See also: Crary, Jonathan: *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London, Verso Books, 2015.

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Odell, Jenny: *How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Brooklyn, Melville House Publishing, 2019. The summary about Jenny Odell's book in this paragraph was originally published in the publication for the exhibition *So Far, So Good*. (Budapest History Museum – Budapest Gallery, 09. 07. - 06. 09. 2020, edited and written by Flóra Gadó).


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<https://juditfloraschuller.com/>

never fully relax: like our phones, we only can enter into sleep mode (but not real sleep). In other words, referring also to Mark Fisher¹¹, we are zombies, navigating through our life in a living dead state. And if we don't sleep we also miss out on dreaming – which is also metaphorically connected to creativity and the liberation of the mind. As the characters in the film – who are sleeping in front of a press photo from the protests in Turkey – chant together “give us back our sleep”, the video emphasizes the much needed discussion about rest, sleep and just doing nothing. It is also worth mentioning the market which is built around various sleeping disorders, like insomnia or the opposite, drugs which keep you awake all night (like the infamous “study-drug”, Adderall). Are we in fact still free and independent in our dreams, or even our dreams are infused by the grappling proximity of the next workday?¹²

In relation to the discourse which tries to “liberate sleep” it is also important to pay attention to those actions, which are not leading to anything: they don't have a clear goal, they are not useful and they are not making us more productive. In her book, *How to do Nothing*, Jenny Odell deals a lot with the so-called attention economy: that there is a continuous quest to seize our attention and our time in the online world, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to break out of this cycle. In her texts, she aims to show us how to regain control of our attention and break free of the attention economy. She sees the solution for this not in the various self-help and mindfulness trends, which, after a temporary “shutdown,” continue to encourage greater efficiency, but instead in doing nothing. Doing nothing doesn't necessarily need to be taken literally (“nothing” is merely such from the capitalist perspective of productivity). Rather, it in fact suggests a shift of perspective, an attempt to look differently at the familiar things around us and change our patterns of observation.¹³

Judit Flóra Schuller¹⁴ is a Hungarian artist who usually works with questions related to memory politics and how to deal with archival materials from a new perspective. As



part of her investigation about her grandfather's huge archive, she started to deal with notions related to forgetting, letting things go, seeking stability in the chaos, turning inwards. For a time when she was living in Finland, she documented her long walks near the sea: these walks did not lead anywhere, they just happened for the sake of walking, moving (movements which can help you think, feel differently). Their repetitiveness made them into some kind of personal ritual, which is known by many of us. Even though it seems like a seemingly unnecessary activity (not running, doing sports, etc.), its relaxing aspects are also well known. As part of her installation, Judit Flóra Schuller shows a list of the dates she made these long walks which lead nowhere, and presented them next to a black and white photo, depicting the sea. In the photo it is almost not possible to distinguish between the sea and the horizon: they melted together, creating an endless rhythm and an inner tranquility.

What's next?

What happens when we can't continue at this pace? The pandemic has also highlighted the fact that we shouldn't continue these previously fixed patterns and should start to focus on slowing down and thinking about changing our lifestyle. So what are the various coping mechanisms and alternative strategies we should come up with both in order to stay sane as well as try to live a sustainable life? Within the field of contemporary art, thinking about these questions is never about finding one true answer or something which would work for all. It is more like an endless search to find what helps both you and your community. Artists are either trying to focus on the future and envision various survival tactics or on the other hand, they focus on the here and now, and the present moment. And this is a question where one can sense a tension. As critic and art historian



Oto Hudec: *We are the Garden!*, 2020

Installation view from the exhibition: *Ecologies of the Ghost Landscape. The Word for World is Forest*. 2020, tranzit.sk, Bratislava. Curated by Borbála Soós. Photos: Adam Šakový

Barnabás Zemlényi-Kovács observed in his text in relation to the before mentioned exhibition *So Far, So Good* it is interesting to see that in many artistic practices the individual approach dominates, despite the fact that these issues effects many of us and maybe we should learn instead how to be together differently.¹⁵

Nonetheless, this can be also connected to the pandemic's forced isolation and solitude which shaped us differently. In his installation (*We are the Garden*, 2020) – which he created for the exhibition in tranzit.sk in Bratislava¹⁶ and then developed further in Ludwig Museum Budapest – Slovakian artist Oto Hudec envisions a not-so-dystopian future in which due to the climate catastrophe, people are forced to move out of the cities and try to live on their own, growing their own fruits and vegetables etc.

Hudec's installation consisted of a replica of a greenhouse (a possible shelter), a story and a video. Reflecting on what we understand

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Barnabás Zemlényi-Kovács's article in Hungarian: <https://www.prae.hu/article/11797-a-lefekvo-felkeles/>

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See for further information: <https://artportal.hu/magazin/where-the-wild-things-are/>

today as climate anxiety, Hudec's work doesn't bring us hope at first sight. Even though it addresses the fact that we have to prepare to live in a more sustainable way, the isolation and loneliness depicted in his work seems impossible to overcome. Yet, if the viewer continues to look at the small intimate drawings and read the story presented on the wooden plates, it turns out that the protagonist of the story meets a little girl: another survivor



Kateřina Konvalinová: *Corrective relations: Bad trip*, 2019
Film still, courtesy of the Artist.

who accompanies him and encourages him to share his life with him. The presence of another human being brings a certain hope into Hudec's piece, even though it is still impossible to break that isolation which is forced upon our protagonists.

As many artists are preoccupied with the idea of imagining some kind of future, some others are focusing more on the present moment. Czech artist Katerina Konvalinová's film trilogy plays with various genres: from tutorial videos to reality shows the artist presents various coping strategies for the Y generation, often with a critical undertone. In the second chapter of her series *Corrective Relations: Bad Trip* (2019)¹⁷, the artist questions the way

**Dance of Emergencies (MQ Wien),
Dance All Night (Tallinn), Tech-
no Worlds (aqb Budapest)**



break-ups, loneliness and anxiety, in her collaborative events, she enables people without any artistic background to be themselves and form a safe space where they can freely share their experiences with the help of art.

With this text my attempt was to highlight some artistic practices from the region. However there are fortunately more and more artists who are working on this topic also from a collaborative, process-based way. Maybe a way towards articulating our shared vulnerabilities is through working together with other people. Pushing our boundaries and experiments with new formats, thus unconsciously leaving the often closed and elitist field of contemporary art.

