

Use Me Up

It's better to burn out than fade away. This adage of the bohemian artist has become the first commandment for freelancers everywhere in today's economy. Addicted to deadlines, with burnout lurking around the corner, people are working themselves to the bone. Jan Verwoert on the pleasures of exhaustion in the world of art.

By Jan Verwoert

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Complete exhaustion is a state we both fear and seek to reach. To one day run out of ideas and things to say is what creative people dread more than anything else. Yet, at the same time one of the strongest driving forces behind creative work continues to be the desire to push an idea to its limits, to go to extremes and only stop when the point has been reached where all possibilities have been exhausted and, looking at the result of your efforts, you realise with pleasurable horror: this is it, this is how it must be, it could have been different, but now that the hour is late, the deadline has passed, the opening of the show or premiere of the performance is about to start, there is no way you could still change anything. Time is up and the countdown hits zero. 'Check ignition and may God's love be with you' is all you can think of as you reach the state Bowie pictures his spaceman Major Tom to be in when, having passed one hundred thousand miles and stepping through the door into empty space, he suddenly feels very still and utters his famous last words 'Planet Earth is blue And there's nothing I can do ...' This build-up of conflicting emotions around the end of work – the completion of a particular work as well as the depletion of all possibilities to make further work – is at the heart of the drama by which artists and intellectuals in modernity have learned to experience the climax and crisis of their work as a radical form of exhaustion.

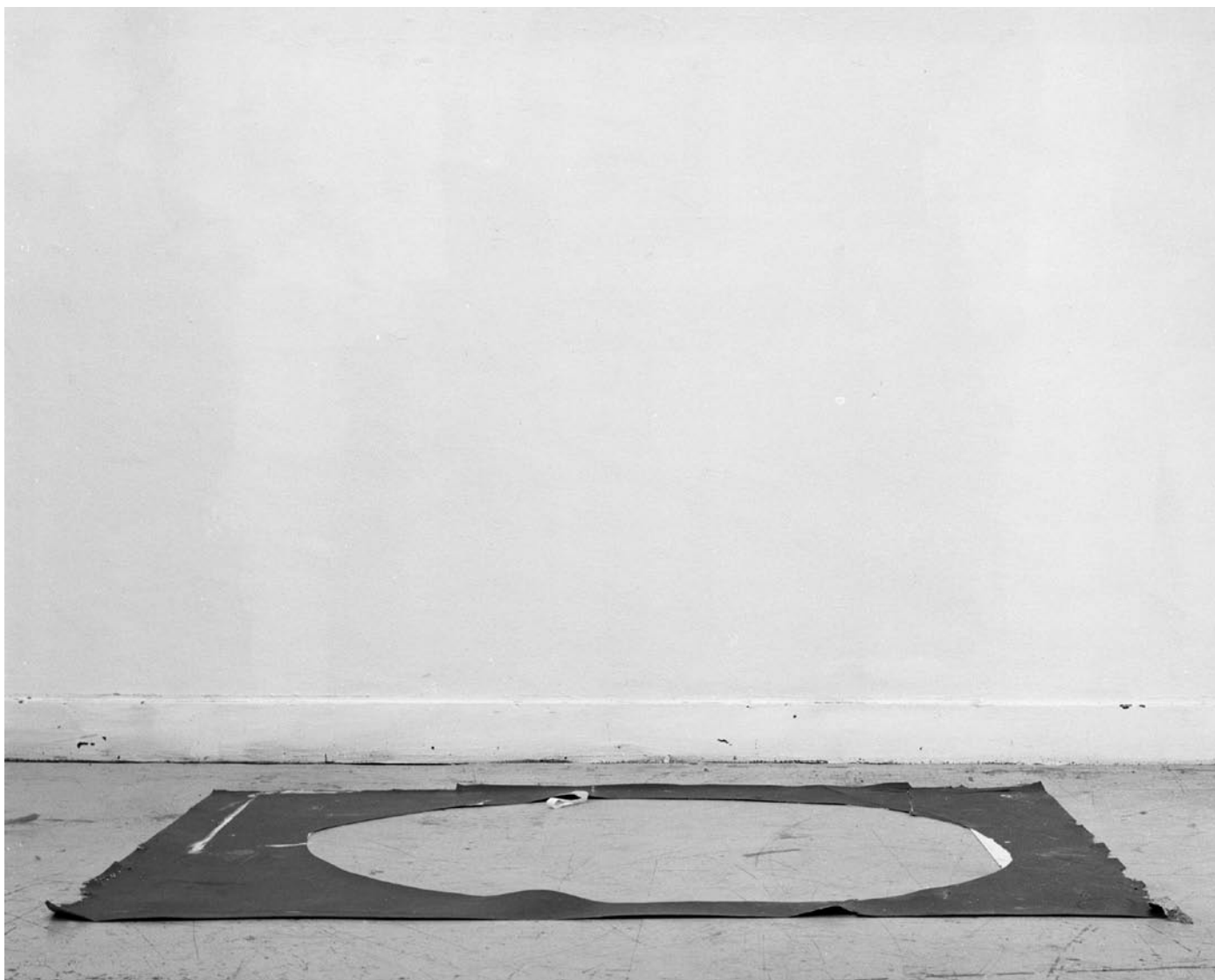
This drama is far from over. On the contrary, it has become a general social condition. As the post-industrial societies of the global north are

increasingly organised around flexible, immaterial and creative labour, complete personal exhaustion in the form of the much feared burnout syndrome has become a collective experience of professionals in all sectors of the service society and new creative industries who feel pressed to perform to the best of their talent and abilities on their job every day. Bizarrely then, the heartfelt belief that 'it's better to burn out than to fade away' that used to set the rebellious devotees of countercultural creativity apart from obedient employees, now seems to have become the first commandment of the so-called 'high performance culture' promoted by current forms of capitalism. Appropriately, the Deutsche Bank currently uses the slogan 'A Passion to Perform'. We see a whole new economy thriving on the rush and thrill of completing tasks, performing services and delivering goods just in time. Parallel to the way in which futurist avant-gardes had demanded the museums to be burned to release art production into a state of pure presence, the economic rationale of just-in-time-production lies precisely in the realisation that the storage of goods in warehouses is too costly and has to be replaced by models of distribution where the consumer or client can access the desired service or product right away (ideally through downloading). Museums and warehouses are sites that retain a certain temporal latency. But in a high performance culture there is no time for latencies, because all potentials of production must be actualised right away, the faster the better. Under the economic imperative of high performance, just-in-time-production is boosted by the buzz and justified by the necessity of the moment because any choice taken under extreme time pressure is without alternatives. As the range of possibilities is always already exhausted when there is no time to consider other options, acts performed in the nick of time appear to be powered by the full force of necessity. Anyone working under the conditions of just-in-time production by definition thereby labours and lives in a constant state of exhaustion.

Consuming and Being Consumed

But is an economy based on systematic exhaustion not bound to collapse at any time? If the current form of capitalism purposefully sustains a sense of crisis to increase the urgency of production, it does indeed seem inevitable that the whole system should soon spiral out of control. Still, such apocalyptic prognoses have been popular ever since in the 1960s consumer culture came to increasingly thrive on excessive overspending and thus seemed to head right towards economic meltdown. Yet, until now nothing like that has happened. So it seems more probable that overspending and exhaustion are simply moments in the cyclical patterns of capitalism's reproduction and regeneration. As more and more people burn out the whole machine gets fired up.

Eveline van den Berg,
Colliding Sides of Unwillingness (2006),
photoprint, 120 cm x 60 cm





↑ Cerith Wyn Evans, *In Girum Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni* (1997), neon, 18 cm high/diameter 140 cm, courtesy Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne

→ Isa Genzken, *Untitled* (2006), exhibition at the Secession, Vienna, courtesy Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, photography Pez Hejduk





What would it mean to escape this vicious cycle and break the spell of the death drive towards exhaustion?

One option, of course, is to start taking care of yourself. It is no coincidence then that, after having exhaustively analysed how people willingly submit to the systematic exploitation of their life energy, Foucault should aptly title the last book he wrote before he died, *The Care of the Self*.^[1] In it he portrays the practical wisdom that ancient Greek and Roman culture gathered in its reflections on how to live a good life in freedom. Instead of fixed norms or codices, Foucault writes, ancient ethics and dietetics encouraged free men to find their own style of economising their energies and controlling their powers. In contrast to such a life with style, the excessive use of power and indulgence in pleasure was seen to invariably destroy your social reputation and prematurely exhaust your capacity to act and enjoy later in life.

In our contemporary high performance culture, however, to draw a line somewhere, stop work and cut off communication, to withdraw at some point and reserve a part of your life for taking care of yourself has become a radical thing to do because it effectively means that you are taking yourself out of circulation. You deliberately hold back resources, free time and potentials, that could be made productive. Still, you can of course never be sure whether the free time you gain and retain is not just the time you need

to restore your energies to be fit to perform again on the next day so that you in fact never escape the cycle of compulsive productivity. On top of that, the care of the self, wellness and health, is probably one of the hottest commodities available today. Sarcastically, Madonna comments upon this in *American Life* (2003): 'I do yoga and Pilates/And the room is full of hotties/So I'm checking out the bodies/And you know I'm satisfied'. Taking care of your health from this perspective could also be understood as a measure to protect your most valuable asset by conserving your physical power to perform.

Directed against this conservative moment, the politics of exhaustion inherent in counter-cultural rites of excess have always been about deliberately squandering that capital. This philosophy of self-destruction is born out of the realisation that the accumulation of capital is tied to the moment when profits are skimmed off and stashed away in the bourgeois private sphere to secure property. The rebellious response of bohemian culture has therefore always lain in the commitment to never accumulate profit but always waste it and get wasted, to consume and be consumed and refuse to save anything or be saved by anyone. Most beautifully maybe, this spirit is expressed in the so-called 'devil's verse', the anonymous Latin palindrome *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (we wander around in the night in circles and get consumed by

fire, originally a puzzle alluding to moths or mayflies). Guy Debord used it as the title for a film he made in 1978 and Cerith Wyn Evans turned it into a neon sign in which the letters of the palindrome are arrayed in the form of a ring which is suspended from the ceiling like a candelabra designed to illuminate a celebratory space for a potential congregation of the wasteful.

High Performance Culture & Eroticism

A nagging doubt of course remains whether this politics of exhaustion is not merely adding a little more fizz to the spectacle of cultural consumption – and whether the insouciant consumers and collectors of art are not just all too eager to see another bohemian go up in a blaze of glory, be pleasantly entertained and in time move on to applaud the next eclipse. Still, there is a beauty and dignity in certain gestures of expenditure that, I believe, will always exceed the petty rationale of the lucratively spectacular. This is because the deliberate exhibition of exhaustion in art or writing deprivatises exhaustion by exposing it as an experience that may be shared. The exhibition of exhaustion produces public bodies.

In this sense, Vito Acconci told me in conversation that among the Marxist beliefs he had espoused in the 1970s but still felt compelled by was the conviction that the rejection of the value of private property should begin with a changed attitude to your own

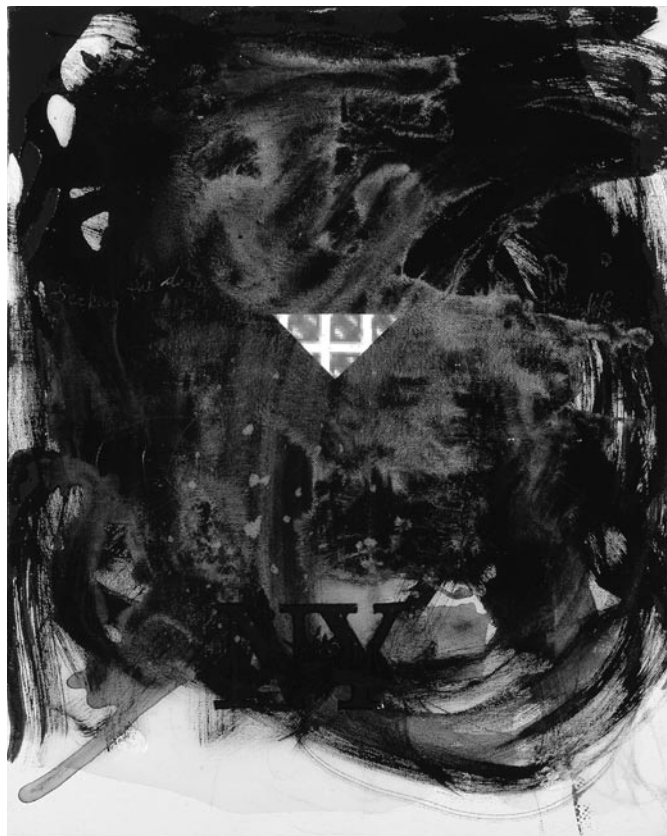
body, with the radical readiness to understand this body and self as public and political, 24/7. The refusal to claim your potentials as private property and the will to allow them to be exhausted by others implies a generosity that, however, has little to do with moral altruism. It seems rather more driven by an unrestrained desire to enjoy and be enjoyed by others. Bill Withers probably best expressed this in his R&B classic *Use Me* (1972), ‘I wanna spread the news that if it feels this good getting used/Oh You just keep on using me until you use me up’.

The erotic force of this desire to be exhausted in turn points to the sexual dimension of a high performance culture. Sex work is one of the fastest growing industries today. And, without wanting to turn ‘sex work’ into a loose metaphor, I still feel that the unconditional readiness to perform whenever and wherever that is expected from freelancers as well as from artists and intellectuals operating in a project-based arts economy somewhat resembles the pressure put on the sex worker to always get it on. Yet, even though this pressure can never be disconnected from the potential to perform, it should also not be confounded with it. For there undeniably is a genuine joy in recognizing one’s own potentials in the act of realising them.

There is a beautiful drawing by Frances Stark which shows the outlines of a peacock in a perky pose but its tail feathers are not yet unfolded. Among the

↖ Frances Stark, *Readying for Reflection* (2006), vinyl paint, collage on panel, 36 x 62 inches, courtesy Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles

→ Jutta Koether, *Untitled* (from the series *the necessity of multiple inconsistent fantasies*) (2004), mixed media, glass on linnen, 50.5 x 40.5 cm, courtesy Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Keulen (from the exhibition *Fantasia Colonia*)



collage of different small cut-outs of texts that the feather texture is composed of, there is a Henry Miller quote written backwards in capital letters: 'GET ON THE FUCKING BLOCK AND FUCK'. The words equally read like a firm admonition (Do it!), a declaration of will (Yes, I will do it!) and a supportive cheer (Common, you can do it!). As you can also tell by its pose, this bird both wants and needs to get up and go. This inextricable ambivalence between what you want and expect of yourself and what others want and expect from you is probably one of the hardest puzzles for anyone to solve who works both creatively and on demand. One consequence is that an uncanny feeling of outside determination and dependency might never leave you, even if you are positively sure that you only do what you want to do. Here again, to push yourself beyond the point of exhaustion is a common technique to relieve yourself of the burden of outside expectations. You just incapacitate yourself to a degree that none can possibly still expect anything of you. The Dead Kennedys summed it all up in *Too Drunk to Fuck* (1981): 'But now I am jaded/You're out of luck/I'm rolling down the stairs/Too drunk to fuck'.

Passion and Passivity

It is, however, a peculiar quality of exhaustion that the experience of impotence that it implies can create a sensation of potentiality of a different kind. It is no longer a potentiality connected to the power to act, but one linked to the radical affirmation of passion and passivity. Entering Isa Genzken's recent exhibition at the Secession in Vienna you were confronted by a group of wheelchair sculptures that awaited you like a welcoming committee. It made infirmity look like an offer you cannot refuse. One wheelchair was turned over so that its footrests were hanging in the air like flailing hands. Its seat was replaced by a shiny golden foil inserted between the armrests. For anyone familiar with Christian iconography the gold foil would likely evoke the powerful promise of redemption. This gesture of embracing weakness made the passion of the exhausted body seem like a potential pathway to bliss.

A second (untitled) sculpture group consisted of a series of baby dolls reclining under ripped rainbow coloured parasols. One, for instance, was propped up on a white 1960s designer chair, eyes barely open and face sprayed with silver paint so that it seemed old and majestic like a Chinese child emperor. The dolls looked wasted and in need of rest, like those aristocrats with overwrought nerves that populated the fashionable sanatoria of the 19th century shortly before the extinction of their class. They didn't appear tired of life in a suicidal way though, but rather exhausted by living life, and thus full of life. The sculptures also gave you an idea of how a public body could look like that is produced through the exhibition of exhaustion (in this case through an

uncannily cultivated display of fatigue). It was a body that deprivatised exhaustion by showing it as a collective experience shared by a group of wasted bohemian dolls – and it testified to the residual vivacity of an existence freed from the need to act or work in the state of exhaustion.

But in the same way that bodies can exhibit the potentials of exhaustion, objects, signs and images can equally do so. Modern life produces all forms of waste, it exhausts bodies, amasses litter and drains the meaning out of cultural signs through their prolific overuse. Together with many of the ideas sketched out above, this realisation has come out of an ongoing conversation with Ruth Legg, Eveline van den Berg and Ruth Buchanan about their work at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, as all three in their own ways seek to bring out the sense of unspecified potentiality that can re-emerge from exhausted materials or drained signs of utopianism. It is this immanent potentiality of the radically exhausted image that also draws me to Jutta Koether's black paintings.

In her exhibition *Fantasia Colonia* at the Kunstverein Cologne, for instance, she presented an eponymously titled installation of large black canvasses in an upper gallery that had previously (while the building still served as the British Cultural Institute) been used as a function room or assembly hall. Each canvass was covered in clouds of black paint as if the image had burned away and gone up in billowing smoke. Hung to the wall without stretchers the paintings almost seemed like gobelins. A black flag above the door underlined their potential function of backdrops for a clandestine get-together of a dark order. It felt like it could be an assembly site for a possible community of those who wish to share their exhaustion and thereby deprivatise it and allow their collective experience to constitute a public body. This body then would be empowered by the shared exhaustion of a community to resist the pressures of a compulsory high performance culture by revealing the potentialities of life beyond the end of work.

[1] Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, part 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, Randon House, New York 1986