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Overproduction

This article was published in an issue (1/2020) of the Polish Magazine *Dialog* that deals with artistic labour. Overproduction results from the penetration of market mechanisms to all areas of our lives, fields of creativity, and institutions in which we work. It is an element of the system preying on our activity, because it is primarily this mobility – not content and sense – that generates profits. When we stop, get tired or stand aside – we become redundant to the system.

Originally published as 'Nadprodukcja' in *Dialog: A Journal of Contemporary Drama*, Dialog 1/2020 (758), 70–75, http://www.dialog-pismo.pl/w-numerach/nadprodukcja.

Translated from Polish by Bartosz Wójcik.

Imagine that you are participating in a workshop. Your group is diverse in terms of national representation, and the workshop focuses on climate activism and related psychological needs. However, after a brief discussion one thing becomes clear: the need for support does not stem from the strains of activism itself, but from the work model and related involvement – common to all, regardless of their field of activity. This model can be labelled OVERPRODUCTION. This is after all the source of your frustration, occupational burnout, chronic fatigue, and interpersonal tension in the workplace. For a few hours, you share your experiences, diagnose all the typical phenomena, and wonder how to break the ensuing vicious circle. You leave the workshop firmly convinced of the need to resist overproduction by radically curtailing your own productivity. Imagine that only two days after you made your commendable resolution you stumble across a colleague in a hallway, who asks whether you'd fancy writing a text… yes, you're right, it's one of life's little ironies: a text on the overproduction in the arts.

> One can hardly imagine a more discomfiting offer. What now? Should I honourably decline, giving voice to my internal integrity and strength of character? Or perhaps I should submit a blank page with only a handwritten scribble: 'Please find here the text I did not write in protest against overproduction'? Or lastly – to compromise myself and dash off something, erecting an embankment of caveats and explications around the text, and capping it ingratiatingly with a slapdash disclaimer: 'This is the last piece I wrote before mounting resistance to overproduction'?

If I eventually opted to take the path of overt hypocrisy, add another brick to the wall of unread texts, increase our carbon footprint, take your precious time that you might otherwise spend in a more socially conducive way, I can offer only one explanation: my heartfelt conviction that OVERPRODUCTION IS EVIL. And if – even by an iota of a degree – I might contribute to disturbing the foundations that carry the skyscraper that is overproduction, let my inconsistency be forgiven.

OVERPRODUCTION is the result of the penetration of market forces into every sphere of our life, every domain of our activity, and every institution we work at. It constitutes an element of a system that preys on our activity, as it is primarily our professional mobility and efficiency – rather than content and sense we generate – that yields profits. The moment we pause, become exhausted, take a sidestep, we become redundant – systemically inessential. Furthermore, we are inessential whenever we direct our energy to activities that really matter, such as tending to those that need our care, children, and adults.

And so, as a result, we produce because we are obliged to. We produce so as to be able to spend time doing care and domestic work. We produce because we are evaluated on the basis of quantity rather than the quality of our output. We produce because the institution we work at has ambitious programming goals but lacks sufficient funding to employ enough personnel, which – as documented by 'High Culture, Low Wages', the recent report compiled by the Workers' Initiative Trade Union[01] – is not a rare occurrence as far as institutions of culture are concerned. We produce to earn a living. We produce to keep our jobs. We produce to provide ourselves with a semblance of stability.

If only this was merely a matter of external pressure, callous market mechanisms, and ruthless competition! Then we would have identified the sources of the threat and duly worked out strategies of resistance. What it all boils down to is the fact that in numerous fields of human endeavour, predominantly in the arts, science, and activities conducted by institutions of culture and in other forms of creative pursuit, overproduction is frequently voluntary and is linked with the tenacious sense of self-identification with the ventures we undertake. I cannot bring anything new to the table here – self-exploitation in the arts and culture has been widely analysed. We produce because we enjoy our work. We produce because what we produce seems important. We produce because we believe that by doing so, we make a change in the world out there. We produce because it is all connected with the people we like and value.

This last reason is of particular significance, as I regard production not exclusively as individual undertakings but also – and perhaps even especially – as all collective projects, activities, and events. We accept invitations to collaborate because we like the people who extend their invitations to us. Because we consider them friends and we want to support them with our work. Because these invitations pander to our ego. Because we suffer from FOMO (fear of missing out). Because we fear that we may never receive another invitation. Because we do not intend to cause any distress or because our refusal – for a number of divergent reasons – would invite immeasurable trouble. And finally, because we meant to refuse but we immersed ourselves in the hustle and bustle of everyday matters and tasks at hand and forgot to do so beforehand. When push came to shove it was already too late and too unseemly to refuse. However, we do not even wait passively for invitations. We seize the initiative. No coffeeshop conversation can do without the routine suggestion: 'Let's do a project, shall we?' And that is how we are frequently caught in a vicious circle: we decide to work on a project with friends because we do not have any spare time, which we could spend doing things other than just work, but our collective work – especially given the precarious conditions of temporal and economic pressure – causes tension, strains the best camaraderie, and cools down social relations.

Overburdened family life, skeletal social life, long-time friendships put to the test – all these would provide more than ample reason to make a common front against overproduction, but they are merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg of structural, economic, social, and ecological problems that our mode of work entails. The mode that destroys the very creative environment of our work and taxes the efficiency of the activities of the institutions we are associated with and affects the projects we carry out. The overproduction of events limits their reach: one can hardly be in the know with regard to all the crucial undertakings, not to mention being in attendance. In addition, unequal distribution takes its toll: bigger players (construed both as municipalities and

01 See also Majmurek (2019).

as institutions) generate so many events that participating in them becomes impossible, while smaller entities are compelled to hone their survival skills just to preserve the bare minimum of programming.

To make matters worse, this is hardly the end. As the world is on the brink of an ecological catastrophe or rather already experiencing it on a number of levels, every action we take carries extra weight – an additional burden. Our (over)activity depletes resources and exhausts energy. This leads to further paradoxes. We would like to be actively involved in our struggle for a better – or at least less evil – world, but we are simultaneously torn: the activities we stage to raise the public awareness of the impending climate crisis leave behind a heavy carbon footprint; our actions for the sake of improving work conditions make those whose fate we aim to improve put in extra hours. By writing about the bane of mandatory overproduction, we provide incontrovertible evidence of its triumph.

How do we fight it?

The narrative of starting from oneself is suspicious. We will not save the world by abandoning drinking straws and plastic shopping bags (yet it goes without saying that we will resort to them once the world has been saved), as our personal consumer choices do nothing to the logic of the entire system responsible for the root cause of the ecological catastrophe. Still, overproduction is one of the instances where 'starting from oneself' is an anti-systemic and absolutely necessary action. We have to 'start from ourselves' because we ourselves – our bodies, our creative output and our activity – have become agents and vehicles of neoliberalism. We strengthen it through a series of minuscule daily activities and decisions. We legitimise it by our mode of work. We may criticise it openly using any means imaginable, we may wake up every single day reciting the passages of Simon Springer's essay 'Fuck Neoliberalism', but our anti-capitalism stance will be of no consequence as long as our activities fail to resist the entrenched logic of the system.

The demise of overproduction is an indispensable step on the road to questioning the very concept of productivity as a primary yardstick against which our activities are measured and to questioning the entire system. Paradoxically, the opportunity to flee the vicious circle of overproduction is available only to the most privileged of us. If I can convincingly imagine lowering my own productivity without detriment to my economic stability, then I am privileged. And for that reason alone, I should do so. Not to buttress my privilege through ostentatious idleness, but to carve out a space where a sense of stability and safety will be shared by more people.

'Collectives of care' rather than 'self-care'

It would be far easier to stoke the fire of resistance to overproduction by referring to the way it damages our physical and psychological well-being, negatively impacts our personal life, and curtails any development opportunities in all the non-professional fields of our life. I am intentionally *not* doing it, though. As recently observed by Jodi Dean: 'For too long, the individualist rhetoric of "self-care" has crowded out our sense of working collectively for shared goals.' (Dean, 2019) When it comes to saving the world as we know it, the very questioning of mechanisms that impose heightened productivity on us or even the lowering of the bar pale into insignificance. But the time and space that we will re-gain as a result can be used to implement a series of changes.

To do so, let's work collectively. As postulated by the authors of 'Undisciplining Political Ecology', we ought to create 'collectives of care' (Armiero, 2019). To work collectively, let's avail ourselves of already existing organisations and institutions. Let's join trade unions that can become a genuine tool for implementing changes in our work-related organisational practice. A radical shortening of the working week or day is one of such proposed changes. This, as advocated by the New Economics Foundation, could solve a few of the most pressing problems all at once: it would decrease our carbon dioxide emission levels, modify our consumer habits and other planet-debilitating activities. Correspondingly, it would solve all the issues related to both overwork and unemployment, enabling as a consequence a fairer distribution of tasks connected with care and domestic work, which would simply increase the quality of our daily life (Coote, 2010). We should also strive to transform our workplaces into feminist institutions of culture in accordance with the proposals worked out in the course of the 2018 Future of Culture Forum, as addressed by Iwona Kurz who spoke about 'the redevelopment of the very foundations of thinking about culture and society. Values traditionally construed as feminine, such as care and cooperation, ought to be fundamental to the entire construction of the social life, institutions, and politics' (Gruszczyński, 2018). Let's not be lulled into thinking that the existing system is the only socio-economic reality imaginable. Alternatives abound. One of them – stemming directly from the activities undertaken for the benefit of the natural environment and out of concern for the future of the entire planet – is the degrowth economy that postulates a radical departure from the neoliberal fetish of the paradigm of economic growth, a transformation of interpersonal relations, decentralisation and democratisation of means of knowledge production and dissemination, activities for climate and environmental justice and – obviously – the change of the conditions of what we call work. These issues are analysed and postulated among others by Federico Demaria, François Schneider, Filka Sekulova, and Joan Martinez (Demaria, 2013).

So: let's put an end to overproduction, as overproduction not only destroys all that is good and important in the world, but also does not allow us to stand up in defence of what is worth fighting for.

As are numerous other forms of creativity, the present text is the outcome of collective activities. It would not have come to fruition but for countless conversations, inspiring enterprises undertaken by my acquaintances (as well as by perfect strangers), texts authored by other, and – needless to say – an invitation to write it. It would not have materialised if many of my associates and colleagues had not shared their experiences that clearly attest to the far-reaching impact of overproduction on each and every one of us. I am indebted to all with whom I spoke in the months preceding to writing this text, to people with whom I whined over cups of coffee and joked with in the rare intervals of inactivity. In particular, I owe my gratitude to the participants in the 'Internationalism After the End of Globalisation' summit and workshop that I refer to at the beginning of my essay and to the attendees of the 'Art as Usual' meeting, which took place within the remit of the First Contemporary Art Climate Summit. I am grateful to the members of various committees within the Workers' Initiative Trade Union (Ogólnopolski Związek Zawodowy Inicjatywa Pracownicza) who devote their time and effort to the struggle for the improvement of work conditions across the board. I would like to thank all the people involved in the dissemination of the de-growth thought that may become a real-life alternative we all so desperately need. And obviously: sincere thanks to all of you I work with and to those I idle time away with.

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