

hyper-employment

*Hyperemployment
Post-work, Online Labour
and Automation*



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any leisurely or semi-leisurely environment. If, on the one hand, *Shouldn't You Be Working?* (2016) ^{p. 117} “allows any surface to remind remote workers that they are still tethered to the machine.”²¹ On the other hand, it underlines a paradox of the current scenario: once a prison to escape from, today, work seems to have become a free space to be protected from the invasive amount of information that tries to get our attention. Significantly, if you visit the Stayfocusd website today,²² it will prompt you to choose Freedom instead: an app working on any device, operating system and browser. “By blocking distracting websites and apps, you’ll be more focused and productive. You’ll develop healthier, more intentional digital habits, that give you control over your time and attention,”²³ reads the app description. Used by over one million people worldwide, Freedom frees you from hyperemployment and makes you free to work.

Lorusso is the author of *Entreprenariat*,²⁴ a book exploring the cognitive dissonance experienced by a generation of workers who are simultaneously doomed to precarious labour and to developing an entrepreneurial mindset in order not to succumb to precariousness: students, freelancers, cognitive and creative workers, employed, unemployed or self-employed, these are people living their lives as a permanent start-up project, constantly updating their LinkedIn profile, perusing productivity apps, promoting themselves on social networks, investing their expectations in crowdfunding projects while simultaneously accepting hundreds of underpaid tasks on crowdworking platforms.

²¹ Nicola Bozzi, “The Aesthetics of Productive Anxiety,” *Digimag Journal* XI, no. 75 (Spring 2017): 65–74.

²² Cf. <http://www.stayfocusd.com/>.

²³ Cf. <https://freedom.to/>.

²⁴ Silvio Lorusso, *Entreprenariat: Everyone is an Entrepreneur. Nobody is Safe* (Onomatopoe, Eindhoven 2019). First published in Italian (Krisis Publishing, Brescia 2018).

Artists naturally belong to this category. Long before the advent of neoliberalism, their working conditions have been defined by precariousness and self-entrepreneurship. Except for the happy few lucky enough to get a stable contract with a commercial gallery, providing them with a stipend and support dealing with institutions, collectors and magazines, family support or a steady job bolster the unpredictability of an artistic career for a long time. But still, the economy of most young or mid-career artists is tied to small participation fees, grants and applications, revenues from sold artworks, precarious and micro labours more or less related to their artistic activity; a lot of free labour accepted in order to add a few more lines to their CV; DIY self-promotion performed by designing and maintaining websites and social network accounts. Most of this work is managed through a computer, independently from the languages and media one adopts in one's work (although, of course, the amount of computer work increases for artists involved in digital media).

Not surprisingly, when New York-based artist **Michael Mandiberg** decided to make a self-portrait, what came out was a year-long investigation of personal working habits and the artist's quantified self. Starting in January 2016, for a year Mandiberg put their²⁵ life under surveillance, adapting technologies already in use for different purposes. From the quantified-self movement, a trend in the wellness industry that incorporates technology such as sensors and wearables to acquire self-knowledge through numbers, Mandiberg borrowed technologies such as the Fitbit, tracking their mental, physical, and emotional states. Hijacking a technique currently used by companies to monitor freelance remote labour, Michael programmed their computer and iPhone to capture screenshots and front camera images

²⁵ The artist asks to use they/them or refer to Michael by name rather than by gendered pronouns. Cf. <https://www.mandiberg.com/about/>.

every fifteen minutes. Finally, Mandiberg kept a journal, writing down every evening short personal notes about their life. The main outputs of this year-long performance based on data collection and self-inquiry were the audio installation *Quantified Self Portrait (Rhythms)* and the video installation *Quantified Self Portrait (One Year Performance)*,²⁶ both presented in a solo show titled *Workflow*, which opened at LACMA, Los Angeles, on 1 January 2017. The audio piece sonifies a year of the artist's heart rate data – recorded through Fitbit – alongside the sound of email alerts and was installed in LACMA's parking garage elevators, appropriating a space-time situation that is often used by people for fast smartphone checking. The video installation consists of three synchronised looping videos played next to each other, featuring the screenshots, the webcam pictures and the journal statements written by the artist throughout the performance. While the first two channels loop in 6'50", the journal excerpts are played slower, taking 47'50" to complete a full cycle. This different rhythm has strong consequences in terms of meaning production: while it is pretty impossible to understand what Mandiberg is working on, the flow of screenshots is perceived as a generic yet frenetic workflow, whose psychological consequences can be understood thanks to the anxiety, concentration, boredom, exhaustion depicted on the artist's face, as captured by the computer's webcam. Played slower and transcribed in a big, readable font, the journal allows us to get into the artist's daily life and provide these sensations with meaning: from there, we can understand Mandiberg's compulsive attitude towards emails, the impact that the artist's job at the Cuny University is having on their creative process, the frustration of an artist forced to turn into a manager and a curator of their own work, outsourcing the creative process to studio assistants. While we could easily argue that the form of the experiment is influencing its own subject of observation,

imposing Mandiberg new tasks and inducing more anxiety (write down the journal note, charge the Fitbit every night, manually take the iPhone screenshot every fifteen minutes as the process could not be automated, etc.); this does not compromise the artwork's effectiveness in portraying the artist's "position as a microcosm of a pathologically overworked and increasingly quantified society."²⁶ As Mandiberg explained in an interview:

I experienced challenges tracking my life (which was time-consuming and stressful), but the performance also made me acutely aware of the challenges that were already present in my life. By giving my life a visible framework, the performance brought frustrations and difficulties that I previously regarded as mundane, or didn't notice, into focus. [...] the challenges I experienced didn't arise from imposing an abstract disciplinary system on myself, but resulted from noticing and recording the ways in which my life is already a tightrope act of internalized self-discipline. The year made it visible that, in a sense, I bring my prison everywhere I go.²⁷

One of the topics of *Quantified Self Portrait* is the assault that working time and hyperemployment shifted to free time, vacation time and sleep time. "It is hard to restrain my compulsion to check my email. Even my work email. Even on vacation," Michael wrote in their diary on 17 January. "I regularly waste hours on the Internet late at night after

²⁶ From the work's presentation, available at <https://www.mandiberg.com/quantified-self-portrait-one-year-performance/>.

²⁷ Régine Debatty, "Failed banks, quantified self and addiction to the infinite scroll. An interview with Michael Mandiberg," *We Make Money Not Art*, 7 September 2017, <https://we-make-money-not-art.com/failed-banks-quantified-self-and-addiction-to-the-infinite-scroll-an-interview-with-michael-mandiberg/>.

I know I should be asleep. It is almost never productive. I almost always regret," reads a post from 20 February. According to Jonathan Crary,

Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism. Most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life – hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship – have been remade into commodified or financialized forms. Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability, and thus remains an incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present. In spite of all the scientific research in this area, it frustrates and confounds any strategy to exploit or reshape it. The stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.²⁸

Yet, if it cannot be exploited, Crary argues, it can be blemished, eroded, wretched and despoiled, reducing our sleep time to the minimum, disturbing it with light and noise pollution, fragmenting it with phone notifications that wake us up at night, and generating anxiety and insomnia that has to be cured (and as such, can be commodified).


In his book, Crary outlines the emergence of a 24/7 capitalism that, while unable to destroy the latest "natural barrier" of sleep, is forcing us to adapt to the uninterrupted time of machines and digital flows. But are we sure that nothing of value can be extracted from sleep? That hyperemployment does not yet extend to sleep time? Within the quantified self movement, a whole range of sleep tracking technologies and phone apps have emerged in recent years: rings and wrist-based trackers measuring

²⁸ Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (London: Verso 2013), 10–11.

heart rate, body temperature and more; devices using radio waves to detect body movements; phone apps that can track body movements and breathing patterns through sensors and ultrasound, collecting data about our sleep but also scoring it and providing recommendations to improve it. Through these technologies, sleep is turned into labour in two ways: through the collection and analysis of valuable data about our bodies, behaviours and habits that could not be collected otherwise; and thanks to the tasks and exercises that self-improvement apps suggest to us to improve our sleep.

According to artist **Elisa Giardina Papa**:


[T]hese apps are a new "pharmakon" – the Greek term signifying both a poison and its remedy – in the sense that they operate through an inherent duplicity whereby they provide a remedy for what they themselves take away. Constant connectivity and increasing habituation to 24/7 techno-capitalism dispossesses humans of "natural" sleep cycles and opens up new scenarios for sleep disorders, but they also simultaneously present us with remedies to re-optimize whatever hours of sleep we have left. That is: we sleep less, but we might learn how to sleep faster.²⁹

In *Labor of Sleep* (2017),  ^{p. 123} Giardina Papa explores this incipient capitalisation of sleep through a series of short video clips, illustrating "how we use technologies to regulate human sleeping habits within the rhythms of a wider system – one that includes humans and non-humans, extending from organic matter to digital devices themselves."³⁰ The thirty-

²⁹ Lucia Longhi, "Technologies of Care: An Interview with Elisa Giardina Papa," *Berlin Art Link*, 11 February 2020. <https://www.berlinartlink.com/2020/02/11/technologies-of-care-an-interview-with-elisa-giardina-papa/>.

³⁰ *Labor of Sleep* was commissioned and first presented on the Whitney Museum website, as part of the programme *Sunrise/Sunset*, a series of Internet art projects


to sing the Internationale. In *An Almost Complete List of Labour Slogans*, a young Indian performer, wearing a funny, colourful self-made coat full of charms, declaims without any empathy slogans such as “the boss needs you, you don’t need him,” “workers of the world unite,” “kicking ass for the working class” and “right to work for less.”⁴⁶ Once able to resonate and keep together a large portion of the world’s population, these slogans have been turned into empty signifiers by the evolution of labour along the last decades and sound absurd in the mouth or on the body of an anonymous crowdworker from a developing country who is systematically exploited by employers – including the artist – through a completely automatised, disembodied system of commissioning and delivering. At the same time, however, we cannot give up with the (maybe illusory) belief that the system can be exploited to implant seeds of resistance within this fragmented, anonymous crowd.

Both these concepts are at play in *Postmodern Times* (2016–2018)  ^{p. 149} as well, **Michael Mandiberg**’s monumental portrait of this new crowdworking class. To make this 87-minute movie, Mandiberg took Charlie Chaplin’s notorious portrait of the Fordist assembly line, chunked it into numerous short clips, and sent them out (again through Fiverr.com) to 182 digital freelancers living in over 25 countries asking them for re-enactments. In the final output, clips from the original movie are woven together with the re-enactments to keep a sense of a linear narrative that would otherwise get completely lost in this fragmented series of characters, workplaces and modes of production. In the movie, we get glimpses not only of the daily life and environment of creative workers from the Western world but

⁴⁶ Segni’s gigs were auctioned on a dedicated web platform, so the videos and pictures where produced only when they were collected. Documentation about the work can be found here: <https://old.guidosegni.com/work/work-less-work-all-we-are-the-99-on-fiverr-com/>.

also of the burdensome conditions of people from Africa and South-East Asia, living in dormitories that should be better described as prisons, probably working in agriculture or mines and doing videos on Fiverr to get some extra money. In a single scene, we travel from an elegant neighbourhood in the United States to a dirty bidonville, from a muddy river to a green park, from a post-industrial scenario to a pre-industrial one. Similarly, amateur footage recorded with the phone camera follows professional images shot in front of a green screen. This postmodern chaos, reflecting the conditions of digital labour, is mirrored into the soundtrack, weaving together “various interpretations of the original soundtrack, including a generic presentation of the MIDI data, passionate interpretations of the original score performed by musicians on Fiverr.com, and traces of the original score and Foley sounds to connect the sound back to the original score.”⁴⁷

V. Automation, Laziness and Post-work

According to Slovenian artist **Sanela Jahić**, crowdworking can be described as a “global digital assembly line,”⁴⁸ in which a single job is fragmented into many micro contracts and micropayments. In her work *Digital Punch Card* (2018–2019),  ^{p. 126} Jahić put the workforce provided by the Texas-based crowdworking platform Microworkers under surveillance, by asking them to download and install an app which tracked the timestamp of their work and the number of mouse clicks and

⁴⁷ Cf. <https://www.mandiberg.com/postmodern-times/>.

⁴⁸ Cf. the artist talk with Sanela Jahić, “The Labour of Making Labour Disappear,” Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 15 January 2020. Realised in the framework of the symposium “AUTOMATE ALL THE THINGS!” within the *Hyperemployment – Post-work, Online Labour and Automation* programme. <https://youtu.be/2FKrbkgip04>.

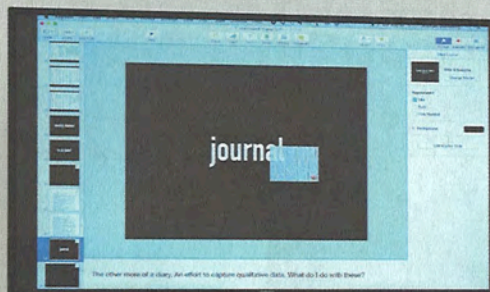
Hyperemployment, exhibition, curated by Domenico Quaranta

MGLC, Ljubljana, 7 Nov 2019–19 Jan 2020

Left: Michael Mandiberg, *Quantified Self Portrait (One Year Performance)*, 2016–2017

Right: Elisa Giardina Papa, *Labor of Sleep*, 2017





I feel a little calmer with the grant done, a storage place researched, and the subletter's check in hand. Still so many things to do in 10 days.

12/9/16