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# Introduction:

## For an Ethology of Exhaustion

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Exhausted through overwork, incapable of productive activity, I found myself drifting through social networks, feeling my depression and exhaustion increasing.

(Fisher 2013)

It is commonplace to observe that, in today's societies of connectivity, our lives are constantly tracked, our behaviour is checked, our performances assessed. Anxious to meet the requirements of quantitative "performance indicators," we hardly ever get to do our actual work, bring our work to full term, or decidedly refuse work—work, produce, work, produce, endlessly. As the late Mark Fisher suggested, the amount of work we do actually keeps us from being productive in an emphatic sense of the word, that is, developing creative ways of encountering the various (philosophical, artistic, etc.) problems posed by existence. Instead, we feed the field of social and economic relations that exhaust us as we run after deadlines, fulfil quotas and complete administrative chores. Even outside of our strictly professional occupations, we perceive an increased pressure to perform our (active, popular, successful) selves who participate in the experience economy. It appears that Fear of Missing Out intensified by social media that are "always on" only further increases their use which, in turn, causes sleep deprivation and exhaustion (Levenson et al. 2016).

Algorithmic capture is hunting down even the most minute gesture, trying to siphon information for the extraction of surplus-value.

Similar modes of extraction account for the material and environmental conditions of the planet in a devastating downward spiral. In what has been called the age of the Anthropocene, the bleak state of the environment, threatened by global warming, mass extinction, and forced displacement, drains individuals and collectives of their futurity, making it harder to imagine other futures. In that sense, the environmental exhaustion of the planet doubles in an exhaustion of the potential to think and act constructively.

In this process, individuals are pushed towards the edge of a sustainable existential field, at once facing a plethora of choices and incapable of making a choice or cut that would deviate from the permanent exhaustive capture. As François Zourabichvili succinctly said in Spinozean manner, “everything is possible, yet nothing is possible” (1998: 354).

“You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” (Beckett 2009: 407)

So then what? It is unlikely that the molar formations of cognitive capitalism, the network society and the “attention economy” as a whole can be shifted or twisted into something more benign any time soon. The entanglement of social relations with digital technologies makes it harder and harder to disconnect, to go completely offline in an act of defiance (is disconnecting even truly possible?) All of this means that we are faced with the paradox of Beckett’s unnamed and unnamable protagonist: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” The question is *how*. This issue of *Inflexions* is committed to investigating what minor ways of creatively working with exhaustion might be possible or impossible today while taking into account that the range of possibility is tied to the conditioning of the field that makes these options felt as real. How can one create vacuoles in the strangling networks

of social relations and obligations; and what kinds of spatio-temporal compositions might constitute these vacuoles? With this question we, the editors and authors, want to approach a multi-faceted conception of exhaustion turning a set of relations not only against itself, as we might observe through the social in social media, but also as a limit concept extending the boundaries of the possible both in its devastating and potentializing ways. In a sense, then, we are proposing an ethology of and for exhaustion, a study of the conducts that got us here and the techniques that might allow us to create with and through it.

Exhaustion is very different from increasingly schematized psycho-social occurrences such as burn-out. While burn-out seems to relate to the state of being overworked and thus somewhat dysfunctional for the place one supposedly holds in the assembly line of capitalist value extraction, exhaustion has a limit-quality. From this point of view, exhaustion is the field effect of a relational operation moving across different strata of human and more-than-human factors tweaking the capacities of an assemblage, such as the human or animal body, but also the technological ensembles of machines or information networks. Exhaustion as a peaking of intensities can lead to complete breakdown and death but also effectuate shifts in the overall mesh of relations in order to enable unforeseen potentials. From this point of view, exhaustion should not be considered as a generalized assertion of our contemporary socio-technological state of being exceeding what we are “capable of” or can “bear with.” On the contrary, we wonder how exhaustion can allow us to problematize the constant interpellation of being active without merely opposing it to a deliberate passivity, but rather as an immanent critique of a reduced understanding of activity susceptible to surplus extraction. And, on the other hand, we ask how exhaustion might become a creative technique to radically alter the redundant extractive modes of activity. Exhausted bodies and collectives perceive and create differently, thus challenging the business-as-usual of the depleting routine. In other words, we ask how exhaustion can be inflected towards new

possibilities of existing at the limit, which is the overall definition of life for both Gilles Deleuze and Gilbert Simondon (Deleuze 1990: 104). If exhaustion becomes an approximation of the limit, this is because it is far from any association with tiredness, as Deleuze points out in his essay “The Exhausted.” Exhaustion as a limit-concept allows us to verge on nothingness as a creative and intense state whose other side might be chaos where nothing is possible. While the Nodes of this issue concern explicitly the modes of exhaustion and their relation to the limit, the contributions to the Tangents explore more how to work along the limits of the possible through exhaustion. Thus the Nodes and Tangents maintain a certain autonomy from each other and, at the same time, are traversed by the creative forces of exhaustion echoing *Inflexions*’ emphasis on research-creation. In other words, the formats might differ between the two sections but their shared interest resides in exploring what exhaustion as a concept and practice can do and might become.

The field within which the interventions shared in the Node section take place is that of the micropolitical. They are about creating techniques and gestures to make the present liveable, to inflect exhaustion towards creation. Sometimes this means dramatizing exhaustion as Melanie Gilligan does to make felt the injunctions and double-binds of our social environments. Or it can mean engaging in an intriguing historiography of geological and physical exhaustion itself, as provided in Sissel Marie Tonn’s “Burial History.” It can consist in a conceptual intervention such as Adam Szymanski’s to warn against the slippery slope of affirming a concept like *plasticity*. In any case, each of the contributions collected here develops or engages techniques for opening holes of escape (or flight) in the tight fabric of exhausting social relations. It should be clear that, although these are *micropolitical* techniques and *minor* gestures, they are in no way disconnected from the urgent political question haunting contemporary societies. Inspired by the work of Félix Guattari, we assume that life is lived at the intersection of various ecologies, including at least the mental, the

social, and the environmental. What Guattari calls ecosophy consists in a thinking that articulates these three ecological registers to produce sustainable ways of living (Guattari 2000: 28).

At every level, individual or collective, in everyday life as well as the reinvention of democracy (concerning town planning, artistic creation, sport, etc.), it is a question in each instance of looking into what would be the dispositives of the production of subjectivity, which tends towards an individual and/or collective resingularization, rather than that of mass-media manufacture, which is synonymous with distress and despair. (Guattari 2000: 33-34)

This is what the contributions do in one way or another in this issue: They traverse emergent existential territories of different registers to articulate ways of being that, for instance, affirm an environmental ecology through the recomposition of a social ecology. This becomes evident in Barbara Glowczewski's plea for new cross-ontological alliances which shows that feminist and Indigenous activist projects are stronger and more efficient for conceiving transversal relations between their different ontologies. Clearly, the key to such endeavours does not lie in a single worldview that is shared by all allies. Rather, these projects are first and foremost about finding pragmatic, albeit provisional, answers to the question, "can one pass through here, and how?" (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 8). Working through this question never produces a general answer, let alone a general solution to the problem of exhaustion. The answers given in the contributions collected here are always singular, responding to and working with the conditions of the situation that raised the question in the first place. In other words, they propose ecological modes of co-composing with and through exhaustion at the limit of what it can do, both, conceptually and pragmatically. The examples discussed by Glowczewski give a sense of the rich variety of social alliances and formations that can (re-)create a new sensibility for relating to the environment, while moving across and between different limits.

This ethological concern for dispositives, conducts and techniques is closely tied to this issue's investment in research-creation. The mandate of research-creation as we understand it is precisely to stage a productive encounter between "theory" and "practice" to produce and share not only new knowledge but new modes of knowing as a kind of feeling. Because of this openness of the question how one will come to know, research-creation is always a veritable adventure, an experiment with the option to fail. This is one of the things that distinguishes research-creation from more conventional, tried-and-tested methodologies. The present issue of *Inflexions* grew out of a research-creation event of the same title, held on April 28-30, 2016 at the University of Amsterdam. There, participants experimented with activating forms of knowledge production that engage and work with exhaustion in an attempt to tackle the occasionally exhausting aspects of conference participation itself. Conferences can be exhausting not only because they are long and repetitive in structure (usually a series of panels that regroup 20-minute presentations) but also because the standardized modes of exchanging knowledge limit what can be thought and what can happen. Thus, while they are physically exhausting, their contents are often very remote from exhausting what is possible in terms of thought. At the same time, it must be admitted, the conference model gives a sense of security because it is grounded in a set of familiar expectations and because it guarantees the efficient exchange of a deliverable from its producer (presenter) to a consumer (the panel audience). Perhaps it was the comforting lure of the familiar that caught us at some points throughout the event. Perhaps it was the university environment itself with its particular conditions: tables, chairs, fluorescent lights, blackboards, projector (sounds), screens, schedules, the colours and scents of an institutional building, etc. In any case, the event had a tendency of seeking refuge in the conventional mould of the conference presentation. Ironically, this falling back onto the familiar made the event all the more exhausting. What gave a sense of security to the individual became a

challenge for the attentional capacities of the collective. What makes the individual's work recognizable to the institution dissolves the cohesion of a social formation. We have learned (once again) from this experience that the creation of a generative event ecology requires a particular care for the various existential territories intersecting within it. While we may have missed the chance to engage in an immanent critique of the format in the moment of being together, the event continues to unfold. The shared sense of exhaustion generated a care for collective modes of thinking and making, a care whose repercussions nurture this issue of *Inflexions* in another space and time. We conceive of this issue of *Inflexions* as an extension of the limits of what we thought and felt in Amsterdam, now through an extended ecology of practices beyond the shared experience.

It is in the experimental challenges of but also the capacities for immanent critique through research-creation that we further venture collectively into the problem of exhaustion. Directly in resonance with the place from which our questions emerged, Peter Pál Pelbart gives a moving account of the Ueinz Theater Company composed by schizophrenics during a (different) stay in Amsterdam. This touching eulogy for Pelbart's friend and collaborator Alexandre is also a powerful reminder that the recomposition of our social ecologies is a matter of life and death for individuals whose mental ecology diverges from the imposed norm. This, too, is research-creation in the mode of writing. Alanna Thain explores the productive enunciative position that Gilles Deleuze created for the filming of his *Abécédaire* with Claire Parnet. Insisting that the interviews should only be published posthumously, Deleuze speaks to us as if from the dead. This kind of thinking and speaking as if one's life was already spent, exhausted, is an act of research-creation directly leaping into others' lives, like the ones watching the *Abécédaire* now. Moving beyond a linguistic mode of exploring exhaustion, Nicole de Brabandere's "experimental media ecologies" show how the exhaustion of certain perceptual habits can open up towards new and more emphatically ecological modes of perception.

Indeed, she demonstrates how materials, technologies and our perceptual apparatus co-compose the dynamic experiences she speaks of. Steve Giasson, too, affirms exhaustion rather than trying to avoid it or even mend it. For him, exhaustion becomes a mode of making art itself, for instance in the serial reenactment and recirculation of an image in order to exhaust it.

If anything, this issue of *Inflexions* points out that the notion of care needs to go beyond the human, that it needs to acknowledge the complex imbrication of mental, social and environmental ecologies. This is because exhaustion itself traverses existential territories in complex ways, with each drained existence (human and non-human) putting others on the line. Therefore “Modes of Exhaustion” calls for practices of co-composing modes of existence across the three ecologies, with and through exhaustion as a threshold towards other possible worlds.

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