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2023-24 NYC Proposal
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Fitter, Happier, More Productive **submitted by: Lexington Davis**

Barre classes. Juice cleanses. Meditation apps. Ten-step skincare routines. Athleisure. Mindfulness training. Dietary supplements. Jade rolling. The "self-care" industry ceaselessly introduces trends aimed at improving physical and mental wellbeing, at least for those who can afford the hefty price tag. Such commodities and services are sold as a pathway to personal optimization, evading the question: for what purpose and whose benefit?

"Fitter, Happier, More Productive" brings together six women and non-binary artists whose work explores the toxic underbelly of capitalist wellness culture, proposing instead alternative understandings of wellbeing that confront socio-political histories, environmental degradation, and structural inequalities. The exhibition problematizes capitalism's framing of wellness as a personal quest for self-improvement rather than a collective project requiring societal investment and systemic change. Instead of offering opportunities for reflection and renewal, wellness culture conditions us to see life as another mode of work, and work as the defining feature of life. By marketing self-care as an individualistic endeavor, capitalism gaslights the public into believing that issues created by corporate greed and a gutted welfare state might be solved by an açai bowl, a yoga retreat, or twenty-five units of Botox.

In highlighting women and non-binary artists, the exhibition draws attention to how wellness products are disproportionately marketed toward women, a group already tasked with a "second shift" of family care duties, who are now expected to perform expensive, time-consuming self-care regimens. In interactive, interdisciplinary work, the first artist draws connections between the successful marketing of Korean beauty products and the country's history of US militarization. The second artist likewise critiques wellbeing's corporatization through multimedial installations exploring how alternative practices of healing might aid in recovery from colonial violence and ecological destruction.

Through installations combining video, clay sculptures, and collage, the third artist satirically exposes how "aspirational media"—such as YouTube vlogs and cooking programs—frame wellness as an individual, moral decision, ignoring the systemic inequalities that make healthy lifestyle choices impossible for many, particularly for Black Americans. The fourth artist is similarly concerned with the relationship between wellness and privilege, which she explores through translucent resin sculptures and oneiric video works examining twentieth-century Soviet bathhouse culture's entanglement with power and class politics.

In lens-based and computer-generated work, the fifth artist mines "hypercapitalist" image culture to critique how feminized subjects—both human and digital—are expected to

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occupy a state of nonstop productivity, as workers and consumers. The sixth artist employs humor and surreal video effects in her ongoing series "Whispering Pines," which features the artist's hypochondriac alter-ego Cynthia on a journey of self-discovery involving New Age products and mystical experimentation, clouded over by existential anxiety.

By examining the social, political, and psychological effects of wellness culture, the exhibition reveals the need for new practices of wellbeing inspired by activists like the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde, who saw self-care as a radical "act of political warfare." Through engagement with overlooked histories and social conditions, "Fitter, Happier, More Productive" highlights how wellness practices might be transformed from capitalist labor into a tool of resistance.

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