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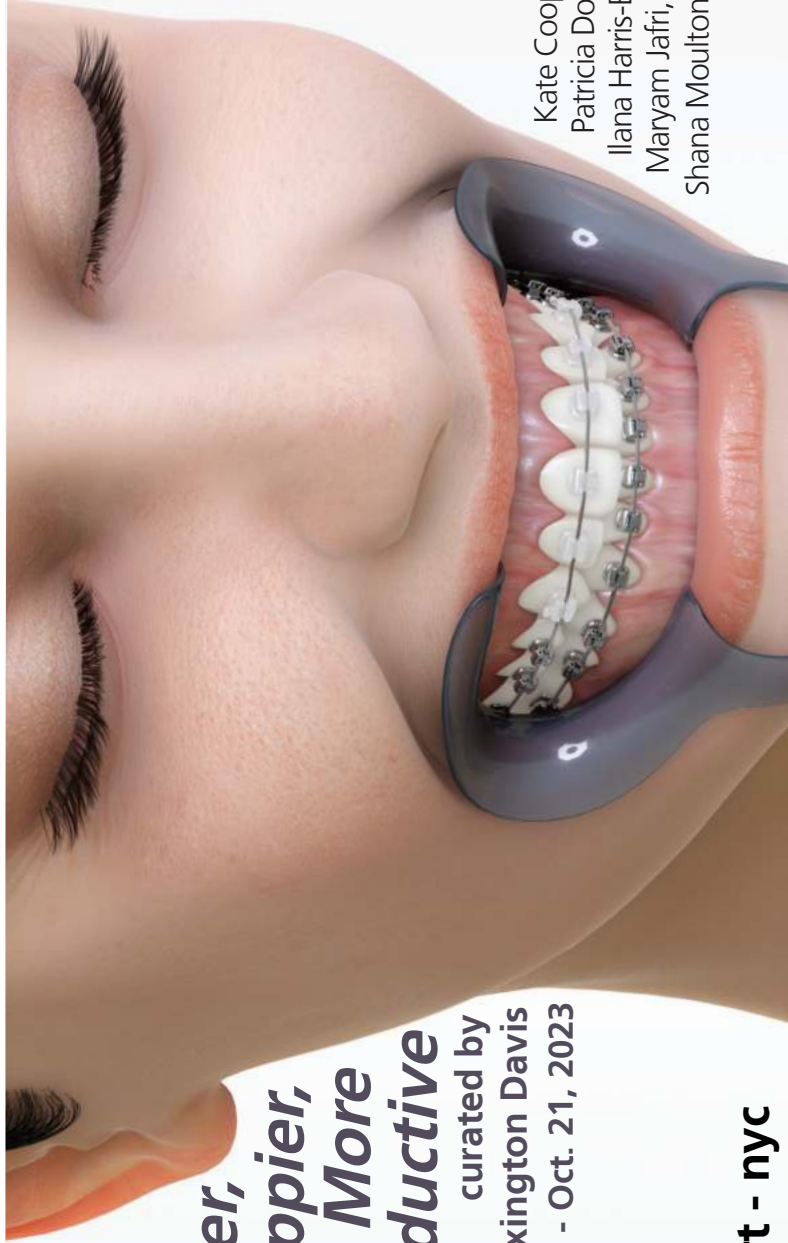
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ISBN: 978-1-946416-59-9

Cover Image: Kate Cooper, *Rigged*, 2014. 2 single-channel videos, color, sound, looped back-to-back, Video 1 (1:54 min), video 2 (4:27)



Fitter, Happier, More Productive

curated by
Lexington Davis
Sept. 8 - Oct. 21, 2023

Kate Cooper,
Patricia Domínguez,
Ilana Harris-Babou,
Maryam Jafri, and
Shana Moulton & Nick Hallett

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Maryam Jafri, *Depression*, 2017, Wood, silicone feet, acupuncture needles, glass cupping equipment, photograph, paper, egg carton, 29.5 x 14.5 x 24.25 in.

Fitter, Happier, More Productive

"To me, it's all laddering up to one thing, which is optimization of self," explains celebrity lifestyle guru Gwyneth Paltrow, flashing teeth the same shade as her crisp, white blouse. For Paltrow, self-optimization is inextricably tied to consumption, but her mode of spending is exalted as virtuous, reaching toward a higher purpose. The products she and other wellness influencers endorse are "clean," "holistic," and "natural"—as if they sprung up from the earth rather than a boardroom investment pitch.

The wellness industry has recently ballooned to a market size of over \$1 trillion, with steady growth projected. Trend cycles move rapidly, and sleekly branded startups offer an endless stream of solutions to multifarious issues, including some that seem to have been newly invented. Jade rolling, juice cleanses, IV drips, and collagen peptides claim to solve problems as vast and existential as aging, malaise, exhaustion, and anxiety, though results remain largely unproven. Between glossy packaging and stylish marketing campaigns, what exactly is being sold? A chance to alleviate late capitalism's damaging effects while simultaneously gaining entry into the class responsible for creating unsustainable living conditions? Instead of offering opportunities for renewal, the wellness industry transforms health into another form of work, requiring tireless self-discipline and effort. 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 a smoothie bowl, a yoga retreat, or twenty-five units of Botox.

Featuring sculpture, computer-generated imagery, and lens-based media, *Fitter, Happier, More Productive*

presents work by five artists who reflect on wellness culture's toxic underbelly. The exhibition problematizes capitalism's framing of self-care as a personal quest for improvement rather than a collective project requiring societal investment and systemic change. In contrast, the exhibition proposes understandings of well-being that confront socio-political histories, environmental degradation, and structural inequalities. Embracing humor and the uncanny, the artists' work dissects the cultural fixation on self-care in dialogue with political and economic shifts that have caused increasing precarity for workers across the globe.

In **Kate Cooper's** work *Rigged* (2014), computer-generated bodies writhe and jog, sporting spandex athleisure and shiny braces. By dislocating these images from their original context in commercial image production, Cooper challenges the desire and violence inherent in hypercapitalist visual and labor regimes. Engrossed in frenzied physical activities, her characters' exertions mirror the forms of feminized, affective labor that have become pervasive in postindustrial economies. Cooper's subjects reveal the potential of these images, and the artist embraces hacking, occupying, hijacking, and invading as methods for subverting capitalist image culture's labor divisions. When making this work in 2014, Cooper was interested in the ways these CGI bodies could be appropriated and deployed as weapons against exploitative labor. She does this by asking how digital bodies might perform in our place and allow us to refuse certain forms of unremunerated labor. Ultimately, *Rigged* considers whether "bodies" produced by emerging technologies might contain new forms of political potential through strategies of withdrawal from our physical selves.

Similarly engaging with representational and labor politics, **Maryam Jafri's** *Wellness-Postindustrial Complex* (2017) critiques the West's appropriation of Eastern self-care practices, including yoga, acupuncture, cupping therapy, and meditation. As the professional workforce becomes increasingly precarious, individuals seek control through self-disciplinary regimens targeted toward personal optimization. To meet demand, Eastern traditional practices are exoticized as "alternative," and repackaged for Western consumers, losing context in the process. Acknowledging that desire for fulfillment often leads back to consumption, Jafri juxtaposes treatment tools like acupuncture needles and cups with mass-produced objects, such as watermarked stock images and silicone body parts sourced from online fetish shops. Her work situates the body as a site where late capitalism's economic, psychological, and social contradictions converge, with dizzying effects.

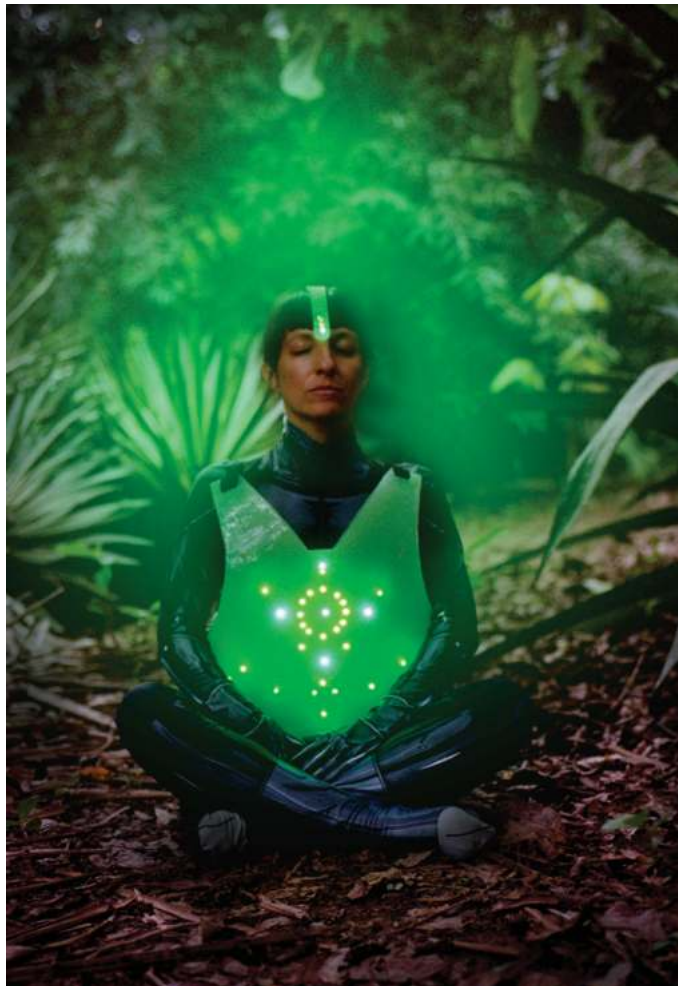


Ilana Harris-Babou, Still from *Decision Fatigue*, 2020, HD video, 8:33 min.

In her installation *Decision Fatigue* (2020), **Ilana Harris-Babou** is interested in the ways that wellness serves to delineate racial and class differences. Through sculpture, collage, and video, Harris-Babou critiques how “aspirational media”—such as cooking blogs and Instagram feeds—frame well-being as an individual, moral pursuit, ignoring the systemic inequalities that make healthy lifestyle choices impossible for many, particularly for Black Americans. Satirically adopting the peachy pinks and sleek surfaces prevalent in wellness branding, Harris-Babou reveals the absurdity of the self-care industry’s predominance in a country where millions lack access to basic healthcare. In her video, the artist appropriates the language of a YouTube DIY vlog, with the artist’s mother instructing the viewer on how to apply a Cheeto face mask and use a jade roller before eating a TV dinner. This disorienting conglomeration of references disrupts the demarcation between “high” and “low” class that is integral to the logic of wellness marketing. Her colorful clay sculptures playfully recall the merchandise on offer at a luxury boutique, but



Ilana Harris-Babou, Still from *Decision Fatigue*, 2020, HD video, 8:33 min.



Patricia Domínguez, *Matrix Vegetal; telepatía floral, si, a tí, te invoco*, Photograph, 2021, 39.4 in. x 26 in.

their fragility speaks to the specter of insecurity haunting most Americans’ access to healthcare and wellness.

Equally concerned with experiences of precarity and survival, **Patricia Domínguez** addresses how alternative practices of healing might aid in recovery from colonial violence and ecological destruction. For her project *Matrix Vegetal*, which consists of a video installation and series of photographs, the artist trained with Amador Aniceto, a healer and curandero based in Madre de Dios, Peru. Under his tutelage, Domínguez worked to de-center Western scientific approaches to ethnobotany through anti-anthropocentric engagement with plant life. Critical of self-care’s corporatization, she considers how the global wellness industry caters to the West but expropriates from the Global South. While açai,

quinoa, and avocados line the shelves of health food stores across America and Europe, their cultivation and exportation cause harmful ecological effects in South America. Through her work, Domínguez explores how emancipatory creative practices might work in opposition to ongoing colonial exploitation.

Like Domínguez, **Shana Moulton** reflects on the intersections between health and environmental deterioration in video and performance works. For the past two decades, she has been exploring wellness as a route to transcendence through *Whispering Pines*, an ongoing series of videos starring her hypochondriac alter-ego Cynthia, whose often comical journey of self-discovery is guided by New Age products and idiosyncratic rituals. The most recent video in the series, *Whispering Pines 10* (2018), follows Cynthia’s discovery of environmental activist Julia Butterfly Hill, who occupied a redwood for over two years to save it from being cut down. Set to an operatic score and libretto written by Nick Hallett, the video witnesses Cynthia’s desire for political action compete with an urge to self-soothe through exercise videos, bubble baths, and face masks. Like many, Cynthia’s finds her paralyzing anxieties about the climate crisis intersect with feelings of helplessness that make retreating into the temporary relief of self-care practices so appealing.

Though the exhibition highlights the absurdities of the wellness industry, it acknowledges that its popularization is driven in part by deep-seated fears about the sustainability of late capitalist living conditions. Rampant usage of terms like “non-toxic” at a time of unprecedented economic degradation is no coincidence and reflects a broader distrust in the quality of our air, food, and water. These concerns are rooted in legitimate crises, but most seriously affect marginalized groups who are not the target consumers of luxury wellness products.



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 10 (with Nick Hallett)*, 2018, HD digital video, 35 min.



Shana Moulton, *Whispering Pines 10 (with Nick Hallett)*, 2018, HD digital video, 35 min.

While each of the artists attends to the more nefarious effects of wellness culture, they also acknowledge that wellness has been, and can again be radical. In counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, many turned to home-grown foods and non-Western health practices as an alternative to consumer culture. Groups like the Black Panther Party saw community wellness as an urgent political issue and created “survival programs” that provided free meals and healthcare services. Famously, the poet Audre Lorde considered self-care a radical “act of political warfare” in a society that devalue Black women’s lives. For many people struggling with chronic illnesses, whose experiences of the medical industrial complex have been traumatic due to racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, seeking alternative forms of care represents an act of willful resistance and self-determination.

As much as wellness has been co-opted by corporate powers, it can still offer possibilities for opposition, with recent feminist scholars emphasizing rest, refusal, and anti-work as strategies for countering neoliberalism’s logic of productivity at all costs. By examining the social, political, and psychological effects of wellness culture, the exhibition reveals the need for new practices of well-being inspired by artists and activists. Through engagement with overlooked histories and contemporary conditions, *Fitter, Happier, More Productive* highlights how wellness practices might be transformed from capitalist labor into tools of resistance.

Lexington Davis
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