

OFFLINE

The Less-Digital Guide
to Creative Work

BY JESS HENDERSON

MATTERS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is for all the readers of Outsider and for all fellow outsiders on the inside. Thank you for your generous and critical guidance.

Thank you to my mother, my brother, my sunshine, and the wise man who changed my life in 2019.

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P003	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	P094	INTERLUDE II
P006	PREFACE	P098	PART TWO: RESISTANCE
P010	WELCOME	P100	LIMIT INPUT
P016	PART ONE: REALITY		Protecting Original Thought
P018	IT'S ALL MARKETING	P104	THE 'JUST BECAUSE' METHOD
	Recognising Reality and Living with Ourselves		Because No Reason is a Reason
P021	OFFLINE ACTION AND INACTION	P108	DESIRE & DISTRACTION
	A New Vision of Value		Socialising as an Antidote to Consumerism
P030	ANTI-TREND FORECASTS	P111	IMPOSTER NON-SYNDROME
	Futurology in the Creative Industries		Being Where They Don't Want Us
P035	MILLENNIAL MELTDOWN	P114	PRECIOUS KILLS
	The Everyday Adoption of Marketing Jargon		Too Much Consideration Becomes Doubt
P041	FROM POSSESSION TO ACTIVITY	P116	AIM LOWER
	The Humanisation of Commercial Creativity		The Realities of Time Perception
P045	PURPOSE SMURPOSE	P120	INTERLUDE III
	On Appropriated Crusades		
P048	INTERLUDE I	P124	CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING
			Your Activism Starts Now
P052	WE'RE IN TOTE HELL	P129	ADHOCISM
	The Proliferation of the Tote Bag		A Case for the Anti-Plan
P054	THE CULT OF DIGITAL	P133	WHY SO SERIOUS?
	An Industry Brainwashed		A Plague of Humour Deficiency
P062	WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT	P136	CYNIC OR CRITIC?
	Why 'Relevance' Lives Offline		The Difference Between Critical Thinking and Cynicism
P065	OVER CONTENT CREATION	P139	RESPECT IS NOT EARNT
	Putting the Audience Before Yourself		Showing How We Expect To Be Treated
P071	OBSCURED PERSUASION	P144	WHAT'S YOUR SOLITUDE?
	Vigilance Against Covert Marketing		Aloneness as Alternative
P076	SHOCK ME. PLEASE.	P149	MAKING SENSE
	Pervasive Boring Creativity		The Language, The Problem, and The Future
P079	TIRED OF PANEL TALKS		
	Why This Format Has Reached Fatigue	P153	INTERLUDE IV
P082	EVERYONE IS BORED		
	Everything is Boring	P156	ENDNOTES
P086	FAKE BUSY		
	Nobody Wants to be Vacant		

PREFACE

*Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know
what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty
is room to act.*

REBECCA SOLNIT

I have woven a parachute out of everything broken.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

I finished the final manuscript of this book the week the Covid-19 virus was announced as a pandemic. The question of *to lock down or not to lock down* lingered in Europe for a couple of weeks before we started retreating into our homes and leaning on our technologies harder than ever. Two camps emerged: those who saw the window as the long-awaited permission to slow, and those who hyped up the hyper-connection in order to cope.

The drive to continue work or study quickly engulfed much of the first encampment. Days became full of video calls – sometimes with clients or colleagues, sometimes with friends and family, and sometimes with that unique extra group: those whom we had lost touch with in the haste of *before*. Our phones became our life lines and we found comfort from the same lights, sounds, and notifications that were oppressing us just weeks earlier – until the oppression came back around, harder and more disorienting than ever. As one student from Rome wrote: ‘Allegedly, this virus has robbed people of their social life due to social distancing, but did it, really? The truth is that social physical interaction was robbed by social media way before the Coronavirus even existed... The majority of us now use this calamity as an excuse for our excessive social media use’. Compared with socialising face-to-face, a life where ‘connection’ came purely through incoming notifications and ongoing Zoom calls felt like a deprived substitute.

My dear friend Dalia told me ‘we need to become friends with the virus’, and I saw it was doing much of the work this book set out to do. It reminded us that the quieter camp is there. It provided an opening, an opportunity. And it suggested a form of creative work that was less dictated by – and worshipping of – digital ‘solutions’. People began valuing the physical interactions that were taken for granted before and had now become punishable. Walks outside, physical hang outs, films watched in cinemas, and the freedom to come and go in the world as you please – all these unconscious acts now became precious. They gained a scary past-like quality, relics from a time before. Sure, we lost our freelance jobs but we can recognise that we gained a lot too. I’m bound to this small apartment with my buddy who happens to be my romantic partner. It’s a special situation for a couple; we are getting to know each other in ways previously unknown, we have the time and (lack of) space to care for each other that we didn’t have in the busyness of life before. We may look back on this time as some of the seminal days of our togethered-lives.

I am fully aware that we are experiencing this from a position of privilege. Some will be experiencing today with immense pain, insecurity, and loneliness. Some will not be able to recover from a hard day of isolation with a hug. Physical contact assures me that offline matters. The rustling of the leaves, walking a street, the way a stranger’s smile from behind a mask touches me deeply – these meaningful occurrences highlight the key role that offline plays in an increasingly virtual world.

We continue to look forward, forward, forward, and once the dust settles, we know that things will not look the same again. We will use our ad-hoc skills and knowledge to develop new tendencies where having so much will become bad taste and being resourceful will become second nature. That means ideas, imagination and creativity – not beautiful bags, bright white sneakers, bought experiences, and *who is the busiest*-statuses – will reign supreme. The unanswered questions of ‘how to implement the changes we desire?’, the same questions posed in this book, have answers that are becoming clearer. One comrade noted during their lockdown experience that ‘Online is a nightmare. Online is you, the screen, and then you and the screen again. And your friends and colleagues imprisoned in little small cells inside it, as if they were kids’ puppets popping out of the puppet theatre’. We will remember what it was like to have the physical presence of each other removed, and we will remember how our online substitutes fell desperately short.

This moment is an opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct our digital habitats. A new start that shifts from reformist to radical is now central to the conversation. What feels ‘fair’ is changing. As power relations are unveiled and come under examination, the strategies for resistance will change too. I hope we can remember the power that comes from the inside, and that it is the masses of precarious workers (freelance creatives, and delivery workers alike) that are revealing the flaws long embedded in the system, and all the inhumanity and fragility that comes with it.

Dare we say it – did you slightly enjoy the time at home in between the bouts of confusion and despair? Did you learn new things, gain new perspectives on meaning, make with your hands, revisit lost connections, and find a focus you thought was long gone? Did you get a fresh healthier relationship with your devices? We all saw a lot of creative thinking being born, and a lot of deeper distraction ensue. I learnt that when you have a deep connection to yourself, others, and nature, it becomes a lot less necessary to find fulfilment in a screen.

We have new experiences and new knowledge to go forth with. What are we going to do with them? Rebecca Solnit relays how, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, people ‘had talent for valuing other things more than productivity and efficiency, the miserable virtues that hustle people past each other and everyday attentiveness and pleasure’. We’ve switched from being good consumers and bad citizens to bad consumers and good citizens. ‘Consumers are Creators’ was the old trope. Not anymore. Mutual aid, empathy, volunteerism, friendship, solidarity, and support are all here. Our period of economic un-growth is leading to greater inner and social growth. We are getting smarter at using our time and smarter at making a living – in the fullest sense of the word.

What’s next in our world of unknowns? I want to find out in physical company, as well as with those friends who are far away. It’s the future dance of being together with other bodies and together with online affordances. It’s an unprecedented time. Take a moment. Think about what you want more of. What you want less of. Offline is a possibility space. Perhaps now more than ever. Take seriously the opportunity to remake. It’s a once in a lifetime experience, in more ways than one.

WELCOME

Is it just me or is it getting crazier out there?

JOKER

Words from the 2019 film of the same name that we could utter ourselves from behind the not-so-safety of our laptop screens. Why do we find ourselves in unwavering devotion to the online when we know how much offline matters?

Throughout my career as a ‘creative professional’ (or is it ‘professional creative’?) I’ve been asking myself this. I was 18 when it began. A full ten years have passed since, and yet that same question still haunts me every day. A feeling that a swift current was carrying us away from a vital element of life. Offline. Anything. Not as a romanticised past, momentary detox, or place we are banished to for digital overuse. But as a space of possibility. As quickly as the current was moving, the ‘creativity’ in creative work was drying up. Peers took pride in identifying as ‘creatives’. I didn’t feel proud. It was boring. Everything revolved around social media, gaming ‘engagement’ metrics, and trying to think hard about ‘immersive digital experiences’. Doing things face-to-face, getting people together, being experimental or weird – all that faded. Dismissed as ineffective. If data isn’t showing it is a trend, it is not allowed. At best an alternative idea might be humoured with ‘prove it works’. If you can’t produce numbers upfront and guarantee a return on investment, there is no way the idea will live. Fun is now forbidden. Creativity-as-work is a serious business. The ‘digital-first’ mindset has become doctrine.⁶ To suggest anything else is seen as sabotaging the task at hand. Meanwhile, that all-knowing ‘data’ still goes unquestioned. At both business and personal levels, there is zero criticism and zero discomfort about its collection or use.

The statement ‘prove it’ encapsulates the essence of creativity-as-work today. Ideas need quantifiable results. ‘Prove it’ lives on with its brother question ‘does it work?’, an enduring classic you’re sure to meet if you start to experiment with the offline. What is this question asking? What does ‘work’ mean here? Is it code for ‘make money’? What is the answer we want to hear? My suspicion would be that it’s something like this: ‘Yes, it’s a surefire way to make money, we have the numbers that say so’. But what about the negative side of this equation? Does it still ‘work’ when the work itself, the worker, and the audience all suffer as a result?

⁶‘DIGITAL-FIRST’, ALSO KNOWN AS ‘DIGITAL BY DEFAULT’, IS AN APPROACH THAT PRIORITISES RELEASING CONTENT INTO DIGITAL AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OVER ‘TRADITIONAL MEDIA’. THIS MEANS ORIENTING INFORMATION TO THE INTERNET RATHER THAN OFFLINE PLACES SUCH AS PRINT MEDIA, REAL LIFE EVENTS OR BILLBOARDS. WITH THE ‘DIGITAL-FIRST’ DISTRIBUTION OF CONTENT, NEW PRACTICES HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED, INCLUDING THE COLLECTION, USE, AND MANAGEMENT OF DATA, WHICH TRACKS READERSHIP, AND DEPENDENCE AND COMPLIANCE WITH THE ONLINE ADVERTISING DUOPOLY (GOOGLE AND FACEBOOK).

Here we should pay attention to that nagging feeling, to our intuitions and suspicions. Regardless of whether or not we have the numbers or the words to explain it, we can sense that the eradication of offline interactions is having an undesirable impact. Feelings are real. Feelings are significant. This is proof that must not be ignored. There are external confirmations and reports, studies and surveys, but ultimately our innate knowledge is screaming loud enough. We don't need hard numbers to confirm it. There is an ever-growing sense pointing us to the value of getting together or taking time out offline – both for ourselves and for the creative in our work. Output included.

In this setting, what was supposedly creative work has become dull, repetitive, and misguided. 'It's all happening online now!' they insist – 'they' being everyone from the bosses in our offices to the marketing futurists and platforms themselves. In-real-life has become passé. Ideas are now based on the results of algorithms and Best Practice Guides. The word 'creativity' itself has been tainted by an industry that stole it for a name. They have drained it of meaning and drained us – the workers at the front lines – of energy and criticality. Today's 'creative' industries more closely resemble a factory for online advertising with a sociopathic tendency for consumerism and greed. Once inside this machine, it doesn't take long for the unavoidable question to arise: 'What is it we are creating?'

As we creative workers toil, my brother sits at university being groomed to enter the creativity-as-work scene. The university presents this site of work as aspirational while paradoxically preparing students for little more than exploitation. Students prep their CVs for unpaid internships, implicitly told that 'doing what you love' should be adequate remuneration. 'Stay hungry, stay foolish' said Steve Jobs to students in his Stanford University commencement speech. Did he mean forever?

OUTSIDER TURNED INSIDER

For three years I have been documenting the dwindling consideration for offline alternatives in creative work. It began in a moment of frustration after sitting at the table of yet another 'social media strategy' pitch at the creative agency I was working at. I was over being the token millennial at the table. I was sick of hearing the well-worn query: 'How do we reach a younger target audience?' only to have the predictable Social Media Solution proposed once more. I got déjà vu watching this room discuss the behaviour of 'youth today' with baseless conviction. I went back to my desk and wrote a

no-bullshit critique of social media becoming the answer to every question – often before a question has even been asked. This is especially true for anything to do with the young or anything to do with 'connection' and 'community'. The piece was probing at these automatic behaviours while beginning to think seriously about offline. The ever-expanding concept yet shrinking reality of the offline space. This small treatise was sent under the pseudonym of Jess from Outsider to everyone I knew in these lines of work.

From there, Outsider became a weekly email newsletter. What started with a readership of 50 quickly took on a life of its own, and was soon being sent to the inboxes of over 5000 people. In fact, the existence of this book is a direct response to their requests. That weekly newsletter built a shelter for fellow workers of the cultural industries suffering the same daily challenges under the tyranny of online obsession. This Cult of the Digital takes over everything, from ruining the work itself to depleting the physical and psychic selves of those making it. It is no coincidence that the rise of this 'tech-determinism' in creative work coincides with increased personal exhaustion, device-related anxieties, and the overall dissolution of explosive, challenging creativity. We need to be radically aware that creative work is overly emphasising digital solutions to our detriment. Fads come and go (TikTok! VR experiences! Podcasts!) but the mythology surrounding the efficacy of the digital remains.

ARRIVING HERE: OUR JUMP-OFF POINT

The presence of 'digital-first' motivations influence our work in more ways than one. From the type of creation to overwork culture and the rise of risk aversion, it's all connected. These are the constellation of topics that surround the offline, in relation to creative work. Let's poke fun at the situation while also poking at the problems. This book hopes to take you on a trip through an unusual variety of elements: approaches, realities, delusions, possibilities.

Today a quick-fix solution is what books are expected to provide. Something tidy and easy. This is not that book. It isn't a clean list of offline tips and tricks. It's a provocation based on the feeling that something isn't right. That something can be different. We're not here for the clickbait reduction of nonconformist ideas. Leave mainstream expectations at the door. This is a radically honest take on what's happening and what might be done.

These thoughts are informed by my experience working as a strategist in agencies and the in-house marketing departments of fashion

brands and cultural organisations. If not identical to your situation, I still hope you will find a commonality, something that resonates with you. This book relates to the general experience of making a living from creative work, whether you're a senior art director or an intern. When it comes to ideas or exploitation – usually both ends of the spectrum are included. These environments are commercial. Tech, design, and advertising are highly fluid, now virtually indistinguishable. To deny this (for instance, pretending a creative agency is not just a nicer name for marketing or advertising agency) is unnecessary. Most, if not all, creative work is marketing in some shape or form. Whether you're an illustrator hired by a culinary service to draw cooking tools or a museum director building a programme to attract visitors – it's all marketing. Within this setting, I document problems and contemplate opportunities to take a different approach. This thinking combines two strands: our personal dislike with being advertised to and a sense that the very output we're making can surely improve. I strive to address the people commissioning this work as much as those making it. A constant advertising landscape is the situation we live in. It forms our surroundings. If you spend any time online, it's the infrastructure of almost the entire landscape. Online is transactions. The offline too. There are other transactions than advertising. This is what we are here to address – what can be done right here, right now?

I want something better than a life tethered to consumer culture. As both creator and audience, we get the full spectrum fallout of negative advertising, from smart phone distractions and ongoing burnouts,¹ to scary surveillance, privacy breaches, and irritating algorithm holes. These are the thrills and disturbances of the accelerated, hyper-stimulating culture of today, one that now feels as intolerable as it does overwhelming. We are all constant victims of invasive online marketing. And we have all been that person at that table, watching another done-to-death digital 'concept' being suggested, looking around the room feeling crazy, unable to believe that we're the only one thinking: 'Is this the best we've got?'

When *Outsider* first began, it was a personal vehicle to escape that shrinking horizon of possibility. Going to work meant facing maddening complacency. Life's main prospect seemed to be an impoverished creativity – for both my own life and those on the receiving end of this marketing drivel. As creative workers we find ourselves oddly suspended, being both the creator and the target of this commercial output. In sharing these dreams and grievances, the newsletter became an unforeseen way of connecting with like minds. Not only did I write to these listening bodies, but they wrote

to me. Subverting the traditional push-only format, we soon forged a solidarity that didn't have nor need a face. I could write as a no-holds-barred, cold-shower-giving comrade, while also providing a warm hearted confirmation that what you're feeling is real and you are not alone. *Outsider* was a home for thinking about offline as a space for doing things differently. This was not a romanticised lifestyle, not a return to typewriters and flip-phones. Instead, I wanted to explore an offline life that looked forward. As an antidote. As a potential. Not as a quick refresh then back to work, more productive than before. Rather than anti-technology, this was pro-human contentment, pro-oddy, and pro-enjoyment of life.

That place for *Outsiders* has become this book that you hold in your hands. This is for anybody seeking strategies that are counter-cultural to the all-digital-everything delusion that clouds creative work today. It's for anybody wondering why we are not getting together, in the face of being driven apart. From old hands to new grads, those on the brand side or those fulfilling the briefs sent out, this book is for all involved in the world of creativity-as-work. In all its shapes and forms. None of us need more wealthy ad-men telling us how to fail better. Instead we need fun, wit, and trojan horse-thinking.

You hold in your hands a compendium of strategies and alternative creativity acts that understands and subverts business as usual. A human-first approach in a digital-first world. Not only applicable to how we make a living, but how to live at large. A guide for how to engage radically with life. This book wants to rouse us out of our complacency and into critical thinking. I long for a rise of giving-a-shit, a refusal to let this situation go unchallenged. But this fiery provocation is tempered with the lightness to let it all go for the things that matter most, like human connections and hanging out. This is about changing the face of work by acknowledging there is more to life than work. We need to return joy to the everyday, meet up, and resist individual retreats. Embrace absurdity. Bring on a weird creativity that acts socially and cares more about quality of life than it does for selling stuff. Here's a vote for bringing offline from the fringe into the centre. This is your wild trip through provocative non-conformity. It made it into your hands for a reason. You're ready for a wake-up. You're ready to do things differently.

FAKE BUSY
Nobody Wants To Be Vacant

of. Keeping up an image of busyness and scarce availability has become a central strategy for getting work, keeping work, and ascending the promotional ladder. A subject that is hard-to-get is highly prized.

CAN'T SORRY.

Faking being busy at work. Faking being busy with friends.
Pretending to be busy to our families. Using it with dates.
Performing busyness with ourselves, creating distractions from the void of despair. Or, feeling so deeply bound to the guilt of productivity that leisure time becomes an impossibility. The busyness that was once an act is now a condition.⁸

BUSY.

REPUTATION MANAGERS

TOO
TO

BUSY
CARE

A SOCIETY OF BUSY

Busyness for reputation management is a skill. It's a subtle balancing act. Too busy and you look like an underpaid hustler, the sucker of the busyness spectrum. Not busy enough and you must be mediocre. An experienced busyness-player will deploy strategies found in the dating sphere, where availability and scarcity have been manipulated since the beginning of time. 'Treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen' is as effective with employers as (we believe) it is with prospective mates.

Overwork is a source of pride and symbol of success. A leisurely lifestyle is certainly less valued than one that is hardcore, fast-paced, non-stop, and as-much-as-possible. 'Live fast and die young.' What was once the chant of rebels, now belongs to the busy. In our culture, busyness is equated with competence and ambition. It is how we display our scarcity and market demand. We are but human capital, and these are the characteristics that capital values.

Overwork culture and its values have become pervasive, expanding far past the traditional workspace. Society today reveres a busy person. As in the business world, busyness is valued in social scenes. The 'too-busy-to-get-hold-ofs' are sexy members of society, an exclusive club of 'red-hot-wanted'. We like association with success. Now friends play 'hard to get' with each other to assert their status of being in-demand and highly sought-after. Are we managing our relationships like we are managing our careers? We've designed the versions of ourselves we want the world to perceive. First we perfected them for work, now we deploy them amongst friends. Social media taught us fantastic behaviours for expert image management and normalised them for broad spectrum use. The praise for always-on, upheld by common devotions to productivity, has us playing 'I'm soooooo busy' with our friends as much as potential clients. Regardless of being genuinely busy or not, busyness works as the ultimate excuse. It gets points for signalling importance and is socially accepted. In prized overwork culture and times of precarity, 'too busy' is the permissible or even admirable excuse.

In our culture, being overworked is far better than being underworked. This perverse logic means that busyness is more than a consequence, it is a tactic for survival. If you're not visibly busy, you must be doing something wrong. You are undesirable to the market. If you were of higher value, you would be occupied and hard to get hold

⁸ WHEN WE'RE NOT BUSY CREATING, WE'RE BUSY CONSUMING. 'OUR PERPETUAL BUSYNESS IS FUELLED BY A CULTURE THAT DERIDES OR TRIVIALIZES THE NEED TO STOP... OUR DISCOMFORT WITH STOPPING, WITH TIME UNFULFILLED AND UNSPOKEN FOR, ALSO GIVES RISE TO A MODE OF CONSTANT DISTRACTION, THE PERFECT TWIN OF THE IMPERATIVE TO WORK AND PRODUCE: THE MOMENT WE COME TO THE LIMIT OF OUR CAPACITY AS PRODUCERS, WE CAN ACTIVATE OUR CAPACITY AS CONSUMERS.' - JOSH COHEN IN NOT WORKING (2019)

STATUS SIGNALLING

'I'm so busy' could be the status signal of our time. Its products are the ear buds, the power banks, the multiple phones, the organisational apps – all the gadgets necessary for never-not-working. A fully equipped office on the go. Work anytime, anywhere. And when you're not working, status signal by keeping your headphones in. It's great getting the checkout man to not talk to you without having to say a thing.[§] Your busy-tools allow every minute to be utilisable. Don't just stand there while commuting to work, listen to an informative podcast. Maximum productivity is a possibility, priority, and becomes a point of pride.^{§§} To project an image of productivity means you're industrious. You have the cleverness it takes to make the most of every minute available. In the book *Entrepreccariat*, Silvio Lorusso explains:

Productivity is the aesthetic dimension of the work ethic: it is measured to increase efficiency but also to materialize one's own busyness, thus demonstrating to oneself and to others that one is occupied. Why repeat to each other the obsessive refrain of 'I don't have time'? Because... busyness is no longer just a moral imperative ('Waste of time is thus the first and in principle the deadliest of sins' said Max Weber) but it is also a status symbol, a form of economic positioning that is the reversal of Veblen's traditional leisure: today, being wealthy does not mean having more free time, but being more overburdened.⁺¹

BETTER THAN NOTHING?

Busyness took over from leisure and relaxation as the status to aim for. Remember when an aspirational life was advertised as one of wealth, relaxing by the pool or taking long drives in a convertible, wearing impractically beautiful clothes, and with jewellery and time for days? The visible landscape of an imposed aspirational life has changed

§ 73% OF ADULTS AGED 18-34 ADMITTED TO HAVING SLID A PAIR OF HEADPHONES ON TO 'AVOID INTERACTION WITH OTHER PEOPLE'. (IN A SURVEY BY MUSIC LIFESTYLE BRAND SOL REPUBLIC, 2014)

§§ IN HIS BOOK *NOT WORKING* (2019), JOSH COHEN GIVES US SOME BACKGROUND UNDERSTANDING ON HOW THIS CAME TO BE:
'IN OUR CULTURE OF OVERWORK AND HYPERACTIVITY, BEING BUSY, AND BEING SEEN TO BE BUSY, HAVE BECOME THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF OUR PRIDE AND MEANING... IN HIS SEMINAL 1905 TRACT, THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM, THE GERMAN SOCIOLOGIST MAX WEBER SUGGESTED THAT PROTESTANT MOVEMENTS SUCH AS LUTHERANISM AND CALVINISM HAD ENTRENCHED A KIND OF SACRALISATION OF WORK IN WESTERN SOCIETIES. THESE MOVEMENTS ENJOINED PEOPLE TO THE MOST EFFICIENT AND THRIFTY USE OF THEIR TIME IN ORDER TO MAXIMISE PRODUCTIVITY. ON THIS VIEW, THE MOST EGREGIOUS SIN IS TO IDLE, MEANDER OR STRAY, ESPECIALLY INTO ACTIVITIES – OR INACTIVITY – THAT HAVE NO DISCERNIBLE PROFIT OR PURPOSE.'

to adverts depicting 'successful' workers who, rather than having an abundance of leisure to their wealth, are time-deprived and valued for it. Slick, important, and powerful – far from haggard, these admirable individuals are 'making it'. Don't pity them. Busyness is brilliance. Ads acknowledge their missions and the degree to which these figures are time-stricken. They stand ready and waiting, offering an abundance of products and services to make these lives easier. The Wall Street Journal's 2016 campaign featured celebrities talking about their busy, busy worlds, all underscored by their key slogan: 'People who don't have time make time to read the WSJ.'

STILL

NOT

LOVING
WORKAHOLISM

BUSYNESS.FM

Lamenting 'crazy schedules' or 'desperately needing a vacation' are the soundscape of busyness as status. Non-brags are the songs and guiltlessness the station. To be deficient in leisure-time is not an embarrassment, it is a sign you are living right.

'How are you?' – the simplest question we ask one another – is now as commonly answered with 'busy!' as it was with a flat, thoughtless 'good'. This busyness is virtually never assumed to mean anything other than busy with paid work. Of course, we could be busy with household tasks or something more hedonistic in nature. But it is safe to assume the unspoken subtext is work-work. We indicate this life well lived at every opportunity because it shows we are ethical people. The role of 'hard work' is key in making us a 'good person'. Paid work is tightly bound to right life. Busy = good and virtuous. Not busy = lazy, slacker, unwanted.

ME: *Hi Nana, how are you?*

GRANDMOTHER: *I'm keeping myself busy.*

DECEMBER 2019. PHONE CALL.

OPTING OUT IS NOT AN OPTION

If you refuse to see busyness as cool, you do not get a welcome. Being critical of the busyness status means you might be inadequate to it, and thus, became anti. If you *could* function within it you would. Clearly, you can't find enough work or you aren't popular with friends. If you were ambitious you would have a drive to create constant side projects. If you were *creative* you wouldn't choose not to create as much as possible. If you're not trying to be busy, there must be something wrong. As one study noted, '...people dread idleness and desire busyness in search of meaning and motivation in their lives.'²

Under the hypnosis of living correctly, busyness bleeds from performance to reality and back again. It gets used for status and provides the perfect cover for the inner turmoil of precarious worker-life. This unique form of turmoil combines *coulds* ('I could be working later tonight', 'I could be working on a side project, too', 'I could do a diving course at night', 'I could reach out to that person and ask to start a magazine together') with *shoulds* ('I should reply to that email', 'I should write a new post', 'I should update my portfolio', 'I should be applying for more grants', 'I should take up oil painting') into a muddled never-ending despair. Surrounded by busyness propaganda, we find ourselves pressed by that inescapable next question: am I busy *enough*? The safe answer is irrespective of fact. Either way, just pretend to be.

Faking busy gets murky when you can no longer tell if it is automatic, inflicted, or by choice. The things one has to, could do, and should do provide an infinite array of possibilities to *do*, all unfolding under an environment that encourages that always-on mindset. If you cannot tell and are unsure, it's okay. Just keep running.

THINGS I HAVE TO DO

vs.

THINGS I 'HAVE TO DO'

Pretending to be busy on all fronts, from the office to the book club, is the most exhausting of performances. Real or fake, being busy is boring. 'Busy' people are boring.⁸ Who is proud to decline invites with 'ugh, so busy atm!' (besides everyone) and then stay home alone? We sit by ourselves with our screens and label it 'self-care'. We're all pretending to be busy when in reality, we're burnt out and bored.⁸⁹ So why not cut the bull, stop status signalling each other, and assess what's really at stake here?

Do we actually believe it is cool to be constantly occupied? Does it fill one with pride to say 'I'm busy'? Would you rather not, but can't understand why there is always so much to do? Can we identify the deeper compulsion that is happening? Are priorities misaligned? Can you separate the things you have to do from the things you might be choosing to 'have to do'? How much of the complicated life is being chosen and what sacrifices would make it simpler? We demote time together and ignore one another – to do what exactly? What are we so busy with? Is there another way of life we would prefer than adhering to the busyness regime?

A WISE MAN: *'You're very busy? I'm so sorry to hear that.'*

JANUARY 2020. OVERHEARD CONVERSATION.

BUSY

BY

CHOICE?

MAKE TWO LISTS

THINGS I HAVE TO DO:

THINGS I 'HAVE TO DO':

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'I'M SO BUSY IT'S HARD TO FIND THE TIME TO TELL THAT TO PEOPLE' SHE SAID.

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ONCE WE ACKNOWLEDGE HOW BORED WE ARE WITH BEING BUSY, THE BUSYNESS GETS LESSENED. BUSYNESS CAN SELF-DISSOLVE. IS THIS THE 'SECRET TO LESS'? THE LESSON TO LESSEN THAT PEOPLE BUY SELF-HELP BOOKS TO FIND? THE ADMISSION OF HAVING NO DESIRE FOR INCESSANT BUSYNESS COULD BE THE KEY. A REVOLT THAT EMBRACES THE RIGHT TO QUESTION WHAT'S PRODUCTIVE, FEASIBLE, REALISTIC, AND OF PERSONAL PRIORITY. AND THE RIGHT TO DO NONE OF THAT AT ALL.

SS

ANECDOTES FROM

PERFORMATIVE BUSYNESS AT WORK

‘The best busy I’ve played is with bosses. They do it, so why not do it back? One can get very good at pretending to be working when in fact you’re doing a personal admin task at your desk... or just killing time. Of course, there is the boring version of this, which is going on Facebook during working hours. Yawn. Why not make your “against from within” more exciting? Research ideas for passive incomes, listen to a whole album uninterrupted, correspond with a secret admirer... this is how I resist and protest, on full pay.’

‘When the creative director uses absence as a display of authority (important people are allowed to come and go as they please without informing where they are going or when they’ll be back), I use their absence as an opportunity. It’s a balance between your conscience and your defence. When you know you’re getting done what you’re there to do, power to you to make use of everything around it.’

‘Faking busy at work is different than in private. Performative busyness towards friends and family is stickier than towards employers. Stickier because it leans closer to exercises of power, rather than empowerment. Busyness isn’t status. It’s strategy.’

‘A laptop can be a chain to work and tool for out-of-hours exploitation, but it is also a central tool to performative busyness. If you’re behind it, you can be considered legitimately working. The exploited becomes the exploiter. If you were to do your “concepting phase” sitting at your desk flicking through magazines, or researching out on the streets, or even with the laptop closed getting lost in deep thought – the body language of that reads as “not working”. Obviously, on a laptop one could be doing an infinity of un-work-related tasks, yet it will be perceived as working without question.’

THE INSIDE

PERFORMATIVE BUSYNESS IN SOCIAL LIFE

‘Saying “I’m crazy busy” to your friends is a non-romantic playing hard to get. Busy is sexy, available is not.’

‘Receiving “ahhhhhh sorry I haven’t replied – I’ve been so busy” is my worst – but I do it too.’

‘Today, one must be “on it”, always. This means side projects, important work, lots of social engagements... actually seeing your friends becomes less regular, since they know you’re busy and they will still be there when you’re “free”. You’re a person who has a lot going on and at the end of the day, they know you care. There is still that low-level constant communication: txts, comments, voice messages, emojis, likes. Those things acknowledge each other’s existence and become the friendship’s maintenance. You’re not entirely absent. You’re just busy.’

‘My parents open every phone call with an apologetic “We know you’re busy...” and their voice sounds guilty. Like, they automatically think they’re interrupting me. It makes me sad I’ve faked it so many times to get out of something, that now they are hesitant to call me.’

‘Family? They just think (constant busyness) is “young people today”. That it’s part of our times. Because it is.’

‘I refuse to be busy.’

RADICAL STRATEGIES FOR THE CREATIVE WORKER

WHEN DID CREATIVE WORK BECOME SO BORING?
HOW DID 'DIGITAL-FIRST' COME TO DOMINATE *EVERYTHING*?
...AND WHY IS NOBODY TALKING ABOUT IT?

OFFLINE MATTERS is a handbook for anybody experiencing digital overload in their lives and creative work. Part insider exposé, part worker-manual, this book is for any creative seeking help on:

- Navigating the possibility of offline alternatives
- Countering overwork culture, exploitation, and dulled-down ideas
- Recovering what you loved about your creative calling

... away from the confines of our screens. We are dreaming of offline. Not as a romanticised past, a punishment, a quick detox, or a WiFi-free café. Offline is not a *lifestyle*. It's a space of opportunity.

By the end of OFFLINE MATTERS, you'll have a new perspective on the dry digitality that defines creative work today – and a set of strategies for going beyond it.

'Offline Matters is a much needed take-down of the whole "cult of creativity" from the inside. This rattle gun attack on the perniciousness of creative digital work will leave you aghast and amused in equal measure.'

OLI MOULD,

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AUTHOR OF TEAM HUMAN

'This book is extremely timely... Offline Matters reminds us that life online is (also) elsewhere. The neologism "offline," which did not exist twenty years ago, has philosophical relevance. This book is hoping we can discover it.'

FRANCO 'BIFO' BERARDI,

PHILOSOPHER, THEORIST AND ACTIVIST

OFFLINE MATTERS
ISBN 978 90 6369 578 1



'With compassion and humour, Henderson brings us back to ourselves and it turns out we are not predestined to be profiled and branded. Offline Matters is the mutual help book we need right now!'

STEFANO HARNEY,

CO-AUTHOR OF THE
UNDERCOMMONS: FUGITIVE
PLANNING AND BLACK STUDY