BE WELL, OR ELSE!

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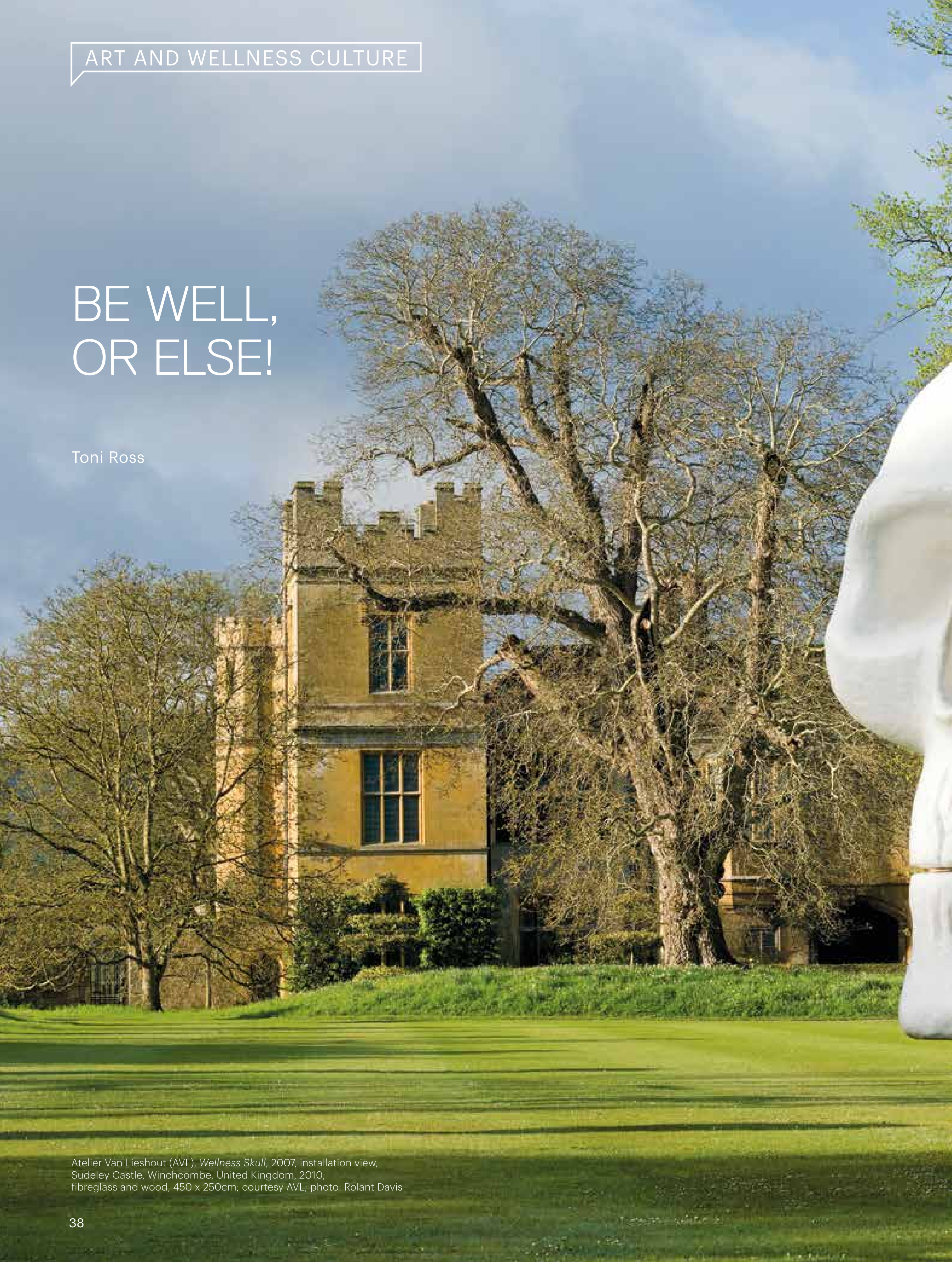

Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL), *Wellness Skull*, 2007, installation view, Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, United Kingdom, 2010; fibreglass and wood, 450 x 250cm; courtesy AVL; photo: Rolant Davis

> The modern world is a Darwinian place: As long as there is disenchantment with it, there will be the false redemption of wellness.[1]

Long before the health emergency of the ongoing global pandemic, recent decades have witnessed an ever-growing cultural and corporate obsession with wellness, commonly defined as a state of complete physical and mental health. The wellness trend seems most prominent in high-income western nations, where citizens are daily bombarded with news of physio and psychic aids such as forest bathing, CrossFit regimens, yoga and meditation retreats, mindfulness apps, detox diets and myriad other self-care possibilities. Common sense might decree that there is nothing wrong with compelling people to lavish attention (and money) on a healthy lifestyle, to ditch unhealthy habits and thereby enhance their work-life productivity. However, among the multitudinous paeans to wellness circulating today, questioning voices have been raised in popular media and academic circles. Even *Vogue* magazine – that temple of fashion and beauty – last year published an article titled 'Our obsession with wellness might be unhealthy, and even dangerous'.[2] Like a number of journalistic push backs against wellness, this think piece incorporated commentary from business school academics Carl Cederström and André Spicer, co-authors of *The Wellness Syndrome* (2015),[3] who speak of their book as seeking to reveal that 'behind the great drama of wellness … lies a distinctly unwell world'.[4] My contribution to this themed issue of *Art Monthly Australasia* sketches the rise of the wellness juggernaut, its increasing impact on art institutions, and airs some sceptical accounts of what some view as a contemporary pathology. I shall also discuss a sample of artworks in dialogue with twenty-first century wellness culture.

The wellness phenomenon is so ubiquitous these days that some governments have been drawn to the cause. In 2019, the New Zealand Labour Government launched its first 'wellbeing budget' focused on poverty and mental health. Finance Minister Grant Robertson declared New Zealand to be the first western nation to design policies and measure national progress according to wellness priorities rather than simply privileging GDP growth. He defined wellbeing as 'people living lives of purpose, balance and meaning to them, and having the capabilities to do so'.[5] Here, a concern with wellness focused on societal problems, although it remains to be seen whether this softening of the state's infatuation with economic growth with wellbeing talk will result in concrete social outcomes.

More often, wellness as a cultural obsession and commercial behemoth has a decidedly individualistic flavour. As Daniela Blei observes, the so-called father of the wellness movement was American MD Halbert L. Dunn who, in 1959, described 'high-level wellness' as 'a condition of change in which the individual moves forward, climbing toward a higher potential of functioning'.[6] Such ideas reappear on the Global Wellness Day website where wellness is synonymous with personal optimisation, the responsibility of each individual for their own health rather than depending on external authorities, and the power of positive thinking.[7] This stress on self-improvement and a positive mindset echoes the self-help movement, a product of early twentieth-century American business culture, which by the end of the century had become a massive publishing market. The nexus of self-help and the present infatuation with healthy living is perfectly expressed in the title of fitness guru Darin Olien's book for male aspirants: *SuperLife: The 5 Simple Fixes that Will Make You Healthy, Fit, and Eternally Awesome* (2015). As an extension of the self-help movement, wellness business (valued at US$4.5 trillion in 2018),[8] practices and ideas have spread globally in the twenty-first century, including gaining a foothold in the arts sector.

Many art museums now host yoga and meditation classes, mindfulness workshops and other therapeutic antidotes to the stresses of contemporary life. In 2014, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) collaborated with philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong to curate an 'Art as Therapy' intervention in the public reception of works from the gallery's collection. The program was based on their bestselling book of the same name, first published in 2013, which speaks of artworks compensating for our 'psychological frailties'.[9] De Botton and Armstrong are leading lights in The School of Life educational company, a self-help enterprise with a fig leaf of philosophical cred. Their book on art as therapeutic aid received the imprimatur of none other than Gwyneth Paltrow, wellness entrepreneur and founder of the Goop lifestyle empire, who opines on the book's back cover: 'paintings that I have long admired suddenly become new when seen through the filter of self-awareness

Amber Boardman, *Princess Hair Middle Aged Gravity*, 2017,
oil on canvas, 50.8 x 40.6cm; courtesy the artist and Chalk Horse, Sydney

Katie West, *Clearing*, 2018–19, installation views, 'ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2019', TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, 2019; mixed-media installation; courtesy the artist

and exploration. Really, a gem of a book.' Not everyone was so enamoured. *Guardian* art critic Adrian Searle reviewed the authors' curatorial partnership with the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, in 2014, which echoed the NGV program by transforming a major art institution into a self-help hub. Searle speaks of the 'smarmy and banal ideas of self-improvement' imparted by intrusive wall labels penned by De Botton and Armstrong that instructed gallery visitors on how to view artworks as guides to self-knowledge and a virtuous life.[10]

More recent examples of art institutions tapping into the wellness trend include the Manchester Art Gallery's program called 'And Breathe …', editions of which have run since 2018. With a title evoking breath modulation in mindfulness exercises, the program 'explores how we can nurture our mental and emotional wellbeing through interacting with art'.[11] In 2018–19, the Frye Art Museum, Seattle, convened a show titled 'Group Therapy', which was advertised as turning the museum into 'a unique kind of free "clinic" in which visitors may engage in therapeutic processes in the experimental context afforded by art'.[12] A year later in January 2020, Somerset House, London, displayed six newly commissioned artworks under the heading 'Hyper Functional, Ultra Healthy'. The program asked that we 'reconsider well-being in new and unexpected ways, a refreshing antidote to the vast wellness industry that has fuelled societal pressures to conform, often creating an unrealistic and anxiety-inducing desire to be healthy, happy and productive'.[13]

The aforementioned programs, exhibitions and the art they incorporated traverse a range of attitudes to the wellness phenomenon. Some seem to drink deeply what one critic calls the 'wellness Kool-Aid',[14] and wildly exaggerate art's therapeutic efficacy. Others articulate more sceptical or ambivalent responses to the monetisation of wellness, and reflect on socio-economic conditions that have contributed to its present-day ubiquity. The latter often chime with disparaging accounts of the wellness fashion that I shall now turn to.

Critics of wellness culture

For an especially curmudgeonly skewering of wellness, look no further than Netflix's recent documentary series *Pretend It's a City* (2021). Here director Martin Scorsese plays straight man, interviewing his longtime friend, cultural critic, raconteur and diehard New Yorker Fran Lebowitz. In one episode, Lebowitz damns wellness as 'something I really cannot tolerate', as practised by people who imbibe 'seeds and teas', and who downgrade New York's once fashionable streets by carrying yoga mats everywhere. She blames the wellness idea on tech people in Silicon Valley who 'are very concerned with *their* health, but not with *your* life', and in an interview about the show, Lebowitz denounces wellness as 'a greediness for extra health in a world – and I don't even just mean because of the virus – while the vast majority of people almost have no chance of getting even near good health'.[15]

If one is seeking a more academic, but no less sardonic dissection of wellness culture, Carl Cederström and André Spicer have become go-to experts on the basis of their 2015 book *The Wellness Syndrome*. Spicer is Professor of Organisational Behaviour, Cass Business School, City University of London, and Cederström is Associate Professor of Organisation Studies, Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University. They insist that their study is not against the idea of people wanting to be healthy but, rather, is focused on how wellness has become a coercive, moralistic, all-pervasive ideology that disguises deeper contradictions of contemporary society.

The book presents many vignettes of the current fixation on wellness from institutions, businesses and the media, including examples of wellness prescriptiveness taken to almost unbelievable extremes. One cruelly ironic case of the latter opens a section on the current ubiquity of life coaching. Here the authors cite media reports of the double suicide of New Yorkers John Littig and Lynne Rosen in 2013. At the time, the couple hosted a radio show called *The Pursuit of Happiness* and ran a life-coaching business ('Why Not Now'), where clients were advised on how

Stine Deja, *Cryptic Ruins*, 2019, still; single-channel, four-minute video with sound; courtesy the artist

As Cederström and Spicer write: 'For the neoliberal agent the body is no longer personal. It is not even political. Instead, it is an enterprise which, to create maximum returns, needs careful monitoring and optimization.'

to 'foster and encourage your inner strengths, identify hidden and untapped resources, and put you confidently on the path to designing the life you've always wanted to live'.[16] While Cederström and Spicer point to the familiar self-help platitudes of the 'Why Not Now' brand – 'be happy, nurture your body, cultivate a positive attitude, connect to your deeper inner emotions' – the barb in this tale seems to be that aspiring to design your perfect *life* does not always work out.

The Wellness Syndrome combines case studies of this kind with analytical ballast from psychoanalytic theory, research by cultural historians and critical diagnostics of late capitalism. The *syndrome* of the title refers to a situation where health and happiness have become fundamental criteria for what passes for a moral life. Pursuing health is no longer simply an option for individuals or a circumstantial possibility, but has become a superego-like command infiltrating all sectors of life from workplaces, universities and prisons, to relationships, lifestyles and diet. As Cederström and Spicer observe, eating today has become a 'paranoid activity' where we are exhorted to monitor every morsel that passes our lips for its health advantages.[17]

Not only does wellness ideology promote bodily and emotional health as prerequisites for a happy prosperous life, dutiful adherence to its mandates is equated with moral rectitude and an implicit sense of superiority over those who fail to live by the wellness agenda – for instance, the obese, the poor, the infirm, smokers, fast-food consumers. Cederström and Spicer also view the relentless focus on self-care in wellness culture as expressing a sense of individual powerlessness to force political change in the wider world. They derive this idea from cultural historian Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminished Expectations* (1979). Here Lasch speculated that the political disorder of the 1960s (Vietnam, Watergate) saw many Americans lose faith in official politics, turning instead to small-scale individual transformation projects such as eating health food, jogging, learning ballet and belly dancing, or 'immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East'.[18] Cederström and Spicer extend Lasch's prescient spotting of the seeds of what has become a deluge of self-modification programs, services and gadgets marketed today, to suggest that wellness culture fosters subjects myopically focused on their own wellbeing and thus oblivious to wider sociopolitical predicaments.

The Wellness Syndrome argues that slavish conformity to wellness ideology can actually be bad for people's health. The self-optimisation and positive thinking peddled by wellness experts and businesses cast the individual as ultimately responsible for their own health and life success. This harsh insistence on personal liability intensifies fear of failure, provoking anxiety and self-blame for not living up to wellness ideals. Moreover, inflating the individual's supposed mastery over their destiny ignores larger structural impacts on life experience. From this perspective, say the authors, '[l]osing one's job is not the result of economic circumstances; it is the product of one's own attitude'.[19] Cederström and Spicer also propose that the 'corporeal babble and increasingly invasive lifestyle tweaks' of wellness culture let governments off the hook when it comes to fairly redistributing society's material resources and initiating more challenging structural reforms to improve the lives of citizens.[20]

Another key proposition of *The Wellness Syndrome* is that wellness regimes are employed by institutions and corporations to engineer cheerful athletes of late capitalism. Wellness ideology cultivates a self in sync with neoliberal norms of employability, where the ideal worker is a self-monitoring performance machine – a fully flexible, agile and malleable person of heightened efficiency and productivity. As Cederström and Spicer write: 'For the neoliberal agent the body is no longer personal. It is not even political. Instead, it is an enterprise which, to create maximum returns, needs careful monitoring and optimization.'[21] On this reading, wellness culture's preoccupation with both calming and turbo-charging the minds and bodies of individuals is really about servicing the ceaseless economic productivity demanded by neoliberal corporate culture.

Cederström and Spicer's account of the wellness syndrome hints at a nightmarish vicious circle. On the one hand, the current fixation on wellness serves neoliberal capitalism well by creating ever-expanding consumer 'needs' and coaching high performance, positive thinking (read uncomplaining) employees. On the other hand, features of this economic system have arguably created an explosion of demand for wellness products and services because of negative impacts on people's mental and physical health arising from the accelerationist, precarious and stressful conditions of contemporary working life. Po-

litical economist William Davies describes this double bind succinctly: 'One contradiction of neo-liberalism is that it demands levels of enthusiasm, energy and hope whose conditions it destroys through insecurity, powerlessness and the valorization of unattainable ego ideals via advertising.'[22]

Another significant contribution to debates about the wellness industry is supplied by Barbara Ehrenreich in her book *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer* (Twelve Books, New York, 2018). Recounting her own experiences of American culture, Ehrenreich argues that self-care has become a coercive and (economically) exploitative obligation, where endless medical tests, drugs, arduous wellness regimens and exercise fads have become the epicentre of existence for those who can afford them. She makes a point of the shameless profiteering enabled by wellness culture's heightening of people's anxieties about their health status, while linking the psychological impetus of the wellness obsession to an impossible desire for total mastery over our biological and emotional health, and thus a pathological denial of death.

Artistic dialogues with wellness culture

One of the franker assessments of why art institutions are so enamoured of 'mind-body programs' these days comes from Amanda Donnan who curated 'Group Therapy' at the Frye Art Museum. In the catalogue she writes of this trend reflecting the ways cultural institutions have 'responded to the pressure to demonstrate measurable social benefit', adding that 'they must now prove themselves against the index of individuals' feelings of physio-psycho-spiritual health. Visiting an art museum is now a self-optimizing activity.'[23] These remarks point to a now-widespread demand on art institutions by governments and funding bodies to re-position their activities and the art they exhibit as having utilitarian competencies responsive to predicaments deemed socio-economic priorities. Promoting, with little substantial evidence, the therapeutic capacities of art has clearly become one such state-sanctioned priority. This suggests that art or museum programming that unquestioningly assimilates wellness ideology simply conforms to commands of the current status quo. In the following sample of art engaged with wellness culture, I shall focus instead on works that broach the topic more critically or, at least, ambivalently.

One of the earlier artistic ripostes to twenty-first century wellness is a giant sculpture of a human skull by the Rotterdam-based collective Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL), established by Joep van Lieshout in 1995. *Called Wellness Skull* (2007), this larger-than-life cranium is constructed of white fibreglass, with the skull's interior fashioned as a basic health spa. A small bath is housed in the neck, and a sauna inside the cranium can be entered via wooden stairs attached at the back. On the irregular occasions when the sauna is activated, steam shoots out of holes in the skull's sunken eye sockets. Here the protective shell of the human brain is transformed into an aid for full body relaxation and the purging of toxins.

The sculpture exemplifies AVL's deliberately lumpen and unrefined aesthetic applied to works that often mix art with utilitarian design functions, even if the latter seem outlandishly impractical. After all, there must be easier and nicer ways to take a bath and sweat it out in a sauna than being claustrophobically enclosed in this unlovely looking skull. Often installed in verdant parkland sites dotted with picturesque built structures, *Wellness Skull* looms like a monster vanitas symbol reminding us of the futility of worldly possessions, success and pleasures in the face of inevitable death. Of course, the Netherlandish vanitas painting that flourished during the seventeenth century had a specific religious message influenced by Calvinism, which devalued wealth and material pleasures in this world to ensure the faithful cultivated their personal relationship with God in preparation for the afterlife. AVL's publicity for *Wellness Skull* hints at the supplanting of such outmoded religiosity with a present-day theology, describing the work as questioning 'our contemporary obsession with youthfulness, self-experiences and indulgence, as wellness has become a new religion'.[24] Yet, the blunt message imparted by this giant death-dealing symbol is not so distant from Calvinist piety, if minus a consoling belief in the afterlife. If, as Ehrenreich surmises, wellness culture is motivated by a desire for ultimate control over one's biological and emotional life, which amounts to a pathological denial of death, then AVL's black-humoured monument to wellness evangelism lays waste to any illusion of cheating mortality.

In a 2018 exhibition of her paintings at Kudos Gallery, Sydney, Amber Boardman tackled the all-pervasive self-optimising regimes sold to and performed by girls and women on social media. Called '@jade-

Stine Deja, *Cryptic Ruins*, 2019, still; single-channel, four-minute video with sound; courtesy the artist

fad: a social media feed in paint', the show, and a companion Instagram feed, told the story of Jade – a fictional social media influencer closing on middle age – and her desperate pursuit of self-improvement based on contemporary beauty and self-care fads. Jade's ever-hopeful makeover aspirations and their woeful results are depicted in Boardman's idiom of messy, thickly layered, expressionist brushwork, garish colour and cartoonish figuration.

The oil on canvas, *Princess Hair Middle Aged Gravity* (2017), distils Boardman's absurdist take on the excesses of present-day wellness and beauty culture. It shows a nude Jade striking a deeply ungainly yoga pose, nothing like the ideal of flexible bodily grace enacted by yoga experts online. Her brassy blonde flowing locks with prominent dark roots appear just as unruly as her traitorously imperfect body (by social media beauty standards), with lopsided sagging breasts at the mercy of aging and gravity, plus a 'happy trail' of body hair. Additionally, Boardman depicts Jade's tresses as breaking cardinal rules of the recent 'princess hair' fashion referenced in the painting's title. Apparently, this hair styling trend has sprouted from Disney animated fairytales in the *Frozen* mould and fantasy epics such as *Game of Thrones*. A droll *Tatler* magazine piece on the topic informs that princess hair is:

> always thick and resplendent, curling in great, springy waves, almost reaching the princess's handspan waist. The hair must be an extraordinary shade of gold or deep auburn or flaming red, the colour always strong and true. It is never mousy, and there are never telltale roots, because princess hair is natural, and that is because princess genes are superior to normal genes. Of course they are – otherwise she wouldn't be a princess, see?[25]

The picture of Jade's yoga ritual shows the character ticking just one paltry box in this long list of princess hair essentials: her mane certainly looks exceedingly thick. While Boardman's paintings comically exaggerate the absurdity of Jade's slavish pursuit of self-improvement, any sense of cruel ridicule is softened by the pathos of her constant striving and failing to perfect herself according to impossible ego-ideals of aspirational culture. After all, who among us can claim to be entirely immune to their blandishments?

The spare, elegant decor of *Clearing* (2018–19), a mixed-media installation by Western Australian Indigenous artist Katie West installed in 2019 at TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, suggests that of an upmarket yoga studio or meditation space where users seek healing sanctuary from the rigours and stresses of late-modern society. In a secluded light-filled room of the museum, West, known for her textile work using plant matter and natural dyeing processes, suspended from the ceiling a looped swath of sheer silk dyed with local eucalyptus and wattles. On the concrete floor, flat cushions made of soft natural fabrics (silk, calico and muslin) delicately tinted, imprinted and scented with gumleaves, bark and puffball fungus were arranged in a formation of ordered simplicity and earthy chromatic harmonies. A large picture window opening onto views of a vineyard, bushland and rolling hills beyond brought natural light and soothing greens of the outdoors inside.

Since the decor of *Clearing* is so reminiscent of formulas for creating Zen-inspired home meditation nooks that one finds all over the internet, some visitors may have felt inclined to sit down, switch off from all external distractions, and empty their minds while taking deep calming breaths. However, other installation elements suggest that this is not exactly what West had in mind for those venturing into this tranquil haven. These components veer away from a neoliberal ethos of wellness focused on self towards a contentious sociopolitical world outside, specifically highlighting environmental issues and their importance in communal belief systems of Indigenous cultures.

A small wood shelf mounted on one wall of the room held four books mostly produced by Australian Indigenous authors. These included Kerry Arabena's *Becoming Indigenous to the Universe: Reflections on Living Systems, Indigeneity and Citizenship* (2015) and a children's book, *Welcome to Country* (2016), by Aunty Joy Murphy – a Senior Elder of the Wurundjeri people of Melbourne and surrounding areas, including the TarraWarra site – with illustrations by Indigenous artist Lisa Kennedy. Arabena's text proposes an ethically and ecologically oriented cosmology for the twenty-first century, one that intermingles Indigenous worldviews from Australia and other parts of the world with sectors of contemporary western science and environmentally conscious philosophies. The text casts human health in the time of the Anthropocene as ineluctably dependent on non-human forms of life and as intertwined with complex natural ecosystems. This perspective is contrasted with neoliberal values of untrammelled resource consumption, acquisition and domination of the natural world. While *Welcome to Country* also speaks of Indigenous Australian cosmology, this is more locally inflected to educate readers about unique characteristics of Wurundjeri Country: the people, plants and animals, the landscape, climate and stories of how First Peoples identified signs of seasonal change.

Another element of *Clearing* extends this turning away from self-centred incarnations of the wellness agenda, exemplified by the faux-Buddhist meditation rituals so popular these days. Speakers in the gallery space transmitted a 13-minute score composed by Simon Charles that combined sounds of nature – bird calls, wind and water – with a chain of words voiced by West. As Olga Bennett has observed, while this sound component may bring to mind guided mindfulness exercises, West's slow syncopated recitation of words such as 'hair, fur, blood, water, leaves, fingers, arms, wings' extends the boundaries of the human body outwards, confirming solidarity with non-human creatures and the natural world.[26]

Earlier I mentioned a London program of commissioned artworks titled 'Hyper Functional, Ultra Healthy', unveiled at Somerset House in early 2020. The artists were tasked with creating non-conformist or unexpected responses to the invasive wellness industry. Danish-born, London-based new media artist Stine Deja was one of the contributors. Her four-minute single-channel video *Cryptic Ruins* (2019) presents a long view on our world's chronic exercise compulsion from the perspective of a human civilisation over 1000 years in the future.[27] Using 3D software, Deja simulated the ancient ruins of a gym that a camera tracks through, revealing a dilapidated concrete-roofed chamber and close-ups of melted drink bottles, broken weights and equipment, a curled exercise shoe and other gym wear buried in rubble. One moment reveals a surprisingly pristine, motivational wall poster proclaiming: SWEAT IS FAT CRYING.

Accompanying the visuals is a *The Twilight Zone*-type soundtrack of clicks, buzzing and echoing acoustics overlaid with a woman's documentary voiceover. This commentary, reminiscent of *National*

Geographic archaeology programs, mixes historical information with a tone of amazed wonder at strange human customs over the ages. We are told that this 'angular structure, often referred to as a body temple, is located on the bend of the Thames and has been there for thousands of years. It is massive, distinct and very mysterious'. And while this cryptic ruin was:

> long thought to be just a tomb, in the late 3070s archaeologists uncovered an amazing secret that shed new light on this ancient structure. Some theorised that humans could access sites like these 24 hours a day, seven days a week to prostrate and exercise under luminescent light, often to heavy, dramatic music.

Later a male expert chimes in, speculating that this 'work-out place' may also have been used for 'ritual gatherings' where long-dead Holocene humans possibly engaged in 'sacrificing calories to honour their ancestors'. Deja's video parodies contemporary gym culture and the patronising tone of popular archaeological docos where past civilisations are cast as backward when compared to those of the always more advanced present. In this refreshing fictional scenario, our time of work-out evangelism is viewed from the future not as a sign of advanced culture, but as a mystifying and bizarre form of worship lost in the mists of time.

The aforementioned works respond, from various angles, to a contemporary world where the societal command directed at individuals to be well (or else) has become all but inescapable, where the monetisation of healthy lifestyles has generated enormous profits for some, while contributing to late-modern society's climate-changing and environment-destroying consumerism. For the critics whose ideas I have surveyed, the wellness religion is not a path to redemption from the ills of this world but, rather, is a symptom and exacerbation of them. The works by AVL, Boardman, West and Deja are just some of many examples of contemporary art that refuse to simply cheerlead for the current wellness mania.

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