Biopersistence

curated by Agáta Hošnová & Karolína Voleská

During the postwar period, society worked to erase death from consciousness and everyday life, replacing it with an increasingly optimized utopia of eternal life. New and accelerating forms of the capitalist system sought not only to close our eyes to the inevitable decay of all material things, but also to monetize the experiences and emotions associated with finitude. In addition to the institutionalization and commercialization of death and its rituals, attempts are being made to control death biologically and technologically, through efforts to either prolong life or slow down time. These individually adapted systemic changes have thus anchored in our minds the idea that we can control our own mortality and its signs in various ways during our lifetime. Through the works of Czech and international artists, the Biopersistence exhibition reflects on the need to (sur)vive under conditions of constant pressure to optimize the body and mind.

Although the issues of physicality and aging, whether from a queer or feminist perspective, have been a prominent part of visual culture since the 1960s, the question of our physical bodies, their rights, and possibilities is expanding into unprecedented situations with digital technologies and the developing pharmaceutical industry. In a world where biological matter is becoming a malleable material and where death is perceived more as a technical problem of planned obsolescence than as an inevitable fate, new ethical dilemmas are emerging: do we have the right to stay alive, do we have the right to leave? What sacrifices are we willing to make to stay in this world, which is rushing towards destruction, for as long as possible? The exhibition attempts to answer these and other questions from several possible perspectives that enter the biopolitical discourse from critical positions, either directly or symbolically. Biopersistence reveals how our ideas about the body, consciousness, and finitude are changing at a time when life is fast becoming an investment project that deepens questions about who has the right to it and when we can speculate about the inevitability of death.

The obsession with clinically maintained longevity is sown by campaigns reinforced by both the state apparatus and commercial mechanisms, which are becoming increasingly algorithmically precise. Our bodies, condemned to tireless productivity, are monitored ever more effectively, and like diagnostic tools, these external factors are getting deeper and deeper under our skin. In this context, **Marie Holá**'s work is an oversized instrument of biomacht, whose blade reveals the ambivalence of interventions that can both heal and hurt at the same time. The materialization of physical and mental interventions into our own integrity using a fictional tool establishes and reproduces the necessary passivity and disturbed boundaries of the silent subject being examined.

Wounds are covered and marked by bandages, and the pressure to heal leaves scars. Economic and social conditions determine who can afford care and who must face its lack. **Kristina Láníková**'s work brings hope for collective healing, but it can also be read as a symbolic record of systemic harm. A series of silkscreen prints, in which the author revives rhymes from a 1934 wedding album, combines impersonality with presence. Intimate, yet anonymized, the cards are immortalized through a photographic imprint of long-recorded words from people who are no longer present. Some life situations and cycles are constantly repeated in our stories, even though they remain personal, while others become shared experiences, part of broader socio-cultural conditions and external demands.

Natália Sýkorová's sculpture, which doubles as an aroma vaporiser, fills the exhibition space with the scents of myrrh and geranium to create a contrasting sensory impression. The medical appearance of these stainless steel technical objects carries within it the past of its own essence, which is folk medicine and spirituality. Geranium was used to treat menstrual pain, while myrrh, in addition to its many medicinal uses, is still used today in various religions during rites of passage and funeral rituals (last rites, incense burning, and so on). The controlled sterility of the object is expanded by a cloud of cultural experience of the body and its treatment, also reminiscent of the ritual acceptance of finitude.

The scent-infused steam that emanates from inside this object destabilises the purely rational framework and inscribes into it other ways of understanding health, illness, and death. At the same time, it condenses the physical tension stemming from the social oppression of the female body, as this ambivalent tool finds itself on the edge of treatment and poison, care and collective contamination. This ambivalence is further reflected in the logic of circulation, reminiscent of the infrastructural systems of water flow—an elemental medium that sustains life but also carries toxins and microbial alterities.

Biopersistence also opens a debate on the tendency of the commercial market to appropriate traditional knowledge and spiritual experience, instrumentalizing, commodifying, and emptying them in the name of quick and superficial solutions. **Galamb Thorday**'s large-format paintings cynically permeate these mechanisms: on the one hand, they absurdify them, and on the other, they strip them of idealization by exposing them as closed consumer loops. Caring for oneself, for mental and physical health, is not a liberating gesture but an activity conditioned by reward—whether internalized or systemic. It is precisely in the constant repetition of these consumption cycles that pressure is revealed, especially on female beauty, which, in addition to its external reflection, is presented, among other things, as a sign of inner peace and balance. Often financially costly retreats and procedures may offer a deceptive opportunity to connect body and mind, but they serve more as hidden tools for regulating the body and subjectivity.

The effort to pretend that we have biological processes under control is also a side effect of the mental separation of humans from ecosystems and thus from the unstable exchanges of life and death that sustain them. On this level, **Nona Inescu**'s metal carnivorous plants serve as a reminder of this living cycle, where the death of one organism nourishes another. Metal *Venus* fl*ytraps* (*Dionaea muscipula*) are suspended in their natural state of dormancy, which can last up to three months – a temporary shutdown of functions in which metabolism, growth, food intake, and other activities slow down or practically cease. This state is therefore something between being and non-being, and human beings often find themselves in this stage of prolonged finitude or rigidity.

In this context, **Bianka Barniaková**'s marble objects represent ambivalent memorial monuments – they resemble gravestones and the messages associated with them for the bereaved and the deceased, allowing for mourning in a timeless future. Through her poetic inscription, the author also transforms the tradition of memorial plaques in public spaces, which seem to connect a certain place with a certain person forever.

The work is thus not a celebratory commemoration of important personalities, but carries messages that lack a clear addressee. Instead of stark information, the marble monuments bear traces of fleeting thoughts and impressionistic perceptions. The preserved past is replaced by a presence through poetic language that transcends individualism and seeks to speak to contemporary struggles, fears, and hopes.

Tereza Zelenková's work explores the relationship between image and language and how photography challenges our perception of the past as something static and stable. The moths in The Language of Moths represent night as a space of imagination and death—the captured bodies are already lifeless, and the medium of photography merely lends them the illusion of life, while the ageing, analogue material gradually reveals its own physical essence, transforming the image into an object that bears traces of its own decay. In The Skull of Descartes, the author turns to the fascination with relics of famous personalities and the Cartesian tension between body and mind. According to René Descartes (1596–1650), the human body is a mere shell where the soul resides in the pineal gland. The philosopher claimed that this is where all our thoughts are born, which he follows up with his famous statement cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am. During the transport of Descartes' remains in 1666, the philosopher's skull disappeared, as if his body and soul had been finally damned, and was not found again until 1823. By that time, five other skulls were already considered to be the "original" centre of Descartes' consciousness. In an effort to reveal the authenticity of Descartes' skull, natural scientist Georges Cuvier compared it with the author's portrait in a painting by Frans Hals. In 1913, anatomist Paul Richer created a plaster cast of the skull and placed it in a plaster bust based on Hals' portrait. His motivation was undoubtedly to prove that the shape and proportions of the skull correspond to the physical features of Descartes' face. The result is a plaster bust with removable facial parts, under which the skull is hidden. Through photographic representation, a record of the past is created, although the skull, wedged into Descartes' bust, refuses to be buried and thus remains in a kind of immortal limbo.