

Jakub Choma **Healing Through Fatigue**

Curated by Søren Grammel

Co-Curated by Fabienne Finkbeiner

Venue: Heidelberger Kunstverein, Heidelberg, Germany

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Exhibition Photography: Jan Kolský

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In his first institutional solo exhibition, the 1995-born, Prague-based artist Jakub Choma integrates elements from digital gaming realms into a sprawling installation that captivates audiences through its interlocking layers, hybrid material assemblies, and a richly charged atmosphere. Drawing on narrative strategies akin to worldbuilding (1), Choma transforms the exhibition space of the Heidelberger Kunstverein into a dungeon-like (2) setting—a site oscillating between some kind of open-world level (3) and a weird sort of parkour training module fantasy (4). We wander through a landscape that is both artificial and real. The environment the artist has created does not seem to be a seamless, unbroken vision of a digital future. Nothing here is finished; everything appears to be in a state of transformation. The space partly resembles a factory hall, a shrine, a dump and a workshop: Structures that evoke machines, a constant electronic hum that makes one think of server farms or data centers.

To craft this atmospherically charged environment, Choma employs a wide range of materials, spanning cork, plastics, wood, metal, and stickers, all the way to textiles, electronic components, LCD screens, and various printing techniques. The resulting assemblage-like objects, fused with construction materials, evolve into large-scale, almost architectural installations. What may initially appear makeshift or chaotic reveals itself upon closer inspection as a precisely calculated arrangement, in which a suspenseful interplay between roughly worked everyday materials and meticulously executed interventions and adaptations unfolds. Much like online role-playing games that undergo perpetual updates and patches (5), Choma's works are subject to ongoing "self-overwriting." Installations are disassembled, reconfigured, expanded, or assigned new functions in subsequent exhibitions, reflecting a dynamic approach to artistic production. He refers to this cycle as "Continual Expansion," likening it to a sprawling, ever-evolving game universe in which fresh levels, mods (6), items (7), and quests are continually introduced. He rather offers a fluid framework open to negotiation and transformation, than presenting his practice as a fixed statement.

At first glance, the exhibition's title, *Healing Through Fatigue*, may sound paradoxical. Within gaming culture, "fatigue" refers to the depletion of a character's energy when it oversteps or outright breaks the boundaries of the game world. Yet what typically leads to virtual "death" by exhaustion in a video game becomes, in Choma's work, a site of potential self-empowerment. By pushing into zones that are not fully mapped or sanctioned—either in-game or in the real world—Choma highlights a moment of friction where new forms of agency can emerge. When he performs in his own installation, Choma moves through the space with probing, almost investigative gestures, as though navigating an unfamiliar zone that remains to be charted. The sculptures themselves become interactive checkpoints or quest (8) stages, where Choma, in the role of an otherworldly or algorithmically guided figure, carries out unfathomable tasks akin to those found in game scenarios. At times, he appropriates the demeanor of Non-Player Characters, NPCs (9), those avatars governed by in-game logic rather than human players. Referencing "glitches" (10), he also taps into viral phenomena such as endless wall-running animations—memorable from platforms like TikTok, where they have taken on a life of their own as a distinct video genre. In so doing, Choma alludes to what Legacy Russell, among others, has theorized as a space of creative subversion (11).

Choma's practice resonates with discussions around the "post-internet" condition—a term that, as critics such as Marisa Olson and Michael Connor have noted, does not imply the end of the internet but rather describes an era in which the online world has become irreversibly woven into every aspect of life (12&13). In this view, the internet is no longer a discreet or immaterial sphere; it is deeply embedded in physical, psychological, and social infrastructures. Hito Steyerl captured this with her assertion that the internet is not "dead" but everywhere, effectively dissolving the obsolete line between online and offline (14). Choma's

work gives tangible form to this idea by mingling the remnants of digital culture: icons, user interfaces, glitch motifs, with everyday objects and raw materials. Through this approach, he reveals how seamlessly the digital realm now coexists with, and indeed augments, our physical environments. One of the most striking examples of this interplay is Choma's use of cork as a sculptural foundation. He likens its granular texture to the pixelated building blocks of bitmap (15) images. Cork also carries personal meaning for him: in his childhood, it served as an orthopedic corrective in his shoes, guiding his foot into a desired position over time. By juxtaposing this memory with the programmatic shaping of avatars in digital games, Choma underscores how both physical bodies and digital proxies can be slowly reconfigured within—and sometimes against—predefined systems.

Choma deliberately avoids the ultra-polished, sometimes hyperaffirmative aesthetics that characterized many early “post-internet” artworks, where slickness and heavily edited digital effects often took center stage. In a cultural moment when tech giants strive to seamlessly merge analog and digital spheres for commercial ends, Choma opts for a more dirty, fragmented aesthetic. His installations can initially resemble DIY-workshops, neglected construction sites, or chaotic storage rooms filled with wires, metal scraps, and oddly contoured cork boards. Plastic tarps attached to improvised support structures are reminiscent of construction methods in favelas, while indefinable minerals and debris evoke associations with the remnants of industrial processes at illegal dumping grounds. Circuit boards and electronic components lie scattered between wire mesh and fallen leaves. A plastic bag swells continuously in the wind. Cables dangle from the ceiling. And seductively, yet toxically, brightly colored materials evoke contested minerals. What is hinted at here is that the online world, beyond its seemingly immaterial screens, has a very extractivist, physical engine: A cycle of hardware, industry, humming fans, blinking routers, bundles of cables, minerals, raw materials, electronic waste, cheap labor, and toxic refuse. It is as if the invisible circuits of the internet have been translated into visible objects and sculptures. This tangible materiality reminds of what Finnish media theorist Jussi Parikka refers to as the “Anthroscene” (16)—an obvious wordplay combining Anthropocene and obscene. Parikka draws attention to the fact that the digital sphere has a geology—a hard material foundation made of rare earths and metals. He also speaks of the “geological layers of media. And in Choma's installation, we can feel the toxic radiation of these layers — both ecological and social. Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, in their widely discussed study “Anatomy of an AI System” (17), have shown how every digital device relies on a network of resource extraction, logistics, and human labor: Every cloud has a ground; every virtual world is built upon real-world mines, factories, and server farms. And at the end of their life cycle, many of these components return to the planet as waste — often far removed from our field of vision. What usually happens hidden in the depths of global supply chains, Choma condenses into atmosphere and presence.

Amidst this purposeful multitude, viewers may suddenly glimpse references to retail displays of consumer spaces—a phenomenon sociologists like Alan Bryman refer to as “gamification,” in which playful, theme-park logics spill into the everyday world of shopping and commerce (18). Choma draws on the concept of the “dungeon” to investigate how pleasure, consumption, and depletion—or the exhausting of finite resources—are intertwined. Although *Healing Through Fatigue* might seem to promise a ritual of replenishment, it also provokes the question of when we might finally run dry. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han has described our contemporary culture as a “society of fatigue,” in which we voluntarily exploit ourselves nonstop (19). Extractivist economies — that is, economies built on the continuous extraction of value from both nature and people, including our personal data and our very selves — deepen this condition. The culture of relentless self-optimization drives us into a paradoxical spiral: We are expected not only to work productively but also to regenerate efficiently, to optimize our mental health — ideally in the same rhythm as machines and algorithms.

Digital environments normalize a life structured by the constant management of personal resources. Choma highlights this phenomenon by incorporating the paraphernalia of gaming interfaces, ranging from mana points to health bars and rage meters, 17). His work reframes how these once-abstract measurements of digital bodies have already seeped into our physical reality, including today's ubiquitous wearables. The idea of implantable tech is no longer science fiction; it stands at the threshold of everyday life, suggesting a postdigital era where the network expands into the body as a kind of invasive, yet also enabling, prosthesis. Choma's investigations highlight how profoundly our identity and desires are molded by a logic that markets consumption as freedom while nudging us into market-compliant trajectories. His

almost cinematic mise-en-scène reflects how easily we can be guided by overstimulated, seemingly interactive images—whether through endless social media feeds that plunge us into a hypnotic “doomscroll mode,” or via gamified consumer environments in which we drift purposefully yet aimlessly, as though wandering a theme-park backdrop.

In a particularly striking gesture, Choma “rescues” a virtual training dummy from an interactive role-playing game, where it is normally meant only to absorb hits without retaliating. Choma lifts it from its purely functional role, endowing it with a “personality” by printing it out and compelling it to confront the taxing demands of human existence: exhaustion, doubt, and the potential disillusionment that life in a society driven by profit and power maximization can entail. By channeling the reward-and-punishment logic of games into a tactile, sometimes gritty materiality, Choma envisions a spillover of so-called virtual rule systems into the analog sphere. Within this liminal zone, exhaustion becomes not merely a sign of weakness but a kind of threshold: a place where our notions of depletion and regeneration may be rethought. Precisely in the act of Healing Through Fatigue, the possibility arises that we might, if only briefly, bend the rules of the game that we had accepted as binding only moments before. (Text by Søren Grammel)

Jakub Choma was born in Košice, Slovakia, in 1995. He studied fine art at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design (AAAD) in Prague from 2014 to 2023, where he continues to live.

Link to the video documenting the performance that Jakub Choma presented as part of his exhibition at the opening on 15 March 2025 at the Heidelberger Kunstverein: [LINK](#).

References:

- 01 Worldbuilding: The creation of a fictional world.
- 02 Dungeon: Places in fantasy, pop and consumer culture that are designed to give consumers a so-called ‘immersive’ experience, usually an adventurous and uncanny one.
- 03 Open world level: Digital play area that players can explore freely and non-linear.
- 04 Parkour Training Module: A specially designed environment or unit for practicing parkour techniques.
- 05 Patches: Updates for software or games that fix bugs or improve content.
- 06 Mods: User-created modifications or extensions for a game or software that add new features or content.
- 07 Items: Objects that can be used or collected in games or applications.
- 08 Quests: Tasks and challenges in digital games.
- 09 NPCs (Non-Player Characters): Software-/algorithm-controlled characters in games that interact with players.
- 10 Glitches: Bugs in games or software and other digital content causing unexpected or strange effects.
- 11 Legacy Russell: ‘Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto’, Verso Books, 2020.
- 12 Marisa Olson: ‘Postinternet: Art After the Internet’, Foam Magazine 29, Winter 2011, pp 59 – 63; repr. in Art and the Internet, London: Black Dog, 2013.
- 13 Michael Connor: ‘What’s Postinternet Got to do with Net Art?’, Rhizome, 1 Nov 2013.
- 14 Hito Steyerl: ‘Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?’, e-Flux Journal, Issue No. 49, November 2013.
- 15 Bitmap: An image that consists of individual colour pixels in a grid. Typical formats are BMP, PNG, JPG and GIF.
- 16 Jussi Parikka: ‘A Geology of Media’, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2015.
- 17 Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler: ‘Anatomy of an AI System’ is a large-scale map and long-form essay investigating the human labor, data, and planetary resources required to build and operate an Amazon Echo. Published by: SHARE Lab, SHARE Foundation (<https://labs.rs>) and The AI Now Institute, NYU (<https://ainowinstitute.org/>)
- 18 Alan Bryman: ‘The Disneyization of Society’, The Sociological Review, 47(1), 25 – 47, 1999.
- 19 Byung-Chul Han: “The Society of Fatigue”, in Bulletin of Chelyabinsk State University 491 (9), p.116-119, December 2024
- 20 Health bars, mana pools, and rage meters: Show the current supply of health, mana (magical energy) or rage (anger) needed (or not needed) for survival, certain abilities or actions.