

Visual Expressions

Introduction

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From 2–4 June 2022, the 34th Annual Conference of the Association for Anthropology and Medicine (AGEM) took place in Vienna in Cooperation with the Austrian Ethnomedical Society and Weltmuseum Wien. Entitled *Visual Expressions of Health, Illness and Healing*, the conference was open for presentations dealing with the visualisation of medical topics in various ways from different perspectives. The conference was inter- and transdisciplinary with a focus on visual medical anthropology and the transcultural medical humanities. The participants were researchers in social sciences, artists, curators, as well as medical practitioners, their patients and the patients' relatives. The conference was also organised in memoriam of the late physician and medical anthropologist ARMIN PRINZ who founded the Austrian Ethnomedical Society and initiated the Ethnomedical Collection including objects, materials and paintings representing various aspects of health in different medical cultures. The Ethnomedical Collection was formerly located in the historical building “Josephinum” and was donated to the Weltmuseum Wien in 2017 (<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/>). Therefore, the exhibition *Donation of the Austrian Ethnomedical Society – A Selection of Popular Paintings from Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo* (2 June–1 November 2022) was curated and opened in the scope of the conference. HELMAR KURZ und KATHARINA SABERNIG published a detailed report on the conference in *Curare* 45 (2022) 2: 97–106.

The AGEM conference was regarded as a continuation of the previous conference *Aesthetics of Healing: Working with the Senses in Therapeutic Contexts* which took place in Münster in 2019 and about which a report was published and edited by HELMAR KURZ in *Curare* 42 (2019) 3+4. After the pandemic interregnum a call for papers was opened in November 2021 and invited contributions involving simple sketches, vivid comics, elaborate paintings or computer-aided simula-

tions, to name just a few possibilities, that are used to illustrate medical topics that are often difficult to access through language alone. The aim was to explore the manifold ways of visual and artistic expression in the context of individual healing, education or social awareness. This issue is a selection of contributions of authors who presented in person or had submitted an abstract but finally could not come.

Depending on the setting, purpose and audience, images may be created not only as a didactic tool to explain medical content, but also in the context of therapy and communicating individual as well as societal fear or suffering. The visualisation can contribute to a deepening of therapeutic conversation or also stand for itself as an artistic manifestation. Visual expression can take place in the context of therapy, and as form of self-reflection during educational training of prospective medical professionals rooted in their medical field and respective cultures as well as on a broader societal stage. Medical humanities regard visual arts as a powerful tool for public engagement, which also showcase healthcare topics in an artistic manner (CRAWFORD *et al.* 2015: 117). This *Curare* issue is a collection of scientific articles, essays of individual or collective experiences, and conference or project reports. Together they present a variety of aims, approaches and artistic expressions from different educational backgrounds.

Articles

In a nutshell, this issue starts with two articles dealing with educational examples from Asia. BARBARA GERKE examines a Tibetan medical thangka (scroll) which illustrates knowledge on “infectious diseases” in the seventeenth century. ELIZABETH TURK's article documents the visibility of Mongolian public health campaigns in the context of “being cultured” with a focus on the corona pandemic. A more personal aspect of health

visualisation is presented by SASKIA JÜNGER & MARIYA LORKE in “Visual expressions of embodied risk,” who conducted narrative interviews with individuals who have an increased risk for certain diseases and were invited to sketch their risk on body maps.

Visualisation of medical content for the purpose of communicating information or improving communication is demonstrated in all three articles. Individual reflections on the visualisation of conditions that are otherwise difficult to describe is at the centre of the following two essays. BARBARA GRAF reflects on her artistic PhD project wherein she visualises the bodily sensations of her own multiple sclerosis disease. ILEANA SZASZ documented the ongoing development of the dementia of her father as a filmmaker and anthropologist. The Essay by SARA VALLERANI and her team gives insight into the creative group process, inspired by the situation of lockdowns during the pandemic in Italy. In the Reports section we have four reports on activities regarding artistic medical humanities. ANDREA PRASCHINGER *et al.* present the didactic considerations and development of an inspiring medical comics project within the hospital at the Medical University of Vienna. CÉLINE KAISER reports on the development of medical humanities activities within IMHAR, a space which combines the approaches of artistic research with those of medical and health humanities. KATHARINA SABERNIG gives insight into the results and the conference of the “Comparative Guts” project, a further group work on the diverse ways in which the body’s interior has been depicted throughout time and space and she reports on her own artistic research project.

BARBARA GERKE’s and ELISABETH TURK’s articles examine the visualisation of didactic medical content, authored by historical and contemporary Asian health Institutions, and addressed to anonymous viewers to transport information. GERKE’s article “Visual Dynamics of Contagion: Poisons and Antidotes in Tibetan Medical Paintings of the Seventeenth Century”, refers to a scroll painting included in a set of Tibetan medical thangkas. It was created at the eve of modernity not only for medical students but also for a broader public during an important historical period, namely the rise of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s Ganden Podrang Government in Lhasa (cf. PARFIONOVITCH *et al.*

1992; GYATSO 2015). She analyses the dynamics and relationship between poisons and antidotes used to treat poisons and questions the multi-layered concept of pathogen transmission in the Tibetan context, in the core of which is a myth of Indian origin.

Another form of visualisation in the scope of contagious diseases on behalf of a government was examined by TURK with her contribution “‘Being Cultured’, Changing Culture: public health messaging in COVID-era Ulaanbaatar”. Her observations took place not far north of Tibet, in Mongolia, and bring us to a contemporary world, which at the time of the conference was still dominated by measures and dynamics of the pandemic. TURK shows images of a health campaign alongside LOUIS ALTHUSSER’s work on ideological state apparatuses. In addition to visualising measures to prevent the transmission of the virus, the campaign also aimed to promote good behaviour and avoid misbehaviour, such as avoiding urinating and spitting in public.

Yet another goal of visualisation is investigated in a research project by SASKIA JÜNGER & MARIYA LORKE entitled “Visual expressions of embodied risk – body maps as a means of reflecting and understanding the meaning of health risk in research and teaching”. Instead of using body maps to communicate an abstract likelihood of risk that an individual will get a certain disease they inverted the principle and tried to visualise the impact for an individual or the general meaning of a certain risk of disease. They interviewed 20 people affected personally with a diagnosed higher risk of familial breast and ovarian cancer or psychosis and invited them to draw their individual risk on a body map. In the scope of an ethics seminar they also invited medical students to imagine the risk for selected case in a similar way. They conclude that the use of body maps can help patients and participants to reflect on and understand embodied health risks (see also: LYS *et al.* 2018)

Essays

The essay “Visual Embodiments of Bodily Sensations and Their Individual Conditionality: A Visual Phenomenology” by BARBARA GRAF delves deeply into this form of visual communication in a more personal and artistic way. She visualises the sen-

sations caused by her multiple sclerosis and reflects on the influence of her artistic activity on her self-perception. The drawings not only convey the quality of her paraesthesia but also its intensity in the sense of dolography, similar to pain scales (cf. AFFOLTER & RÜFENACHT 2018; MELZACK, RONALD & TORGERSON 1971). In her work she is not only reflecting on her own experiences but also conveying the invisible sensations to other affected individuals, such as relatives and medical professionals. These quantitative and qualitative scales of sensations have the potential to be used diagnostically to help other patients to communicate their discomfort.

In “As far as I can record. Constructing the representations of living with dementia in a personal documentary film”, ILEANA SZASZ reflects on her relationship as a filmmaker with her father as he experiences the ongoing process of his dementia. She discusses the methodological challenges within a documentary setting while oscillating between the interchangeable roles of being an outsider (the documentary filmmaker) and an insider (the daughter). In the genre of personal documentaries the lines between public and private life are blurred (cf. AUFDERHEIDE 1997). The contribution is not only a moving documentation of family dynamics during a progressive illness but also an autoethnographic contribution on (Re)discovering and reframing familiarity.

MARTINA CONSOLONI, DELIA DA MOSTO, MARGHERITA NERI and SARA VALLERANI describe in their essay “Comics in the Time of COVID-19: Examining the Role of Graphic Medicine in Promoting the Right to Health”, the experience of creating the medical comic book *Materia Viva* in 2020. The comic book was formed by the KÄTHER COLLECTIVE, a group of scholars with different educational background, and is an open access medical graphic which does not focus on a certain disease but on health inequalities and the right to health. Though the Käthe collective was founded before the Covid pandemic the comic was born in the context and under the impressions of the first Italian lockdown in 2020. The contribution gives insight to the circumstances in which the book was developed and the dynamics of how the scholars communicated online.

Documentation

Another group project visualising medical comics took place in the Medical University of Vienna teaching centre. It was initiated by ANDREA PRASCHINGER and EVA K. MASEL and additionally carried out by RUTH KUTALEK and RUTH KOBLIZEK. Within more than three years three exhibitions on three medical topics – body, borders, and pain – have been curated by a larger team. One aim is to use the comics to provide an opportunity for reception, interpretation and reflection by viewers. In difficult clinical situations, especially in palliative care, it is important to address the unspeakable or unspoken (MASEL *et al.* 2020). Medical graphics may be a helpful tool to start conversations in difficult situations not only in the scope of relations between patient and medical professionals but also to address stressful situations in clinical practice or medical education. Various artistic contributions using different media and materials to visualise particular problems were exhibited. The project ended with a symposium: “Power of Graphic Medicine”.

Yet another initiative which combines approaches from Medical & Health Humanities and artistic research, in order to develop and encourage new perspectives on perceptions of health and illness (ANKELE & KAISER 2022) is the Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research (IMHAR) founded in 2020. IMHAR involves artists, cultural scientists, medical historians or activists, and, above all, people who are actively engaged in transdisciplinary creative work in these areas. CÉLINE KAISER looks back and forward after three years of activities with three different event formats: the ‘Reading Room’, the ‘Colloquium’ and the ‘Salon’ which initially took place in the digital space.

The significance of visualising the bodily interior rather than relying on textual descriptions is explored in the project “Comparative Guts,” initiated by CHIARA THUMIGER and ANGELIKA MESSNER (both Kiel University, Cluster of Excellence Roots). A year before the hybrid and in-person event took place, more than thirty visual artists, textual historians and medical anthropologists and archaeologists from diverging fields were invited to several online meetings to present as-

pects of human guts from their perspective. Organs which are traditionally linked to nutrition and digestion, were presented with their associated emotional, ethical, and metaphysical significance. With the scholarly knowledge of a diverse mixed crowd of experts three remarkable results have been achieved: an online database, a printed book and the conference itself which is reported in this issue.

The cover image of this issue is the result of a long process deeply rooted in my research on the concepts and history of Tibetan medicine and anatomical knowledge. My studies on two- and three-dimensional representations of the human body and ethical questions associated with the field of anatomy led me to the idea of knitting interior structures, which could be used as the visual basis of a bilingual Latin-Tibetan anatomical chart such as images of the intestines and female urogenital tract. Rather than focussing on current developments of the project, the report sheds light on the earlier thoughts and background of “knitted anatomy” and the close links to my examination of the development and coining of Tibetan anatomical vocabulary.

Conclusion

The conference and this issue of *Curare* were regarded as a continuation of the “Aesthetics of Healing: Working with the Senses in Therapeutic Contexts” with a special focus on the visuality of various expressions in the context of health and healing. The diversity of the individual and group contributions reflects the numerous possible applications of the visual in a health-related context. The visualisations presented in the articles are sometimes didactic, sometimes therapeutic, often oscillating between both, but the focus is always on communicating a health-related topic. These are examples of the wide range of useful applications of pictorial communication. The conference has certainly shown the possibilities of collaboration between the medical and health humanities, and that the arts could be utilised much more in clinical practice and that more research could be done in this field.

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Notes

- 1 Käthe Collective 2021. *Materia Viva*. <https://collettivakathe.wixsite.com/kaethe>.
- 2 IMHAR. <https://www.imhar.net/en/>.
- 3 Comparative Guts: <https://comparative-guts.net/>.
- 4 Knitted Anatomy: <https://www.knitted-anatomy.at/>.

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