

Two and a Half Years of IMHAR

Report from the Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research (IMHAR)
an Affiliated Institut of University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Ottersberg, Germany

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Two and a half years of IMHAR – how can the work of the Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research be summarised so far? A concrete example may serve as an indication of the aims and topics we pursue and the way in which we work. A few months ago three members of IMHAR, ANGELA ALVES, MONIKA ANKELE and CÉLINE KAISER, were invited to the international and transdisciplinary workshop *Art & the Critical Medical Humanities: Confabulations X Health & Care* led by FIONA JOHNSTONE (Durham University, UK), ALLISON MOREHEAD (Queen's University, Canada) and IMOGEN WILSHIRE (Lincoln University, UK) at the Royal College of the Arts, Battersea, London. There the three presented their collaborative project “Lying in: Bed”, which will be published in 2025 in Bloomsbury's *Critical Interventions in the Medical and Health Humanities* series together with other together with other works that emerged from these “confabulations”.

Lying in bed seems to be an everyday situation. It seems even more obvious that sick people lie in bed. Being ill and lying in bed – hospitals and hospital beds are closely connected, one without the other hardly imaginable. The bed, one might think, offers itself for lying down as part of the interactive process between actors, material objects and environments. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that beds always unfold a normative dimension that prescribes ‘correct’ handling and leads to deviations – of a physical, cultural, psychological or social nature – being sanctioned or preventively suppressed. In this respect, beds are by no means as ‘innocent’ as they might appear. Even when they are located in private spaces and are claimed in the modern age as a symbol of privacy, as a place of escape in the face of social demands on the individual. Ideas of normal, productive or sick bodies and behaviours flow into the settings and material objects as well as socio-cultural prac-

tices. Who is lying in bed and who is not, who is in a horizontal position and who is looking at it from a vertical perspective, is always the result of structures of action and power, which are simultaneously established by relations between environments, bodies and objects. The extent to which medical concepts, cultural meanings and social codes refer to the bed as an agent in this way and use it to create and negotiate complex situations is the subject of a project initiative that has emerged from a collaboration between members of the Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research (IMHAR; www.imhar.net).

Under the title “Lying in: Bed”, the choreographer and crip artist ANGELA ALVES, the historian MONIKA ANKELE and the literary and cultural studies scholar CÉLINE KAISER came together to investigate the intricate relationships that human bodies enter into horizontally - with objects and the environments that surround them, as well as with medical therapies and socio-political interpretations. ANGELA ALVES is a Berlin-based choreographer with a sick nervous system, and an artistic collaborator in the project team of Claire Cunningham's professorship at the University of the Arts in Berlin. In her performance and sound installation *REST*, ANGELA ALVES invited people to lie down in her own bed and talk about lying in bed as an act of care, surrender and even an act of rebellion. Visiting her art project, you can also lie in her bed and listen to the sound installation where you can hear the voices of three women lying in bed, talking about overcoming guilt and shame, and enjoying inefficiency. These dynamics not only take place in the cognitive space where meanings are negotiated, but also take place much more subliminally on a sensual, physical level. For example, a horizontal position can also support or bring about a sense of the body that goes hand in hand with feeling ill. MONIKA ANKELE, Professor of the History of Med-

icine and Medical Museology at the Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin, examined the practice of being put to bed and staying in bed in the context of the history of psychiatry, using the example of the introduction of bed treatment at the end of the 19th century. Ankele is interested in unfolding the interplay of spatial arrangements (the bed) and sensory perception (feeling sick) that should convince the patient to feel sick. The fact that doctors' perspectives on bodies lying down can also be permeated by social, normative, politically and ethically problematic ideas becomes particularly tangible where the clinical context fades into the background: in literature. The story of Oblomov, the eponymous main character of the novel by IVAN GONČAROV from 1859, is about lying in bed and getting up, being horizontal and then rising into the vertical. CÉLINE KAISER follows this figure of literary and medical history, tracing the novel from its reception in the 19th to the 21st century, which sometimes appropriates OBLOMOV as a symbol of feudal decadence, sometimes as the eponym of a clinical syndrome, sometimes as a refusal of the neoliberal idea of self-improvement. The attributes associated with the figure of OBLOMOV, especially by physicians and psychologists, and the implications they bring to light in the transfer of the literary figure to a clinical patient illustrates a hopelessly overdetermined entanglement of verticality with productivity and the horizontal with passivity, asociality and a refusal to be productive.

This outlined project continued in content and structure what motivated the founding of IMHAR, the International Association for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research, e. V. (<https://www.imhar.net/association/>) in 2020, which is to say in combining approaches from Medical & Health Humanities and artistic research it has aimed to develop and advance innovative perspectives on ways of perceiving health and illness in a productive and experimental way.

Some of the founding members had already made artistic or scientific contributions at the international conference *Material Cultures of Psychiatry* at the University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf, which was conceived by MONIKA ANKELE and BENOÎT MAJERUS. The opening ceremony of the *Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research* (IMHAR) on 25 March 2022, which emerged from our association, has been co-direct-

ed by MONIKA ANKELE and CÉLINE KAISER since its foundation.

Since then, the *Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research* is a space and forum for transdisciplinary approaches and research practices. It initiates, designs, and conducts research projects, builds project-related collaborations and works in multi-perspective teams to further develop research and communication strategies that are suitable for communicating its research findings beyond the scientific community. The Institute aims to provide a space for research and discourse that is open to diverse perspectives. It represents a critical and decidedly cultural-scientific position in the field of Medical & Health Humanities, as called for in particular by WILLIAM VINEY, FELICITY CALLARD and ANGELA WOODS. Cultural forms, material cultures, artistic practices, corporeality and sensual perception of all actors involved in the context of medical cultures are at the centre of the research questions to be addressed in the Institute's projects. In our view, a combination of artistic, cultural studies and historical investigations strengthens research processes that may start from subjective dimensions of perception and experience but aim at a critical exploration of the cultural dimensions of health and medical cultures. Here, productive connections expand to disability studies, to critical reflections on racism, to questions of gender studies, to name just a few of the neighbouring fields of research in cultural and social sciences. Common to many projects of Critical Medical and Health Humanities is a programmatic openness to activist perspectives and a participatory inclusion of the patient perspective in research work.

We assume that by linking the research approaches of Medical & Health Humanities with those of artistic research, a 'different', situated and embodied knowledge can be applied, tested and critically reflected in research and communication processes. By linking such approaches with the modes of perception and cognition characteristics of artistic research, aesthetic, medial and embodied dimensions of the perception of being healthy and being ill can be explored, thematised, brought into play and questioned, as well as the resulting social and sensual experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The interplay of artistic and cultural studies research methods can thus contribute to

relating sensual perception and sense-making in different medical contexts and make them fruitful.

Our concerns are not only reflected in our projects and collaborations. They become tangible in the composition of the people who are committed to the founding of the research institute and who, as members of the association, have jointly developed a lively culture of discussion and openness to transdisciplinary issues: Our members include artists, cultural scientists, medical historians and activists, or to put it another way: People who productively cross the boundaries between these fields in their scientific and artistic practices.

Our main fields of interest are also evident in the series of events we run with external guests. In addition to the "IMHAR on Tour" event format, within which the Lying in: Bed project took place, we have developed three other event formats in which we offer several meetings per semester: the "Reading Room", the "Colloquium" and the "Salon". These events take place in a digital space, which makes it possible to participate from different locations around the world. The "Reading Room" is used for joint reading sessions and discussion regarding basic texts and current contributions from the fields of Medical & Health Humanities and artistic research. The colloquium offers members of the Association the opportunity to present project ideas in a protected space and to develop them further through dialogue with participants. In recent semesters, our colloquium has also enabled us to exchange ideas and network with other initiatives and institutions from the field of medical humanities, such as the Medical Humanities Research Centre in Innsbruck. In our digital salon, we invite artists, researchers and activists who inspire our thinking and our work with their projects, thinking and approaches. For example, we hosted the Viennese artist BARBARA GRAF, who presented her artistic research work on the perception and visualisation of pain from the perspective of a person suffering from multiple sclerosis. The Flensburg artist ELKE MARK presented her artistic research work on the sense of touch and sensory knowledge. Under the headline "Haptic visualisation", we invited STELLA BOLAKI from the University of Kent and the physician and artist KATHARINA SABERNIG from Vienna. BOLAKI presented her project on Artists Books in the Medical Humanities and KATHARINA SABERNIG gave us an insight into her

"Knitted Body Materiality". Another double feature took place under the title Designing Sensuous Spaces, where VICTORIA BATES and REBECCA FLEETWOOD-SMITH from the University of Bristol, were invited to present their project "Sensing Spaces of Healthcare", and the Amsterdam based artist JENNIFER KANARY NIKOLOV(a), who in her presentation shared insights into "Labyrinth Psychotica. The Wearable", a psychosis simulation VR project, and the subsequent follow-up project "The Anoiksis Experiment". Other guests in our salon were RUTH ANDERWALD and LEONARD GROND from the Angewandte in Vienna, who spoke about Dizziness. Two researchers spoke in our salon about film & psychiatry: MIREILLE BERTON from Lausanne presented her SNSF project "Cinéma et (neuro)psychiatrie en Suisse: autour des collections Waldau" (2021-20125) and the Bremen film scholar TOBIAS DIETRICH gave insights into his research on film and mental illness. This year we also hosted FIONA JOHNSTONE from Durham University, who made a presentation about the work of the Visual and Material Lab that she currently leads as part of the Discovery Research Platform for Medical Humanities at the University of Durham (2023-2030). And MONIKA PIETRZAK-FRANGER from the University of Vienna presented a joint project that she realised with the Viennese photographer PETER MAYR concerning "Living with Long Covid. Interviews and Photographs". YLVA SÖDERFELDT and ERIKA SIGVARSDOTTER, Director and Coordinator, presented their Center for Medical Humanities at Uppsala University (Sweden) as well as new formats of collaboration in the course of the Artists in Residence Programme, which started in 2023 with the artist ANNA ODELL. In the next few months we expect a presentation by the Berlin artist and psychologist KIRSTIN BURCKHARDT about her work (Relationships, on 8th November 2024, 4 p.m.). And on 6th December 2024, 4 p.m., we look forward to a contribution by the artist SASHA BERGSTROM-KATZ "On the Subject of Tests: Performing with Objects". On 24th January we are expecting SOPHIE LEDEBUR in our colloquium to discuss the Medical Collection of the University of Zurich. If you are interested in attending one of these events, please do not hesitate to contact us at anmelden@imhar.net. Of course, we are also happy to welcome new members! (see <https://www.imhar.net/association/>).

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