

Report about the new Institute for *Medical & Health
Humanities and Artistic Research*, affiliated institute of
the Hochschule für Künste im Sozialen,
Ottersberg (Germany)

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Chairs – a beginning

A chair crocheted from the torn strips of a bedsheet on which no one can sit. A chair that refuses the weight of the body, whose actual function – to give support to a body – is suspended by the textile material it is made of. A chair, soft and malleable, that is now in need for support itself, that receives it through a body that catches it, embraces it, serves it, stretches it, makes it the plaything of its own impulses to move. A dance movement between performer and chair, in which new forms of encounter are explored and in which a new relationship with and against each other is created.



Fol. 1: Raja Goltz: Have a Seat¹

¹ See Raja Goltz: Have a Seat. In: Monika Ankele, Benoit Majerus (ed.): *Material Cultures of Psychiatry*. Bielefeld 2020, 138-139, 139.

On 25 March 2022, Raja Goltz presented her performative exploration of chairs in the history of psychiatry at the digital opening ceremony of the *Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research* (IMHAR), an affiliated institute of the Hochschule für Künste im Sozialen (HKS), Ottersberg, in northern Germany. She set a thread that carried through the event and gave the multi-perspective contributions by Monika Ankele (represented by Martina Wernli), Gabriele Schmid and Céline Kaiser an – albeit moving – anchor point.

At the same time, the presentation of the art therapy graduate Raja Goltz tied in with an important chapter in the prehistory of this foundation. In 2018, the international conference *Material Cultures of Psychiatry* took place at the University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf, which was initiated by Monika Ankele and Benoît Majerus. Scholars and artists participated at the conference, who would come together in 2020 to found the *International Association for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research e.V.* (<https://www.imhar.net/association/>).

Coming back to the chair therefore made sense in several ways, on the one hand to remember our first steps, on the other hand to celebrate the next step of a multifaceted collaboration on a collegial and institutional level, but finally also to outline our interests for the *Medical & Health Humanities* and artistic research and to formulate questions that keep motivating and guiding our collaboration.

In addition to well-known chairs from the history of medicine and the penal system, the contributions also dealt with rather casually placed, seemingly insignificant chairs that have made and continue to make their appearance in therapeutic settings as well as in medical-historical and medical contexts. In addition to chairs that were specifically embedded in or designed for certain practices, the contributions to the opening ceremony focused on chairs that serve the performative production of phenomena and can thus become part of clinical-therapeutic knowledge and theory-building, as Fritz Perl's duo of *Hot Seat and Empty Chair* in *Gestalt therapy* may exemplify. Chairs play a major role overall in the staging and performance of social and especially clinical-therapeutic situations. "No psychotherapy without chairs", is the summary of a research finding by psychologist Lisa Landsteiner, who also contributed to the Hamburg conference.² However, most of the chairs we encounter in these contexts are not that extraordinary in themselves. They are simply there, and we usually do not take any further notice of them. Just think of the rows

² Lisa Landsteiner: Have a Seat! Approaching the Object of the Chair at the Site of Psychiatry. In: Monika Ankele, Benoît Majerus (ed.): *Material Cultures of Psychiatry*. Bielefeld 2022, 116-135.

of chairs in waiting rooms or the chairs placed at the bedside of hospital patients. Chairs are a standard example of what is currently being discussed in the humanities and cultural studies with the concept of ‘affordance’: Chairs, one might think, offer to sit down in an interactive situation between actors, material objects and environments. On closer inspection, however, it also becomes clear that chairs can unfold a normative dimension that prescribes ‘correct’ handling and leads to the sanctioning of deviations – of a physical, cultural, cognitive, psychological or social nature. In this respect, chairs are by no means as ‘innocent’ as they may seem, and this does not only refer to those particularly spectacular and violent exceptional cases such as the restraint chair from the history of psychiatry or the electric chair, whose artistic resonances Gabriele Schmid dealt with in her contribution.

Even as seemingly harmless everyday objects, chairs are always designed for specific bodies and body sizes. Notions of normal or ideal bodies and behaviour incorporate the settings and material objects as well as the socio-cultural practices. Chairs thus call for sitting quietly, rarely for walking around them, standing on them, lying down under them – even though all these may be possible relations and options for dealing with this furniture. What is negotiated in the juxtaposition of ‘normal’ or irregular ways of dealing with things does not (only) take place on an individual level, but as part of a material culture generates forms and thus differences that can have an inclusive or exclusive effect, which at one time can contribute to recovery, at another time to the development or intensification of, for example, symptoms of illness or the experience of illness.

Thus, on the one hand, the contributions to the opening ceremony allowed to catch a glimpse of how chairs can produce meanings, process exclusions and inclusions in specific contexts. On the other hand, the artistic contributions showed how chairs are deconstructed, reconstructed, recontextualised, made the object of interventions, can be interrogated aesthetically and through artistic research, and thus – as in the performance *Have a seat* by Raja Goltz – set possible meanings in motion.

In the various contributions, the series of chairs outlined here this way served as a starting point to initiate a conversation about the dimensions that results from the interplay of artistic, cultural studies and historical research perspectives for the field of the *Medical & Health Humanities*.

Content and focus

This describes one of the main goals of the newly founded research institute: The *Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research* aims to combine approaches from the Medical & Health Humanities and artistic research in order to develop and advance innovative perspectives on ways of perceiving health and illness. It 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 disseminating its research findings beyond the scientific community.

At the centre of our interest is the exploration of more or less subtle, multifaceted relations and dimensions of perception, experience, embodiment and shaping of health and illness and the knowledge of medicine and care. The Institute aims to provide a space for research and discourse that is open to diverse perspectives, to expertise from the cultural sciences and humanities, the medical-therapeutic disciplines and professions, from the arts and activist positions and their experiences.

The *Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research* represents a critical and decidedly cultural studies position in the field of the *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 open up to disability studies, to critical reflection on racism, to questions of gender studies, to name just a few of the neighbouring fields of research in the cultural and social sciences. Common to many projects of the *Critical Medical and Health Humanities* is a programmatic openness to activist perspectives and a participatory inclusion of the patient perspective in the research work.

We assume that by linking the research approaches of the *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 characteristic of artistic research, aesthetic, medial and embodied dimensions 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 to making them fruitful.

Initiatives

Some of these questions were discussed in a workshop organised in close cooperation with Zurich SNF Prof Dr Sophie Witt and Prof Dr Christina Schües and Prof Dr Cornelius Borck from the *Institute for the History of Medicine and Science Research* at the University of Lübeck. From 06 to 08 May 2021, a series of digital talks and a final public panel on “Embodiment & Critical Medical Humanities” with Dr Angela Woods, Professor of Medical Humanities at Durham University, UK, Dr Erin Manning, Professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University, Montreal/Canada, the medical sociologist Prof Dr Monica Greco from Goldsmiths College, London/UK, Dr Ana Gómez-Carillo, Post-Doc at McGill University, Montreal/Canada, and the New York writer Siri Hustvedt. A publication of these talks is currently in preparation.

In order to promote an ongoing and sustainable exchange among researchers and activists and to strengthen national and international networks, our institute currently offers three different event formats: the “Reading Room”, the “Colloquium” and the “Salon”. These events take place in digital space, which makes it possible to participate from different locations around the world. The “Reading Room” serves the joint reading and discussion of basic texts and current contributions from the fields of the *Medical & Health Humanities* as well as 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 joint exchange with the participants. We invite artists, researchers and activists to the “Salon” who inspire our thinking and work with their projects and theoretical or methodological approaches.

The first “Salon”, held on 10 June 2022, featured artist Barbara Graf from the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. As a result of her diagnosis with multiple sclerosis, Barbara Graf deals intensively with the question of the perception and visualisation of pain in her ‘drawing phenomenology’. In doing so, she takes her own physical experience as a starting point and understands the project as a kind of “processing of the chronic illness”.³

³ Barbara Graf, Patrick Altmann, Henriette Löffler-Stastka: Die subjektive Verarbeitung chronischer Symptome und Schmerz bei Menschen mit Multipler Sklerose. Visualisierung und Externalisierung als



Fol. 2: Barbara Graf: Faltenlinien 8 – Fußbandage 1 (Mapping), 2016-2018

The founding members

Our concerns are not only reflected in our events with external guests, but also in the composition of the people who have committed themselves to the founding of the research institute and, as members of the founding association, the *International Association for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research*, e.V., have jointly developed a lively culture of discussion and openness to transdisciplinary questions since October 2020. 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. Among our founding members is the physician and medical historian Prof Dr Heinz-Peter Schmiedebach, who held the first professorship for *Medical Humanities* established in Germany at the Charité in Berlin. The Berlin dancer, choreographer, crip artist and founder of the association *Turn. New Movement for Multiple Sclerosis*, Angela Alves brings her artistic and activist perspectives to the work of the *Association*. We benefit from the expertise of literary scholar PD Dr Martina Wernli (Frankfurt), whose research includes the intersection of literature and the history of psychiatry. The Hamburg stage designer and artist Mascha Deneke is currently working artistically on forgetting and remembering and the significance of lost objects – a connection to which artistic research projects of the Cologne-based artist Cony Theis, who holds a professorship at the HKS Ottersberg, can be linked, for example in the context of dementia as a facet of her examination of the individual and societal image of man/portrait. Gabriele Schmid, Professor of Aesthetic Education at the HKS

Ausdruck der Lebensqualität. In: *Psychopraxis, Neuropraxis* 25 (2022), 107-112.

Ottersberg and a long-standing member of the Board of the *Society for Artistic Research* (SAR), has accompanied the ideas of the *Association* from the beginning, as has the historian Dr Monika Ankele, who is currently based at the Chair for the History of Medicine at Medical University of Vienna and researches the material cultures of psychiatry, and Prof Dr Céline Kaiser, who holds a professorship at HKS Ottersberg and researches and teaches at the intersections of literary/media/cultural studies, medical history and artistic practices.

An-Institute

The *Institute for Medical & Health Humanities and Artistic Research* is an affiliated institute of the Lower Saxony University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Ottersberg, which is privately funded and focuses its research and teaching primarily on the fields of art therapy, dance and theatre in social fields/dance and theatre pedagogy, on social work with a focus in artistic practice and also on social work with an artistic focus and fine arts (<https://www.hks-ottersberg.de/EN/>). On several levels, the HKS Ottersberg develops artistic research in social fields in addition to art therapy-clinical research and thus offers our institute contexts to which it can productively connect but which it expands and complements in the direction of critical cultural studies dimensions.



Fol. 3: Mascha Deneke, aquarelle

Hybrid institute

Something we learned from the Corona pandemic is that being able to meet in digital spaces does have its advantages – but also that we occasionally need to meet in analogue spaces to collaborate. That is why we have built a hybrid institute: A website (<https://www.imhar.net/en/>) – and thus our own address – not only allows us to make information about our work public, but the website also supports our collaboration. Hence, our internal office wing offers us a noticeboard with current information, meeting and writing rooms where our collaboration can take place, as well as a corridor where we can exchange ideas with each other.

If we have aroused your interest, please feel free to take part in our events! You can find our current dates at <https://www.imhar.net/en/news/>. If you would like to learn more about our association or become a member yourself, you can find more information here: <https://www.imhar.net/en/association/>.

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