

Artistic Research on Things in/of Psychiatry: An Interdisciplinary Teaching Project

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In the room next to the Small Anatomical Theatre, there is a bed up against the wall. It looks comfortable. Although it is the same color as its surroundings, its fluffy, crumpled covers and pillows form a noticeable contrast to the sterile wash-room with beige tiles, where corpses were once cleaned for autopsies and brought in and out. It stands there, the unmade bed, as if someone had just gotten up, perhaps to drink a coffee or to take a shower. An intimate moment, surrounded by a clinical room in which the horizontal position evokes quite different, frightening connotations.

Indeed, in her work *Materiality* (see page 226 in this book), Daniela Hoge, a student at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts [*Hochschule für Künste im Sozialen, HKS*], Ottersberg, not only *claims* the familiarity of a bed; she actually exhibits her own, personal bed in order to reflect in a very sensorial way on the loss of intimacy that patients experience in the clinical context.

With her artwork she makes a gesture that to a certain extent takes up a central thesis of the international conference “Material Cultures of Psychiatry.” In their exposé for the conference, Monika Ankele and Benoît Majerus emphasized that everyday objects change their meaning in the realm of psychiatry. “[A] bed clearly changes its meaning in a psychiatric hospital” (ibid.), where it could be a place to sleep, a medium of understanding disease, a therapeutic agent, or a patient’s personal refuge (see, for example, Ankele 2018). Yet how should we think about such a change of meaning? How can it be researched? And what aspects and dynamics can be considered?

Socio-scientific, science-historical, or cultural and media-analytic perspectives can direct their attention to the relations that things enter into in psychiatric-historical contexts, for example, as well as to the semiotic processes that are thus generated. If, following the research approaches in the work of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Gilles Deleuze, and Bruno Latour, one assumes that material cultures cannot be exhaustively analyzed based on the system in which they are embedded or from any kind of creative drive, then the focus shifts to the things and the possibilities that lie within them. The way in which things in the context of psychiatry, for example, are “chained” and rearranged with each other and with human actors “links” them in a different way than in the domestic space; in this way, things separate from contexts, but “can also be separated off again and introduced into new structures,” as Friedrich Balke emphasized in light of a “return of things” in recent academic theories (Balke 2011: 13).

Even the form of things itself could be changed. A literal de- and reconstruction of objects introduced a transformation that affected the objects themselves. This in turn could be accompanied by a symbolic redefinition, a new linking of things and actors. Aesthetic (cf. Kämpf-Jansen 2002) and artistic approaches to research open up interesting connections for exploring such processes of transformation.

While the aforementioned scholarly research perspectives analyze the arrangements of things as quantities that create meaning, artistic research is less interested in the reconstruction of, but rather in playing *with* structures of meaning. Artistic research opens up the possibility of building on sensory experience, *aisthesis*, and allows a specific mode of perception (see Klein 2018, among others).

A combination of cultural-science research with aesthetic and artistic strategies thus does not serve as an “evidence machine of an experiential society,” as Thomas Thiemeyer critically noted about hybrid forms of scientific and aesthetic strategies in cultural-historical exhibitions (Thiemeyer 2013: 26). It is not the obvious shortening of a movement of thought (cf. Cuntz et al. 2006) that is the concern of artistic research; rather, it creates interferences and an opening of levels of meaning and perception. As Julian Klein emphasizes: “Artistic experience is an active, constructive, and aesthetic process in which mode and substance are inseparably fused” (Klein 2011: 2). Synesthesia and the creation of meaning collide with and also refer to one another.

A turn to the things of psychiatry, which are at the intersection or tipping point between cultural-historical and artistic research, aims at the poietic dimension of the material cultures of psychiatry. To follow these transitions – or, more precisely,

to open up a specific space for them – was the aim of a teaching project that took place in the summer semester of 2018 at the HKS Ottersberg and was jointly led by Monika Ankele (University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf) and Céline Kaiser (HKS Ottersberg).

The teaching format “Interdisciplinary Project 2” is aimed at students in the third and fourth semesters from all bachelor’s programs at the university (Art in Social Contexts. Art Therapy; Dance and Theatre in Social Contexts. Theatre and Dance Pedagogy; Fine Art; Social Work) and aims at a topic-centered interdisciplinary artistic work. A preparatory seminar introduces content and strategies, which are then taken up in the context of a project week in individual or group work. The resulting artworks are finally presented and reflected on in an artistically designed portfolio.

The framework of this “P2 project” was set by the conference “Material Cultures of Psychiatry,” where the presentation of the artworks took place. In terms of content as well, the connection to the other artistic and scholarly contributions to the conference was intended to be as narrow and fruitful as possible. The preparatory seminar, which spanned two and a half days, therefore had the task of building bridges between research on material cultures and the participants’ own artistic engagement with the things of psychiatry. Since there was not enough time for detailed research with the group, the aim was to offer an introduction to the topic, to offer conceptual impetuses, and to begin a transfer for the artistic work.

In this sense, the lecturers created a conceptual and experiential space that was intended to foster students’ own experimental and creative ideas. The preparatory seminar thus took on the character of a curated space, which was meant to allow for close links between scientific and artistic research movements on material cultures of psychiatry.

Based on example objects, arrangements, and practices, different groups of things were examined. The relationship between abundance and lack of things, the specificity of over-defined objects of psychiatry on the one hand, and the superficial familiarity of everyday objects in the psychiatric space on the other hand were discussed, as were the radical processes of transformation that patients’ objects were subjected to. Writing assignments and performative material explorations, which took place between cultural-science and cultural-historical thematic blocks and in relation to them, initiated the first artistic forms of engagement. The aim of these transfer phases was to open up associative spaces, to stimulate mimetic, transformative, and associative engagements with materials and forms, and to test and use bodily practices in connection with concrete things.

In this way, during the ensuing week of the project, a series of works took shape which artistically explored the aesthetic and poietic dimensions of things based on material cultures of psychiatry.

In a performance in the lecture hall of the Institute for History and Ethics of Medicine in Hamburg (*Loss of Identity*, see page 298), Anne Wilk explored how a radical loss of personal things could affect patients' identity. Some things are particularly tied to the identity of their owners: shoes bear the traces of their wearers and have their own history that makes them unique, as Kai Schlawin explored in his work *Schuh is Who*.

Lydia Oertelt was concerned about how the lack of things for patients could become a "breadless art" of its own. In an exercise lasting several days she moistened and kneaded bread – following the example of some patients – in order to plasticize with it. In addition to a bread sculpture, amulets were created which were distributed to the conference participants (see page 185).

In the foyer of the historical event hall, a special exchange of things and words took place: Viviane Stopp offered drawings of things she had made based on historical sources in exchange for personal belongings from her interaction partners (*Pat. No. 25682*, see page 30). In the Small Anatomical Theatre, Stephanie Lange spun "five threads of duration." Untangling knots, pulling strings, and crocheting, she dealt with the feeling and phases of mourning. The above mentioned work by Daniela Hoge was also shown there.

Raja Goltz presented a special examination of the form and function of everyday objects, their material qualities, and our expectations of them in the lecture hall. In her performance (*Have a Seat*; see page 138), a chair crocheted out of torn sheets and the artist engage in a dialogue in which they negotiate how we can enter into and deal with transformations of material culture.

Synesthesia and semiosis came together in the students' artworks, opened up complex perspectives, offered aesthetic perceptions and new possibilities of interpreting the things of psychiatry, and thus expanded the perspectives of the scholarly contributions to the conference.

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