

Fourth International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Emotional Geographies
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The Medical Waiting Room as Embodied Space: Art, Illness and Healing

Session organizer: Marguerite Perret, Associate Professor, Washburn University.

Health care facilities and waiting rooms are liminal, emotionally charged spaces in which the tension between the non-medicalized outside world and the maze of corridors leading into examination and treatment rooms is manifest. Whether the purpose of the visit is a routine annual exam, a happy event like the birth of a child, or a diagnosis of serious illness, the individual who enters this space is aware of this threshold and the possibility that he/she will re-emerge changed. This session will examine ideas of place, authenticity, identity and embodiment in medical health facilities through a variety of art based initiatives. Presentations include discourse on a range of related subjects: art installations that simulate and critique the waiting room to examine how embodied spaces and objects can serve as proxies for disembodied disease; medical museum collections as mnemonic devices that evoke the experience of the body in health care settings; community engagement as a means of placemaking; and art interventions in hospitals and other treatment facilities that promote healing through environmental modification. Collectively, these inquiries explore the power of art to lend content to the waiting room, which is generally experienced as empty, silenced, inhibiting, and reframe that space as empowering, healing and full of agency.

This session already includes the papers listed below. However, we would like to encourage further contributions. You can send an abstract of approx. 300 words to marguerite.perret@washburn.edu by December 15th 2012

1. *Sick Art and Exquisite Bodies: The Waiting Room as Embodied Space*

Exhibiting a physical or mental illness is experienced first internally by the individual, then through the lens of medical science, and finally as a socio-cultural construct. Throughout this process, the condition is subjected to a value-based framework resulting often and most broadly as social dysfunction. This presentation will consider embodied spaces and objects as proxies for the disembodied disease; a separation of the self and affliction that occurs during diagnosis and treatment, and through marketing and mass media reporting. That tension will be examined through a series of projects developed in collaboration with other artists and institutions over the last decade. These installations become sites for understanding and exposing bias, and serve as examples of re-interpreting illness and healing through literary and visual metaphor. Additionally, employing the feminist notion, "the personal is political," related community outreach projects give voice to patient concerns and to create communal spaces that aid in understanding and healing.

Presenters: Marguerite Perret, Associate Professor, Washburn University, USA and Stephanie Lanter, Instructor of Studio Art, Emporia State University, USA

2. *Latent Narratives: Medical Collections in the Art Installation*

Artifacts from medical collections and archives are intimately linked to the body and forever situated in the context of the physical health care facility. Often these collections contain instruments, equipment, vessels and other devices previously used to pierce, cut, evaluate, and contain the body and its fluids, and even actual samples of the body itself. Other common items include patient records, research documents, and artwork or other objects created by patients during or in response to treatment. Like mnemonic devices, medical collections reflect something essential about the experience of receiving or providing healthcare; who we are as organic, bodily beings, and the places where these procedures took place. These latent

narratives, held in suspension in the museum storage rooms, constitute a different kind of waiting room space. Through the process of selecting objects and documents, and presenting them as is or through additional artistic interpretation, a new narrative is constructed that challenges the viewer to examine their own ideas and preconceptions.

Presenter: Bruce Scherting, Director of Exhibitions, University of Kansas Biodiversity Institute, Museum of Natural History, USA.

3. *“Et Sanabitur”: The Agency of Visual Art in Healthcare Settings*

The correlation between the visual arts and healing, and art’s affecting power in healing settings has an ancient and global history (i.e. prehistoric cave paintings, the Sanctuary of Asclepius in Epidaurus, Siena’s hospital Santa Maria della Scala, Gruenewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, Navaho sand painting, Diego Rivera’s murals in the Hospital de la Raza), but it has received little attention in art historical discourse. In keeping with the focus of this conference, this presentation will address how the introduction of artworks alters the psychological and emotional tenor of a space and contributes the transformation of these places from anxious waiting spaces into the socially significant places that connect us. The past 25 years have seen a major resurgence of integrating visual arts in healing settings and healing practices, exemplified in the United States by the founding of the Society of Arts in Health (SAH) in affiliation with the National Endowment of the Arts (1990), and at a global level by UNESCO’s support for arts-in-hospitals projects. The purpose of this paper is to address the question of how contemporary art in the context of public healing – and dying – institutions contributes to the humanization of these challenging liminal experiences of patients, their families, and caregivers alike, and to identify commonalities and divergencies of themes and approaches to art in such public settings.

Presenter: Dr. Reinhild Janzen, Professor Emeritus in Art History, Washburn University, USA.