

Art & the Critical Medical Humanities: Confabulations X Health & Care at the RCA

19-21 June 2024, RCA Battersea, London

VENUE ADDRESS:

RCA Rausing Research & Innovation Building, 15 Parkgate Rd, London SW11 4NL

CO-CONVENED BY

[Confabulations: art practice, art history, critical medical humanities](#)

Fiona Johnstone, Durham University

Allison Morehead, Queen's University, Canada

Imogen Wilshire, Lincoln

AND

[The Health & Care Research Cluster at the RCA](#)

Gemma Blackshaw, RCA

Alice Butler, RCA

WITH THANKS TO

The Visual and Material Lab at the Discovery Research Platform for Medical Humanities, Durham University

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

AND

The Royal College of Art

We are delighted to share the provisional programme for **Art & the Critical Medical Humanities: Confabulations X Health & Care at the RCA**, a three-day workshop aimed at fostering dialogue, creating connections and activating new entanglements between art-led practices and the critical medical humanities.

We will be showcasing and celebrating work by RCA staff, students and alumni; workshopping material for the book *Art & the Critical Medical Humanities* (Bloomsbury Critical Interventions in the Medical and Health Humanities); and collectively dreaming big and making plans for the future of our field.

We look forward to welcoming you to the RCA in June!

With warm wishes,
Fiona, Allison, Imogen, Gemma and Alice

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

Wednesday 19th June, curated by Health & Care at the RCA:

09:30 Registration and coffee
10:00 Introductions and Welcome
10:30 Dialogue 1: Esther Teichmann + guest Deirdre Gribbin
11:15 Break (tea and coffee)
11:30 Dialogue 2: Abbas Zahedi + guest Nisha Ramayya
12:15 Dialogue 3: Rachel Garfield + guest Jenny Chamarette
13:00 Lunch
14:00 Hermione Wiltshire: *To repair* / Mah Rana: *To well-make and make-well* / Sofie Layton: *To materialise (to give form; to make present)* / Hannah Clarkson: *To converse* / Katrine Skovsgaard: *To voice*.
15:15 Break (tea and coffee)
15:30 Mijke van der Drift: *To refuse* / Mel Brimfield: *To listen* / Edward Thomasson: *To open* / Jess Potter: *To sound* / Minna Pollanen: *To hold*
16:45 Closing remarks
17:00 Wine reception
18:00 to 20:30 Optional visit to RCA's graduate public exhibition PV

Thursday 20th June, curated by Confabulations:

Coffee available from 09.00
09:30 Welcome and Introduction to days two and three
09:45 Icebreaker exercise: Imag(in)ing Critical Medical Humanities
10:50 Parallel sessions of 'lightning' presentations A1 and B1
12:00 Break (tea and coffee)
12:20 Parallel sessions of 'lightning' presentations A2 and B2
13:30 Lunch
14:30 Parallel sessions of 'lightning' presentations A3 and B3
15:40 Break (tea and coffee)
16:00 Keynote: Angela Woods and Will Viney, 'Critical Medical Humanities: 10 years later.'
17:00 Facilitated shared reflections on the day over a glass of wine (finishing by 18.00)

Friday 21st June, curated by Confabulations:

Coffee available from 09.30
09:45 Welcome
10:00 Facilitated Workshop: Future Entanglements: where next for Art & the Critical Medical Humanities?
12:00 Lunch
13:00 Facilitated Workshop: a collective consideration of the book's Foreword, Introduction and Afterword.
14:30 Break (tea and coffee)
14:50 Final reflections and thanks
15:30 Close

FULL PROGRAMME DETAILS

Wednesday 19th June, curated by Health & Care at the RCA

09.30 Registration and coffee

10.00-10.15 Introduction by Confabulations (Fiona Johnstone, Allison Morehead and Imogen Wiltshire).

10.15-10.30 Welcome to the RCA and introduction to the day (Gemma Blackshaw and Alice Butler).

10.30-11.15 Dialogue 1. Esther Teichmann + guest Deirdre Gribbin (Prof. Of Music, Royal College of Music) on *Constellations*, a project in association with the Human Cell Atlas.

<https://constellations.world/about>

11.15-11.30 Break (tea and coffee)

11.30-12.15 Dialogue 2. Abbas Zahedi on *Holding a Heart in Artifice* + guest Nisha Ramayya (Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing, Queen Mary).

<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/abbas-zahedi-holding-a-heart-in-artifice/>

12.15-13.00 Dialogue 3. Rachel Garfield + guest Jenny Chamarette on *The Dwoskin Project*.

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/stephen-dwoskin/>

13.00-14.00 Lunch

14.00-14.10 Hermione Wiltshire: *To repair*

In the throes of desire, our bodies destruct. Skin speed-sliding over skin breaks the thin contraceptive layer of rubber between us. Already a jailbreak, a border transgressed. Differences dissolve into formless liquid space and break loose into my body. The 'swimmers' are already on their way to my cervix. One must have flung itself into my ovum triggering that first doubling. If not a violence, then certainly, a disruption of the rhythm of monthly menses, the pull and push of progesterone and oestrogen that has moved me since puberty in a tidal continuum. The contrapuntal patterns were now changed, pregnancy ensued and for a while, the foetus became our little 'broken condom'.

The short performance-lecture *Actions for Knowledge Repair (Pink/Red/Purple)* will be a grid of moving moth holes mending and un-mending. They will be accompanied by heartbeats that align and then don't as they weave their contrapuntal stories. Those stories will map conception, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding as small yet violent points of disruption that discontinue and disturb the continuum that came before, only – to begin another anew. In terms of public health, a condom breaking, a tooth cracking, an emergency caesarean or mastitis are meagre in significance, but the scale of these experiences feels gigantic when they happen to you. If each small/large event is borne privately, women's experiences can't be fed back into practice (often designed by others) to improve healthcare and the policies which shape it. If those stories can be told and untold, relayed and mapped as more than medical, poetic even, there is an opportunity to learn and to heal which in turn changes the patterns yet again.

Actions for Knowledge Repair (Pink/Red/Purple) will make material these small/big disruptions to the body, the psyche and the timelines of our lives.

<https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/hermione-wiltshire/>

14.10-14.20 Mah Rana: *To well-make and make-well*

Entangled in everyday lived experiences of health and creativity, and paying attention to the processes, places, people and materials involved, well-making is concerned with the changes that can happen when people make things together. My 10-minute contribution offers a nuanced understanding of a daughter's experiential encounter of crafting-together with her mother that privileges shared process and reciprocity as central to relational care.

Interdependence and mutually beneficial interpersonal connections are central to relational care and enable an operational shift from a one-way relationship of care. Relational care is an approach to care that empowers individuals to be equally agentic, and to collaborate in decision-making and solution-finding. My 10-minute contribution begins with a screening of my film *One Day When We Were Young* (5mins 25sec). After the film, I will introduce how well-making, as everyday creativity, practically and emotionally shaped the dementia care that I provided for my mother and the care that she reciprocated to me through her skilled crafting, and storytelling.

<https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/mah-rana/>

14.20-14.30 Questions

14.30-14.40 Sofie Layton: *To materialise (to give form; to make present)*

A short performative lecture that integrates poetry, film, and sound, *Materialising Loss* questions the role of the medical image beyond diagnosis and explores its potential as a non-diagnostic tool. The focus is on expanding conversations surrounding the complexities of the gestational and grief space in relation to the mother-child dyad. The lecture investigates an artist's research practice, utilising the cyanotype printmaking process to translate and remediate medical data. The materialisation process uses the blueprint as a methodology, encompassing the washing and surfacing of the medical body while contemplating the colour blue, both medically and metaphorically. Through this process, the lecture introduces innovative approaches to engaging with medical data, emphasising the haptic encounter. It is a conversation around the 'care' of the medical image, which thinks with Bellacasa's theories of care and the problematics of touch as a form of care: 'Haptic speculation doesn't guarantee material certainty; touching is not a promise of enhanced contact with "reality" but rather an invitation to participate in its ongoing redoing and to be redone in the process.' The translation of data as the blueprint is part of an ongoing redoing and undoing – a potentially troubling reflexive engagement practice which nevertheless opens up the possibility to materialise difficult conversations with and about loss. <https://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/research-degrees/research-students/sofie-layton/>

14.40-14.50 Hannah Clarkson: *To converse*

All the time the buzzing (conversations with Mouth)

Watching Beckett's *Not I* (1973), one sees only the floating 'Mouth' and, barely visible, a shrouded, silent 'Auditor' stage left. The audience cannot see the chair keeping actress Billie Whitelaw in her place: "My head was clamped in otherwise I'd get the shakes and it would start to quiver". Blindfolded, Whitelaw is situated in the comfort of her choosing, in a cage-chaise constructed for her in a gesture of care by designer Jocelyn Herbert. What if Mouth were to settle into a salon chair instead, side-by-side with a listening companion rather than a silent Auditor? What would they talk about? How might the care designed into this chair prompt conversations around 'self-care' and friendship, an opportunity for togetherness and transformation?

Here, recorded dialogues are played through stereo speakers in the hairdryer hoods, comprising anecdotes real and imagined of migraine, 'self-care' gone wrong, getting lost,

and absurdities of dressing up and appearance – experiences in which I feel an affinity with the character of Mouth. In 10-minute live performance, extracted from a longer piece of work recently exhibited in the group show *Chasma* (Beaconsfield Gallery, London, Feb 24), I will talk to an empty chair which speaks back.

<https://research-biennale.rca.ac.uk/projects/the-absurd-art-of-armor-playful-strategies-of-resistance-costumes-of-care-and-decorum-for-the-autoimmune-body>

14.50-15.00 Katrine Skovsgaard: *To voice*

Six Infinity: voicing lived experiences of chronic headaches.

My phd project, *The Headache Chronicles: Sharing Chronic Headaches through a Contemporary Dialogical and Tactile Art Practice*, builds on patient-centred phenomenology and explores expressions of chronic headaches through vision, voice and touch. For the Confabulations event, I will show Six Infinity. This contemporary choir piece activates lived experiences of chronic headaches through lyrics inspired by conversations with professionals working in the fields of medicine, touch, philosophy and art and people with chronic headaches. This piece is a collaboration between composer Rosanna Gunnarsson and myself. <https://www.katrineskovsgaard.net/en/About>

15.00-15.15 Questions

15.15-15.30 Break (tea and coffee)

15.30-15.40 Mijke van der Drift: *To refuse*

In this short presentation, I am laying out the need to refuse autonomy in medical and social settings. Autonomy structures (by law) medical settings and guides the interactions between doctors and patients, and seeks to offer patients the power to accept or refuse treatment. I will make the case that this doesn't work, because it ignores the wider context in which people live and thrive. Refusing the ruse of autonomy might return agency to people needing treatment.

Dr Mijke van der Drift works on ethics and anti-imperial epistemologies, often in the context of transfeminism. Co-authored with Nat Raha, the book *Trans Femme Futures* is coming out with Pluto Press (2024). Mijke's work has been published in various academic journals, edited volumes and non-academic outlets. Dr Mijke van der Drift is Tutor (research) in the School of Communication and co-convenor of the School Wide unit *making Worlds with Others*. <https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/mijke-van-der-drift/>

15.40-15.50 Mel Brimfield: *To listen*

From This World, to That Which is to Come

The presentation will give a brief account of the complex research methodologies informing the development of a series of three large-scale solo exhibitions at Chapter (Cardiff), Tetley (Leeds) and Kelham Island Industrial Museum (Sheffield) between 2020–2022. The title refers to John Bunyan's 1678 parable 'The Pilgrim's Progress', which describes a religious pilgrimage from 'The City of Destruction' to 'The Celestial City'. This tale is reimagined as a loose allegory for a collapse of mental health and the fraught journey to recovery. The project was informed by two years of work, based on a long-term research residency at Bethlem Royal Hospital's National Psychosis Unit and Kings College Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience in 2018/19. Here I collected extensive first-hand personal testament from patients, carers, nursing staff, and leading neuroscientists and clinicians via interviews and workshops, alongside close observation of therapeutic intervention and experimental research. In addition, conversations with independent activists strongly resisting pathologized definitions of neurodiversity fed into the process. The series of works

produced in response begins with an exploration of the frequently alienating effects of mental ill health and its treatment at an individual, familial and societal level, but ends with a timely celebratory paean to the radical potential of collective creative action and kindness. Through the work, I sought directly to unite, mobilise and foreground networks of community groups offering vital support at a time of crisis in the provision of effective mental health services. <https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/mel-brimfield/>

15.50-16.00 Edward Thomasson: *To open*

Security (2023) is a short performance that uses song and spoken word to describe the complexity of being intimate with other people, and the possibilities for navigating them. The work makes reference to the setting of mutual consent agreements common to both therapeutic work and power exchange role play. It looks to these models in order to ask what might be needed for someone to feel able to open up. If vulnerability is central to having open exchanges, what are the conditions that make it possible? Perhaps performance itself might be a useful strategy for public intimacy.

<https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/edward-thomasson/>

16.00-16.15 Questions

16.15-16.25 Jess Potter: *To sound*

Beinn a Cearchail: Mountain Song articulates in moving image and sound a field of cross-disciplinary research which I have termed—in dialogue with indigenous thinkers of interdependent land and human health such as Robin Wall Kimmerer—‘ecologies of care’. An ecology of care, as I understand it, connects ideas of reciprocal healing and therapeutic landscape; it moves across human and more-than-human bodies and worlds, and it is explored in the work I will share: a circular film song born of a circular mountain, informed by the cyclical structures of Gaelic working songs. The songs are shaped by the sounds of water running through glacial rock formations and peat beds, woven with samples from Nan Mackinnon's (b. Barra, Scotland, 1902–1982) songs and stories held in the Tobar an Dulchais archive. They are songs from the Highlands and Islands. They are songs born of a struggle for land rights and for living. They abound with beauty and hope and force. The sounds call us to listen to the land, to remember and learn from Gaelic voices – to preserve and connect with indigenous communities and imagine new interconnected, caring, and sustainable forms of life and living. <https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/jessica-potter/>

16.25-16.35 Minna Pollanen: *To hold*

The hundreds of millions of pieces of space junk orbiting the earth consist mainly of obsolete or malfunctioned remains of man-made communication, surveillance, and war technologies such as satellite and rocket parts. In space, space junk is distant waste, but when it falls back to earth it becomes something else: a relic carrying the marks of an altogether different type of erosion, speed, and time.

In this practice-based research project space junk is both a material metaphor and a central concept. I make tactile objects that take their shape from fallen pieces of debris. Made from off-cuts of industrially processed wood, the sculptures, like space junk, orbit between material, object, and waste. A ruptured fuel tank is about care across the scale, from the individual descent of the component-part to the mass of space junk circulating in 'graveyard orbits'. Through an open invitation to touch and hold (or not) these interpretations of fallen orbital debris I explore what Franklin Ginn, Uli Beisel and Maan Barua describe as unloved others: things we might not think about or want to care for.

What and how do we encounter through an object an artist has named space junk? (Ginn, F. Beisel, U. And Barua, M.; Flourishing with Awkward Creatures: Togetherness, Vulnerability, Killing. In: Environmental Humanities 1 May 2014; 4 (1): 113–123.)

<https://research-biennale.rca.ac.uk/projects/tender-orbits>

16.35-16.45 Questions

16.45-17.00 Health and Care at the RCA thanks x Confabulations

17.00-18.00 Wine reception

18.00-20.30 Optional visit to RCA's graduate public exhibition PV.

Thursday 20th and Friday 21st June, curated by Confabulations

A note about Creative facilitation: Creative facilitation uses arts-based and experimental techniques to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to collaborate and form meaningful connections. The programme for Thursday 20th and Friday 21st June has been devised with the assistance of the Creative Facilitation Unit of The Discovery Research Platform for Medical Humanities, Durham University, where creative facilitation provides the intellectual, ethical and practical foundations for many of the Platform's activities.

Taking advantage of the in-person format and acknowledging the vital necessity of creating active opportunities for constructive conversations and relationship-building, the programme for Thursday 20th and Friday 21st June incorporates four interactive workshop-style sessions, each led by Dr Bentley Crudgington, Creative Facilitator, Durham University.

Thursday 20th opens with an 'ice-breaker' exercise, "Imag(in)ing the Critical Medical Humanities". The middle-part of the day consists of three parallel 'lightning' presentation sessions aimed at sharing the book material, followed by a keynote presentation from Angela Woods and Will Viney (both Durham University). The day will close with a facilitated reflective session.

Friday 20th will be entirely devoted to dialogue across two workshops, the first focused on future possibilities for Art & the Critical Medical Humanities, and the second a collective overview of the book material with a view to mutually shaping the Foreword, Introduction and Afterword.

Thursday 20th June, curated by Confabulations:

09:30 Welcome and Introduction to days two and three.

09:45 Icebreaker exercise: Imag(in)ing Critical Medical Humanities

A facilitated exercise designed to get people talking to each other and establish connections between the RCA-curated day on Wednesday 19th, and the Confabulations curated days of Thursday 20th and Friday 21st.

10:50 Parallel sessions of 'lightning' presentations A1 and B1

NB: 'Lightning' presentations should be no more than five minutes long, and should involve a single PowerPoint Slide. We recognise that this might prove a challenge for contributions that are co-authored! Please use your lightning presentation to identify a challenge, problem or tension that you have faced when writing the text.

A1. LIVED EXPERIENCE (Chair: Fiona Johnstone)

Vanessa Bartlett (University of Melbourne), "Creative collaborations with guts: curating art, science and lived experience with the medical humanities".

Chris Millard (Sheffield University) and Daniel Regan (independent artist, UK; executive director of the Arts & Health Hub), "Making, Communicating and Valuing Lived Experience."

Silvia Casini (University of Aberdeen) and Ilona Sagar (independent artist, UK). "Risk on Risk off": Silvia Casini in Conversation with Ilona Sagar."

Skye Haggerty (University of Alberta) on Ruth Cuthand. Title TBC.

Isabel Davis (Natural History Museum, London) and Anna Burel (independent artist, UK), "Marian Maternity and the Medieval Modern: Anna Burel's Madonna della Misericordia (2022)."

B1. MEDICAL IMAGING (Chair: Imogen Wiltshire)

Ashley Lazevnick (Converse University), "Dissecting 'Mental Images': Revisiting Twentieth-Century Surgical Illustration." [pre-recorded]

Kathleen Pierce (Smith College, Northampton, MA), "Looking Well: Art Historical Interventions for a More Equitable Medicine."

Liz Orton (independent artist, UK) and Fiona Johnstone (Durham University), "Becoming an Image: photography, ownership, language & power in the clinical encounter."

Rebecca Whiteley (Birmingham University) "Engraving the Fetal Subject: William Smellie, A Set of Anatomical Tables (1754).

Arya Thampuram (Durham University), Wangechi Mutu, Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors (2004-5).

12:00 Break (tea and coffee)

12:20 Parallel sessions of 'lightning' presentations A2 and B2

A2. VISUALITIES, KNOWLEDGE AND POWER (Chair: Allison Morehead)

Keren Hammerschlag (Australia National University), Natasha Ruiz-Gómez (University of Essex) and Tania Cleaves (née Woloshyn) (independent), "Global Bodies: Art, Race, Encounters Since 1800".

Christine Slobogin (University of Rochester), Katie Snow (University of Exeter), Laura Cowley (Birkbeck, University of London). "Pathologies, Punchlines, Power: the medicalised body, humour and art".

Anna Jamieson (Birkbeck, University of London), Thomas Laurence, *Mad Girl* (1786).

Anna Arabindan-Kesson (Princeton University) and Gabriella Nelson (Maternity Care Coalition, Philadelphia), "Making Meanings from Medicine: visual histories of medicine, race and reproductive health." [pre-recorded]

Liisa-Rávná Finbog on Carola Grahn. (Title TBC).

B2. RETHINKING ART AND THERAPY (Chair: Fiona Johnstone)

Suzanne Hudson (University of Southern California) "1, 2, 3".

Leah Gipson (School of the Art Institute of Chicago), Shi Yunyuan (Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing) and Imogen Wiltshire (University of Lincoln). "Place and Culture in Art Therapy and Global Health".

Kaira M. Cabañas (The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.), Lygia Clark's *Estrutura viva* (1969). [pre-recorded]

Rose Ruane (University of Glasgow), The Adamson Collection.

13:30 Lunch

14:30 Parallel sessions of 'lightning' presentations A3 and B3

A3. CLINICAL ENCOUNTERS AND CAREGIVERS (Chair: Imogen Wiltshire)

Alison Syme (University of Toronto), "Healthcare Intimacies: Vanessa Bell and Dr Marie Moralt."

Jessica M. Dandona (Minneapolis College of Art and Design), "(Re)producing Reproduction: Training the Hand and the Eye in Obstetrical Education, 1880–1900."

Cera Smith, Simone Leigh's *The Waiting Room* (2016).

Jessica Womack (Princeton University), Charmaine Watkis, *The Return of the Seed Keeper* (2021). [pre-recorded]

Camilla Mørk Røstvik (University of Agder), Lyndsay Mann, *As You Were* (2023).

B3. CARE AND REPAIR (and HORIZONTALITY!) (Chair Allison Morehead)

Gemma Blackshaw (RCA) and Alice Butler (RCA), "Sick Women Correspondents."

Maria Morata and Lorenzo Galgo (independent artists, Madrid), "Manual: broken bodies for broken landscapes."

Suzannah Biernoff (Birkbeck, University of London) on kintsugi. (Title TBC).

Nora Heidorn (independent artist, Berlin), "Being Horizontal".

Monica Ankele Monika, Angela Alves, Céline Kaiser, "Lying In: Bed."

15:40 Break (tea and coffee)

16:00 Keynote: Angela Woods and Will Viney, 'Critical Medical Humanities: 10 years later.'

17:00 Facilitated shared reflections on the day over a glass of wine (finishing by 18.00)

Friday 21st June, curated by Confabulations:

09:45 Welcome

10:00 Facilitated Workshop, Future Entanglements: where next for Art & the Critical Medical Humanities?

Building on the momentum of Confabulations and considering the potential opportunities offered by the newly established Visual and Material Lab at Durham University's Institute for Medical Humanities, this facilitated workshop aims to collectively think through the affordances of art-affiliated disciplines in relation to the critical medical humanities beyond the current book project, and to consider new directions for the emerging field of visual medical humanities.

What future relations and entanglements might be imagined between art practice, art history and critical medical humanities? What new projects might germinate from the connections and conversations enjoyed over the last three days?

What does visual medical humanities mean to you? What are the field's aims and ambitions? Where do we see the field in ten-years' time? Who – and what – is visual medical

humanities *for*, and what should visual medical humanities be doing that it is *not* currently doing?

What do visually-orientated disciplines offer medical humanities more broadly? How can we better articulate the value of our own field's methods to researchers in other disciplines? How – and why - might we work collaboratively with researchers in other disciplines? How can art (broadly understood) deepen our shared knowledge of human health?

12:00 Lunch

13:00 Facilitated Workshop: a collective consideration of the book's Foreword, Introduction and Afterword.

This workshop will facilitate us in collectively considering the material that goes into the book's Foreword (written by Angela Woods), Introduction (written by Fiona Johnstone, Allison Morehead and Imogen Wiltshire) and Afterword (written by Tanya Sheehan). What themes have emerged in relation to the book's contents over the past three days? Has anything surprised you? Does anything strike you as missing, or under-represented? What does the book say about the direction of the field?

14:30 Break (tea and coffee)

14:50 Final reflections and thanks

15:30 Close