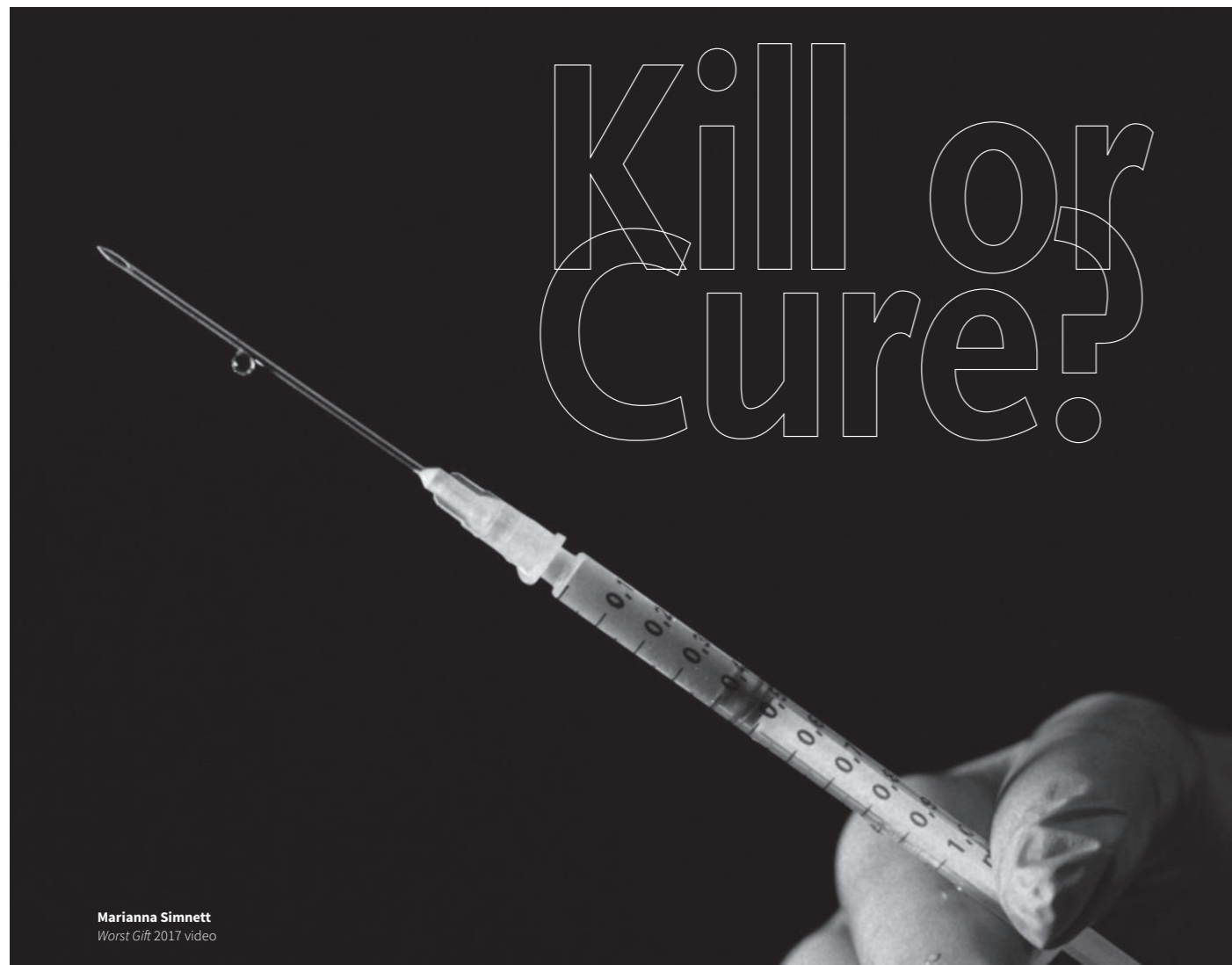


GIULIA SMITH SPECULATES ON THE REASONS FOR THE UPSURGE IN ART ABOUT SICKNESS

Judging by the work of artists such as Jenna Bliss, Lucy Beech and Patrick Staff, is the cure sometimes worse than the disease?



Marianna Simnett
Worst Gift 2017 video

In over a decade of active engagement with the art world, I have never come across so many projects about pharmacology and healthcare as in the past couple of years. I am not talking about gimmicky ‘science-meets-art’ schemes, nor do I mean work produced in the context of art-therapy sessions. No, I am thinking of the institutional art world. An introductory list would include the films of Jenna Bliss (Profile AM405), Lucy Beech, Patrick Staff

and Marianna Simnett; the work of Sidsel Meineche Hansen, Park McArthur, Amalia Ulman and Nina Cristante; and, this year in London alone, public programmes such as ‘Sick Time is Time to Resist’ at Raven Row and ‘The Things that Make You Sick: East London Health Campaigning (1977–1980)’ at the ICA.

The examples I have chosen for this article share a common point of origin in the London art scene, though some of the artists

under consideration have recently relocated to the US. This automatically prompts questions about their stance towards the current NHS crisis in the UK, precipitated by the cuts implemented by the Tories since 2015, and the failed attempt by US President Donald Trump to repeal Obamacare. Why the upsurge of art dealing in medical care if not to comment on this transoceanic assault on its public subsidies?

This is indeed how we should understand



As it turns out, the bone of contention is not so much the privatisation of healthcare as medicine’s historical perpetuation of gender normativity. The artists featured here tend to regard doctors and clinics with Foucauldian suspicion, often choosing to focus on the most manipulative face of the healthcare industry: big pharma.

‘The Things That Make You Sick’. Set in the ICA Reading Room, the display revisited the history of political art made in protest against the first major wave of NHS cuts, which were implemented by Labour in the late 1970s. The focus was on the work of Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, specifically their *Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign*, 1977-78, and *East London Health Project*, 1978-80, two collaborations for which the artists worked closely with dissenting NHS staff and local East End communities. Their plan was as simple as it was ambitious: use art to raise consciousness about the politics of healthcare and mobilise grassroots resistance against the closure of small neighbourhood facilities like Bethnal Green Hospital. They went about it with ‘visual pamphlets’, which sometimes grew into films and exhibitions. Montage was their medium of choice, the black-and-white documentary imagery being strategically intercut by eye-catching graphics in red – the definitive colour of anti-capitalism as well as a clear reference to Soviet Constructivism (and, in some of the most powerful posters on display at the ICA, a play on blood spilled in the name of bookkeeping).

Inevitably, Dunn and Leeson’s militant aesthetic feels dated today, but who is to say that their message is not on point? The issues which preoccupied them at the end of the 1970s are still with us today. They worried about the disproportionate impact of austerity on vulnerable communities – as do we. They condemned a criminally deregulated pharmaceutical market for taking a huge toll on the finances of the NHS and for exploiting the global south for controversial clinical trials – same here. Dunn and Leeson also denounced the gendered stratification of the medical profession, highlighting the patriarchal bias

of its scientific practices. 'WOMEN beware of MANmade medicine' reads one poster about the adverse effects of the contraceptive pill. These debates are by no means resolved. If anything, they have grown to encompass a more intersectional cluster of voices, including LGBTQ+ ones. So how do visual artists deal with these issues today?

As it turns out, the bone of contention is not so much the privatisation of healthcare as medicine's historical perpetuation of gender normativity. The artists featured here tend to regard doctors and clinics with Foucauldian suspicion, often choosing to focus on the most manipulative face of the healthcare industry: big pharma. This is the case with Bliss and Ulman's critique of the oral contraceptive. Similarly, Staff deals with the ills of hormonal therapy in the light of LGBTQ+ debates about the political limitations of these treatments and their long-term health risks, which trans communities are disproportionately affected by. For artists like Simnett, the medicalised body becomes a metaphorical vessel for exploring the social construction of gender through rituals involving body modification and surgery. On a formal level, the trend today is towards fictionalised and introspective narratives – essay films, docudramas and abstract montages – as opposed to the documentary mode that in the past has often characterised the representation of public health.

Poison the Cure, 2017, the latest essay film by Bliss, might be a good place to start. It was recently premiered at '56 Artillery Lane' at Raven Row, an exhibition that exposed the psychological intricacies of the domestic sphere through the prism of feminist art, both historical and contemporary. The piece focuses on drugs as an instrument of domestication, a dynamic that Bliss had already explored in *History of Lincoln Detox, 1970-1979*, 2016-, a film about the politics of treating heroin addiction in the Bronx at the height of the Black Power movement

and Puerto Rican anti-imperialist struggles (AM405). *Poison the Cure* leaps across a longer historical period in a similar effort to expose the intertwinement of drug consumption, public health and social economics.

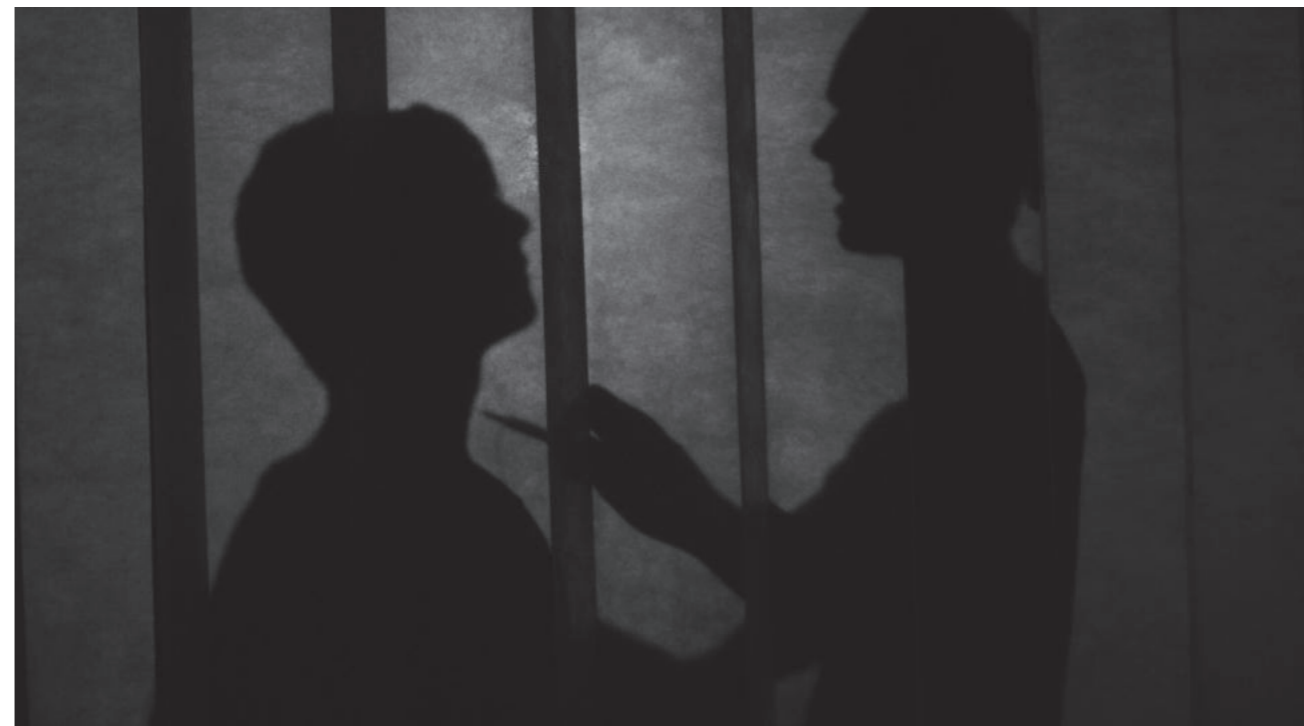
The film opens with a tea party set in 1876. The table is shot from above, much like a surgical scene. It is all white lace and exquisite crockery, with stacks of Turkish delight and marzipan fruit interspersed with the reaching arms of four fair-skinned ladies (we never see their faces). From being cheerful and frisky, their hands quickly go limp following a round of morphine injections. The drug, the voice-over explains, was liberally administered as a cure for neuralgia, a condition commonly ascribed to 'overeducated' wives whose intellectual ambitions went against the monotonous reality of Victorian domestic life.

Bliss's claustrophobic portrait of *fin-de-siècle* domesticity finds its dialectical flipside in the masculine experience of the colonial voyage, represented in the film by footage of ocean waves floating behind the outlines of Walter Crane's *Imperial Federation: Map Showing the Extent of the British Empire in 1886*. In a dreamlike sequence, we hear of opium-addicted doctors travelling the world in search of new markets for stupefying substances. As the narrative goes on, a clear pattern begins to emerge linking the fortunes of patriarchal imperialism with the establishment of pharmacological fads suited to maintaining the balance of social power in place.

The film ends in a deliberately artificial rendition of 1950s Río Piedras, a Puerto Rican town that has come to be known for hosting the first human trial for the contraceptive

Patrick Staff
Weed Killer 2017
video

Jenna Bliss
Poison the Cure 2017
video



Marianna Simnett
Worst Gift 2017
video

pill. The experiment was the lifework of two Boston scientists, John Rock and Gregory Pincus. The drug was manufactured by the US company GD Searle and each pill contained three times more progesterone than the average pill does today, which led to some of the participants experiencing major side-effects. Later, Rock and Pincus would be accused of exploiting the bodies of impoverished brown women for the benefit of less disposable (at least in the eyes of racialised capitalists) communities – Río Piedras becoming shorthand for the uneven geopolitics of pharmacological development. *Poison the Cure* sides with this line of criticism, even though Bliss only alludes to the facts of the original trial, instead working in the register of fiction and counter-history.

In a final leap of fantasy, one of the patients conspires with a dissident nurse to poison the staff of the pharmaceutical company behind the trial (with the caveat that the firm featured in the film is not Searle but Pfizer, one of the biggest drug manufacturers in the UK today). The sequence closes with a dramatic shot of people in white coats lying unconscious on the floor. Rather than a place of healing, the clinic is presented throughout as a site of struggle – an institution to be reformed, not defended.

Since its popularisation in the 1960s, the contraceptive pill has been at the centre of the feminist critique of 'MANmade medicine'. While a great many saw the introduction of female-regulated birth-control as a step towards fuller emancipation, others criticised it as an illusory gain that left the patriarchal structure of society more or less intact. Now that undesired pregnancies are no longer a mass phenomenon in the affluent West, the backlash has grown stronger. Proof of this lies in the proliferation of 'pill-hating' websites dedicated to sharing horror stories about the pill's

adverse effects (which are many and surprisingly under-researched). Bearing this in mind, it should come as no surprise that the oral contraceptive repeatedly crops up in contemporary art that aligns itself with the history of the Women's Movement, especially when the art in question draws heavily on online trends. A case in point is Ulman's 2014 solo show at Evelyn Yard, 'The Destruction of Experience', an immersive commentary on the role that synthetic hormones and cosmetic surgery play in standardising the appearance, and indeed the biological life cycle, of western women.

Ulman is widely known as a pioneer of selfie-art that deals with female objectification. Some appreciate the craftiness of her internet-based parodies, while others have criticised them for being inauthentic and normative (AM384, 387). Few have taken the time to review the work she has made for display offline. For 'The Destruction of Experience', Ulman transformed Evelyn Yard into an uncanny blend of a sexual-health clinic, a corporate lounge and a baby-shower altar – all on a pharmaceutical spectrum of pale blues and greens. Among the displays were exquisitely designed calendars with somewhat paternalistic tips about the female reproductive apparatus (February says, 'Find out what's normal for a vagina, including discharge, size, colour and texture' before sharing a link to an NHS website). Each month featured soft drawings inspired by today's medical manuals, yet thoroughly decorated with stick-on rhinestones and pearls (Ulman is openly interested in 'sugar-coating' as both a form of visual seduction and a brainwashing technique). There were also pillows emblazoned with daisy chains in the form of swastikas and a heart-shaped picture frame with a portrait of Marijn Dekkers, then the CEO of Bayer AG, a firm that Ulman selected because it manufactures Yaz, one of the most common contraceptives on the market.

The implication is that the medical route out of gender dysphoria comes with its own share of toxicity. Cure and poison appear once again caught in a vicious circle.

Overall, the show conjured a dark, if humorous, conflation of big pharma and intimate family rituals.

If Bliss chose to present the pill as the end-product of de facto colonial exploitation, for Ulman the point was to highlight a widely normalised practice of biopolitical self-management. Neither focused on the day-to-day benefits of synthetic hormones. This sets their work apart from that of LGBTQ+ artists and activists who have made a point of offering a straight-faced account of their experiences with hormone therapy as a step towards gender reassignment surgery. A good example is *Trans: A Memoir*, 2015, by writer and journalist Juliet Jacques. The book is careful to portray the NHS as a life-saving service, albeit an imperfect one. As the author explains, the need for sober and strictly fact-based chronicles comes as a reaction to the sensationalism that colours the representation of transgender people in mainstream media. By this logic, the documentary form can seem a political necessity, and fiction a privilege – though Jacques is the first to vent frustration at this axiom. It is telling that recently she opted for a more abstract mode of expression in *Approach/Withdrawal*, 2017, an experimental short on the theme of queer love and biomedical science made for ‘Queering Love, Queering Hormones’, a project initiated by No.w.here (in critical response to the BFI’s programme of summer screenings on the theme of ‘Love’) that Jacques co-directed with Ker Wallwork. I say ‘telling’ in the sense that visual art – a field in which the critique of the documentary is a well-established tradition – allows for an approach that is more imaginative but also, unfortunately, more hermetic.

A similar tension between documentary and fiction plays out in Staff’s *Weed Killer*, 2016, (AM407). The script draws heavily on *The Summer of Her Baldness*, 2004, Catherine Lord’s autobiographical account of her experience with breast cancer. This too is a subject that feminist artists have historically drawn attention to, as in the late work of Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke for example. In Staff’s film, an actress performs an outstanding monologue in which Lord’s descriptions of the devastating effects of chemotherapy are interlaced with broader reflections about the stigmatisation of the lesbian body in everyday life. Oneiric sequences shot with a thermal camera intercut the performance, giving the whole narrative an allusive, rather than strictly factual tone. Gradually, Lord’s gruelling encounter with medicine expands into a broader political engagement. When Lord presents community care – rather than healthcare – as a lifesaving force, the implication is that it is a vital support for those battling with cancer as much as it is for LGBTQ+ individuals at large. And when the treatment prescribed by the oncologist is compared with ‘weed killer’, the implication is that the medical route out of gender dysphoria comes with its own share of toxicity (key here is the debate around the damaging side-effects of synthetic hormones, some of which are known to be carcinogenic). Cure and poison appear once again caught in a vicious circle.

A direct reference for the artists featured here is Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, 2008 (English translation, 2013). Aside from documenting the beginnings of Preciado’s transition, the book – not a memoir, the author insists programmatically – is a highly performative account of the effects of synthetic hormones, with Testogel

as the main act. Preciado borrows Foucault’s notion of ‘somato-politics’ to argue that subjectivity and sexuality are mass regulated by the pharmacological industry, an industry deemed ‘pornographic’ in both the literal and metaphorical sense. The main historical co-ordinate is the early Cold War period, when unprecedented investments in lab research led to quantum leaps in sexological and pornographic technologies, historically a testbed for the tech industry at large – think the Pincus-Rock trial and early attempts at gender reassignment surgery alongside the setting-up of first Playboy Mansion. Bottom line, in the era of ‘pharmaco-capitalism’, the notion of biological sex is less tenable than ever.

A fantastical take on this philosophical universe is again to be found in the art films of Simnett, who was recently shortlisted for the 2017 Jarman Film Award. Equal parts medical sci-fi, surreal fairy tale and musical fantasy-comedy, her scripts always present an eccentric yet immediately convincing amalgam of narrative conventions. One of her most recent, *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016, consists of a single slowed-down sequence of a surgeon injecting Simnett’s throat with Botox in order to lower her voice to a masculine pitch. The doctor was specifically chosen for his experience with treating transgender patients, though he is not the main focus. For what feels like an eternity, we follow the tip of the needle, in close-up, poking back and forth in search of the right spot between Simnett’s vocal cords. The effect is unnerving, to say the least.

There is a canon for Simnett’s brand of abjectly introspective medical fiction, and it has little to do with the history of public healthcare, though it is dependent on its services (think, for example, of Dennis Potter’s serial drama *The Singing Detective* from 1986). In this tradition, the hospital is merely the stage for a much deeper psychological narrative that pivots on the body as a symptom of internalised social relations. For her latest film *Worst Gift*, 2017 (Reviews AM410), Simnett rented out a whole section of Ealing Hospital, an NHS facility that evidently finds itself in the position of having to supplement its budget by capitalising on its facilities. *Worst Gift* is not about the NHS or its current difficulties, however; like the rest of Simnett’s films, its focus is on metamorphosis, surgical body modification and the unstable nature of sexual identity.

To return to the questions with which I opened this article, it would seem that the most pressing issue for many artists with an interest in the politics of healthcare is not the precarious future of the modern hospital. Rather, all the works I have considered make a point of discrediting the medical establishment by highlighting the discipline’s historical entanglement with sexual oppression. The integrity of the biological subject is thoroughly undermined in the process: addiction, contamination, illness, surgery, dysphoria and psychosomatic disorders characterise the physiology throughout this article. By and large, the mode of expression is introspective and metaphorical, a withdrawal that in some cases reveals something troubling, if unsurprising, about art’s disaffection from mainstream politics. ■

GIULIA SMITH is an art historian based in London.