L. Feldman, Max, *On Sickness and Self-Transcendence: "~~Kingdom~~ of the Ill" at Museion, Bolzano, Mousse Magazine*, 23 January 2023

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# On Sickness and Self-Transcendence: ~~Kingdom~~ of the Ill" at Museion, Bolzano by Max L. Feldman

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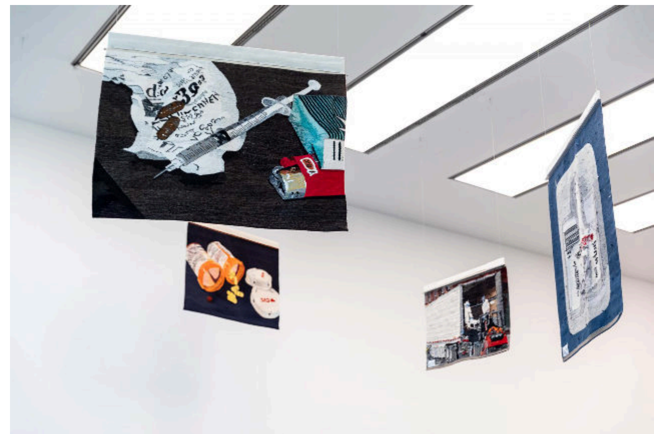
The COVID-19 pandemic is our one truly shared global trauma of recent decades. Certainly, we have faced AIDS, 9/11, the war on terror, a global financial meltdown—crises that affected millions, that were global media events. But COVID-19 scared us because actual death was everywhere, stalking us, changing how we lived and behaved. COVID-19, furthermore, was unique in that nearly everyone, everywhere in the world—despite vast inequalities defined by class, gender, place, and race shaped by global financial capitalism—faced the same crisis together in real time. And we did so truly collectively. We mourned together for those who perished, because we all know someone who died. We worried for those who fell ill, knowing the virus would eventually come for us all.



Erin M. Riley, Kingdom of the Ill installation view at MUSEION, Bolzano, 2022. Photo: Luca Guadagnini

And we cannot forget that the air we all breathed and the nearness and touch of others was now under political control. We all have our personal opinions about whether lockdowns were sensible policies to pursue, but we can probably all agree on one thing: the lockdowns were the first time in recent history that political power was so thoroughly exercised, disciplining the movements of so many individual bodies in private while at the same time managing entire populations' public lives with restrictions and threats. The scientific evidence backing it all up made clear to rational people that we were facing disaster. We understood that at least some of this use of power was justified so as to keep us well, to make sure we stayed alive.

*~~Kingdom~~ of the Ill,* an exhibition about sickness, health, and medical institutions, takes stock of this situation, which will take some time to process. Part of a collective recovery effort, it is the second exhibition in Museion's three-part series "Techno Humanities," reflecting on the pandemic's global impact. The first installment, *Techno*, looked at how techno music offers a version of liberation—how conditions under which techno events are organized (by committees using democratic processes) and the way we respond to the music on the dance floor (with a feeling of togetherness that is otherwise mostly absent in highly individualistic societies) open up new insights about how to achieve radical social change. *~~Kingdom~~ of the Ill* considers the politics of illness. It recasts ill health not as a limit on our personalities, but as something that provides insight into our survival as individual and social beings under present conditions. It reflects on who and what we can be, and how we relate to one another based on care and empathetic solidarity, reimagining what it means to live a truly democratic life. Several of the featured artists, including Brothers Sick (Ezra and Noah Benus), Nan Goldin, Carolyn Lazard, Lauryn Youden, and Sharona Franklin, identify as chronically ill, giving the exhibition not only a personal dimension, but an activist one.

Curators Sara Cluggish and Pavel S. Pyś developed the exhibition concept by thinking about Susan Sontag's distinction between the "kingdom of the well" and the "kingdom of the sick" in Illness as Metaphor (1978). Sontag, undergoing treatment for cancer at the time of that writing, asserted that each of us has dual citizenship to these realms: we all hold two passports, and must accept that we will cross the treacherous border between them at some point. Cluggish and Pyś challenge Sontag's fundamental concept of two territories. Though it's a simple and perhaps limited gesture—symbolically dressing our wounds, knowing they can probably never fully heal—crossing out the word "kingdom" in the title allows them to make two moves. First, they criticize "wellness" as a pseudoscientific idea that commodifies the rational goal of living a good, healthy life, putting it forever out of reach because there's always a new product to buy or method to

pursue to make us our best selves. The second move is to cast the unhealthy polity not as a monarchy organized by a crude hierarchy of those who are more or less worthy of care or treatment, but as a democracy that is open to all.

That comes, however, with an unnerving clinical feel, which carries through both architect Diogo Passarinho's exhibition design, which gives all four floors of the museum space the emotional texture of a medical facility, and the works themselves. We pass through rooms shrouded in a different kind of silence than we usually feel in a museum. We tread carefully, looking not just with humble respect, but with the hush that is required during hospital visiting hours. As we enter, for example, we pass through the exhibition's "main gates": three transparent cuboids containing almost-glowing green material made to resemble the entrance to a hospital, or a checkpoint that decides—perhaps by mysterious technological methods—who can come and go as they please and who must be confined for their own good.

Some works openly deal with illness or death. On the ground floor, **Erin M. Riley**'s *Oraquick* (2018) tapestry depicts two vials of at-home HIV tests, while *Narcan in Hell* 2 (2021) shows a bottle of the prescription medicine used to treat opioid overdoses, a well-documented social crisis in the United States. Riley's most unsettling piece, however, is *Cold Storag*e (2021), which depicts bodies being loaded into refrigerated trucks by figures in hazmat suits as if they were just so much biological waste, contaminated meat. Indeed, in New York from April 2020 onwards, between 500 and 800 bodies were stored in eighty-five such vehicles sent by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). They served as makeshift morgues outside hospitals, which could not cope with the surge. The precise number is not easily found, and those figures are based on estimates by the medical examiner's office compiled by non-profit news website The City and Columbia University's Stabile Center for Investigative Reporting.

Goldin's harrowing twenty-four-minute slideshow *Memory Lost* (2019–21) shows snapshots of the artist's life when she was addicted to the prescription opioid OxyContin, complemented by drawings, including *Unknown Species, Berlin, August 2013* (2013), *The Crowd Descends, Berlin, September 2015* (2015), and *The Cyclops, Berlin/New York, September 201*6 (2016), that provide an almost diaristic account of this time in her life. Golden subsequently cofounded the collective PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) with artists, activists, and other people facing struggles with addiction and its consequences. The present show includes banners the group displayed at the Sackler Wing at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018 to protest how the Sackler family, whose company Purdue Pharma aggressively marketed OxyContin to an unknowing public and doctors who violated some basic principles of medical ethics by encouraging their patients to take the drug when it wasn't needed, attempted to launder their reputation by supporting art. Four such banners, reading "400,000 dead," "Shame on Sackler," "200 dead each day," and "Take down their name," in black block capitals on a red background, feature in a corridor-like setting.

In some ways, Goldin's work couldn't be more different in tone from what we see on the top floor, which features various takes on new-age alternative medicine. This includes Lauryn Youden's *From the Great Above She Opened Her Ear to the Great Below* (2020) and *To Offer You Something, to Bring Relief* (2020), two wall-mounted altars containing herbs, medicine, sacred objects, dried flowers, and books (from healing guides to tomes on botany, feminist theory, and poetry). The makeshift shrines feel intimate, like a bedroom with its secrets and rituals, or a common but still private place like a living room.

**Riley**'s tapestries are like photographs. They show us her personal observations of experiences that are available to many others. In the case of *Cold Storage*, we take another look at something we all saw too much of when the pandemic was at its worst: the grim motivation behind authorities' often callous and strict, sometimes authoritarian rules, and seeming scant regard for how they would influence our emotional lives or mental health. Youden's altars, for their part, fit into the tradition of self-portraiture, showing how people can take responsibility for their own comfort and well-being even if the means aren't sanctioned by, or cannot be met by, the medical establishment. Goldin's work lands somewhere in between, showing a different side of the breakdown of public trust in medicine, and a different kind of personal response to it. All the works show distinctive, but equally valid, approaches to the problem of how to make big, global shifts feel personal and make the self-expression of those in pain available to all. They share a sense that medical matters reveal where our ideas of who we are personally and collectively begin and end—a theme that the curators hint at in their catalogue essay without exploring fully.

The wellness industry doesn't just commodify the basic human need to be healthy. It also transforms the art and science of medicine, in which there ought to be a direct, personal relationship between doctor and patient, into an emotionally remote service to be produced, exchanged, and accessed by consumer-clients, which in turn makes wellness into, as the curators rightly put it, an "impossible goal."1 In his foreword to the catalogue, Museion director Bart van der Heide notes that the curators want to "break down the division between . . . the declaration of being healthy against the self-image of not being ill."2 Perhaps he means there is a difference between simply affirming that you are well as a kind of positive status symbol versus defining yourself in terms of not being like those others who suffer so wretchedly. This is a partial inversion of Sontag's description of illness as "a kind of interior décor of the body,"3 which is not only a style choice, but a way of turning ourselves into an image and managing how we appear to others—a typically modern

thing to do. It is, however, this act of thinking beyond how things are or the way we take ourselves to be that is so important for understanding the stakes of this exhibition.

This derives from another idea in Sontag, namely the differences in cultural myths associated with tuberculosis versus cancer. Suffering and dying from TB was, at least in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, considered glamorous, romantic. Writers characterized victims as exalted figures, enjoying dizzy heights of understanding the human condition, while cancer patients were cast as "robbed of all capacities of self-transcendence."4 Sontag was not referring to the possibility of having a mystical experience of a realm beyond everyday understanding, but rather making a point about how we express our inner abilities to create things, to define ourselves, and to make our mark on the world. This is vital for being human, and is significant here, since works by Brothers Sick, Ian Law, Lynn Hershman Leeson, and P. Staff all deal with how the external conditions imposed on us in industrially organized, market-driven societies—whether in a medical institution or some other type—shape our ideas about self-transcendence and the possibility to imagine how we and the societies we live in could be otherwise. This begins downstairs with a troubling, haunting image.

*for the world eternal* (2022) by Brothers Sick shows two outstretched arms side by side. The arm on the left is wrapped with a tefillah—a leather strap tied to a black leather box used by religiously observant Jews in their morning prayers. The arm on the right is wrapped in a clear plastic cord used for the intravenous administration of medicine. Both arms reach out toward a black shape in a petitionary gesture. Seen as one image unit, we see four hands (two identical images in the formation are upside down) reaching toward a triangle, with the Hebrew words *l'olam va'ed* (forever and ever) at the top and the bottom of the image. There is certainly room to perceive a reference to the variously colored triangles the Nazis forced certain concentration camp victims to wear. It also summons to mind the pink triangles worn as part of the "Silence = Death" project at the height of the AIDS crisis. Yet the triangle's morbid divinity may also refer to the unnamable, unknowable creator of all things, the God whose name cannot even be written in traditional Judaism, whose presence is reimagined in Christian and Islamic theology, whose existence is conceptualized and debated by the "scholastic" movement in Medieval philosophy. This is a figure who can be thought but never grasped, described only in terms of what it is not, whose true name we may perhaps only know when we are at our weakest or on the verge of death. This image is repeated over and over again across an entire wall, situating *for the world eternal* in the tradition of Andy Warhol's silk prints and soup cans, or more mundanely invoking poster-covered walls found in cities all over the world. If this last is true, then it only emphasizes how just one vision of the infinite is available to us today: the empty promise of endless economic growth and accumulation in which real living bodies that get can get sick and die are seen as merely disposable. This is a qualified kind of transcendence. We face the infinite but are forced to deal with systems that elude us, organizing our lives from above, beyond our ability to do anything about them. This problem also appears in works by Law, Staff, Mattia Marzorati, and Hershman Leeson.

Of Law's two works in the show, *The wait is ove*r (2015) and T*here was a body, I was there, was a body* (2015), the former speaks to this transcendence. It consists of the cushioned backs of chairs marked with the silhouettes of flowers typically found in hospital waiting rooms. The chair backs are painful reminders of spaces of limbo where we wait to find out if those we love will recover. The spectral traces of flowers also suggest the tokens we give to hospital patients in the hopes of imparting cheer. They also (however obliquely) suggest the cruelty of nature, a force that transcends us, since flowers are grown, cultivated, and packaged using the same industrial techniques applied in health care systems.

This idea appears again in Staff's *Acid Rain for Museion* (2022), a system of metal pipes suspended from the museum's ceilings that periodically drip an acidic liquid into steel drum barrels, which will eventually erode. Though acid rain is by now a dated environmental issue, it certainly speaks to a wider cultural anxiety about industrial processes that affect everyone while being beyond the control of any one individual. Marzorati also tackles this problem in *The Land of Holes (LA TERRA DEI BUCHI)* (2019–ongoing), a series of photo prints and lightboxes about the widespread health issues caused by pollution in the Italian city of Brescia. So does Hershman Leeson, whose *Twisted Gravity* (2021) is a series of silhouettes of the human body rendered in LED lights in which the brightness of the panels shows how much plastic-contaminated water the individual figure has ingested. As with the contrast between Riley, Goldin, and Louden, the pieces by Law, Staff, Marzorati, and Leeson show us how the fragile human body is made not only ill, but unfree, by processes over which we cannot but should have a say.

COVID-19 did not come with some moral message we can all learn from. But if we learned anything, perhaps it's to accept our vulnerability. We are all bodily creatures who are exposed to things that take place outside of us—how we are thought about or treated by other people, and how impersonal social forces affect us without our say. We cannot take our health, our very biological existence, for granted. We can all be destroyed by invisible viral and bacterial battalions. If the young and fit and strong, committed to their long morning runs, their sweat-drenched yoga classes, their big lifts, can be betrayed by their own lungs or struck down with fatigue, then anyone can, for no one is immortal. Faced with COVID-19, health care systems buckled. Some haven't recovered. Nor have some people. Our vulnerability is also a political condition. Accepting this gives us new, democratic ways to relate to each other. It's fuel for social critique.

One specific example is health policy and how we think about our shared lives together, the very substance of politics. There has been much talk of how the pandemic's destructiveness expressed wider inequalities of class, race, and place (the most egregious expression of which is probably the neocolonial protectionism that guided vaccine provision and the intellectual property associated with it). The media played a significant role here, framing how we decided who is worthy of surviving and guiding how we distributed our empathy accordingly. We all saw how in the United Kingdom, people came out of their houses every Thursday evening to clap for the nurses and other care workers who risked their lives for those they looked after, even though the government did not think they deserved wages they could live on.

There is, however, another problem specific to illness itself that applies whether we're talking about diagnosis and treatment or a wider sense of how we treat others. Indeed, large sections of the population have experienced chronic health problems that are imperfectly understood by medical professionals and institutions. Not all illnesses and symptoms have visible markers that allow easy diagnosis, and this is now taken far more seriously, which has implications for those with chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, Lyme disease, and more. Conditions once dismissed as imaginary, as psychosomatic, or as the sufferer's attempt to attract attention or sympathy are far more readily acknowledged with the advent of long COVID. Finally there is justice being done here.

Although Cluggish and Pyś's criticisms of wellness could use further extending, *~~Kingdom~~ of the Ill* is a productive gesture toward transforming how we think about health and ill health under present social conditions. It not only suggests that we can imagine ourselves beyond sharp distinctions between health and sickness, but opens up a kind of thinking that may be required to recover from the various kinds of discipline we were subjected to during the pandemic (testing, masks, social distancing) and the wider regulation and calculation of people's value based on their health status. It provides new space for thinking about some problems even as it leaves others unaddressed, in particular whether we should just passively acknowledge our vulnerability or seek more concrete political answers. Even if we cannot mount a full resistance to the impersonal systems that determine how we live, *~~Kingdom~~ of the Ill* asserts that we can at least protest, and think ourselves anew in the name of a truly human self-transcendence.