

Pharmakon



Lucy Beech's new film Pharmakon (2016) explores health anxiety and self diagnosis in an era of mass communication. The film engages with marginal communities that seek support via online networks. 'The Healing Grapevine' provides care and conversely intensifies it's users' symptoms. Here, connectivity is poison and cure. These support groups are stereotyped as women who collaborate in their sickness through a shared discourse.

Diagnosis similarly involves a collaborative exchange between clinician and patient. Beech invited writers Alice Hattrick and Naomi Pearce to correspond via email about the film, in order to mirror this dynamic, as well as the structure of these online networks. They were given a set timeframe of two weeks in which to write and edit the correspondence. This text continues their ongoing project Under the Influence, the first instalment of which was produced in association with Women's Art Library, London in November 2015.

On 5 June 2016 at 11:33 Naomi Pearce wrote:

Dear A,

Lucy was worried this complex ecology she'd been nurturing might stop functioning – turn toxic.

Documentary meets re-enactment becomes fiction. Whatever this film is, it feels invasive. A series of interrogations, repeated voluntary and involuntary acts that breach borders – hands learn to frisk, doctors run tests, a woman describes unknown fibres breaking through her skin.

... So again, we are writing to each other about women under the influence.

FB (Female Bouncer) is our protagonist and the face we look at the most. Christa manages 'The Healing Grapevine', a support group cum online quackery offering natural remedies for those suffering from 'unknown infestations'.

Lucy gave Christa a name and with it agency.

She manages pain into product – doing emotional labour all the time – tapping into her own traumatic experiences as resource and securing customers through identification: "I know many of u have doubted yourselves, as I did." Christa won't give u a cure but she will give u access to another way of surviving: community.

Have you seen [The Passion of Joan of Arc](#)? FB displays the same suffering look depicted on Renée Falconetti's face. See the way her scalped head tilts back, jaw gesturing to the left, eyes searching, transfigured. Rumor has it [The Passion's...](#) director was a sadist, inflicting pain in order to capture it. More sad female biography: Falconetti suffered from mental illness throughout her life, eventually committing suicide in 1946.

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It's a silent film, Falconetti has no words. And yet diagnosis relies upon our ability to give appropriate narratives to the body, to find the right words.

Unlike disease – which doctors tell us we 'have' – illness is a feeling, something inward, only accessible to the patient, an 'underworld of experience'.

I've been looking back through our old emails, not the good ones, the ones from after we spent those nights together. Something is clearly misfiring. It's as if all that physical closeness short-circuited our discourse, we stopped encountering one another in ways that we could understand. Maybe this new found bodily knowledge broke our brains.

Last week we crushed so hard on Maggie Nelson. Eating dough sticks and drinking white wine, your words ran in me. I took this transfusion. On the tube home writing notes on my phone, revived and nourished, high from the encounter of our thoughts. Sometimes when we talk its physical – concepts become shapes moving in space, words wrestle into arguments, our minds lock together. An alchemy that gives off heat.

Love always,

Nx

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On 6 June 2016 at 14:21 Alice Hattrick wrote:

N,

I've been in bed all day. Unclean hair unclean skin. Under my arms sticking to themselves. A bad smell coming from the rotting tulips she gave him for his birthday. Storm coming. The tightness in my chest making me aware of my body. Just like perfume makes me aware of the air surrounding it and inside it, air in its mixed and threatening form mixing up inside me, contaminated air. Toxic.

I thought about my Mum when I read that essay Lucy sent us:

you will find it institutionally, in the form of welfare disputes or dismissals from employment; interpersonally in the breakdown of trust and respect in a marriage; psychologically in the self-doubt and depression of an ill person who lacks an approved way of deciphering the way they feel in their body.

(failed marriage followed by endless series of failed relationships, failed / late education, signed off work, passed on 'illness' to her daughter, probably about to be fired for being ill, etc. etc.)

She thinks sick, lives a sick life.

THE PRESENTATION SCENE: I remember mum and I went to one about this magical new form of therapy for M.E. when I was a teenager at the Quaker meeting house in Brighton. It was about tailored forms of therapy, but it was all a secret so no one could just do it themselves. It was presented by people in 'recovery', who had got better enough to stand up and persuade people it could work for them too. Anyone else would be untrustworthy, right? As far as we could tell it was basically CBT with stuff like graded exercise thrown in (before CBT was prescribed by the NHS, if you can wait long enough). Mum and I were skeptical. I think we only went to call it out as bullshit. Mark ourselves out as different from all the crazies on forums all day and not leaving the house and sending hate mail to anyone who said M.E. wasn't a real illness. We were not the only mother/daughter couples at the Quaker meeting house that day (the family home as site of contagion). We were alone together. She takes her to-do lists with her to her (subsidised) therapist she sees now. Signed off work. New drugs. Don't act agitated.

No one trusts doctors, but this mistrust is reflected back onto the patient. They start to distrust themselves. They lose words. FB has a good face.

Her inputs: mites, videos online, special water...
No outputs (pain is language destroying).

A xx

On 6 June 2016 at 22:33 Naomi Pearce wrote:

A,

What makes a sick life? A lifestyle, a diagnosis, a frame of mind? Bad luck or the influence of 'bad people'? With my arthritis – which has always just been there – distinctions have never been made. Health is abstract when pain is an everyday nuisance rather than total debilitation. It is always about managing and I don't mean 'just about managing', I mean more a case of organising, like a to-do list: 'take painkillers, don't sit still too long, exercise etc.'

What if, when faced with the feminine body, the cis body or maybe (fuck it) just 'woman' in all its recorded glory: the books you read about periods, the paintings in museums, Irigaray, Cixous, Caitlyn and Queen B, the boys who wrote you poetry about your curves or your eyes, the girls who stopped eating at school, the empty space below your stomach that one day everyone assures you you will want to fill – in the aftermath of all these narratives and noise are our bodies not the most alien place to be?

You drew a heart on your copy of The Argonauts next to the line: *They seemed to make a fetish of the unsaid, rather than simply letting it be contained in the sayable*

Is this what Lucy's film does? FB's disembodiments – her physical out-of-jointness – destroy her language? I think I do the opposite, writing to articulate sensations – a fumbling around to give form to feeling, if only that I might know it better, feel it stronger.



This film has many containers and they slot into each other like tupperware. The glass house hosts all: healing plants, volunteer gardeners, yogi's and 'The Healing Grapevine' meetings.

The smallest of non movements betrays FB's relaxedness: a quick crick of her neck on the door of the club, she's struggling to contain what's going on inside.

There's a scene in the glasshouse where FB turns away from the stretching yoga bodies, she rejects this kind of embodiment. She attempts to understand her physicality – to meet it as Acker says in her writing on bodybuilding – through the distancing meditation of her iphone. Earphones go in, hands cup the screen, FB becomes immersed within a community who forgo presence to encounter one another online: "The fibers have made a home in her face"

Christa by contrast is poised throughout. As she prepares to film a vlog post she asks her volunteers to fuss over her body, check her hair, her makeup. All the surface stuff.

Women find safety in numbers.

The final scene: FB gulping down energy medicine in the form of branded bottled water. Communities provide containers. Replace the 'i' in illness with 'we' and get wellness. Influence – as you know – is such a messy and unrestricted process, like the way germs spread. 'The Healing Grapevine' enables women to collaborate in their sickness through a shared discourse, this 'we' gives a special kind of access: permission for total introspection.

This form of collective care seems incredibly nourishing. Is it the exchanging of money or its delusional foundations that make it toxic?

Lucy considered opening the film with an abortion. What could demonstrate bodily alienation more clearly than a woman rejecting her 'nature'? Brain overriding, no home here.

Instead we have the beautiful looking word Pharmakon.
It's stamped across the lush and vital green of the opening scene.

The pharmakon is at once what enables care to be taken and that of which care must be taken. Simply: a poison and a cure. Its power is curative to the immeasurable extent that it is also destructive.

Love always,
Nxxx

On 7 June 2016 at 14:21 Alice Hattrick wrote:

N,

Lucy's film was going to start with an abortion, well so did my 2016.

I took the test an hour before people came over for dinner for NYE. I painted a beautiful writer's fingernails gold, had feelings in what felt like a different body (medicated, pregnant). Mouth shut praying NO ONE ASK ME ANYTHING ABOUT ME. Later his friend told me not to fuck up again and I walked off before I could say anything back. Don't worry, I don't want to keep it.

I looked at the scan of it even though you're not supposed to. I liked the drama of the record. I even liked going to first appointment. It felt nice, to be cared for, and about. Do you have any questions? etc. Later, less so. There was lot of pain for such a tiny thing. But you've read that text already.

Now I have to re-write a book proposal (again) to make it more about psychosomatic illness and perfume, or, even, just about my mother. I'm thinking about good / bad objects, projection / introjection, to feeling unreal, to being / not being good enough, to the binaries contained by 'pharmakon' (and Pharmakon).

Have decided to write quickly as you can probably tell (you think too much for the both of us). Will write more about 'thinking sick' next time.

Love always

A

On 7 June 2016 at 21:17 Naomi Pearce wrote:

A,

I so wanted you to have a baby even though it didn't make sense.

Maggie writes that even before we can speak 'our mothers police our mouths'. It's this care that instils in us the conviction to continue living. Back in January, it was hard enough convincing yourself.

I'm still on the pharmakon because (if it's ok) I want to keep talking about having or not having babies.

Lucy tells me to read Bernard Stiegler: 'He's written a lot about it'. In What Makes Life Worth Living Stiegler opens with a passage about Donald Winnicott, apparently 'the transitional object' is the first pharmakon.

The transitional object is a teddy bear or a blanket, something that allows the child to split from the mother and safely enter the world. Beneath this piece of cloth holds something that is neither an exterior space, nor simply internal to either the mother or child. It's the border to both:

"The transitional object is the point of departure for the formation of a healthy psychic apparatus, and yet [...] dependence becomes harmful, that is, destructive of autonomy and trust."



The care that the mother takes of her child necessarily includes protecting them from this object: eventually she will have to teach them to let their blanket go.

Maggie describes her love affair with her infant son: 'A boyant eros, an eros without teleology.' This purposeless love writes alternative narratives on the body, it isn't exactly yours anymore.

In her book On Immunity: An Inoculation Eula Biss writes: 'My son's birth brought with it an exaggerated sense of both my own power and my own powerlessness.'

Watching now as my mum attempts to recalibrate (empty nest) having performed the role of host and carer since the age of 22. Four children and more decades later she is anxious, frustrated: 'I used to be able to do things.'

Filmmaking can be thought of as a form of care, one that questions and antagonises

FB often looks frightened. Her job is to police and protect other bodies. What about her own?

Love always,
nx

On 8 June 2016 at 19:11 Alice Hattrick wrote:

N

What is it about touch, about skin? Like taste and smell, the chemical senses, it's unreasonable, untrustworthy. Same goes for anything you feel in your body.

You have a child and you are suddenly more plugged into the air. into to everything else. all the inputs and outputs. everything became one or the other: hours of sleep; minutes of crying; ml of baby milk, baby massage oil...

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For a long time i have not lived as an ill person, but yesterday I thought maybe that's not true. I am living a sick life. I don't know any other.

Inputs: emails from work, fingers (masturbation), tampon, antidepressant, eggs, bread (+ additives), coffee

Outputs: emails from bed, shit, wetness (is an orgasm an output?)

Side Effects of Medication: vivid dreams (i didn't have before); my palms sweat; my whole body sweats at night; so much it wakes me up.

Ppl were talking about what you need to say to get drugs the other night at dinner. That docs won't give you drugs if you're agitated. I sat quietly, nodded, yeah, that's what I heard. What they said was not inaccurate enough for me to say any different.

I can't read our emails, the ones between you and me. it's upsetting – too much not worked out / spilling over / too much still not worked out / wanting to be next to you, walking into spaces with you. Enjoying how you write, how you walk on your own.

A

On 11 June 2016 at 12:31 Naomi Pearce wrote:

A,

I've been reading The Empathy Exams again. Leslie Jamison describes similar lifelong feelings of bodily unease: 'a wrongness in my being that I could never pin or name' She writes about self diagnosis outside of the medical establishment as a way of containing what is unknown.

Christa's community can be "Alone Together"

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But it doesn't come for free. The 'Healing Grapevine' is a slippery kind of on demand connectivity in a context of 'the commercialisation of human feeling'.

Arlie Russell Hochschild's been writing about this since the 1980s, before the Internet with its prosumers and networked economies. In our service producing society, emotional labour is alienating us from our own feelings, wielded as they are as 'instruments of labour'.

In the wake of 'no society' I too seek togetherness, finding it through shared lifestyle choices validated by where I spend my wage.

Like 'The Healing Grapevine', the spin class I go to builds its community around affirmative slogans too: Let's do This.

'Psyche' is a total body workout on a bike. Its mission: 'To inspire people to lead, vibrant, energetic & happy lives....'

At the front desk that first time, the girl next to us said: u'll get addicted.

Later in the dark as the smell of the 'free' dove aerosol they leave in the changing room mingles with the moisture in the air, Kaya (my favourite instructor) shouts at us to look down at our legs.

'Be grateful that you can move, you have the power of movement. Where will your legs take you?'

My body works to trick my mind to make me think happy (at the expense of others)

Behind reception fridges with rows of bottled water. A problem for someone else to deal with (piles of these plastic vessels are pooling together somewhere off the coast of singapore) and that's it we're all tangled in a web.

We ride together moving in formation to rihanna, there's a master slave dynamic in the room.



If work wasn't sitting behind desks at computers we wouldn't have to sweat like this with strangers. Work again. Music asking you to work, girls being hot, they are working it, men used to sweat when they worked, now we exercise to work, this escaping work is work.

A guy in the office asks why we like working out so much, i say it's because we're not having enough sex. I'm not lying. But the bike doesn't ride you, you're in control.

I could write 10,000 words about Kaya's bum but who's got the time to read them anyway.

Wondering what role the workplace plays in these psychosomatic illnesses, whether they might be the result of psychological alienation in the wake of emotional labour? In the case of delusional manifestations, the minds detachment from feeling morphing into physical sensations.

In love and lethargy,

Nx

On 13 Jun 2016, at 21:37 Alice Hattrick wrote:

N,

Yvonne's story in the book [It's all in your Head: True Stories of Imaginary Illnesses](#). She loved her job at the supermarket, but then a colleague sprayed glass cleaner in her eyes as a bad joke and she never recovered her sight, even though every test showed she 'wasn't really blind', her visual pathway was still intact.

The workplace plays a role.

A while ago I watched a vid of people being interviewed about Sick Building Syndrome. One person says they got sick after they got in a lift with a colleague who was wearing perfume.

Chest pain, hard to breath, headaches... And then they are in A&E and off work sick. Sickness becomes chronic, and therefore alienating.

Work makes you sick, so you blame it on the chemicals in building materials, the smell of new carpet... You can't go back because that's the source of your sickness. (In Todd Haynes' [Safe](#) Julianne Moore is sick of her domestic environment, the other sphere of the 20th century. Her friends are obsessed with diets. More inputs and outputs.)

Eileen Myles with her hand in her pocket, cracking jokes. Your body is a container for the sea. (I know that's in your notes.)

This, from our press release for our event last weekend: At a moment when state-provided care is receding, what might it be to 'take care' of ourselves or others? What if we're all past caring – all already polluted, toxic?

Love A xx

<Screen Shot 2016-06-13 at 21.25.10.png>

On 14 June 2016 at 14:45 Naomi Pearce wrote:

I am waiting to get my blood taken.

The nurse just injected tuberculin into my forearm – it's sitting in a bubble underneath the top layer of my skin.

The doctors have to check I don't have TB before I go on this new injection. The drug works by suppressing your immune system, that's where the arthritis lives and is active. So the drug is a classic pharmakon – I might not ache anymore but I'll probably get sick in other ways...

What about FB being a security guard? Policing, surveillance and self monitoring as all pervasive condition atm. What about the panopticon? The bodies of these women as metaphors for

countries – the alien evil within? Also thinking about the Huw Lemmey talk we listened to the other day and what he said about homosexual histories of secrecy / surveillance... it's as if the women in Lucy's film represent the opposite...the great unwatched. This invisible community, neither hot young things nor grand dames, the hysterically ignored. They must therefore carry out their own surveillance.

Anyway, it's difficult to be the master of me when u feel like something alien is trying to crawl out from inside. Nothing like hosting to make u fear the security of ur borders – see Brexit etc.

Cute pic of u and ur mum – u look very alike – but u know that already.

Love
Nxxx

Sent from my iPhone

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On 16 June 2016 at 13:42 Alice Hattrick wrote:

I like your psycle notes a lot btw.

The language at the beginning of Lucy's film is the language of illness, of contagion and testing: "behaviour breeds behaviour." FB as security guard (and doctor?) "screening who and what enters the building." self-medicating with youtube videos, contact at a distance, even when she's inside the building.

Work takes her to 'The Healing Grapevine'. lift the silence. login to the support group forum. A subscription isn't that different from a prescription, and matter becomes a sample in the instant it is removed or ingested.

And yes I read the Eula Biss book – the bit about us all being toxic anyway. Accepting that there is alien matter embedded

in our bodies starts to look like a form of resistance. Maybe FB is just one of the first to recognise it for what it is, to really see it.

What about all these microbeads and synthetic fibres in the sea? They've been found in seawater and freshwater, where they are consumed by fish and other creatures, and bioaccumulate in the bodies of animals higher up the food chain... Apparently they alter animal behaviour.

I have to confess, the whole time I was watching Pharmakon I was thinking: FB is wearing a coat like yours when she puts theory into practice, at the nightclub. alright sweetheart. have a good night. Saying those lines she's learnt to maintain that boundary.

And then you told me it was really your coat. FB is, unavoidably, for me anyway, a version of you.

See u later
A xx

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Pharmakon, 2016
HD video, 21 min
Written, Directed, Edited
Lucy Beech

Cast:
Melanie Ash
Christa Englebrecht

Volunteers:
Christine Corser
Melanie Revill

Conflict management
workshop participants:
Kerry Bergin
Sarah Clare
Marie Friend
Jess Huckerby
Sally McFerran
Rebecca Riley
Kam Uppiah

Yoga Instructor:
Niamh Kavanagh

Healing Grapevine members:
Kate Befield
Gabrielle Douglas
Lucy Fiori
Naomi Gardener
Kate Lavery
Kerry Lee
Abigail Mckenzie
Rosalie Mieville
Miwa Nago
Julie Padget
Lydia Parsons
Ishtar Staunton

Camera:
Jamie Quantrill

AD:
Phoebe Billington

Sound:
Adam Laschinger

Producer:
Emily Morgan

Production Assistant:
Katie Tysoe

Camera Assistant:
Philip Macdonald
Greg Ashcroft

Props / Costume Assistants:
Emma Walker
Rebecca Quinn

Runners:
Mattheaw Morgan
Joshua Smith

Transport:
Joyce Morgan

Locations:
The Palm House,
Sefton Park
Playground
Liverpool Film Office /
Council

Kit:
Visual Impact
Documovie
FACT

Post:
Halo Post
Okay Studio

DIT:
Loki

Sound:
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