

# 'Health is What You Make It'

An essay on the work of Gary Zhexi Zhang, Kirsty Hendry and Ilona Sagar arising from conversations with the artists about health, the Peckham Experiment and the relationship between science and language.

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According to health.com, the most common New Year's resolution in 2018 was to simply 'have a healthier body'. But how do we achieve this? The NHS website provides a whole section entitled *Healthy Body* which gives the reader advice such as 'Get active' and 'Eat fish'. According to this, if we follow these patterns within our lives then we will attain optimum health. What can be questioned then is, does this truly constitute a 'healthy body'? Where is the line drawn between a healthy body and a sick one?

In 1938, Stephen Taylor, a senior resident medical officer at the Royal Free Hospital penned the article *The Suburban Neurosis*. Within this, he discusses how 'Mrs Everyman' (a married lady of 28 or 30 years old, with 'always respectable clothing') is suffering from symptoms including ill tastes in her mouth and sleepless nights. Everything indicates this woman is healthy, happy. She is from a 'uniform background', is married to 'Mr Everyman' and has a house, children and financial stability. Yet buried beneath this fetishisation of the home, this domestic 'bliss', lies what Taylor describes as chronic neurosis, brought on by 'the slum that numbs the mind': suburbia. Taylor highlights that environment plays no less a part in the production of 'suburban neurosis' than it does in the production of physical disease. Hidden behind a façade of surface level 'health', a silent sickness festers.

During the early part of the 20th century, beginning in the interwar period, a plexus of biological and social experiments developed. Framed by an atmosphere of governmental and social change that arose from the aftermath of WWI and the country's collective healing, a pivotal initiative arose in 1926, in the stable working

class suburb of Peckham, named The Pioneer Health Centre. This materialised in a community centre which families could join for one shilling a week. Here, George Scott Williamson and Innes Hope Pearse established the Peckham Experiment to explore an increasing interest in preventive social medicine. The members could enjoy a wide range of activities such as physical exercise, swimming, games and workshops under the condition that they were to be medically examined and monitored throughout their time at the centre. Central to Scott Williamson's philosophy was the belief that, left to themselves, people would spontaneously begin to organise in a creative way. By providing an environment to develop health within, Scott Williamson and Pearse could begin to understand the conditions for a 'healthy body'.

Despite foreshadowing the foundation of the NHS in 1948, the experiment has been subject to historical neglect. The programme is brought to light in *Self-Service*, a publication and event series that was developed by Kirsty Hendry and Ilona Sagar for Glasgow International 2018. With a wide range of contributors from multi-disciplinary backgrounds, the publication explores the history, design, and social context of welfare and wellness. Included is Gary Zhexi Zhang, a graduate of GSA's Painting and Printmaking course, whose own work was also shown at Market Gallery, as part of *Cross Feed*. Along with Anjara Omann, the pair engaged in a discourse around microbiology, materialising in film and sculptural works. The exhibition focused on micro and macro ecologies and observed disparities between natural and synthetic systems.

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Zhexi Zhang explains his way of thinking as 'ecosystematic' which perhaps has relations with Deleuze and Guattari's 'rhizomatic thinking'. The philosophers use the term 'rhizome' to describe theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. In this manner, an ecosystem apprehends multiplicities, offering a space in which a myriad of organisms can continually become. This articulation of 'ecosystematic thinking' is a biopolitical re-invention of 'systems thinking'; they are both processes that reject the reductive decomposition of things into individual parts. This Gestalt concept that the 'whole is other than the sum of its parts' offers a view of how relationships are formed within systems.<sup>1</sup> In isolation, the individual components of a system do not perform the system's collective outcomes. Innes Hope Pearse (founder of the Peckham Experiment) wrote:

To see how a machine works, you take it to pieces; but to see how a living entity functions it must be seen in its organismal unity and in its living environment. We cannot possibly examine separately the parts involved in life as we examine separately the parts of a machine. In particular we cannot separate the influence of the environment since environment belongs to the unity which we perceive as life.<sup>2</sup>

Zhexi Zhang's film, *The Kernel Process*, which was shown as part of the *Self-Service* screening (alongside pre-existing works by Sagar and Hendry), adopts the trope of anthropomorphising machines. Zhexi Zhang paratactically positions the Pineal gland ('the seat of the soul') and the kernel process (the programme at the core of a computer's operating system).<sup>3</sup> This use of anthropomorphic metaphor is a common feature within biopolitical discourse; metaphor offers a way in. By framing socio-scientific ideas within a somatic context we allow ourselves to extend the reach of our understanding of the workings of complex systems through the language of lived bodily experience, which is our primary way of knowing the world.

It's a strange relationship between science and language. In relation to surgical procedures, Zhexi Zhang speaks of "peeling the body as if it were an overripe piece of fruit". Metaphor, next to quantitative fact, seems decadent, lyrical, and wholly unscientific. Democritus said;

We in reality know nothing firmly but only as it changes in accordance with the condition of the body and of the things which enter it and of the things which resist it.<sup>4</sup>

While understanding the workings of the scientific world in equivalencies is not ideal, the version of 'truth' it allows us is somewhat closer to what we as individuals know to be, as it changes in accordance

with our bodies.

The 'purpose-built, living laboratory of uninterrupted openness' that is the Pioneer Health Centre calls into question the validity of the data collected throughout the Peckham Experiment.<sup>5</sup> While the lack of structure and imposed boundaries upon the families attempts to mimic the agency afforded in everyday life, the space itself was carefully constructed by architect Sir Owen Williams. Its framework captured a will to create light, openness and visibility but in actuality it was intrinsically confining due to the precise design; from custom built chairs to an upper viewing deck. With its glare resistant window, it allowed the scientists to view from a distant, overt placement. Sagar describes this as the 'nucleus of the building'. This suggests the centralisation of power, which shifts the dynamic into a top-down hierarchy. The communities' own publication, titled *The Guinea Pig*, saw the participants take ownership of their role within the experiment and engage with its social structure. By claiming their role the participants arguably maintain singularity within the system.

At *Lab-oratory*, the workshop organised as part of *Self-Service*, one of the student onlookers from the Peckham Experiment was present. Throughout the discussion they maintained that the participants involved were always aware of their role as 'guinea pigs'. They owned their choice. This raises questions of agency within a larger system where life is object to political manipulations. As addressed in the essay *Exhaustion and Exuberance*, Verwoert questions:

When do we commit to perform of our own free will? And when is our commitment elicited under false pretences to enforce the ideology of high performance and boost someone else's profits? And who is there to blame if we chose to exploit ourselves?

This is suggestive of a contemporary approach to health which situates the body as profitable through 'high performance'. As Noah Harari suggests, the move from mass to personalized healthcare exists within a narrative of the diminishing of the value of individuals.<sup>6</sup> While 'our bodies may belong to us ...we ourselves belong to a greater body composed of many bodies'.<sup>7</sup> We are all, to a lesser extent, custodians of the health of those around us. This would likely preserve the value of the group in the face of atomised personalised healthcare. In *The Centre*, the essay written for *Self-Service*, Zhexi Zhang highlights how the people that were involved were self-described, self-selected and self-actualising. He makes it clear that we understand that the platform provided for participants was autonomous however 'the individual bodies are inextricable from environments of activity'.

The anxiety that can be seen around the loss of the self within a larger social system appears to arise from

<sup>1</sup> Gestalt, a German word for form or shape, may refer to Holism, the idea that natural systems and their properties should be viewed as wholes, not as collections of parts. The concept of gestalt was first introduced in philosophy and psychology in 1890 by Christian von Ehrenfels.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from *Coda Cycle* by Ilona Sagar, an essay included in *Self-service*. The original quote is taken from *The Peckham Experiment* by Innes Hope Pearse.

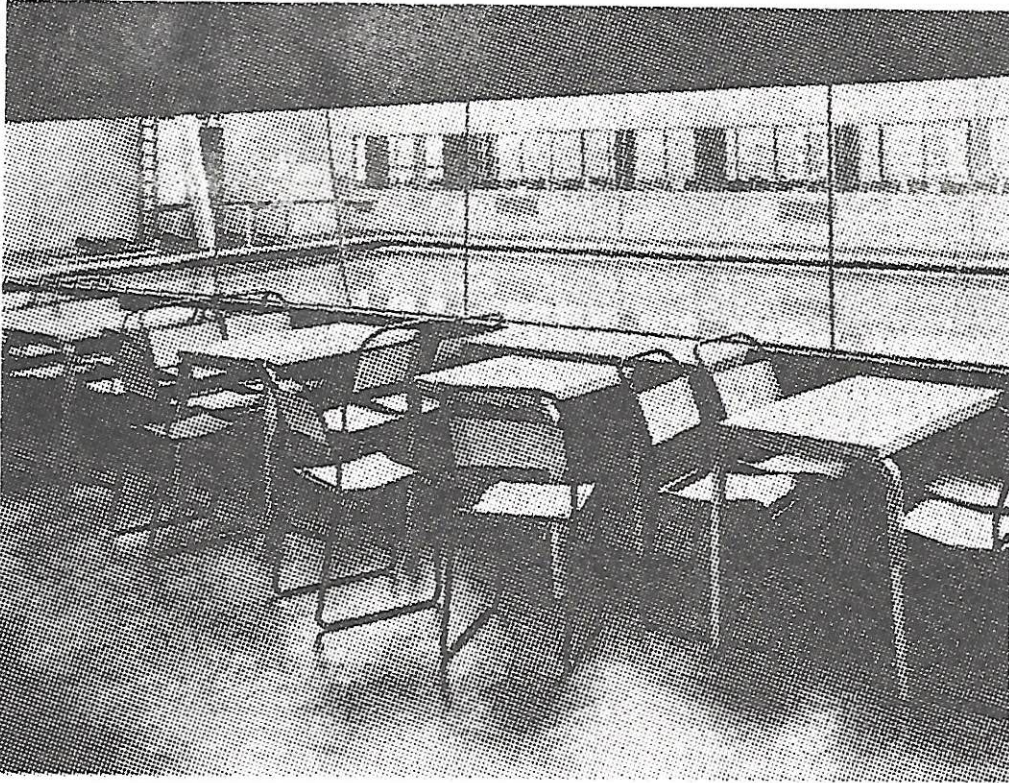
<sup>3</sup> Descartes regarded the Pineal Gland as the principal seat of the soul and the place in which of all our thoughts are formed.

<sup>4</sup> From Sextus Empiricus's *Against the Mathematicians* VII.

<sup>5</sup> This is how Ilona Sagar describes the architecture of the centre in *Coda Cycle*.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* by Yuval Noah Harari.

<sup>7</sup> This is a Eula Biss quote taken from *The Self in Data: a review of Homo Deus*, a blog written by Laura Cooper. It can be found at <https://transitionalform.wordpress.com/2016/10/26/the-self-in-the-data-review-of-homo-deus-by-yuval-noah-harari/>



Visibility everywhere: distant Long Room seen across  
the pool from the Cafeteria

the conversion of the self into quantified data. In the April of last year, Emma Smith held a talk at Tramway about how the Western understanding of the self is formed in relation to capitalist ideologies, such as the notion of the American Dream.<sup>9</sup> The culture that arises from the self-orientated approach to prosperity is what Taylor attributes the cause of 'suburban neurosis'. Smith posits that Western readings of Eastern ideologies, such as the Japanese cultural logic of the 'social self' (which is sustained by an engagement with others rather than by an internalised soliloquy), form the foundations of 'mindfulness'.<sup>9</sup> Under the *Moodzone* section of the NHS website, 'mindfulness' means knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment. Nothing is extrinsic. Thinking in this way, from an 'eco-systematic' standpoint, leads to an awareness of your own physiology and the role it plays in the environment you exist within.

Embedded within a body of images on an advertisement for the centre, showing families enjoying the facilities, is the assertion '*HEALTH IS WHAT YOU MAKE IT*'. Indeed, pervading the archives of the Peckham Experiment is an awareness of self-care that is central to the centre. Even through the titling, *Self-Service* allows us to speculate on the future of what healthcare could become. In reaction to the constant quantification of the body and the pressure to perform under the premise of a biopolitical approach to health, the publication offers a practical approach that starts with simple awareness. By the end of *The Kernel Process*, Zhexi Zhang leaves us hanging on to the middle of a thought. The film stages a relevant discourse of the relationship between the synthetic and the natural. However, by being situated so deeply in theory, it perhaps isn't as readily approachable.

Everything has a threshold. The boundary between health and sickness is diluted by environment. This is a post-human predicament and by no means a completely negative one. We cultivate technology to improve health which has improved our well-being exponentially. But we can no longer be satisfied by pre-existing humanist structures that cater for the born and not the manufactured. Moreover, we perhaps need to find ways to be healthy that are not wholly linked to the need to use the body as capital: 'Even the personal bodily situation of immunity is inseparable from whatever political situations that we find ourselves in today'.<sup>10</sup>

Given the right conditions, we are as flexible as the simple amoeba and equally programmed for survival. We have the added advantage that we are able to think and learn from our experiences – but, equally, we can be limited by poor environments and, in the worse cases, we can give up the desire to thrive and learn altogether. Better to be seen as an amoeba, able to adapt and change, than a 'cog' in a man-made 'machine'.

LEFT  
Plate 1 from *The Quality of Life: The Peckham approach to Human Ethology*,  
Innes H. Pearse,  
(Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979)

<sup>9</sup> Emma Smith talked at Tramway in an event titled *Neuroscience and Movement* on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 2017. This was part of the DIG Festival and the talk was produced in collaboration with Siobhan Davies.

<sup>9</sup> Takie Lebra, *The Japanese Self in Cultural Logic* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Taken from *Autoimmunity: A self-destructive Service* by Emma Balkind. This essay is part of the *Self service* publication.