

Enstranglements: Undercover in Arts for Health

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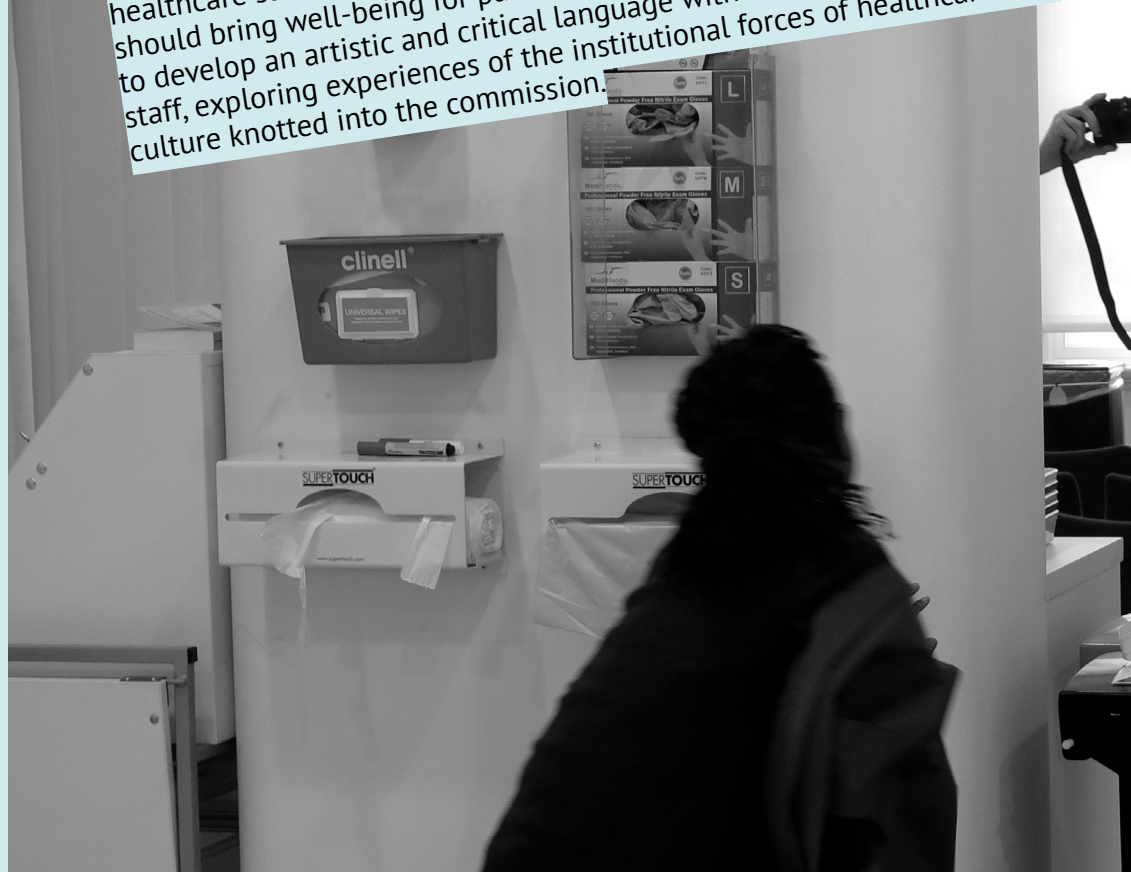
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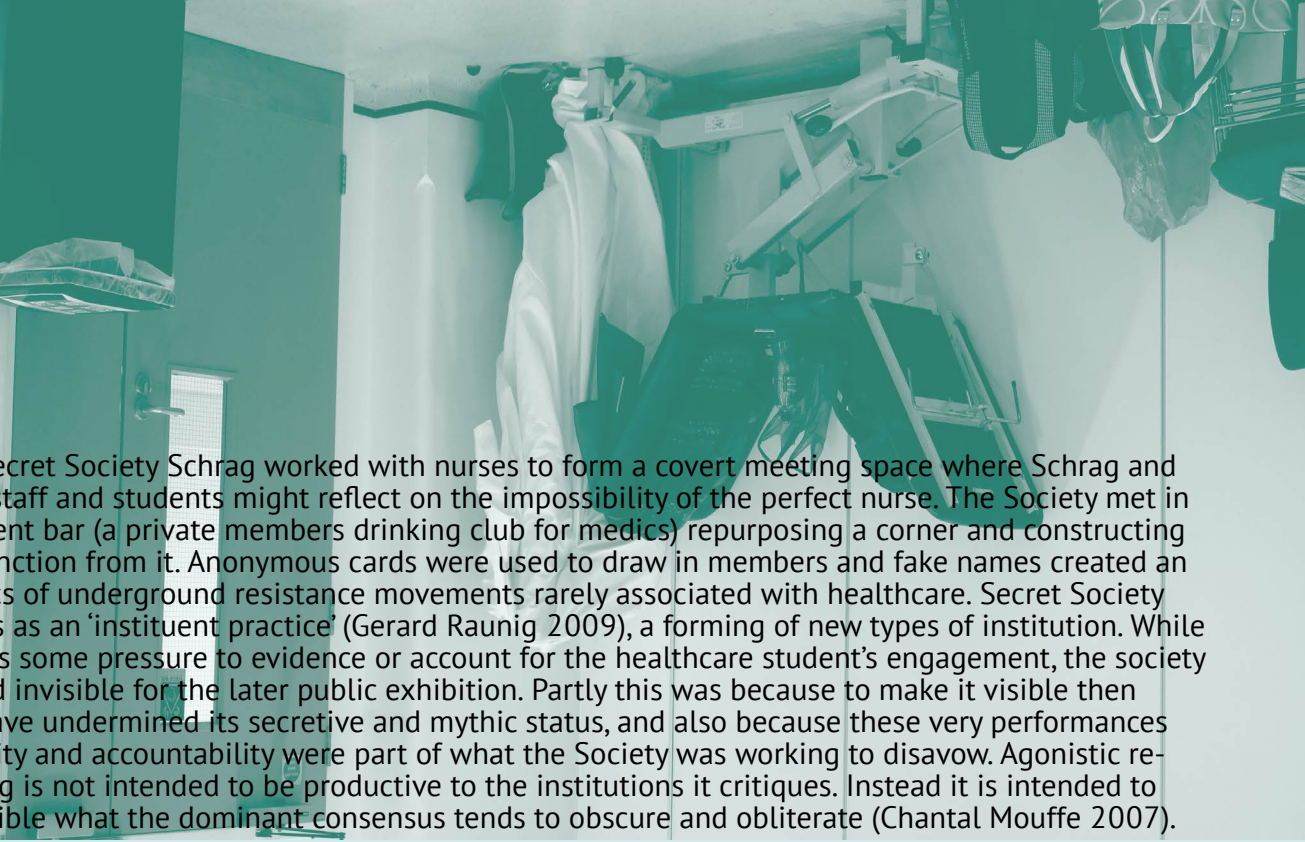
Enstranglements: in Arts Undercover for Health

Becky Shaw, Anthony Schrag, Frances Williams and Sarah Smizz Smith


The UK arts for health movement is ensnared in a double bind of co-opted insider and critical outsider: on one hand seeking to be at the centre of government-approved delivery of well-being, (such as social prescribing) and on the other hand understanding its history as a force critical of dehumanizing clinical practices and environments. Champions of art and health often praise the way the arts makes protected space, and provides sanctuary from 'business as usual' in healthcare. Any 'under the radar' spaces that are made by Arts for Health, however, still happen in UK health institutions: a context understood as collapsing under its own encumbered weight with conflicting policy, performances, practices, values and cultures. In the following we explore two live artworks that work with and are formed by this materially and politically 'enstrangled' environment. We consider how visibility and the covert already hover in the hospital and explore whether there are other material ways to be 'undercover' such as 'burrowing'; a dark celebration of the material and social affordances of the hospital.

Hiding in Plain Sight (Becky Shaw) and The Secret Society for Imperfect Nurses (Anthony Schrag) are live works developed within the project 'Are you Feeling Better Yet?' by curator Frances Williams, for the UTOPIA 2016 London festival. The remit of funding was to involve and engage communities of nursing and midwifery students from King's College London, to explore the legacy of Thomas More's Utopia for healthcare research and practice. The UTOPIA 2016 festival took place within a year of UK National Health Service cuts and austerity measures, precipitating highly visible junior doctor strikes. The terms of the commission, with its focus on utopia and the expectations of 'engagement' then, felt tokenistic and analgesic against the profound difficulties facing healthcare staff. Rather than the assumption that art in health practices should bring well-being for patients, Schrag, Shaw and Williams, sought to develop an artistic and critical language with healthcare students and staff, exploring experiences of the institutional forces of healthcare and culture knotted into the commission.

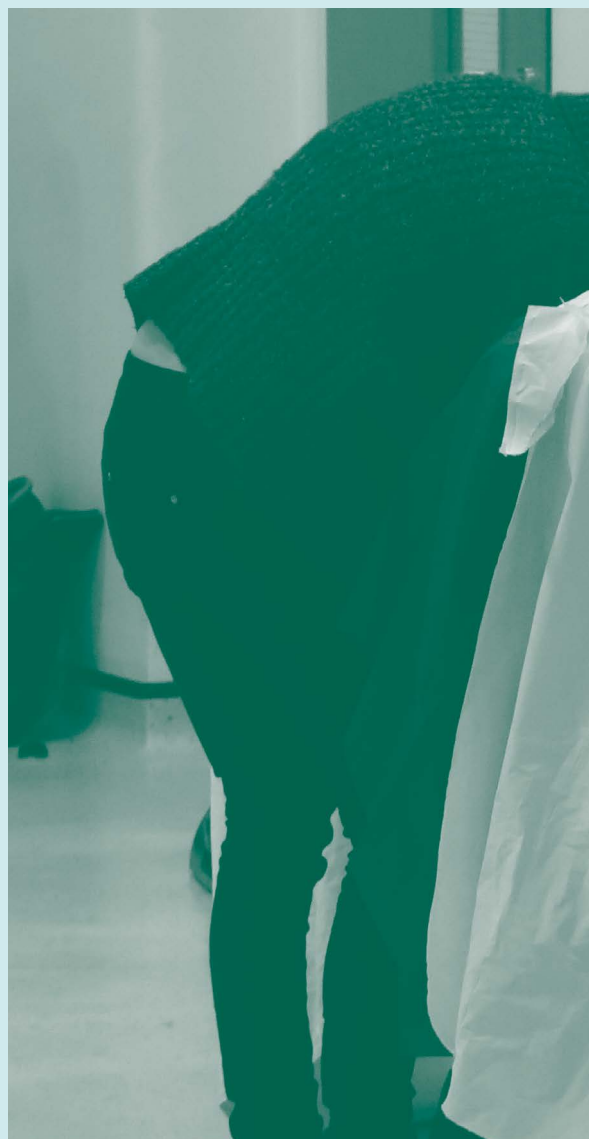




In The Secret Society Schrag worked with nurses to form a covert meeting space where Schrag and nursing staff and students might reflect on the impossibility of the perfect nurse. The Society met in a basement bar (a private members drinking club for medics) repurposing a corner and constructing a new function from it. Anonymous cards were used to draw in members and fake names created an aesthetics of underground resistance movements rarely associated with healthcare. Secret Society functions as an 'instituent practice' (Gerard Raunig 2009), a forming of new types of institution. While there was some pressure to evidence or account for the healthcare student's engagement, the society remained invisible for the later public exhibition. Partly this was because to make it visible then would have undermined its secretive and mythic status, and also because these very performances of visibility and accountability were part of what the Society was working to disavow. Agonistic re-imagining is not intended to be productive to the institutions it critiques. Instead it is intended to make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate (Chantal Mouffe 2007).



In Hiding in Plain Sight Shaw worked with a group of practicing nurses and midwives undertaking doctorates, who described their awkward undercover lives between practicing and researching. Access was gained to a Simulated Ward Learning Environment in Guy's and St Thomas' hospital, which was then used as a place where care is rehearsed, education practiced in the material of an ersatz ward: Photography, assemblage and performance strategies and both are performed. visibility, movement and patient/carers relationships were used to explore roles,



This developed into a live, audience-free work, where staff played hide and seek, using cameras as tools for 'seeking' so footage was generated as part of the game. A film draws together the footage and captures staff shaking with laughter under blankets, falling out of cupboards and walking with peculiar creeping gaits. Walter Benjamin's text, *A Child Hiding*, was used as a talking point and the group reflected on the danger of becoming 'one' with the material environment and never 'found'. Psychoanalyst Donald R. Winnicott reflected that, in play, 'it is a joy to be hidden, and disaster not to be found', a statement that captures some of the complexity and

Benjamin, W. (1928). *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Classics.

Mouffe, C. (2007). *Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices*.

Available online at: <https://vimeo.com/60549192> (accessed December 3, 2021).

Raunig, G., and Ray, G. (eds) (2009). *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*.

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Stoner, J. (2012) *Toward a Minor Architecture*. Boston: MIT.

Winnicott, D. W. (1971) *Playing and Reality* London & New York: Routledge.



Be perfect

'failure' of less visible artistic processes (Winnicott, 1965, p.187). The commissions here were utterly responsive to, and dependent upon, the conditions that generated them, so they were also subject to the instability and illegibility of the institution. Instead of escaping the institution these two works attempt to re-form the material of the institution. Drawing on Jill Stoner in *Towards a Minor Architecture* (2012) we imagine this as more akin to a mole's process of disordering striated layers of earth, or digging in new materials rather than being under a 'simple' layer of what is seen.



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Schrag, Shaw, Smith and Williams are all part of CAHN: the Critical Arts in Health Network.

