

# Prescriptions: artists' books on wellbeing and medicine with featured artist, Martha A. Hall

In July I went along to the Beaney House of Art & Knowledge in Canterbury to meet with University of Kent academic Stella Bolaki, the curator (along with book artist Egidija Čiricaite) of *Prescriptions*, an exhibition featuring the work of American book artist Martha Hall, which was part-funded by a Wellcome Humanities and Social Science Small Grant.

Hall drew upon her experience of breast cancer in her work. She sadly lost her struggle with cancer in 2003, and at her request her work was placed in the public domain at the Maine Women Writers Collection (MWWC). Hall hoped that her works would help inspire new dialogue and awareness about people's experiences with cancer and other illnesses. She also wished to create greater empathy among healthcare professionals with the hope of improving patient-doctor relations.

Stella Bolaki wanted to extend this dialogue across the Atlantic with an exhibition and academic symposium focusing on Hall's work and the role of artists' books in mediating our experiences of illness. In order to further explore these themes, Stella and Egidija invited submissions from book artists whose work represented a wide range of other illnesses, conditions and experiences.

When I met with Stella she brought along two artists' books produced by Hall, both multi-coloured, heavily textured, concertina-like "books", and encouraged me to handle them (which I did very gingerly). Now, you may be thinking "I don't really know what an artists' book is". Don't worry - until I saw them in the flesh, neither did I! Many of the works appear book-like in shape, but their material and size are varied. Some contain words, pictures, personal items, stitching, even digital media, but this is by no means the limit. Take a look at the link below, which includes photographs from the exhibition, for a visual representation of some of the many forms an artist's book can take:

<https://www.kent.ac.uk/english/research/conferences/artistsbooks.html>

The accompanying symposium was held at the Cathedral Lodge in Canterbury in April 2016 and launched the *Prescriptions* exhibition. It enjoyed a varied audience of academics, healthcare professions and some of our own Wellcome Library colleagues. Discussion was sparked on issues such as the radicalisation of medical education, desensitisation of

healthcare professionals, improvements in doctor-patient relations, and how art can influence social change.

Many of the delegates at the symposium were as unfamiliar with artists' books as me. However, like me, they were encouraged to handle them freely. Once you handle the books you get a sense of the lived experience that they represent; you have access to someone's personal journey with their health, which is very emotive. Unfortunately, in the exhibition the works have to remain within the safety of the glass cases, but Stella and Egidija have done an excellent job in making the display feel as though you can touch it. It is multi-dimensional and very visually tactile.

Further to the exhibition and symposium, Stella held a workshop to introduce this very democratic and accessible art to a new audience. A diverse group of people were invited to learn how to make their own artists' books, including art therapists who have taken their new skills on to use with their patients. Another workshop is planned for October, and Stella is currently in the process of finishing off the exhibition catalogue for publication, which also contains reflections from the symposium and workshop. Additionally, research from this project is included in Stella's recently published book, *Illness as Many Narratives: Arts, Medicine and Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

*Prescriptions* is on until the 25th September 2016. Please see link below for more details:

<http://canterburymuseums.co.uk/events/prescriptions/>

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