

Universalmuseum Joanneum Press

Universalmuseum Joanneum
Mariahilferstraße 4, 8020 Graz, Austria
www.museum-joanneum.at

presse@museum-joanneum.at
Telephone +43-316/8017-9211

Katharina Sabernig Knitted Anatomy

Studio, Neue Galerie Graz, Joanneumsviertel, 8010 Graz

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Curated by Günther Holler-Schuster

Information: +43-316/8017-9100, www.neuegaleriegraz.at

Why Knitting?

Katharina Sabernig

'Knitted Anatomy' is concerned with finding representations of the inner body that will cause the viewer's eye to linger and enable self-reflection regarding one's own body or disease. Many people are not familiar with the inner physical state of the body and find it difficult to form a picture of it, because it is not easily observable. Human senses are capable of perceiving things outside the body in different ways. When looking at a picture, for example, one can compare and evaluate an image against earlier visual impressions. However, it is not possible to look inside the body. For medically educated people, as well as for medical laymen alike, it is a challenge to form an adequate image of what exists in the body or what exactly happens. To look inside the body, such as in the case of a serious injury, is usually an alarming and often traumatic experience. The inside of the body is a sphere to which one normally has no direct sensory access despite the direct subjective feeling of it.

The pandemic and the associated, often repressed fears regarding the disease, but also vaccination, bring this to our attention as a major societal challenge. In the course of medical treatment it is often necessary to explain to a patient what the diagnosis concretely means or what kind of intervention is to be carried out.

However, conventional graphical representations of the inside of the body are often perceived as unpleasant and disturbing, if not disgusting—especially when the illustrations are realistic or intended to depict a disease that affects oneself. Science historian Marieke Hendriksen once put it this way: 'sensory perception and a sense of beauty necessarily also includes the development of strategies to deal with the visceral disgust encountered in the process of gaining anatomical knowledge.'¹

It can be said that this visceral disgust is on the one hand a natural human reaction, but on the other, disturbing in certain situations and can obstruct a clear view of what is happening.

Anatomical representations in knitted form generally do not trigger this protective reaction. It seems to be an inherent characteristic of the medium to be associated with warmth, security and care, and this is a marked difference to graphic or even photographic presentations of a dissected body interior. Thus, knitted objects offer a way of dealing with this visceral disgust—outwitting it, so to speak—to gently convey medical content. A person looking at an anatomical

or pathological image will be particularly vulnerable if he or she happens to feel helpless regarding the exact pathological state that needs to be explained or if the parts of the body where a surgery is to be performed require clarification. As medical historian Thomas Schnalke has described in detail, this profoundly human vulnerability is a challenge for exhibitions that convey medical content.²

Among the images you will find not only knitted anatomical illustrations but also histopathological tissue forms that show stages of tumour growth and possibilities for surgery. My basic hypothesis is that the specific abstraction inherent in knitting as a form of representation will prevent the disgust reflex that normally occurs with other forms of representation. I believe that this can facilitate reflection on one's own condition. When presented in knitted form, the anatomy appears harmless, familiar and not threatening. This may, I hope, contribute to patients being able to perceive and understand their somatic situation in a way that is less fraught with fear or other negative emotions. As described in more detail in the section on challenge and perception of anatomical representation, the knitted or textile medium of anatomical representation solves an ethical dilemma of anatomical history: the use of human material.

¹ Marieke Hendriksen, *Elegant Anatomy: The Eighteenth-Century Leiden Anatomical Collections*, Leiden, Boston 2015, p. 205.

² Thomas Schnalke, 'Veröffentlichte Körperwelten: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer Medizin im Museum', in: *Zeitschrift für medizinische Ethik* 1, 1999, pp. 15–26, here p. 19.