

 MADNESS: Fighting for Justice in Mental Health

# What does it mean to have a just mental health care system and who has access to it? Who decides who is labelled as mad?

The international conference **MADNESS: Fighting for Justice in Mental Health** takes place on November 25 – 27 at Kunstquartier Bethanien in Berlin. The 28th Conference of the Disruption Network Lab investigates systems of mental health care and support, focusing on prevailing discourses and practices, biases and inequality. It is exploring the possibilities of a mental health system which puts human rights and justice in the centre of its practice. The conference introduces the perspectives of scientists, human rights and social justice activists, artists, doctors and practitioners as well as those closely affected – the people living with mental illness, through keynotes, panels, performance, film screening, workshops and meetups.

What does it mean to have a just mental health care system? Who is deciding who is labelled as mad? Who is telling the story of madness? Who has access to mental health care services? Can we decolonise psychiatry? Different perspectives and positions, such as scientific and social discourses, the medical practice, the fight against profit-oriented health care management, as well as the social, racial and ethnic differences of those affected, will be combined. This conference brings

together researchers and practitioners but gives also specific attention to the perspectives and needs of people living with mental illnesses. The goal of the conference is to give visibility and voice to those closely affected, to emphasise the necessity for action in the way this problem is being treated and to think of examples for more humane policies.

The speakers provide critical insights into their activities and positions at the intersection of psychiatry, psychology, activism, art and social justice. **Jasna Russo** talks about the meaning of justice in mental health and **Colin King** addresses the institutional racism and structural discrimination within the UK public health care. **Wilda L. White** discusses the work that must happen outside the U.S. mental health system to achieve justice within the U.S. mental health system, whereas **China Mills** gives a global overview of the so-called state violence and what can justice in Mental health be. The Friday panel focuses on the structures of inclusive and just mental health support system and decolonising psychiatry, while the art programme and panel on Saturday display the great capacity of the artistic practice to overcome mental health stigma and frame proactive practices.

Fri Nov 25 · 16:30 · Doors Open

Fri Nov 25 · 17:00 – 17:15 · OPENING & INTRODUCTION

**Tatiana Bazzichelli** (Artistic Director, Disruption Network Lab, IT/DE),  
**Elena Veljanovska** (Curator, Disruption Network Lab, MK/DE), **Nada Bakr**  
(Community Curator & Project Manager EG/DE).

Fri Nov 25 · 17:15 – 18:30 · KEYNOTE

# Madness and Systemic Oppression

**Jasna Russo** (Independent Researcher & Consultant, DE), **Colin King** (Teacher, Lecturer, Researcher, UK). Moderated by **Elena Veljanovska** (Curator, Disruption Network Lab, MK/DE).

What is madness and who has the right to tell its story?

The first keynote with **Jasna Russo** and **Colin King** introduces the complexity of the conference topic by viewing the multifaceted stories of madness – as a social construct, as a historical development, and as a system of oppression. It gives an insight into the current theory and practice, as well as on the efforts to organize and protest. It gives shape to the possibilities to have a voice and to claim knowledge within structures where the perspectives of those labelled as mad have been historically suppressed and denied. It addresses the need for epistemic, as well as social justice, and directly address the inherent racism in the state institutions of health and justice, which instead of protecting, perpetually harm individuals. The speakers look at the topic from their activist and theoretical points of view, but also from their personal experiences. They discuss emancipation strategies that can be acquired through research, political organizing and advocacy. Lastly, they are exploring the possibilities for transformative practices that center marginalized and oppressed lives.

In her keynote, **Jasna Russo** situates the institution of psychiatry within wider oppressive social structures. She briefly presents its history, its social mandate and the formation of the “psychiatric industrial complex.” At the same time, she highlights a parallel but far less visible phenomenon that has existed since the very beginning of psychiatry: political organizing by people declared mad, psychiatrically disordered or mentally ill. Their dual purpose is to claim their fundamental rights and to document their own truths and knowledge. She discusses dominant approaches to this distinctive knowledge base, raising questions of silencing, epistemic injustice

and epistemic violence. She is critically engaging with initiatives to “humanize” psychiatry and argues for the potential and power of collective first-person knowledge to radically revisit the dominant understandings of madness and distress – and, most importantly, to *transform* societal responses to these human experiences.

**Colin King** talks about race and injustice in Mental Health in his keynote address. Data on mental health and race injustice in the UK shows that black Caribbean men are significantly more likely to be detained than those of white ethnic groups (odds ratio 2.53). Black African patients are significantly more likely to be detained than those of white ethnic groups (odds ratio 2.27). South Asian Patients are slightly more likely to be admitted compulsorily compared to white ethnic groups (odds ratio 1.33). Black Caribbean patients are significantly more likely to be re-admitted compared to white ethnic groups (odds ratio 2.30). The keynote looks at mental health as a modern *Drapetomania* that is apparent in the criminalization of the black experience in the neo-liberal mental health systems in modern Britain. Colin then confronts the concepts of European whiteness vs. the black body seen as madness, and talks about his personal experiences of injustice he faced in the educational and the mental health care system in the UK. At the end of his talk, he discusses this year’s article in *Lancet Psychiatry* “Black men wanted for restraint and research?” as a call for people working in the mental health system to become aware that death is often a

often a consequence of diagnosing the Black body, and to stop the state criminalization of the victims’ distress in official reports, rather than holding people accountable for state killings

Fri Nov 25 · 19:00 – 20:30 · PANEL

# Decolonising Psychiatry: Mental Health in Conflict Zones

**Lamia Moghnieh** (Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Copenhagen, LB/DK), **Reima Maglajlić** (Reader in Social Work, University of Sussex, UK), **Donato Zupin** (Psychiatrist, Department of Mental Health - WHO CC, Trieste, IT). Moderated by **Aouefa Amoussouvi** (Researcher, The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER), FR/DE).

The panel discusses the processes of decolonising Western and Eurocentric notions of psychiatry in the light of the discussion about Mental Health in Conflict Zones. It puts focus on the various challenges to mental health provision during a war conflict and discuss strategies for survival in and outside of conflict zones. The panel further discusses the structures of support that are being built after a conflict, again in conflict zones themselves and outside of them. Furthermore, it emphasizes the translation of traumatic experience and the need to overcome purely Western notion of medicine in a cross-cultural setting, and discuss the relationship between mental illnesses and cultural, socio-economic and political contexts. This highlights the need to recognise other systems of knowledge and emotional experience and expression and it looks into the possibilities of decolonising psychiatry in order to dismantle racism, especially when approaching non-western survivors in the mental health care sector.

**Reima Maglajlić** talks about distress caused by political conflicts with a focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). She will focus on two aspects. She first provides an overview of professional and experiential responses to distress caused by political conflicts in BiH. Second, she provides a brief summary of the findings from two co-produced qualitative studies on experiences of distress caused by the war in BiH. The studies are novel in drawing their inspiration from the interdisciplinary field of Mad Studies, which prioritises social understanding and interpretation of madness and distress, as well as emphasises experiential knowledge, both of distress and of the conflict-affected geographies. The talk places particular focus on why access to justice is important for people who experience distress, both

in conflict-affected countries and elsewhere, and on the types of support that people with lived experience reported to value the most.

In her talk, **Lamia Moghnieh** draws her conclusions from several ethnographic and archival cases in Lebanon and other MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) societies. Inspired by the science-fiction style of the black feminist writer Octavia Butler, Moghnieh looks at the politics of trauma, grief, and resilience in these geographies, while drawing parallels to the ways in which we survive and recover from violence, and the ways in which we are expected to do so by psychiatric, humanitarian and state institutions. In order to do so, she tries to move beyond the binary of trauma/resilience, towards paying more attention to everyday forms of survival, adaptation and rebuilding during war, economic and ecological crises, in times when “the world as we know it” is falling apart.

In his talk, **Donato Zupin** addresses the systemic racism against migrants and ethnic minority groups in psychiatric institutions. He gives his local perspective from Trieste, Italy, to clarify some aspects of this phenomenon. Since the 1970's, Trieste has been known for the radical deinstitutionalization processes, kick-started by Franco Basaglia, which take a freedom-first social-rights based approach to mental disorders. The city is also a key point of the *Balkan Route* and hosts some of the strongest anti-immigrant political movements. In his talk, Zupin addresses the cultural contradictions in his work as a coordinator of the Working Group on Migration of the Mental Health Department, where he has had the chance to observe how public institutions and NGOs interact when concepts such as mental health, migrations, solidarity, and social control come into play.

Sat Nov 26 · 16:00 · Doors Open

Sat Nov 26 · 16:30 - 17:00 · PERFORMANCE

## Sentire

**Marcello Lussana** (Sound Designer, Researcher, IT/DE) and **Olga Kozmanidze** (Artist, DE/IT).

Hearing and feeling are bound together in the Italian word *sentire*. The interdisciplinary project *Sentire* weaves these senses together using sensors that connect movement and contact to sound. The textures, timbres and rhythms of a sound environment are transformed by the interactive system of *Sentire* based on the distance and tactile encounters between two participants. The algorithmic sound environment has several configurations ranging from spacey and atmospheric to percussive and rhythmic, with touch

and proximity each transforming the environment differently.

*Sentire* emerged from the MovLab community at the art-science space *Spektrum* in Berlin in 2016, where sound-artist and researcher Marcello Lussana met performer and musician Olga Kozmanidze. In 2018, Pascal Staudt joined the project as a creative coder, instrument developer and sound artist. In 2019, the project received funding by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) for a 3-year research at Humboldt University Berlin.

Sat Nov 26 · 17:15 – 18:45 · KEYNOTE

## State Violence and Mental Health

**Wilda L. White** (Founder, MadFreedom, Inc., US), **China Mills** (Healing Justice Ldn, UK).  
Moderated by **Julian Schwarz** (Psychiatrist, DE).

The keynotes bring two different perspectives on State and Corporate violence as root causes of mental distress, which however, are often hidden in the individualisation of suffering. The speakers explain how political and cultural systems, the pharma industry, the media and corporations are contributing factors and inevitable influences on any individual diagnosis. They address the existing stigma and injustice towards people diagnosed or labelled mad, their socio-economic predicament such as unemployment, and point to aspects of sanism in mainstream media. Both speakers point to the need to recognize these “silent killers” in the labyrinth of state institutions, welfare programs and market driven health provision, and criticize their failing to improve the livelihood of people who live with mental conditions.

In her keynote, **Wilda White** argues that the solution to injustice in the mental health system lies not within the mental health system, but rather in shaping the cultural politics of American society. She shares her ideas for shifting attitudes,

opinions, beliefs, and perspectives, and influencing the media and the arts, which all shape American society and political opinion and give rise to the social, economic, and legal realities that sustain an underfunded, second-class, coercive mental health system that shortens lives, restricts opportunities, and dashes hopes. In the United States, people labelled or diagnosed with mental illness have the highest rates of unemployment, the highest rates of disproportionate incarceration, are most likely to be killed by police, and die 20 to 25 years prematurely. Most Americans do not want to work with someone with a mental illness and do not want someone with a mental illness marrying into their family. While most people diagnosed or labelled with a mental illness are able and willing to work, surveys of U.S. employers reveal that half are reluctant to hire someone with a past psychiatric history, approximately seven in 10 are reluctant to hire someone currently taking antipsychotic medications, and one in four employers say they would fire someone who had not disclosed a mental illness. People with mental illnesses are the

butt of jokes on late night television, scapegoated for gun violence and routinely demeaned at every level of American society.

**China Mills** talks about the weaponization of mental health – state violence, accountability, and justice. There are many ways to tell the story of Global Mental Health – it is manifold, and as it progresses it is reworked and made meaningful (or not). But its agenda – often set in the global North by a privileged few – tends to be diagnostic and treatment-based. In the dominant story, state and corporate violence – violent systems and institutions that distress people and make life unliveable – are often not part of the diagnosis. Root causes can get lost when distress is reframed as an individual symptom. But what about when

distress, pain and suicide are symptoms of state and corporate violence – violence which is slow, normalised, and which eludes simple cause and effect? Drawing on over a decade's work within and outside of global mental health, Mills discusses what happens when mental health is weaponised by the State (and other perpetrators of harm, including Big Business) to deny their responsibility in creating conditions that produce distress and to distance themselves from accountability. Mental health is not a single issue – it is produced by, and leaks into, multiple systems of oppression. She invites us to delve into some different stories of global mental health – stories of abolition and justice, stories that help us recognise existing, and dream of new, life-affirming infrastructures and ways of being that make life liveable.

Sat Nov 26 · 19:15 – 19:40 · SCREENING

## Faces of an Exhibition

Documentary by **Nina Wesemann** (Filmmaker, DE) and **Simon Reichel** (Filmmaker, DE).

Can art help reduce stigma towards illnesses like schizophrenia? In June 2021, the Pop-Up Institute brought together 10 people to work artistically on the topic of schizophrenia. The project lasted for one year. At the end, the work was publicly exhibited. The film *Faces of an Exhibition* follows the group through the creative process.

Sat Nov 26 · 20:00 – 21:30 · PANEL

## Art and Survivor Empowerment

**Marcello Lussana** (Sound Designer, Researcher, IT/DE), **Anika Krbetschek** (Artist, DE), **Dolly Sen** (Artist and Activist, UK). Moderated by **Lily Martin** (Researcher, Pop-up Institut, Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences, DE).

In order to achieve a more just and compassionate approach to mental health, it is necessary to learn to pay attention and develop a shared understanding of the individual experience of “madness”. This will consequently make it possible to develop better coping strategies for people living with mental health conditions. Artistic practices are an obvious way of making these conditions experienceable. At the same time, artistic practices can serve as a coping strategy in themselves. They not only give survivors an opportunity to process their personal experiences,

but can also be vehicles in the survivors' fight for social justice and self-empowerment. This will be illustrated through the work of the speakers on the panel. They present three approaches to artmaking, which are different in their format, style and thematic focus, but they are all deeply insightful, subversive and transformative.

The interdisciplinary project *Sentire* weaves the senses of hearing and feeling together by using sensors that connect movement and contact to sound. The textures, timbres and rhythms of a sound environment are transformed by the

interactive system of *Sentire* based on the distance and tactile encounters between two participants. In the summer of 2022, for the *mental – das Kunstfestival zu Schizophrenie*, the *Sentire* team developed a collaboration with people who experienced schizophrenia. For this project they recorded voices that the experienced hear in their acute phase. In this presentation, **Marcello Lussana** talks about the process of producing this work together. Through attentive listening, bodily movement, empathy and a slow and mindful approach, they all managed to transfer this complex experience into an art format. In order to convey the dynamic between the inner world of the people who experience hearing voices and their outer world trigger, the *Sentire* team created a participatory installation, where the audience could use the system to directly experience the connection between getting closer and influencing the generated sound.

The works by **Anika Krbetschek** explore the relationship between art, mental conditions and therapy. Having worked for a long time with art therapy, she curiously explores the connections between art and therapy, the meaning of their use, and asks whether an illness can be visible in an artwork. In her talk, she focuses on the process of artistic creation as a therapeutical, as well as

emancipatory process, and on the different aspects of working with art when the artist is also affected by different mental conditions. In this regard she looks at the potential of artwork to be educational, transformative, to create a social discourse out of an individual expression, and to promote healing for others.

The art practice of **Dolly Sen** addresses systemic violence and primarily critically targets the mental health care system in the UK, but her arguments could easily be translated to a wider global level. She talks about the multiple layers of injustice a person entering the mental health system will face, even more so if they come from a marginalised group. She relays how this has happened to her, and how usual and socially acceptable routes of challenging injustice make no impact, because any system's complaints process is still part of the system and any anger towards injustice will be pathologized. She recounts the epiphany she had at a placard protest about how to better defy wrongdoing and unfairness, which led to her using art in activism. She rounds off the talk by showing some examples of where she has subverted processes to question their power, and how she confronted institutional and governmental monsters using art, love, and rage.

Sat Nov 26 · 21:30 – 21:45 · CLOSING

**Tatiana Bazzichelli** (Artistic Director, Disruption Network Lab, IT/DE),  
**Elena Veljanovska** (Curator, Disruption Network Lab, MK/DE).