

1. There is no mountain between us.

☐ True ☐ False

2. “I don’t believe in poetry, nor do I believe in hate.”

This statement is (circle one):

Completely wrong 1 2 3 4 5 Very true

3. ☐ There is action.

☐ There is thought.

☐ There is wellness.

Which is: ☐ Neither ☐ Both

Disclaimer:

I’ve long been searching for that truth . . . The search for it drove me into these snowy mountains. And now I have it. My dream has granted it to me so clearly that I will always remember. Yes, I am overjoyed and filled with its warmth. My heart is beating strong and knows why. It beats not for purely physical reasons, the way fingernails grow on a corpse. It beats for human reasons and because my spirit is truly happy. The truth of my dream has refreshed me—better than port or ale, it courses through my veins like love and life, so that I may tear myself out of my dreaming sleep, which I know only too well can be fatal to my young life. Awake, awake! Open your eyes. Those are your limbs, your legs there in the snow. Pull yourself together and stand up!*

Signature:

Date:

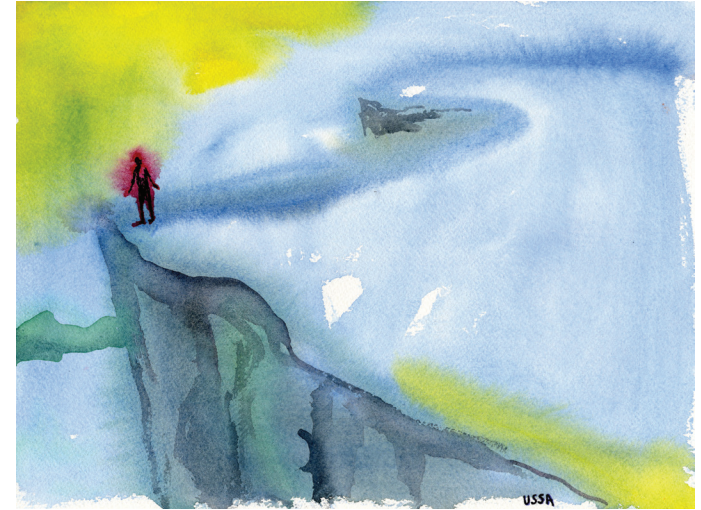
Who Believes in the Healing Power of Art?

Abigail Winograd

Who, these days, still believes in the healing power of art? With *Snow* and the *USSA 2012 Wellness Center*, Zachary Cahill undertakes a project in the spirit of romanticism in order to reconsider the healing effects of art. Radically anachronistic in its formulation, the exhibition approximates a turn-of-the-twentieth-century sanatorium somewhere in northern Europe, though neither the specific location nor date is significant. *Snow* draws on a variety of source material, including Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the Overlook Hotel from Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation (1980) of Stephen King's novel *The Shining* (1977), and the tradition of northern romantic painting, as exemplified by the work of Caspar David Friedrich (German, 1774–1840), and German expressionist painting, as exemplified by the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, 1880–1938). Stylistically, the *USSA 2012 Wellness Center* stands as an expression of and reaction to modern art historical moments—alternately and simultaneously employing the language of pop art, exploiting the visual immediacy and legibility of social realism, and drawing on the interactivity of relational aesthetics. Cahill's project also resuscitates the classical notion of the sublime, which affirms the simultaneity of ecstatic admiration and awe-inspiring terror in the face of divinity, immensity, or artistry that touches the soul. With these references as a guide, the *Wellness Center* examines the relationship between art and healing as it relates—not just to the individual—but to society as a whole.

Snow is the third in Cahill's series of exhibitions organized under the banner of the *USSA 2012* project—the title is an amalgamation of USSR and USA, though the resulting acronym has no inherent meaning. Previous iterations appeared as an orphanage and a gift shop, respectively. *USSA 2012*, which began in 2010, was born of the global economic crisis and the reverberations of the financial crash of 2008. Suddenly, discussions of health and prescriptions for recovery were everywhere. In a cultural landscape dominated by a fear of infection (toxic assets), recommendations for containment (austerity measures), and apocalyptic warnings of collapse (stock market free fall and the end of the Euro), Cahill conceived *USSA 2012* and the *Wellness Center* as arenas in which to explore the connections between art and wellness. The relationship between these two ideas is complicated despite the popularity of art created by the mentally ill, as well as art produced as therapy, sometimes conflated with outsider art and frequently associated, unfortunately, with “primitive art.” Given the fact that many artistic geniuses responsible for some of the greatest cultural achievements in history were created by individuals who battled extreme psychological

Zachary Cahill
The Future, 2014
Digital photograph of watercolor on Plexiglas
18 x 24 in. (46 x 61 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and USSA 2012



distress—Emily Dickinson (American, 1830–1886), Edvard Munch (Norwegian, 1863–1944), Friedrich Nietzsche (German, 1844–1900), and Vincent Van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890), just to name a few—it seems absurd to consider the prescribed distance between art and therapy in prevailing art historical discourse. Oddly enough, physical wellness has never suffered from the same stigma. In fact, the obsession with health and fitness is one of the defining features of the current cultural landscape.

The *Wellness Center* is an invitation to retreat and reflect—a vantage point from which to consider the requirements and conditions of health. Its visual language is heavily indebted to romanticism as it was expressed in painting, with its defining features of nostalgia and a biting sense of irony, both of which were reactions to the failures of the Enlightenment (the climate of crisis that inspired the romantic challenge to existing philosophy and artistic hierarchies was not dissimilar from the foment that provided the impetus for the *Wellness Center*). Romanticism extolled the virtues of art as a path to knowledge, touted its ability to unlock truths unreachable by philosophy, and maintained an abiding faith in its curative powers; the aesthetic encounter represented the very threshold of revelation. Essentially, the romantic view of art was optimistic about the ability of the image to embody spiritual and religious truth—an optimism missing from the cynical landscape of today.

The previous installments of *USSA 2012* relied heavily on sculptural forms and included little actual painting. Cahill's return to the canvas after a long hiatus is a recognition of the conceptual possibilities of painting. “I got interested in painting because it seemed to be an activity that made sense with a wellness center, something that



Zachary Cahill
 We Shall Paint the World in Wellness, 2014
 Digital photograph of watercolor on Plexiglas
 18 x 24 in. (46 x 61 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and USSA 2012

participants would do,” he explained. “And I thought if I could do a project like this, that I should participate.” After all, the *Wellness Center* is, at its heart, a confrontational proposition. What better way to increase our discomfort than to compound the skepticism surrounding art and therapy by using the most maligned and exalted medium in the history of art?

As a model, the *Wellness Center* draws heavily on the setting in which the Nobel Prize-winning author Thomas Mann staged *The Magic Mountain* (1924), his vast philosophical appraisal of pre-World War I Europe. The novel chronicles the story of Hans Castorp, a student and aspiring engineer from a respected German family, who goes on a three-week holiday to visit his cousin in a tubercular sanatorium, the Berghof, only to develop symptoms of the disease. As a result, he remains there for another seven years until the outbreak of the war. Atop the peaks of the Swiss Alps, removed from society and attempting to get well, Castorp encounters an extensive cast of characters who expose him to competing views on life, religion, and philosophy. The Berghof, nestled amongst the clouds, was a place suspended in time and history, where meaning could be reordered. Here Castorp was pulled between the forces of reason and humanism, as embodied by the Italian advocate of the Enlightenment, Ludovico Settembrini, and those of mysticism and irrationality, as embodied by Leo Naphta, the Marxist supporter of totalitarianism.

Mountains have always loomed large in the romantic imagination for their ability to afford the intrepid climber an Olympian perspective of the world. In the works of painters such as Friedrich, as well as Phillip Otto Runge (German, 1777–1810) and J. M. W. Turner (British, 1775–1851), the natural world was a manifestation of the divine. Therefore, the act of capturing its likeness on canvas was akin to an act of religious communion. (Mann attributes Castorp’s prosaic comportment to his being born of the flatlands; it is only in the mountains that he is able to perceive the world in all of its complexity.) Moreover, Mann chose the sanatorium, the institution on which the *Wellness Center* is based, because, like its sister institutions the clinic, the spa, and the prison, it was what the eminent sociologist, Erving Goffman deemed a total institution—a place apart, where individuals were removed from the rhythms and concerns of normal life and placed under the control of systems that governed every aspect of their existence. Capitulation, for Goffman, is the defining feature of the “total institution.” In a sanatorium, the voluntary submission of autonomy, self-control, and identity—a withdrawal with the promise of an eventual return to health, unless, of course, death should intervene—indicated an acknowledgment of illness. I would add the school and the museum to Goffman’s list, as there are certain features of the aforementioned institutions that bear a resemblance to these two formative environments. This last point may seem obvious yet the tools of the diagnosing physician in the nineteenth century were limited in their ability to identify disease. Therefore a diagnosis of tuberculosis was not a prerequisite for admittance to a tubercular sanatorium. This disconnect led to a paradoxical situation in which many patients entering a facility whose primary purpose was to cure tuberculosis may not have actually suffered from that particular malady. Often, confinement to a sanatorium was made on the recommendation of a physician for the treatment of ambiguous symptoms. This explains the incorporation of psychoanalysis in a curative regime, which included restrictions of diet, mandated periods of rest, and physician-approved exercises despite the absence of a connection between mental health and tuberculosis.

The Berghof was located in Davos, Switzerland (a municipality now synonymous with the global economy as it hosts the annual World Economic Forum). But where on the map of the twenty-first century can the *Wellness Center* be found? In its inspiration, the *Wellness Center* straddles the Atlantic Ocean from the Swiss Alps to the Colorado Rockies, where King’s novel *The Shining* famously equated the isolation of the mountain range with axe-wielding insanity. It is worth noting that the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, the inspiration for the Overlook, was built by Freelan Oscar Stanley for his wife who suffered from tubercular symptoms. Despite the disparate views on the benefits of isolation, Mann and King, as well as Kubrick, recognized the mountains as sites of reflection. For Mann, the Berghof provided a vantage point to reflect upon the nature of contemporary society. In *The Shining*, the stately, alpine elegance of the Overlook Hotel became the backdrop for the mental unraveling of Jack Torrance. King’s novel revealed the destructive violence that can hide beneath the veneer of placid domesticity. All truly terror-inducing

tales are frightening because there is truth located at their center, as the ghosts of the Overlook pull lose the threads of Jack's sanity so, too, do they reveal the unstable foundation of the values at the bedrock of American life.

Linguistically and stylistically, *USSA 2012* is situated between the East and the West (a possible reference to the aforementioned tug-of-war between reason and unreason in *The Magic Mountain*). In its engagement with the culture of advertising, the *Wellness Center* owes much to social realism and Soviet agitprop, the mandated artistic language of Soviet Russia, which often touted the value of health and wellness as necessary to the prosperity of the communist state. Though images of strapping young men wielding sickles and young women donning the red pioneer scarf are now nearly synonymous with Soviet-era aesthetics, the triumph of realism was the result of a hard-fought battle within the USSR between the values of abstraction and figuration to accurately convey the spirit of the revolution to the people. In the United States during the Great Depression and the years of Roosevelt's New Deal, social realism was an accepted and state-sponsored project, although it fell out of favor during the Cold War, due in no small part to the success of postwar abstract expressionism and the Soviet embrace of figuration. The enduring stigma attached to realism is, in part, the lingering result of the battles of the cultural Cold War, which pitted abstraction and democracy (USA) against realism and fascism (USSR). Despite its instant popularity with the general public, the almost universal rejection of pop art by cultural critics in the 1960s and 1970s, who viewed its embrace of figuration as a challenge to the victory of abstraction, was a result of this same conflict. In its relationship to the history of art, the *Wellness Center* is thus both a critique and expansion of modernism.

Still, we appear to be no closer to locating the *Wellness Center*. If it does not exist in a specific time or place, what is it? Is it the antidote for what ails us? Clearly, the *Wellness Center* is not part of the ordinary world. Nestled in the in-between-ness of the sanatorium, hovering in the otherworldly dimension of the mountains, straddling East and West, Cahill identifies a cathartic opacity. In its stubborn ambiguity, the *Wellness Center* separates itself from much of contemporary art by betraying a lack of faith in the explanatory power of art. It neither reflects the real world nor takes refuge in irony. Instead, it strikes a delicate balance, vacillating between genres: parody, in its moments of genuine humor; and horror, in the somewhat manic, anxious quality of its paintings. It is precisely this duality that captures the spirit of the sublime, which in its audacious conceptions and claims plants a seed of doubt in the contemporary viewer so unaccustomed to the grandiosity of this romantic notion. The misgivings engendered by claims to the sublime are similar to those that surround the language of healing. Struggling against the limitations placed upon art and artists, Cahill's insistence upon the remystification of art is an affirmation of the enduring value of uncertainty.



Zachary Cahill
What Does It Mean to Be Healthy Anymore?, 2014
 Acrylic on panel
 26 × 54 in. (66 × 137 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and USSA 2012

Chicago Works

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Born in 1973 in Johnson City, New York, Zachary Cahill is an interdisciplinary artist who received his MFA from the University of Chicago in 2007. Cahill's work will be included in the Eighth Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art in 2014. He has exhibited at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany; TONYs, New York; and the Smart Museum of Art and threewalls, both Chicago; among other institutions. In 2012, he participated in *The Retreat: A Position of Documenta (13)*, a residency at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada. He has written for a number of exhibition catalogues as well as *Mousse Magazine*, *Afterall*, and *frieze*, and is a regular contributor to *Artforum.com*. Cahill teaches in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago where he is also the Open Practice Committee Coordinator.

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