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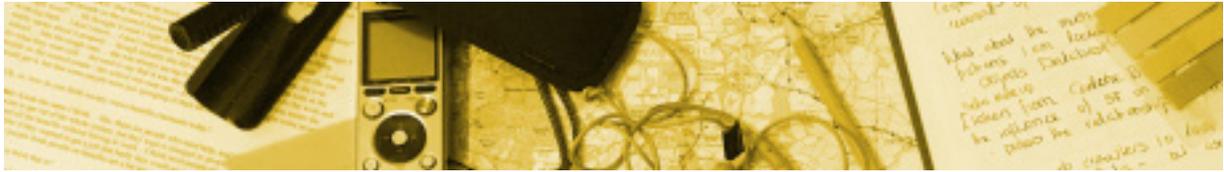
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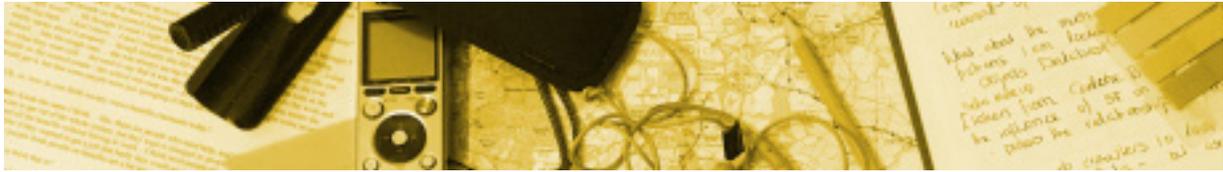
## **[Review] *Vital Bodies. Living with illness* by Charlotte Bates (2019).**

**Policy Press, 2019, 113 pp. (paperback)**

**Katalin Halász**

### **Abstract**

This book review discusses *Vital Bodies* by Charlotte Bates, a notable visual sociology study on the self-caring practices of twelve participants living with a chronic illness. The author masterfully engages with the sensorial capacities of a wide range of methods, including video diaries, stills, polaroids, drawings and contributes to the expansion of sensuous scholarship.

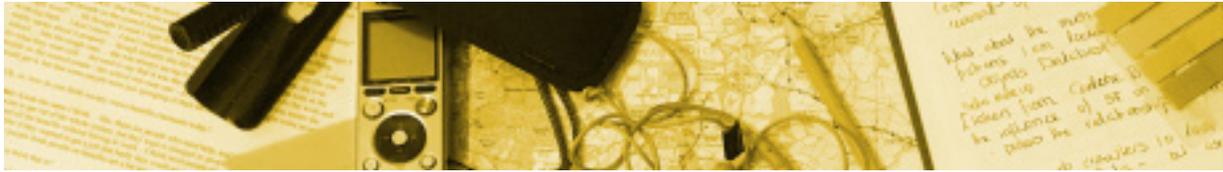


*Vital Bodies* is a remarkable addition to explorations of the sensuous dimensions of video and its integration into other sensory methods (Pink, 2008), and to Bates' own growing body of work on sensuous scholarship (2013, 2014, 2017). It provides a case study in the field (Stoller, 1997; Pink, 2009; Back and Puwar, 2013), a rich account of how to excavate video's qualities beyond the visual and the semiotic and work with its sensorial capabilities.

The book focuses on self-caring practices of twelve participants living with a chronic illness, on 'the rhythms and routines of everyday lives' (Bates, 2019, 87). Listening, as a bodily sensation and an act of care, is one of the key motives that runs through the book, not only in the descriptions of the ways in which the participants have learnt to listen to the needs of their bodies and look after them accordingly, but as an active engagement with their accounts from the readers themselves. Through this engaged listening that Bates and her participants require from the reader, it is possible to shift the research from a study on controlling diseased or ill bodies to a celebration of vital bodies that are being taken care of and listened to. The book carefully employs 'fluctuations' between control and care: ill and vital bodies move between sadness and joy, necessity and pleasure, vulnerability and strength.

The six chapters of the book are organised around two key themes. In the first three chapters, in Eat, Exercise and Sleep, the weight of these daily routines becomes palpable through their rhythms that structure participants' lives. The hours of mealtimes, physical exercise and sleep regulate activities into a rhythm, which is both a friendly tool in managing illness and an ill-fitting frame, in which bodies are forced to fit. While there are some notes on medical advice from physiotherapists or other health care providers, the book's key concern is with how the participants themselves have developed practices to care for their bodies. Their embodied intuitions and heightened physical awareness gained through illness enable the participants to use their bodies to their advantage instead of fighting against them.

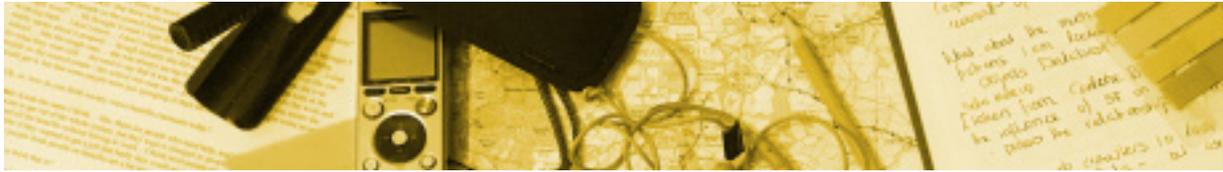
Video enabled the participants to convey some of this urgency and intensity to the researcher. Over a period of one week they recorded video diaries on an easy-to-use handycam capable of recording high resolution footage. The instructions given by Bates were short and included no technical information on composition, camera angles, timing, etc., apart from the suggestion that 'it is up to you whether you put yourself in the frame' (2019, 98). This allowed participants to experiment with different takes and filming techniques. As Bates writes in her methodological conclusion, the video diaries 'ranged from reality television to intimate personal diary, and from action shots to quiet reflections' (2019, 100). For Anna (one of the participants of the study) running is much more than just a daily routine, it is a physical and mental necessity and a self-healing practice. She has a complex relationship with running, captured in Bates' descriptions of her video diary. Anna wanted to express how running makes her feel 'fluid, light and free' (2019, 22) but the first time when she tucked the camera under her arm while running resulted in agitated footage. She then asked her friend to film



her running in the distance and decided to also record her running shoes as material reminders of her joy of running. Alongside interviews, journals, drawings, photographs and Bates' vivid writing, the video diaries compound to a multi-layered, intimate and affective account of the vitality of ill bodies. Through combining these methods, the researcher was able to be attentive to the ways in which the mundane, ordinary routines became multi-sensual rituals with their own bodily noises, social soundscapes, hidden and revealing subject positions, sensations, memories, dissonances, and personal experiences and emotions. As Bates notes, Anna's first attempts and apparent failure to record the fluidity of her running in itself is informative of the complex relationship of the footage to its maker and audience. And while Bates recognises that the resulting videos exert their own power, she is careful not to let them escape the research and be seen without the sociological analysis that frames them. And while the reader might find this well-argued, but not being able to watch the videos still frustrating, the 41 colour photographs offer an insight into the rich visual elements of the study.

(In)visibility is the second theme that runs through the last three chapters of *Vital Bodies*. Genes and organs, Feet and legs and Hands and hearts concern how illness is being made visible or hidden, how it flows through the material spaces of bodies, lives and worlds. These chapters draw attention to the discrepancies between society's and one's own idea of the body and its functionality. Control, care, pleasures and pains become entangled with the act of living and belonging, with creating connection to the world, and to one's own body. In its corporeality, the body is the primary surface to the world, and it can be both a 'fortress' and a 'prison' in the public realm that is reserved for healthy, able bodies (2019, 92).

The participants' accounts highlight the self-care that involves cultivating a sensitive attentiveness to the body and to the broader environments in which we live. Bates revisited some of her participants seven years after she conducted her original fieldwork. Each chapter ends with excerpts from the follow-up study and allows for reflection on the passage of time, a rare insight in a visual sociology study. We meet the young participants again, learn about how they became more settled into their lives with long-term partners and children, and how their illness has or hasn't changed over the years. This revisit also allowed them to reflect on the impact of being in the study. Their quotations, along with diary entries, stills, polaroids, drawings and thick descriptions of the various research encounters bring *Vital Bodies* to life.



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**Katalin Halász** works as an Associate Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University London and at Brunel University London. She is a visual sociologist interested in whiteness, affect and emotion, feminist and queer theories, and artistic research methods. She has staged a number of participatory and multimedia performances (I Love Black Men, UK, 2011; Freeing Up Shame, Brazil, 2012; The Blush Machine, Bolivia, 2013; The Chamber of White, Denmark, 2014) and curated the exhibitions Visualising Affect (UK, 2013) and The Future of Art is Urban-Artistic Research Practices and Methods in Social Sciences (UK, 2014).

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