

Fellows

Michael Cowan

BTWH/IFK_Junior Fellow

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Michael Cowan

PROJEKTTITEL

The Performative Production of Willpower around 1900

PROJEKTBESCHREIBUNG

As part of a broader investigation into the interactions between modernization, subjectivity and aesthetics around 1900, this project examines debates on the will, its "pathologies" and its potential "cures". Michael Cowan plans to focus in particular on a largely underresearched genre of turn-of-the-century medical literature: popular manuals on the training of the will. Marking the emergence of the modern industry of self-help literature, handbooks such as Reinhardt Gerling's "Gymnastik des Willens" (1906) sought above all to adapt their readers to the exigencies of modern life by combating the perceived passivity and idleness associated with neurasthenia (variously diagnosed as "Willensschwäche", "Willenslähmung", "Willenskrankheit" etc.). Drawing on Anson Rabinbach's definition neurasthenia as an "inverted work ethic", one can see such popular writings on will training – with their pervasive social-Darwinian rhetoric of the "Kampf ums Dasein" – as a key site for the struggle to produce the bodily and psychic conditions for participation in the new culture of urban modernity and capitalist entrepreneurship. In his research, Michael Cowan will focus in particular on these authors' attempts to develop the disciplinary potentials of hypnosis and create performative rituals for the production of willpower modeled on premodern spiritual exercises for the production of

belief, such as those of Thomas a Kempis and Ignatius of Loyola. This new focus on the will as the imaginary site for the construction of a modern subjectivity was hardly confined to the medical sphere. As the very term "Willensgymnastik" suggests, the search for psychological methods of will training went hand in hand with the rise of modern sports; many of the experiments in body culture, such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's program of "rhythmical gymnastics", were explicitly conceived as methods for cultivating pupils' willpower. Accordingly, this research will also involve an investigation into the interplay between medical literature on the will and the wider array of movements for bodily and cultural reform around 1900.

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