

Visualising relationships between the arts and health



The American photographer Irving Penn (1917–2009) described a good photograph as one “that communicates a fact, touches the heart and leaves the viewer a changed person for having seen it”. This photography feature bears eloquent testimony to the health initiatives around the world that are supported by the arts—initiatives that encompass a wide range of artistic practices and settings to promote the treatment and management of health conditions across various age groups and cultures—underscoring Penn’s triple formula of communication, connection, and change.

The 32 images shown here provide a photographic accompaniment to the work of the Jameel Arts & Health Lab–*Lancet* Series on the health benefits of the arts, in collaboration with WHO. These photographs exemplify some of the many stories of what can or could be achieved through creative approaches to health and wellbeing, while questioning long-held assumptions. Alongside each photograph is a description of the project and its context, as well as the curator’s summation. Many of the photographs focus on under-represented experiences and communities, where care is often provided in challenging circumstances. The pictures are from different periods in time and some have been previously published elsewhere.

In curating this photo essay, we have followed certain methodological criteria, as set out in the appendix. For this project we have focused particularly on three ways in which photography can contribute to revealing new ideas and enhance understanding. First, art as research, with the artist-investigator role deployed as a model for drawing new

insights, revealing under-represented experiences, and witnessing care within complex environments. Second, art as engagement, where photography is used to document arts activities that have been convened to support engagement, increase participation, or to foster interdisciplinary debates. Third, art as expression, where photography is defined as the medium for artistic expression, and can potentially be evaluated as a component of contemporary art discourse.

The primary curatorial premise has been to identify photographs that combine artistic quality and methodological rigour with genuine impact in the health and psychosocial spheres. Collectively, the photographs illustrate the impact of this vibrant and diverse field of activity. We are reminded that knowledge and meaning-making, like health treatment and wellbeing, come about through the collaborative endeavours of diverse disciplines.

The promotion and creation of good health, even more than the treatment of illness, demands that art and science work from and with each other. In an age shaped by visual images, this photo essay invites us to see how the arts, by illuminating and imagining the possibilities for intervention, can be truly transformative for health.

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See Online for appendix

Further reading

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Ioana Ofelia © Cluj Cultural Centre

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Song and Soft Embrace (2022), photographed by Ioana Ofelia at a Cultural Centre in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; courtesy of Ioana Ofelia for Cluj Cultural Centre

Project description

A group of mothers at Cluj Cultural Centre, Romania, taking part in a 10-week singing intervention designed to support women experiencing postpartum depression. The sessions provided a safe environment for mothers to share experiences and improve their emotional wellbeing.

Project context

Postpartum depression affects about one in seven women globally. Cluj Cultural Centre, a Romanian non-governmental organisation for culture and sustainable development, worked with the Central Denmark Region under the supervision of the WHO Regional Office for Europe on a project that sought to demonstrate the potential for music to help alleviate the symptoms of postpartum depression. 15 Romanian-speaking and Hungarian-speaking mothers took part in the Music and Motherhood project, facilitated by professional singing leaders. Led by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and based on research from the Centre for Performance Science—a collaboration between the Royal College of Music and Imperial College London in the UK—the project was informed by a programme developed by Breathe Arts Health Research. While showing the potential for music to have a role in addressing symptoms of postpartum depression, the project also explored how a clinically effective group-singing intervention could be adapted to different contexts, which was evidenced by its successful implementation in Denmark and Italy.

Curator's comment

Postpartum depression is a global health challenge, yet pharmaceutical treatment options can be rejected by mothers who worry that such medication can be secreted into breastmilk and have an impact on their baby. The Music and Motherhood intervention offers help with reducing postpartum depression symptoms, while also building social connections among participants, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose, and helping mothers bond with their infants. At the same time, the group singing sessions are essentially risk-free and accessible. In the words of one participant: "It was really incredible. Just a short intervention...that changed [our] perspective...it was like adding bubbles to still water."



©Evelina Rönnbäck/Clowns Without Borders and Clown Me In

Clown Me In (2023), photographed by Evelina Rönnbäck; Sabine Choucair leads a clowning workshop in a refugee camp in Kahramanmaraş, southern Türkiye; courtesy of Evelina Rönnbäck for Clowns Without Borders and Clown Me In

Project description

At a refugee camp in southern Türkiye, Sabine Choucair, Co-Founder of Clown Me In, leads a performative clowning workshop to help children build emotional resilience, process trauma, and foster connection through laughter and play. The initiative is part of a broader collaboration with Clowns Without Borders Sweden, supporting vulnerable communities globally.

Project context

About 3 million people were displaced by the 2023 earthquakes that devastated Türkiye and Syria; in early 2025, more than 600 000 people were still living in temporary housing. Clown Me In has trained over 50 clowns to provide art therapy and laughter in communities across Türkiye, Lebanon, and beyond, including Mexico, Palestine, and Brazil, while partner organisation Clowns Without Borders (CWB) Sweden has worked in crisis zones, including Palestine and DR Congo. These two organisations have brought their experience of working in these differing contexts to a project focusing on the psychosocial rehabilitation of children in crisis zones. In only 10 days, an all-female team brought laughter and joy to over 3400 people across Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, and Islahiye in Türkiye. The methodology is based on the belief that creative interventions can provide emotional relief and foster social connections, especially among displaced and vulnerable populations. Theatre, music, and storytelling can also enable participants to build a supportive network beyond the workshop.

Curator's comment

This project offers a compelling example of how arts-based interventions can function as effective tools for psychosocial support in displacement settings. Previous studies have shown that medical clowning reduces stress and improves outcomes for children. To build on this, the Jameel Arts & Health Lab and Red Noses International have launched a study to assess how clowning can support displaced children's recovery and resilience in humanitarian settings.

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Giving Blood at the Museum (2021), photographed by the Museum of Fine Arts in Orléans, France; courtesy of Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans

Project description

Civilians donating blood at the Orléans Museum of Fine Arts as part of a collaboration with the Etablissement Français du Sang (French Blood Establishment). This initiative offers blood donors the opportunity to donate within art-museum contexts in France, seeking to increase participation in blood donation while providing opportunities for cultural engagement.

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City of Orléans. Don de sang. 2021. <https://www.orleans.fr/actualites/detail/don-de-sang> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Project context

Since 2021, the Orléans Museum of Fine Arts has partnered with the Etablissement Français du Sang (French Blood Establishment) to host blood drives in art galleries. Here, in the museum's Old Masters gallery, blood donation chairs were set up alongside medical equipment for blood donation. The initiative sought to enhance the experience for the individual, while addressing the issue of blood shortages, by offering donors a peaceful environment in which to donate, surrounded by great works of art. During the monthly donation drives, participants are given playful, art-themed prompts to engage with and help them to relax. This unique approach, combining health care with cultural engagement, has drawn a good response, with all appointment slots filled since its inception.

Curator's comment

The aim of offering blood donation opportunities in museum galleries is to create a serene environment for a procedure that can be relatively distressing for the donor. The Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Orléans has been running these blood donation sessions in the halls of the museum since 2021. The idea was to provide a reciprocal offer to donors, in a more pleasant setting than a truck or administration corridor. The project was initiated by the French Blood Establishment, which noted a considerable and steady increase in registrations and collections. Many of the donors, including medical staff, were coming through the museum's doors for the first time; their experience was overwhelmingly positive. This exemplary experiment has now been repeated in other French museums and provides an inspiring model for cities and museums around the world.



Universe of Brains (2024), photographed by Sydelle Willow Smith at a rural school in San Juan, Argentina; courtesy of Sydelle Willow Smith/Makhulu Media on behalf of Atlantic Institute

Project description

Puppetry performance promoting brain health at a school in Argentina. As part of the Universe of Brains project, this initiative aims to increase global public awareness of the importance of brain health throughout life.

Project context

Universe of Brains is part of a series of extensive engagement and education programmes centred on the BrainLat Institute at the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez in Santiago, Chile, that seek to help people make healthier decisions throughout their lives. The project was informed by an evidence-based health communication initiative, My Brain Robbie, led by neurologist and researcher Eléonore Bayen, Professor of Medicine at Sorbonne University, France, and supported by the Global Brain Health Institute to produce teaching packs and animations. The people who lead the project in Argentina adapted the education model, embracing local vernacular and culturally familiar entertainment traditions. They transformed the original animation into a touring puppet show, making the resources accessible to children in areas where non-communicable disease intersects with poverty.

Curator's comment

The arts have a vital role in health communication by translating complex concepts into accessible, emotional, and engaging forms of expression. In this project, storytelling, visual imagery, and performance help to promote brain health and foster empathy, understanding, and early dialogue around mental and neurological wellbeing.

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©Zeina Daccache/Catharsis-Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy

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Johar... Up in the Air (2016), photographed by Patrick Baz in Roumieh Prison, Beirut, Lebanon; courtesy of Zeina Daccache/Catharsis-Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy

Project description

A drama therapy project inside Lebanon's largest prison, Roumieh Prison in Beirut, where men in the prison participated in a powerful production of Zeina Daccache's play *Johar... Up in the Air*. The performance explored the experiences of residents living with mental illness and serving life sentences, using theatre as a means to amplify marginalised voices and call for legal reform in Lebanon.

Project context

Directed by Zeina Daccache and produced by Catharsis, the Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy, the play *Johar... Up in the Air* explored the connection between mental health and incarceration through monologues, songs, and scenes created by some of the men in Roumieh Prison, including those with mental health disorders or who had been incarcerated as a result of having been pronounced to have a mental illness. Other residents not suffering from mental illness played the part of their fellow residents in a project that highlighted the need for improved mental health services in Lebanese prisons. The project helped to improve relationships between prison staff and residents and contributed to efforts for prison reforms, such as the implementation of a 2002 law reducing prison sentences for good behaviour. Since the play was first performed, two draft laws aimed at improving mental health conditions in Lebanese prisons have been submitted to parliament.

Curator's comment

The arts offer a vital means of expression and healing within settings of forced confinement, where opportunities for self-reflection and human connection are otherwise constrained. Creative practices such as visual art, theatre, and writing can enable justice system-involved individuals to process trauma, reframe identity, develop meaningful relationships, and envisage alternative futures. By fostering agency, empathy, and dignity, the arts can challenge punitive norms and support more humane and restorative approaches to justice.



© National Arts in Health Week, Lagos Nigeria

Let's Move! (2022), photographed by a volunteer during National Arts in Health Week Nigeria, Lagos, Nigeria; courtesy of National Arts in Health Week, Lagos Nigeria

Project description

A professional dancer leading a group of children and adolescents from low-income families in a performance of street dance in an urban public space, as part of National Arts in Health Week Nigeria, where street dance has become a pop-culture phenomenon.

Project context

Street dance, which is particularly popular in Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya, can play a part in supporting children's mental health and emotional wellbeing, as this unique opportunity for children from low-income families to explore dance and movement in a choreographed way demonstrated. In many countries, formal education systems are assisted by informal arts programmes that focus on social connection and related psychosocial benefits. In Nigeria, where the enrolment rate in elementary schools is 68.3%, with an average of 51 pupils per class, and there is a completion rate of 54.4% in lower secondary schools, street dance has been shown to contribute to increased academic enrolment and consequent educational improvement.

Curator's comment

Engagement in dance serves as a vital channel for children and adolescents, particularly those with limited access to resources that facilitate their potential development. Through structured mentoring and exemplification of positive role models, dance can empower youths to cultivate essential life skills. This process not only enhances their emotional resilience but also lays the groundwork for a future characterised by optimism and fulfilment. Furthermore, the arts function as a medium of cultural exchange and social interaction, fostering community engagement and inclusivity.

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© Ahmed Alghariz/Camps Breakerz

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Camps Breakerz (2023), photographed by Ahmed Alghariz in an urban public space in Gaza, Palestine; courtesy of Ahmed Alghariz for Camps Breakerz

Project description

A young boy performs a breakdance move in a refugee camp in Gaza as part of the Camps Breakerz Crew, an initiative bringing breakdancing workshops to refugee camps and schools across Gaza, where children face the daily impact of war, poverty, famine, and restrictions on their movement.

Project context

The Camps Breakerz initiative, which uses dance as a tool to support mental health, build peer networks, and provide moments of freedom and joy in an environment shaped by instability, emerged from the lived experience of its founders, Mohamed Ghraiz and Ahmed Alghariz. As breakdancers who grew up in Gaza, they used hip-hop culture as a way to process trauma and build community. Their workshops, which reach more than 300 children annually, are based on a grassroots understanding of Gaza's humanitarian crisis. Living in one of the world's most densely populated and politically restricted areas, many children in Gaza have witnessed violence first-hand and suffer from chronic stress, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms. Research has shown that group-based physical activities can reduce these symptoms, particularly in post-conflict and refugee settings. Camps Breakerz explores this connection by facilitating accessible, culturally relevant dance sessions, with observed improvements in emotional expression, cooperation, and social trust among participants.

Curator's comment

Camps Breakerz is a powerful testament to the role of the arts in times of conflict. In places like Gaza, where children are growing up under the weight of trauma, war, and uncertainty, creative expression becomes a lifeline. This project shows how something as seemingly simple as a breakdancing workshop can offer emotional and psychological support. Beyond the physical benefits of movement and sport, these gatherings foster resilience, social connection, and collective healing. They create moments of joy, strength, and solidarity amid the conflict and chaos.



Humayun Memon/©BrainSPACE

Wreaths of Resilience (2024), photographed by Humayun Memon at a hospital in Karachi, Pakistan; courtesy of BrainSPACE

Project description

Henna design in the shape of a wreath is applied to the head of a young patient with cancer in Karachi's Indus Hospital, Pakistan, as part of a collaborative workshop celebrating the children's courage.

Project context

BrainSPACE's project Wreaths of Resilience, conceived and conducted by Fatin Khalil and artistically executed by Samia Younus, was delivered in partnership with Kolachi Mehndi Henna Healing Arts. It offered children with cancer a creative, uplifting experience at Karachi's Indus Hospital and Health Network, one of Pakistan's largest free hospitals, by focusing on the creative and symbolic application of intricate henna designs in the shape of wreaths, representing the children's courage and celebrating them. The workshop combined traditional body art with mind-body practices, such as breathwork, mental reframing, hope enhancement, and emotional support, while the tactile nature of applying henna was shown to have a meditative, therapeutic effect on the participants.

Curator's comment

This image celebrates the use of henna art as a culturally rooted, therapeutic practice that can foster connection and emotional resilience in health-care settings. Traditionally used in ceremonial and communal gatherings, the tactile and meditative process of applying henna can offer those facing severe health challenges a moment of creative self-expression, sensory engagement, and social bonding. In the context of arts and health, henna art serves not only as a temporary adornment but also as a visible symbol of strength, hope, and belonging, transforming the body into a canvas for resilience.

Related reading

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The AIDS Quilt (1987), photographed by Jean-Louis Atlan in an urban public space in Washington, DC, USA; Jean-Louis Atlan/Sygma via Getty Images

Project description

The AIDS Memorial Quilt, a vast collaborative artwork with over 50 000 panels, was displayed on the National Mall in Washington, DC, USA. It served as a powerful expression of collective mourning, with each panel honouring an individual lost to AIDS-related illness.

Project context

The AIDS Memorial Quilt served as a form of activist art that challenged widespread political indifference and media silence around the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Each square, created by loved ones, friends, or community members, represents a life lost. Displayed in major public spaces, including Washington, DC, and San Francisco, USA, the quilt brought private grief into the public sphere and became a central symbol in the fight for visibility, funding, and dignity. It sought to humanise the epidemic through personal storytelling, turning statistics into individual names and faces. Launched in 1985 by activist Cleve Jones and the NAMES Project Foundation, the quilt is one of the world's largest community folk art projects, now comprising more than 50 000 panels. Research into public health communication and memorialisation has shown that large-scale participatory art can influence public perception and policy; the Memorial Quilt remains a seminal example, used in education, advocacy, and commemoration efforts worldwide.

Curator's comment

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is one of the most powerful examples of collective art used for public health advocacy, a poignant symbol of protest making the human cost of the epidemic unignorable amid political inaction. At a time when policy makers were paralysed by prejudice and inaction, the AIDS Memorial Quilt visualised and personalised the human toll of the HIV/AIDS crisis in a way that data alone could not. The process of making these quilts became an act of mourning, resistance, remembrance, and healing. Each handcrafted panel carries personal sorrow and love, breaking through stigma and provoking empathy. This act transformed grief into activism and ultimately changed policy.

Related reading

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©The Ona Iwosan Foundation for Art Ltd/GTE

The Art of Healing (2022), photographed by Jochi Session in Lagos, Nigeria; courtesy of The Ona Iwosan Foundation for Art Ltd/GTE

Project description

Nigerian artist Olumide Onadipe works on a mural in the Male Psychiatric Unit of Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Nigeria, as part of a series of arts-led transformations of clinical environments.

Project context

This project was part of The Art of Healing (TAOH) initiative at Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) in Nigeria. TAOH, in partnership with Hospital Rooms UK, has completed five murals in mental health wards, transforming the spaces into uplifting environments. Drawing on research linking the viewing of murals with workplace belonging, perceived quality of care, and wellbeing, these interventions were designed to improve mental health through art, while fostering a sense of community within the hospital. Local and international artists led monthly workshops to explore various media, helping patients, staff, and families find emotional relief in a homely environment.

Curator's comment

The hospital environment, often perceived as sterile and sombre, can be reimagined into a more therapeutic and welcoming space. For patients undergoing long-term admissions, the physical landscape of care settings can substantially impact mental health outcomes, alleviating feelings of despair and social isolation. The use of evidence-based design principles and visual art have a role in helping to transform hospital facilities into nurturing environments that foster a sense of wellbeing and community.

Related reading

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Movement is thy Mantra (2019), photographed by Digitally in a performing arts centre in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; courtesy of Vonita Singh

Project description

Dr Vonita Singh and caregivers engage people with Parkinson's disease in Kathak dance moves. This captures a moment from *Still Dancing*, a dance-theatre production where individuals with Parkinson's perform alongside professional dancers to the rhythms of Kathak, a classical Indian dance form.

Project context

Conceptualised by Dr Vonita Singh, and written and directed by Sanjeev Dixit of Third Half Theatre, *Still Dancing* premiered in The Junction performing arts space in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in 2019 with the objective of increasing public awareness of Parkinson's disease. The production has since played to packed houses in United Arab Emirates and India, with plans for global tours. Inspired by her experience as a caregiver for her father, Vonita, founder of Movement Mantra, uses mindful movement practices to support people with Parkinson's disease, thereby helping maintain motor and non-motor health and demonstrating how dance can empower individuals to overcome physical, emotional, and social challenges. The production, based on the true-life story of her father, highlights challenges faced by people living with Parkinson's disease, such as slowness, tremors, hypomimia (reduced facial expression), micrographia (diminished handwriting), mood swings, and hallucinations, and introduces the artistic and aesthetic elements of dance as a way to help alleviate some impacts of the disease and improve the overall quality of life.

Curator's comment

This image highlights the therapeutic potential of dance in supporting brain health and overall wellbeing for individuals living with neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease. By engaging multiple sensory pathways—visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic—dance can help improve motor coordination, emotional expression, and social connection. The rhythmic structure and embodied storytelling inherent in this classical Indian art form offer participants a resource to cope with the physical and cognitive challenges often associated with Parkinson's disease. Projects like *Still Dancing* demonstrate how culturally rooted movement practices can foster resilience, reduce isolation, and enhance quality of life for people with neurological conditions.

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The effect of Kathak dance movement on balance and gait in Parkinson's disease: an experimental study. *J Physiother Res* 2022; 12: e4175



©Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre and Saltoun Gallery

Jo Spence wearing a helmet (1982), from The Picture of Health?, photographed by Jo Spence in collaboration with Terry Dennett and Maggie Murray; courtesy of Jo Spence Memorial Archive, The Image Centre and Saltoun Gallery

Project description

Self-portrait by photographer Jo Spence, taken during her treatment for breast cancer as part of a series of self-portraits that reveal the complex interplay of identity, health, and societal pressures

Project context

Jo Spence (1934–92), a photographer active in the 1980s, explored the personal and political dimensions of illness by asking, "How can a camera help us when we're sick?" She began her career as a commercial photographer before moving on to documentary and therapeutic photography during the 1970s. She co-founded Photography Workshop Ltd with Terry Dennett and helped to establish the Hackney Flashers art collective and other groups. After a diagnosis of cancer in 1982 she focused predominantly on illness and systems of health care. Her foregrounding of photography as a way for people to own the narratives of their illness was a precursor to the greater emphasis in medical practice on patient voice. Much of her work, including the series *A Picture of Health?*, critically examined her illness. She responded creatively to a subsequent diagnosis of leukaemia with *The Final Project*, continuing to explore themes of illness and self-representation until her death in 1992.

Curator's comment

Spence's work points to the roles of art as creative enquiry, exploration, and research, sometimes highlighting concerns before they become mainstream practice: a centuries-old role for art as maker of health.

Related reading

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Roel Foppen/©Stichting Ambulance Wens

A Dying Wish (2015), photographed by Roel Foppen in Amsterdam, Netherlands; courtesy of Roel Foppen for Stichting Ambulance Wens

Project description

A woman who is terminally ill looks at a late self-portrait by the 17th-century artist Rembrandt at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, Netherlands. This visit was made possible by the Dutch non-profit organisation Stichting Ambulance Wens Nederland (Ambulance Wish Foundation).

Project context

Established in 2007 by Kees Veldboer, a former ambulance driver, the Stichting Ambulance Wens Nederland (Ambulance Wish Foundation) offers people who are terminally ill moments of joy in their last days by creating opportunities for them to fulfil their final wishes. The Foundation operates in numerous countries to provide even the most frail with meaningful experiences in the final stage of their life. More than 270 medically trained volunteers have fulfilled nearly 24 000 wishes, including visits to exhibitions, family reunions, and nature trips. The programme echoes the learning of palliative care programmes that integrate psychological and spiritual care alongside pain and symptom relief. This initiative points to a broader approach to the role of museums and their contributions to societal health and wellbeing.

Related reading

Stichting Ambulance Wens. Home. 2025. <https://www.ambulancewens.nl/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Curator's comment

End-of-life care accounts for almost a quarter of global health-care spending. Such care is often reduced to clinical interventions that overlook the emotional and existential dimensions of dying. In ageing societies, we are reminded that families dealing with death need more than only symptom relief, they need opportunities for meaning-making and connection. The arts historically served these needs, but in modern health-care systems they are frequently sidelined. This image showcases their importance and reminds us that the quality of the end of life is not solely biological: it is profoundly human.



©Heath Reed/Sheffield Hallam University, in partnership with The University of Sheffield

The Head-Up Collar, designed in a university research centre to alleviate neck weakness in patients with motor neuron disease (2015), photographed by Heath Reed in Sheffield, UK; courtesy of Heath Reed for Sheffield Hallam University, in partnership with The University of Sheffield

Project description

The Head-Up Collar is an innovative cervical orthosis designed to alleviate neck weakness in patients with motor neuron disease. Developed by Sheffield Hallam University working with Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, it provides a highly positive example of collaborative and interdisciplinary research between creatives and health-care professionals.

Project context

Developed over 24 months with funding from the UK National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Invention for Innovation (i4i) programme, the Head-Up Collar, a patented class 1 medical device for supporting neck movement in people living with motor neuron disease, is now in use at 25 National Health Service (NHS) trusts in the UK and available globally. Through participatory design workshops, people living with motor neuron disease, their caregivers, clinicians, and designers collaborated to create a flexible, supportive neck collar. This co-designed medical device shows the power of interdisciplinary research in creating practical, patient-centred health-care solutions that enhance quality of life for individuals with neurodegenerative conditions.

Curator's comment

This project, providing an innovative solution to a clinical care challenge, has been widely adopted within the UK's NHS and distributed globally. As a case-study it offers important evidence of the advantage of design-led methodologies when applied to health contexts, embedding a genuinely patient-centred, collaborative approach to design throughout its conceptualisation, development, and realisation. A non-hierarchical attitude to understanding led to an intervention that not only provides improvements to health outcomes for people living with terminal conditions, but also profound enhancements to patient dignity, wellbeing, and independence. This project's approach, which strategically engages stakeholders throughout research programmes, has led to the shaping of government policy, the commissioning of interventions within health, and the extension of commercial markets.

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Lab4Living. Head-Up: developing a novel cervical orthosis for neck weakness. Lab4Living, Sheffield Hallam University. <https://lab4living.org.uk/projects/head-up/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)



Traffic culture (2011), a mime artist helps a woman across a street, to encourage better civility among drivers and pedestrians (2011) photographed by Ariana Cubillos in an urban public space in Caracas, Venezuela; Associated Press/Alamy

Project description

On this pedestrian crossing a mime artist guides a woman across a street in Caracas, Venezuela, to encourage better interaction between drivers and pedestrians in a creative initiative to reduce traffic fatalities.

Related reading

Mockus A. The art of changing a city. *The New York Times*. July 16, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/17/opinion/the-art-of-changing-a-city.html> (accessed sept 12, 2025)

Cole A. Mimes directing traffic in Bogotá had surprisingly loud impacts. *Atlas Obscura*. March 4, 2025. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/traffic-mimes-of-colombia> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Project context

In an attempt to improve traffic safety, Carlos Ocariz, when he was Mayor of Sucre in the eastern part of Caracas, Venezuela, turned to mime artists, who humorously shamed reckless drivers while applauding courteous ones. In so doing, he was following the example of Antanas Mockus, former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia. Facing corruption in the traffic police force and dangerous roads, Mockus disbanded the service and retrained some traffic police officers as mime artists. The mayor's audacious approach exemplified how creative, non-confrontational methods could bring about societal change. Using theatrical techniques, the mime artists were a key element in transforming Bogotá's chaotic traffic culture, helping to reduce fatalities by 50% and easing gridlock. This public education campaign is now studied globally as an innovative strategy for civic reform and traffic management—an example of a creative approach to tackling problems where health issues intersect with various other challenging issues.

Curator's comment

This image captures the radical imagination at the heart of public health innovation. By reassigning authority from enforcement to performance, the mime programme in Caracas reframed traffic safety as a shared cultural responsibility. Theatricality becomes a tool for empathy and behaviour change, highlighting how humour, play, and dignity can disrupt harmful norms and save lives: a powerful example of the arts redefining civic space and social contracts.



©Michael Koon Boon Tan

Dancing with Dad (2012), photographed by Michael Koon Boon Tan in Singapore; courtesy of Michael Koon Boon Tan

Project description

A tender moment, captured at home, between a son and his father living with progressive supranuclear palsy. This image is from *Dancing With Dad*, an installation that intimately explores themes of caregiving, love, and resilience, created by an artist caring for his father throughout his diagnosis and journey.

Project context

Progressive supranuclear palsy is a neurodegenerative disease that affects mobility, speech, and vision. Caring for individuals with the condition is emotionally, as well as medically, complex. Through photography, text, and sculptures, the artist-caregiver shares his emotional journey and invites us to reflect on levels of care invisible to formal services. Inviting viewers to consider how artistic expression can deepen our understanding of illness, the work bridges the fields of medicine, medical humanities, and art. Over 4 years, Michael Koon Boon Tan found solace in making art, but he also used art as a way to process his experience as a caregiver. The installation serves as a totem of liberation and a reflection on the healing power of creativity. If life is a dance where the music can change dramatically, how can we adapt?

Curator's comment

This intimate moment between caregiver and parent as they move in synchrony opens a window into a deeply personal space where creativity becomes both a coping mechanism and a form of communication. There is something very human and healing about turning to the arts in times of uncertainty, and everyday gestures such as this dance lead us to a quiet but profound reflection on how the arts support care in ways beyond medical intervention.

Related reading

Mindful-compassion art therapy for dementia care (MCAT-DC): a waitlist RCT. Ageing Research Institute for Society and Education (ARISE), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. <https://www.ntu.edu.sg/arise/research-focus/social-integration-and-education/mindful-compassion-art-therapy-for-dementia-care-%28mcat-dc%29-a-waitlist-rct> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Tan WJ, Lim XYH, Lee T, Wong SC, Koh HJ, Yeo D. Enhancing the caregiving experience of family care partners in Singapore through an arts programme for persons with dementia: an exploratory study. *Aging Ment Health* 2022; **26**: 1942–48



Keith Haring mural in the lobby of NYC Health + Hospitals/Woodhull (2023; mural 1986), photographed by Nicholas Knight in New York, USA; courtesy of Nicholas Knight

Project description

Mural in the lobby of NYC Health + Hospitals/Woodhull at Woodhull Medical Centre, gifted in 1986 by artist Keith Haring (1958–90) who believed his art should be accessible to everyone.

Project context

Since the 1980s, artist Keith Haring's bold, cartoonish, and graffiti-like style has profoundly influenced art makers and audiences. Through his work he advocated for children's rights and spoke out against social ills. In 1988, when diagnosed with AIDS, he created the Keith Haring Foundation to support HIV/AIDS organisations and children's initiatives. He died on Feb 16, 1990 at the age of 31 years. Haring believed strongly in making his art accessible, valuing the educational and life-enhancing impact of his work as much as its artistic or decorative application. The importance of hospitals' architectural environment in terms of health-positive practice has been reinforced by neuro-aesthetics and international comparative studies. Hospital architecture is typically functional; in this setting people can be made to feel welcome or alienated simply through the selection of paint colour, pattern, and imagery on walls. Here Haring's mural transforms the lobby of a hospital into a joyful space.

Curator's comment

Haring was not only one of the most iconic artists of his time, he was also deeply committed to health advocacy. After his AIDS diagnosis in the late 1980s, he used his art as a way to speak openly about illness, stigma, and compassion. This mural is a striking example of how art can bring joy, colour, and meaning into health-care spaces. Hospitals are often designed for efficiency, not emotion. But they are also places of vulnerability, connection, and care. Haring's mural reminds us that healing involves more than medicine; it is about the environment, the mood, and the moments of humanity we create for one another. Through bold lines and playful figures, this work transforms a clinical space into one of energy, dignity, and life.

Related reading

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Karnik M, Printz B, Finkel J. A hospital's contemporary art collection: effects on patient mood, stress, comfort, and expectations. *HERD* 2014; 7: 60–77



©Antoine d'Agata/Magnum Photos/courtesy of the artist

Virus (Lockdown) (2020), photographed by Antoine d'Agata in Paris, France; courtesy of Antoine d'Agata for Magnum Photos

Project description

One of a series of artworks the photographer produced through thermal imaging technology, to visualise the “essence of humanity” in his documentation of France’s streets and hospitals at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Project context

The photographer Antoine d'Agata's use of the thermal imaging camera—initially in documenting religious rituals in Paris, France, following the Bataclan attacks in 2018—reduces people to heat sources, stripping away cultural specifics and revealing a shared human essence. d'Agata's project exists as a subjective addition to the record of a historical event as well as a component within the context of an ongoing reflective art practice. This series of images underscores the artist's existential approach to photography, where creativity and moral responsibility are intertwined in his efforts to capture the intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the artist this was not a time for reflection but action, driven by a strong sense of responsibility to document the crisis. A quotation by the novelist Henry James (1843–1916) from his short story *The Middle Years* (1893) resonated with him deeply during this difficult period: “We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”

Curator's comment

This artwork blurs the boundaries between art practice and health communication, using thermal imaging to reflect the emotional and physical intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most significant global health crisis in our lifetime. By stripping away visual identity, Antoine d'Agata reveals a shared human vulnerability, positioning the artist as both witness and moral actor, offering an alternative historical record, one that registers the psychological atmosphere of crisis as urgently as clinical data captures the physical impacts of COVID-19.

Related reading

VIRUS, Antoine d'Agata. MEM. 2022. https://mem-inc.jp/artists_e/dagata_e/virus/ (accessed Sept 8, 2025)



©David Cotterrell/produced with support from the Wellcome Collection

Sightlines I (2009), photographed by David Cotterrell in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; courtesy of David Cotterrell, produced with support from the Wellcome Collection

Project description

Trauma surgery in a British military field hospital in Helmand, Afghanistan, captured as part of a photographic series documenting, without restrictions, the contemporary UK military care pathway, raising professional and public awareness internationally of the ethical and practical complexities of militarised health care.

Project context

As Professor of Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, over several years David Cotterrell researched militarised and civilian contexts in Afghanistan and the UK. A major aim of the research was to identify the ethical and practical challenges of medicine within conflict environments, using recorded testimony, artefacts, artworks, and analyses. Living among medics at Camp Bastion and forward operating bases in Helmand province, Afghanistan, Cotterrell observed medical procedures conducted from point of injury to strategic aeromedicine. In 2008, he interviewed soldiers, civilians, academics, and medical professionals at Afghan military hospitals, care facilities of non-governmental organisations, and local medical facilities. The following year, back in the UK, he photographed and recorded interviews with those he had previously met in Afghanistan, documenting aeromed arrivals and handovers to treatment centres, including Queen Elizabeth and Selly Oak Hospitals in Birmingham. The research highlighted a lack of opportunity for soldiers recovering from life-changing injuries to reconstruct the narrative of their experiences, and led to the creation of briefing materials and patient diaries that helped to raise awareness of the care pathway, as well as a shift in the regulatory framework for journalistic censorship, enabling better understanding of traumatic experience.

Curator's comment

Artists have a capacity to challenge boundaries of access, knowledge, and narratives. This project demonstrated the potential for field research, non-standard methodologies, and the ambiguous roles of artists to enable insights that might be denied to journalists, historians, clinicians, and others. The project presented the artist as witness, acknowledging subjectivity while also challenging the restrictions that constrained conventional reporting. Acting as trusted independent observer, the artist was able to reveal perspectives that had been obstructed, challenge the disempowerment of patients in owning their own narratives, and raise difficult societal questions that had been suppressed.

Related reading

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©Dr Maitri Gopalakrishna

Positively Shameless (2017), photographed by T T Venkatesh in Bengaluru, India; courtesy of Dr Maitri Gopalakrishna

Project description

A woman performs “the moment before the flashback” in *Positively Shameless*, a therapeutic theatre performance addressing childhood sexual trauma, co-developed by participants in a drama therapy group led by Dr Maitri Gopalakrishna.

Project context

The arts have a unique power to disrupt stigma by giving form to experiences that are often silenced or hidden. *Positively Shameless* emerged from a 12-week drama therapy process developed as a therapeutic intervention for adult women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. By moving from the private space of therapy to the public stage, *Positively Shameless* sought to provoke dialogue and challenge stigma. Initiated as part of Maitri Gopalakrishna's PhD research at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India, the project evolved into a public performance, enacted multiple times in India and abroad, that explores the socio-political roots of trauma. Directed by Maitri Gopalakrishna and Shabari Rao, the project was co-developed with Vijji Chari, Kavya Bose, Sharanya Iyer, Shilpa Waghmare, and Sathyam AP and bridges artistic, therapeutic, and social engagement.

Curator's comment

According to UNICEF, more than 370 million girls and women—nearly one in eight worldwide—experienced rape or sexual assault before the age of 18 years, rising to one in five when non-contact sexual violence is included. In the context of childhood sexual abuse, creative expression allows survivors to reclaim their narratives, challenge shame, and make the invisible visible. More broadly, art has been used to confront stigmas surrounding mental illness, HIV/AIDS, disability, gender and sexual identity, addiction, incarceration, discrimination, migration, and chronic or neurodivergent conditions. By inviting emotional engagement, amplifying marginalised voices, and fostering collective witnessing, the arts provoke dialogue, cultivate empathy, and open space for healing, resistance, and social transformation.

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David Lan/©The Walk Productions

Little Amal (2023), photographed by David Lan for The Walk Productions at the Suchiate River at the border of Mexico and Guatemala; courtesy of The Walk Productions

Project description

Little Amal, a 12-foot puppet of a 10-year-old Syrian refugee child, crosses the Rio Grande on the border between the USA and Mexico as part of her global journey to raise awareness around the social wellbeing and human rights of forcibly displaced people.

Project context

The transnational performative project, *Little Amal*, was designed to foster cross-cultural dialogue and awareness about the refugee crisis, reminding the world of the resilience and hope of displaced communities. This image of the crossing of the Rio Grande formed part of an extensive photographic documentary project. Representing a 10-year-old Syrian refugee, the puppet became a global symbol of human rights and refugee advocacy. Since July, 2021, Amal has travelled more than 6000 miles across 15 countries, and been welcomed by more than 1 million people, hundreds of artists and civil society leaders, as well as millions of people online. Her journey represented solidarity with displaced children and refugees worldwide. Through the project, *Little Amal* became a moving representation of both the struggles and the humanity of refugees, offering a poignant, large-scale symbol of empathy, solidarity, and the need for global action on human rights.

Related reading

Walk with Amal. Little Amal's Impact. 2023. <https://www.walkwithamal.org/impact/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Curator's comment

This haunting image of *Little Amal* crossing the Rio Grande transforms geopolitical crisis into shared emotional terrain. As a towering puppet embodying a small child, *Little Amal* evokes the scale of global displacement while honouring the humanity of each individual within it. The work invites viewers to feel, not only observe—to meet policy with presence, and migration with memory. Art here becomes a vessel for empathy across borders.



© Professor Vicky Karkou/Edge Hill University

Together Un/Tethered performance (2023), photographed by Brian Roberts in Liverpool, UK; courtesy of Professor Vicky Karkou, Edge Hill University, UK

Project description

An immersive performance at Liverpool Lighthouse, UK, inspired by the Arts for the Blues project—an arts-based group intervention for depression, low mood, and anxiety, developed by researchers and artists at two universities in the North West of England. Blending movement, spoken word, soundscape, and projection with live cello, it explores themes of separation, connection, and renewal.

Project context

A collaboration with Edge Hill University and the University of Salford, UK, with funding from Arts Council England, this co-produced piece was developed by artists and participants and delivered as a therapeutic group for mental health service users based in the community in the north of Liverpool. The resulting immersive performance entitled *Together Un/Tethered* toured the country. Its aim has been to demystify the therapeutic process in arts therapies practice and to invite wider audiences to have a proxy experience of the therapeutic journey for themselves. Arts for the Blues, developed by artists, therapists, and arts therapists from the two universities, addresses the diverse needs of children and adults, following Medical Research Council guidelines, aspiring to develop sufficient critical mass to enable systemic changes in services and provide universally good-quality practices. It is currently used with children, adults, and staff in hospitals, schools, and charities in the UK, Europe, and further afield, including India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Curator's comment

Offering accessible, emotionally resonant creative processes is crucial because they meet people where they are, especially those who may struggle with or feel alienated by traditional talking therapies. This immersive performance engages the senses, evokes memory, and activates imagination, making it possible to express complex emotions and experiences that can be difficult to articulate with words alone. This approach also fosters inclusion, dignity, and connection by validating diverse ways of knowing, healing, and being, particularly for individuals from marginalised or underserved communities.

Related reading

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Art is a Doctor (2014–16), photographed by Miki Kap-Herr in Salzburg, Austria, in a child and adolescent psychiatry clinic; courtesy of University Clinic for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Christian Doppler Clinic, Paracelsus Medical University

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Grebosz-Haring K, Thun-Hohenstein L. Effects of group singing versus group music listening on hospitalized children and adolescents with mental disorders: a pilot study. *Heliyon* 2018; 4: e01014

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Project description

Art is a Doctor was a 2-year pilot project in Austria that offered creative arts interventions, including singing, listening to music, textile design, drama, and clownery, for children and adolescents with mental health challenges.

Project context

This initiative was inspired by artist Zenita Komad's phrase "Art is a doctor", emphasising the therapeutic role of creativity in mental health. Many young people with psychiatric conditions struggle to access spontaneity and self-expression. However, when meaningfully engaged in the arts, they can experience powerful shifts in their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Led by professionals, and integrated into psychiatric care at the University Clinic for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Psychotherapeutic Medicine at the Christian Doppler Clinic, Paracelsus Medical University in Salzburg, Austria, the project received positive feedback from participants and was promoted through performance, exhibition, and film. Although initial outcomes point to the benefits of arts-based approaches in child and adolescent psychiatry, further research is needed to replicate the results and understand their mechanisms, effectiveness, and scalability. The project helped catalyse the establishment of the Salzburg Institute for Arts in Medicine (SIAM) and a new focus on Music and Medicine in Austrian higher education.

Curator's comment

The arts offer young people powerful tools to explore, express, and make sense of their inner worlds, especially when words are hard to find. In the face of rising mental health challenges, creative practices can foster emotional resilience, connection, and self-worth. Artistic engagement allows youth to process complex feelings in safe, non-judgemental spaces. As both prevention and intervention, the arts help restore agency and hope where it is most needed.



Charles Carmignac/© Musée-Valise La Mer Imaginaire photograph

The Museum-Suitcase: The Imaginary Sea (2021) at a psychiatric hospital, photographed by Thibaut Chapotot in Paris, France; courtesy of Charles Carmignac for Musée-Valise La Mer Imaginaire

Project description

This miniature travelling museum designed for hospital staff and patients captures the essence of a contemporary art exhibition. Concealed within a wooden cabinet, it showcases original works by artists such as Miquel Barceló and Yves Klein using choreographed scenes illuminated by light and sound.

Project context

The art enterprise Fondation Carmignac, in collaboration with Groupe Hospitalier Universitaire (GHU) Paris Psychiatrie & Neurosciences, France, has created the Museum-Suitcase, a miniature travelling museum designed for hospital staff and patients. Its aim is to serve as a therapeutic tool and facilitate creative engagement for patients and caregivers with limited access to traditional museums. Concealed within a wooden cabinet, the Museum-Suitcase employs secret mechanisms and precision electronics to enhance the viewer's experience, like a contemporary cabinet of curiosities, echoing 20th-century artist Marcel Duchamp's concept of the *Boîte-en-Valise* (Box in a Suitcase). Each niche of this cultural time capsule contains a work of art, an idea, and a memory. Developed by artist and architect Stephan Zimmerli, the travelling museum is based on an idea by Charles Carmignac, and supported by Dr Mathias Gorog and Dr Laurène Egger. It was successfully piloted for a year at Sainte-Anne Psychiatric Hospital in Paris and is currently on tour at Vinatier Psychiatric Hospital in Lyon, one of the largest psychiatric hospitals in France.

Curator's comment

The Musée-Valise (Museum-Suitcase) is a mini-museum featuring 17 authentic works of art. It is a marvellous mobile, animated, and sonorous contemporary cabinet of curiosities designed to re-enchant the hospital world. There is no need for an outside mediator: mediation is carried out by nursing staff in the patient's room. Through the eyes of artists, the art works demystify and open up certain subjects that are difficult to discuss with patients. With its open-ended approach, the Musée-Valise will continue to tour other hospitals, schools, prisons, and other places, engaging the curiosity of diverse populations.

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Cristina Quicler/© AFP via Getty Images

Related reading *Balcony Mood Boost (2020)*, photographed by Cristina Quicler in Triana, Seville, Spain; Cristina Quicler/AFP via Getty Images

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Project description

A woman marked the traditional April Fair in Triana, Seville, Spain, by singing from her balcony during the COVID-19 lockdown, transforming the private space into a moment of shared connection, and offering comfort and unity through music.

Project context

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, populations worldwide faced restrictions that increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression. In Spain, Italy, and other countries residents turned to singing and music-making from balconies as spontaneous acts of connection and emotional relief. These performances became global symbols of resilience, showing how the arts can foster social bonding and mental health. A 2019 WHO report on arts and health found strong evidence that artistic engagement can reduce stress and improve mental health outcomes. Such informal, creative responses as the balcony singing highlight the potential of the arts as low-cost, community-led public health tools in times of crisis. With increasing recognition of the link between arts and health, evidenced by initiatives such as social prescribing in the UK and the WHO's advocacy for arts-based health promotion, how might future emergency planning include creativity as a protective factor for mental health?

Curator's comment

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed an extraordinary, grassroots response from artists and the general public, which was unfunded, uncoordinated, yet deeply intuitive. From singing on balconies to choirs involving health-care workers and projects such as the Great Big Art Exhibition in the UK, launched by Antony Gormley and other artists which encouraged people to create artworks and display them in the windows and balconies of their homes, the arts stepped up to generate social connection and ease loneliness. These acts of creativity and community sustained people and supported mental health at a time of huge isolation. This image of a woman singing from her balcony beautifully captures that spirit of resilience and hope, reminding us how powerful and healing shared moments of art can be—even from a distance.



© Bahía Shehab

Pyramids of Garbage (2020), photographed by Bahía Shehab in Cairo, Egypt; courtesy of Bahía Shehab

Project description

An 11-metre wide, 6-metre high pyramid made out of garbage, exemplifying our throw-away world, erected in a densely populated area of Cairo, Egypt, not far from one of the only surviving wonders of the ancient world, the great pyramid of Giza.

Project context

The densely populated district of Manshiyet Nasr in western Cairo, Egypt, has become widely known as Garbage City, handling around two-thirds of the rubbish generated by the city. Seen as a symbol of an environmental and health crisis, young people in the district are attempting to change the narrative through recycling, which they see as a way to drive change. This garbage pyramid was erected in the district, with the help of local carpenters and school children. Evoking a stark contrast between the historical legacy of the pyramids and contemporary crisis, the image amplifies the sense of dissonance between cultural endurance and environmental degradation. The project was part of a global art action initiated by non-profit creative studio Fine Acts along with Countdown, TED's global initiative to promote and find urgent solutions to the climate crisis. Together they launched ten public artworks from TED Fellows on Oct 10, 2020 in ten cities around the world, with the aim of raising awareness for TED's Countdown, while at the same time presenting climate issues in ways that engage people and encourage participation.

Curator's comment

Communities living amid Garbage City face heightened health risks, including respiratory illnesses, waterborne diseases, and the psychological toll of chronic exposure to pollution. The image underscores the inseparable link between climate crisis and global health crisis, making visible how waste, consumption, and environmental neglect disproportionately harm vulnerable populations. Artists have a crucial role in bringing these often-invisible connections to public attention. Here the artist challenges us to recognise that the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and addressing it is a public health imperative.

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Well-Being Concert (2023), photographed by Fadi Kheir at Carnegie Hall, New York, NY, USA; courtesy of Fadi Kheir for Carnegie Hall

Project description

Mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and pianist Howard Watkins gently lead the audience through exercises at a Carnegie Hall Well-Being Concert, where listeners sit or recline in quiet reflection and experience the soothing, therapeutic power of music as part of a series exploring music's impact on wellbeing.

Project context

Carnegie Hall in New York, USA, launched its series of Well-Being Concerts in the 2022–23 season to explore how live music can enhance individual and collective wellbeing. These carefully curated concerts highlight music's physical, emotional, and social benefits, creating intimate experiences that foster healing and connection. The series also serves as an innovative artistic laboratory, partnering with scholars and scientists across disciplines to investigate music's impact on health. Inspired by growing evidence of music's therapeutic potential, especially for communities underserved by traditional mental health services, Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute developed this initiative to support emotional regulation, resilience, and social bonding. The Well-Being Concerts are part of a larger cultural movement emphasising healing, joy, and accessibility in the arts. Offering both public and private performances for diverse audiences across New York City venues, including veterans, health-care workers, older people, and policy makers, the series embodies Carnegie Hall's mission to bring the transformative power of music to all.

Curator's comment

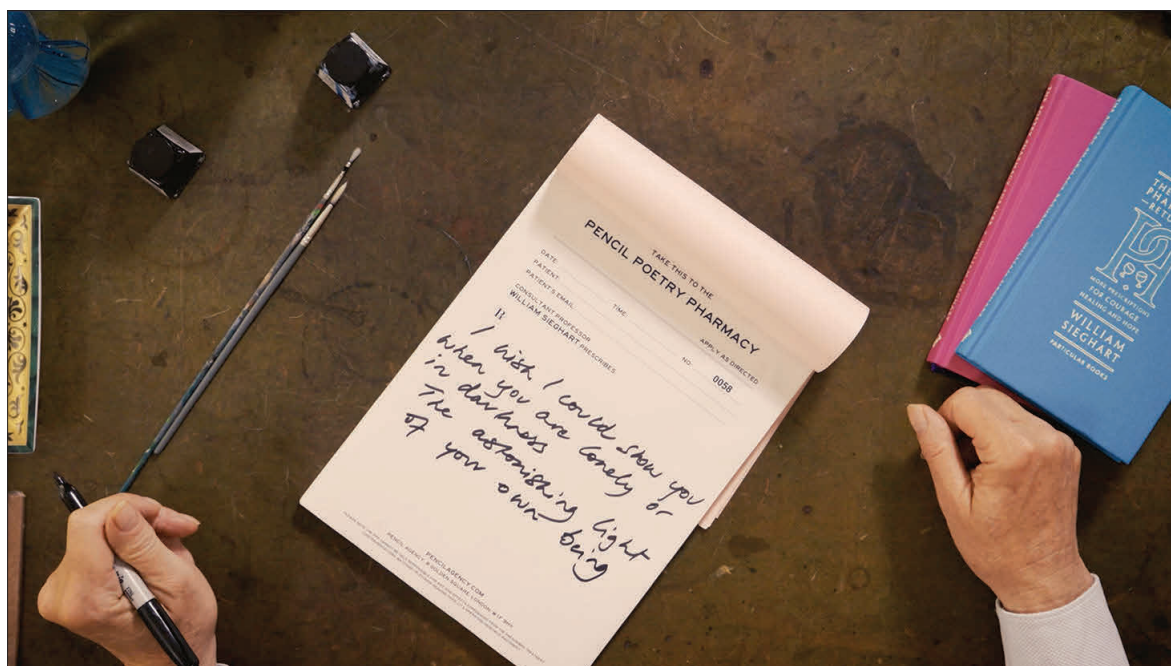
The Well-Being Concerts are a radical reimagining of what a concert can be. Research shows that music can reduce stress hormones, lower blood pressure, and stimulate brain areas tied to emotion and memory. By centring intimacy, softness, and community participation, they invite listeners not only to hear music, but also to feel it in their bodies and spirits. This work reclaims the concert hall as a sanctuary where science meets art, and where healing becomes a shared practice. The dim light, the grounded seating, and the gentle breathing all remind us that presence is powerful. This photograph beautifully captures how Carnegie Hall blends artistry with science to promote mental and physical wellbeing, creating moments of connection, joy, and resilience for diverse communities.

Related reading

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Lecamwasam K, Bresle E, Martiny KM, et al. Beyond performance: a mixed-methods study of Carnegie Hall's Well-Being Concerts.

Health Promot Pract 2025; published online Sept 1. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399251361095>



The Poetry Pharmacy Live Workshop (2025); still from Hospital Rooms Digital Art School with William Sieghart photographed by Kim Szalavicz at Krux Productions; courtesy of Hospital Rooms

Project description

The Poetry Pharmacy supports wellbeing by providing prescriptions of poems to people in diverse settings, whether in hospitals, prisons, or other places; it has also partnered with National Health Service (NHS) Trusts in the UK to display poetry in staff and public areas.

Project context

The Poetry Pharmacy began with founder William Sieghart sitting in a tent at a literary festival offering to listen to people. He has now listened and prescribed poems to thousands of people. It quickly became clear that loneliness was the most common issue people wanted to talk about; that whoever we are, whatever our background, we all have the same need: to not feel alone. Drawing on three Poetry Pharmacy anthologies, *The Poetry Pharmacy Forever* (2023), *The Poetry Pharmacy Returns* (2019), and *The Poetry Pharmacy* (2017), Poetry Pharmacy Live enlists famous actors to bring the poems to hospitals, mental health and literacy charities, care homes, prisons, and universities, responding to people's need for a different kind of prescription. Partnerships with NHS Trusts have seen the introduction of poetry posters to the corridors, clinics, and care spaces of these settings. In 2025, the Poetry Pharmacy partnered with Hospital Rooms, as part of their Digital Art School, to support initiatives that bring art into mental health settings, with Sieghart leading the Poetry Pharmacy Live workshop that will be aired in mental-health wards.

Curator's comment

This initiative by Poetry Pharmacy founder William Sieghart and colleagues to bring poetry to people as a prescription when they are facing some of life's challenges is a remarkable example of a direct and simple interaction between the creative imagination and physical and mental wellbeing. Identifying the most common problem as loneliness, Sieghart reflected on the irony of people having more ways to communicate than ever before, yet feeling isolated and under stress. In his words, "We need in our world the reassurance of other voices." One of the most powerful prescriptions in his Pharmacy is a poem written by the Persian poet Hafez some 700 years ago: "I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being."

Related reading

Hospital Rooms. Digital Art School. 2024. <https://hospital-rooms.com/digital-art-school-free-digital-art-workshops-hospital-rooms/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

The Poetry Pharmacy. Partnerships. 2025. <https://www.thepoetrypharmacy.com/partnerships/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)



Harvey Speck (2019), Navajo Nation, photographed by Chip Thomas; courtesy of Chip Thomas, Jetsonorama

Project description

Photograph, wheat-pasted onto a wall, of former uranium miner Harvey Speck, installed by photographer Chip Thomas in 2019 in this rural location as part of his work foregrounding stories of individuals from marginalised communities and highlighting the impact of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation.

Project context

Medical doctor, photographer, and public artist Chip Thomas established his medical practice on the Navajo Nation in 1987 and soon began documenting his adopted community. In 2009 he started wheat-pasting black-and-white photographs on walls where the people shown had once lived. This image of uranium miner Harvey Speck highlights a period in which most of the uranium ore for the US nuclear programme came from the Navajo Nation. Over 500 uranium mines operated on Navajo land during the Cold War, from the mid-1940s to the early 1980s, and thousands of Navajo men were hired by private companies to work in the mines. Before the uranium boom public health officials believed that the Diné (Navajo) had a gene that prevented them from getting cancer because their rates were lower than the national average. By the late 1990s, with non-existent environmental regulation, deaths from cancer among the Diné had doubled while over the same period the US cancer mortality rate had declined. Mining companies abandoned their sites with no obligation to contain them, leading to land and water contamination. Cancer rates and child birth defects from heavy metal exposure remain higher among the Diné than the national average.

Curator's comment

In 2015 doctor-photographer Chip Thomas was invited to take part in a project that looked at the legacy of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation. His 30-year experience as a physician within the community earned him a different type of relationship and a strong level of trust with the community. In his own words, people had seen him "walking the talk". He encountered patients who were dying from cancer and had respiratory illnesses as a result of their exposure to the uranium mining industry, and they and their family members desperately wanted these sites cleaned up. They told him stories that others from outside the community would not have had access to, stories that he powerfully conveys in his monumental photographs.

Related reading

Southwest Contemporary. Chip Thomas: Living Histories. March 1, 2014. <https://southwestcontemporary.com/chip-thomas-living-histories/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)
Brooklyn Street Art. Jetsonorama tells "Stories From Ground Zero". Aug 31, 2019. <https://www.brooklynstreetart.com/2019/08/31/jetsonoramatells-stories-from-ground-zero/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)



©Yazmany Arboleda Studio

Colour in Faith, Kibera (2014), photographed by Yazmany Arboleda; courtesy of Yazmany Arboleda Studio

Project description

In Nairobi's Kibera settlement, Colombian-American artist Yazmany Arboleda, Kenyan cultural producer Nabila Alibhai, and community members of many faiths painted a modest corrugated-metal church in radiant optimistic yellow, transforming the structure into a luminous symbol of solidarity and hope, countering fear with connection.

Project context

Colour in Faith emerged in response to terrorism and deepening religious divisions in Kenya. Between 2014 and 2019, 18 churches, mosques, and temples were painted in optimistic yellow across Nairobi, Mombasa, and beyond. Each building became a beacon of resilience in communities grappling with poverty, insecurity, and mistrust. In Kibera, neighbours of different faiths came together with brushes in hand, while poets and musicians performed, reclaiming public space through collective creation. Religious leaders embraced the symbolism—"yellow is the colour of the sun; it shines on us all equally"—and congregants described painting together as a gesture of healing. These acts redefined fragile structures as sculptural landmarks of dignity, courage, and belonging, showing how beauty itself can support health and wellbeing. At the same time, the project exemplifies how art can function as civic infrastructure: a collective intervention that shapes perception, restores trust, and builds networks of solidarity. Against landscapes scarred by violence and inequality, the yellow-painted facades embody the power of imagination to create healthier, more connected environments.

Curator's comment

The yellow church in Kibera illustrates how art, in its most elemental form, can generate spaces of peace and collective imagination. By transforming buildings into "sculptures in the landscape", *Colour in Faith* reveals how simple, collaborative gestures can nurture social wellbeing and resilience, and act as preventive care against the isolating effects of fear and division. These luminous facades remind us that just as fear spreads, so too can hope, reframing art as both research practice and infrastructure for health.

Related reading

Sajej N. Mellow yellow: Kenya's mosques and churches painted "in the name of love".

The Guardian. Aug 15, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/15/kenya-mosques-churches-temples-yellow-painted-yazmany-arboleda> (accessed Sept 12, 2025)



© Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd

Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing; a Creative Movement Programme for Older Adults (2018), photographed in a Residential Care Home in Singapore; courtesy of Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd

Project description

Older adults at Villa Francis Home for the Aged in Singapore are pictured taking part in a creative movement session facilitated by The Arts Fission Company. This session was part of the second phase of Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing, a programme that adapts everyday gestures into expressive movements to support wellbeing in later life.

Project context

Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing was developed in Singapore through a collaboration between the Agency for Integrated Care Pte Ltd (AIC), the National Arts Council (NAC), and The Arts Fission Company. Conceived in 2009 by choreographer Angela Liong, and first piloted in 2014, the programme introduced movement practices inspired by daily activities, such as dressing, cooking, and commuting, to support older adults' mobility, imagination, and emotional connection. In 2018, a second phase was implemented at Villa Francis Home for the Aged, with new thematic content and deeper integration into care routines. The programme's success led to the creation of training materials for health-care staff and its long-term adoption within eldercare settings. In a city where the population is rapidly ageing, Everyday Waltzes offers a model for how the arts can be embedded into care infrastructures. By reimagining movement as a form of social and sensory engagement, the project fosters dignity, agency, and community among older adults and affirms that creative expression can be a meaningful part of ageing well.

Curator's comment

This photograph offers a profound and playful reflection on one of the most urgent global challenges of our time: how to foster wellbeing in an ageing world. Gerontologist Anne Basting, whose work combines improvisation to enhance the lives of people with dementia, reminds us that "if we can infuse creativity into care, caregivers can invite a partner into meaning-making...care, which is so often associated with loss, can become generative". The intergenerational exchange in this photograph also underscores that healthy longevity is not only about extending life, but also about enriching it through connection, imagination, and shared humanity. By integrating the arts into care, Everyday Waltzes affirms that creative expression is essential to ageing with meaning and vitality.

Related reading and viewing

Pang C, Xu L, Tan C, Foo V, Lim G, Chandran S. Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing: evaluating a creative movement programme in nursing homes (poster). Singapore: Agency for Integrated Care, Society for the Aged Sick, All Saints Home, 2025
AIC Wellness Programme. Creative Movement: Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing. YouTube. 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldl-Glm3A8> (accessed Sept 18, 2025)



JR, Tehachapi, California, aerial view of the pasting, daytime, USA (2019), photographed and installed by JR in collaboration with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men at Tehachapi maximum security prison, California, CA, USA; courtesy of the artist

Project description

In October, 2019, French artist and photographer JR was granted access to work in the California Correctional Institution of Tehachapi, a maximum security prison in California, USA, where he photographed 48 men, including people who had been or were still incarcerated, prison staff, and individuals who had been victims of crime. JR later created a large-scale installation on the prison yard.

Project context

In Tehachapi, a level 4 maximum security prison, JR and his team photographed people who were incarcerated, one by one, from above. Each participant was then given the chance to record their story. No specific questions were asked; they had the freedom to express themselves openly and candidly. JR also photographed formerly incarcerated individuals and prison staff, collecting a total of 48 portraits and stories from the prison system. 2 weeks later, the artist returned with his team to paste 338 strips of paper on the ground. In just a few hours, the participants, equipped with push brooms and wallpaper glue, worked alongside guards and members of JR's studio to complete the installation. From the prison yard, the final image was indiscernible, but from above it could be clearly seen: prisoners, former prisoners, prison staff, and people who had been victims of crime standing shoulder to shoulder. This naturally ephemeral installation disappeared in 3 days under the footsteps of the prison's population. The project showed the powerful role art can have within a prison context where anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues often go unacknowledged and unaddressed.

Curator's comment

This striking aerial image from JR's Tehachapi project challenges us to reckon with the human cost of mass incarceration in the USA, where an estimated 20% of the world's prison population are held in conditions that often lead to or worsen poor mental health. Prison can be a dehumanising environment, and this project provides a powerful reminder of art's capacity to make people feel less isolated and included in a positive activity. Created by prisoners, correctional staff, and artists working together, the work momentarily dissolved the rigid boundaries that define the prison system, revealing a collective portrait of individuals whose identities are so often denied by their criminal record or job title. It highlights the crucially important part art plays in wellbeing, as well as the paucity of opportunities within the prison system to make or enjoy art. The fleeting nature of this installation, as it becomes worn away by daily footsteps, evokes the fragility of visibility, justice, and reform in a system where stories are routinely silenced. It is an invitation for repair through our shared humanity.

Related reading

JR. Tehachapi, The Yard. California, USA, 2019. JR. 2025. <https://www.jr-art.net/projects/tehochapi> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Can Art Change the World? Foundation. Prison Art Program. 2024. <https://www.canartchangetheworld.net/en/program/prison-art-program> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)

Inside Out. The people's art project. We help communities turn their untold stories into a work of public art! 2025. <https://www.insideoutproject.net/en/> (accessed Sept 8, 2025)