

between happiness & despair

2024

*THE ARTS AND
THE ARTIST
IN A NEW HEALTH
DEFINED PARADIME*

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INTRODUCTION

Were it started	2
The Art House Turku	3
Kunsthal NORD	4
Mikael Odder Nielsen	5

THE LECTURERS

Inga Gerner Nielsen	7-8
Marit Benthe Norheim	9-10
Pia Skogberg	11-14

THE ARTISTS

Ric Raphael Nitsch	17
Matilda Palmu	18
Nina Rose Markvardsen	19-20
Marja Kangas	21
Eka Teriina Vea Kosonen	22
Birgitte Lundtoft	23-24
Nina Rantala	25

ESSAYS BY THE LECTURERS

Solidary Solitaires	27-28
Homage to vulnerability	29-32
Meeting the silence	33-34

ON REFLECTION

Essay by Marie Travers	35-36
Last words	37-38

WHERE IT STARTED

Between happiness & despair was a project meant to educate four Danish and four Finnish artists. The goal was to make them realize their potential to help their fellow citizens’ mental well-being through their art practice. The project offered artists an educational residency, experienced lectures from the established art world, reflection groups, and sparring with health professionals. In the end, the artists facilitated participatory art events in Denmark and Finland aimed at vulnerable citizens, culminating in two exhibitions about the artists’ experiences, discussions on the relationship between art and health, as well as artworks created in the events.

The project was a collaboration between Kunsthal NORD and Art House Turku, supported by Center for Mental Well-Being in Aalborg and Turku Mental Health Association in Turku.

A NEW CHALLENGER APPROACHES

Between happiness & despair was born from a simple observation: We are not doing well.

I remember when there was a universal feeling of optimism in relation to the future. Things were moving towards the better, there was a development of technology, economy, and knowledge that pushed us towards a new and shining future – societies founded on a sense of historical determinism.

Maybe this feeling was born from a place a naivety?

When I look around today it is hard not to conclude the following:

The technologies we have developed seem to have enslaved us and filled us with an ever-present sense of dread and anxiety. Tech companies are not developing better solutions – they are manufacturing issues we never knew we had, which they then offer to solve through the latest app or doohickey.

The economic, production-based miracle, that started after World War II, has long since lost its impact, and an ever-increasing globalization and interconnectedness of trade partners and supply

lines seem to have reached their maximum potential for growth. There is no other China to outsource all the western labor to – there is only a cannibalization of people’s time and dignity, as well as what is left over of nature to keep the global economy from deflating.

Knowledge being produced in hopes of bettering society seems to be pushed to the wayside as a new wave of anti-expert sentiments sweep across Western nations and find their way into politics. We will compromise the economy to accommodate peoples’ needs.

Hello, welcome to the most depressing TedTalk.

So why start here with these grand observations of the issues we are facing today? I think what I mean to say is that the world has become increasingly complex. It is hard to pluck individuals out of these contexts and try to understand the reason they are suffering. I think we all feel the consequences of these overarching mechanisms. We feel the urgency to create more, to communicate more, to do more, to do better, faster and bigger than before. These issues become internalized and serve as a part of how we understand ourselves, the world around us, and our relation to ourselves and it.

If I were to try to point out a place for artists in all of this, it would be this: We, as artists, have the opportunity to sway people, to make them feel, to make them question the assumptions they have about themselves, who they are – or imagine they should be – and let them renegotiate these things through what we can offer.

Between happiness and despair is therefore a chance for us to cometgether and try to understand how we take those first steps into to the world anew, with a new kind of purpose imbued in our art – one based in kindness and the hope that we might help others.

Lasse Fischer
Project Manager

The Art House Turku (Taiteen talo in Finnish) was opened in the spring of 2022 as a home for art and culture – for artists, residents, and tourists alike. The premises are owned by a real estate limited company and the limited company Turun Taiteen talo Oy (Art House Turku) works as an operator. Both companies are owned by the city of Turku.

The Art House locates in Rettig's old tobacco factory in the middle of Turku's Old Town. And since Turku is the oldest town in Finland, we represent a new chapter in a long history of the area and will captive our mark to its traditions.

Activities are spread out across the six floors of the former tobacco factory, and its courtyard buildings. A wide array of creative professionals, including visual and performing artists, work on the premises, and the house presents all kinds of exhibitions, performances, events, and workshops. We are creating a cultural spot where makers and audiences meet every day, and where the community supports the work of residents and colleagues alike.

The aim of Art House Turku is to promote and support cultural activities, the employment and business of art and professionals in art and culture. International co-creations are in the very heart of that and in cases where we can support such activities, we are pleased to take a role. Therefore, we considered **Kunsthal NORD's** proposal of partnership very interesting, especially when the topic of the project highlights the dilemma between the happiness and despair in the two Scandinavian countries.

The partnership together with Kunsthal NORD in Erasmus+ project **between happiness & despair** has given us a chance to assume a role in cultural-wellbeing services. In Turku increasing the well-being with arts has been in focus since 2011 when Turku was European Capital of Culture (ECoc) together with the Estonian capital, Tallinn. One of Turku's slogans was **"Culture does good"** and ever since there has been a strong partnership between social services and the arts in Turku.

Based in this legacy, in Turku, many art organisations provide culture and well-being services, but mainly in limited and small-scale projects. With this project Art House Turku has built new capabilities for itself and showed other operators in the local community what they can learn from other European countries, namely Denmark. Through the project we have promoted our own role as a co-operator and opportunity-maker for our stakeholders.

During the project Art House Turku has developed its practices and served the art community by opening international co-learning opportunities and a chance to foster new skills for professionals. We believe that the project aided artists in furthering their careers and strengthened their skillset, making it possible for them to work with their art in new settings and through new avenues.

Our vision is that Art House Turku is an attractive meeting place that combines different art forms. During the project's exhibition in Turku, we will have a vivid combination of exhibitions, performances, events and movie

screenings. We truly think that by bringing artists and audiences together we can foster a way of co-operation and create something new. The very heart of Art House Turku's aim is to share its resources, and by that give all kinds of organizations a chance to join the community. We also believe that supporting cultural well-being services gives artists both artistic and professional possibilities.

Art House Turku works in cooperation with cultural operators, creative economy companies and commercial companies, as well as universities. We are open to explore all kinds of co-operation opportunities and willing to do our best to create a lifelong partnership. Art House Turku highly appreciate the international artistic co-operation between Kunsthal NORD, and hope that the connection brings new activities also to Turku, Finland.

Art House Turku contains:

- Around 50 visual artists and two residency satellites
- Three galleries (Critical Gallery, ASKI Gallery and Kilta Gallery)
- A movie theatre (Kino Kilta)
- Turku student theatre
- Literature hub
- School that brings more than 150 students to the area on a daily basis
- More than 10 creative economy actors such as advertising companies, jewellery, music producers etc.

Jere Pensikkala
CEO Turun Taiteen talo Oy

The Role of Art Institutions in Supporting Artists Working at the Intersection of Art and Mental Health: The Case of between happiness & despair

Mental health is becoming an urgent societal concern across the developed world. As the prevalence of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety rise, the role of the arts in promoting well-being is receiving growing recognition. Art institutions can have a pivotal part to play in this conversation, supporting artists who wish to explore mental health themes through their work. Programs like between happiness & despair, a pilot project sponsored by Erasmus+, offer a unique model for how art institutions can support artists looking to bridge the gap between art work and mental health services. Both nations grapple with the complex coexistence of widespread reported happiness alongside growing mental health challenges. This raises essential questions: What defines happiness? How do we reconcile societal well-being with individual mental health struggles? Can art play a role in this reconciliation?

These questions form the backbone of between happiness & despair, a collaborative effort between Kunsthal Nord and Art House Turku that seeks to explore how artists can contribute to supporting mental well-being. The program invites artists from Denmark and Finland to delve into the nuances of happiness, despair, and mental health, using their craft to foster understanding and healing – and forms a test case for how art institutions can support artists in this field.

Historically, art has been a medium through which emotions and complex experiences are communicated and understood. Its therapeutic potential is widely acknowledged, and many artists have drawn on

their own mental health journeys to create powerful works. However, institutional support for artists who wish to work specifically in the field of mental health remains limited. Art institutions can bridge this gap by providing resources, training, and platforms for artists to engage with mental health issues meaningfully.

The Power of Collaboration

Collaboration is at the heart of between happiness & despair. By bringing together four Danish and four Finnish artists, the program creates a cross-cultural dialogue on mental health, broadening the perspectives of those involved. The inclusion of mental health professionals from the Centre for Mental Health in Aalborg and from Mental Health Association in Turku further strengthens this collaboration. This interaction between the arts and healthcare fields encourages a multidisciplinary approach to tackling mental health challenges, one that values both clinical expertise and creative expression.

This model of collaboration benefits not only the artists involved but also the communities they serve. One of the key outcomes of the project is the creation of participatory art events where the artists engage with local audiences on the themes of happiness and mental well-being. These events serve as public interventions, fostering a broader understanding of mental health issues in society and encouraging community involvement in addressing them.

In the context of the project, these art events not only serve as public outreach but also provide a real-world application for the artists' newly developed skills. The process of designing and hosting these events deepens the artists' understanding of how art can contribute to mental

well-being, both on an individual and societal level.

The Role of Art Institutions as Facilitators

Art institutions like Kunsthal NORD and Art House Turku, which host between happiness & despair, play a critical role in this process. By offering resources, mentorship, and exhibition spaces, these institutions act as enablers of change, allowing artists to explore uncharted territory at the intersection of art and mental health. Furthermore, by documenting and exhibiting the results of the project, these institutions ensure that the work produced has a lasting impact. The exhibition of the process and the final participatory art events in both Denmark and Finland not only celebrates the achievements of the artists but also creates a platform for ongoing dialogue about mental health. These exhibitions are more than just displays of art; they are educational tools that can inspire future collaborations between artists, mental health professionals, and the public.

As society continues to grapple with rising mental health challenges, the importance of art institutions supporting artists in this field cannot be overstated. Projects like between happiness & despair illustrate the profound impact that art can have in addressing mental health issues, offering a space for healing, understanding, and connection. By supporting artists in their existing practice creating participatory art events that engage the public, art institutions can play a transformative role in the mental well-being of individuals and communities alike.

Cathrine Gamst
Director of Kunsthal NORD



MIKAEL ODDER NIELSEN

Culture Coordinator and Main Facilitator for Culture Vitamins, Aalborg Municipality

Culture and health are two fundamental aspects of human life, that are often closely connected. Culture encompasses the values, norms, traditions, and artistic expressions that characterize a society, while health refers to a person's physical, mental, and social well-being. When we look at the interplay between culture and health, there is a huge potential that can have a profound impact on the well-being of individuals and society. Together, they can contribute to creating a meaningful and satisfying life.

In a time where we are constantly surrounded by technology and busyness, art and culture offer a necessary pause, a moment for reflection and immersion. Art and culture thus play a crucial and active role in our lives, not only as sources of aesthetic enjoyment and intellectual stimulation, but also as significant contributions to our health and well-being.

When we create something, we feel productive and competent. This can improve our self-perception and give us a deep sense of satisfaction and pride, as well as strengthen our self-

esteem and confidence. Engaging with art and culture provides an opportunity for self-expression and can act as a catalyst that helps us process emotions and experiences. Art allows us to express feelings that can be difficult to put into words. This can be particularly beneficial for those struggling with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. Through art, we can process complex emotions and experiences in a safe and constructive way.

When we encounter art, we step onto the playground of great emotions. Art is often created from a desire to express something; a feeling, a mood, and perhaps a message. One can be touched by these feelings and maybe recognize them and realize that you are not alone with them. By exercising some of these feelings and experiencing that it is completely normal to feel joy, sorrow, anger, and sadness, it reminds us of what it truly means to be human.

We also live in a time where more and more people feel lonely and socially isolated, and here art and culture can help strengthen social skills and create communities. Participation

in joint cultural activities, such as choirs, theater, or art workshops, can help build relationships and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. When people participate in shared cultural experiences, it creates a sense of belonging and togetherness.

On a broader level, culture contributes to societal health by promoting social cohesion and inclusion. Cultural events and activities bring people together, regardless of their background, and create a sense of community and belonging. This can reduce social inequalities and promote a more inclusive and healthier societal structure.

It is therefore extremely important that society prioritize art, culture and creativity, as it is a direct path to a rich and meaningful life. By integrating cultural activities into our daily lives, we can improve both our physical and mental health, strengthen social bonds, and contribute to a healthier and more inclusive society. Art and culture are not just entertainment; they are essential for our well-being and quality of life.



THE EFFECTS



INGA GERNER NIELSEN

Inga Gerner Nielsen is a performance artist educated in Sociology from the University of Copenhagen and Artistic Research at a.pass (Advanced Performance & Scenography Studies) in Brussels. She has toured around the Nordics with the project *In The Mirror of Care Work*, an art project in the form of symposia, which invite care workers and performers to share experiences and contemplate their work together with one-on-one interaction.

Inga hatched as an interactive performer in the Danish/Austrian group SIGNA's fictional parallel universes in the early 00s and later in Club de la Faye, an activist, performance collective she helped form in 2007.

In her solo work, she now continuously explores the subtle social and aesthetic nuances of human interaction within her immersive performance installations. Alongside her artistic work, Inga teaches immersive performance and art-based research. Most recently at Art and Technology at Aalborg University and in the Master's program Contemporary Performative Arts at Vaaland, University of Gothenburg.

In recent years, artists and art institutions have started to make social- and health orientated care work a focal point for art creation and exhibitions. I warmly welcome this focus. The relational aspect of my art form has always required special attention to how each and every audience member feels and reacts in relation to a performance.

My project, In the Mirror of Care Work, creates a concrete and practical point of reference, which I believe is necessary for our awareness of the working conditions we, as artists, have need of, now that we in the art world and in society in general are beginning to see art as a form of care work.



How do we care?

There is a new push in society for artists to work within the field of mental health. This push is at the same time contingent on policies, rooted in our current culture, and informed by a sense of urgency as the numbers of people struggling with their mental well-being is rising. This also means that the landscape of funding is shifting to reflect this reality. The topic demands attention. And so there are real opportunities out there for artists who want to work with the emerging field of art and health.

But we find ourselves in a peculiar situation, where very few have presented the answer as to how artists should find their way into working with health. It is a field that demands other, more serious ethical considerations, than what artists are used to when they create.

As anyone who might have had to take care of another person knows,

the task is not to be taken lightly. There is a certain commitment, a weight to what you do, when you enter the role of the caretaker. It is a weight that can be observed in the careful movements, the controlled breathing, and the space the caretaker takes up in the room; projecting an aura of peace, and letting their presence blanket the person they care for.

What might sometimes be an overlooked dimension of the work of the artist, is how they create and facilitate experiences for their audiences, where the dimensions between the artistic work and care work overlap. Artists, working with topics imbued with immense gravity and meaning for people, might set their audience on the path to healing even if this might not have been their intention when creating their artwork. It is commonly known how immense the impact of an art-based experience can be, what is not entirely understood, though, is how the artist should act when they

intentionally straddle the role of artist and care worker in relation to their work.

On their first day of workshops, the artists participating in *Between Happiness and Despair* met with Inga Gerner Nielsen. Inga has for years developed the theme of the artist as a care worker through her work with nurses at UCN in Hjørring. Her work serves as a foundational tool for understanding how the work of the artist can be informed by of the care worker and vice versa, resulting in transnational symposiums on the topic as well as the publication *In the Mirror of Care Work*.

Through her, the artists gained an understanding of what it means to work with care through art, what it means to have a focus on people when facilitating, and how to hold the space when performing. Amidst buzzing bees and flowing grass, she gently guided the artists to realize the gravity of reframing their practice as well as informed them of the importance of doing so.





MARIT BENTHE NORHEIM

Marit Benthe Norheim studied at Vestlandets Kunstakademie, Bergen from 1980–84 and the Royal Academy of Art, London from 1984–87 (Postgrad.). This led to her being London based for 12 years, where for a number of years she taught at various art academies, i.a. Royal Academy of Arts and Central/St. Martin School of Art, in addition to working as an artist.

Marit Benthe Norheim has exhibited in many countries, with the main emphasis on Norway, UK and Denmark and is represented in several public collections, e.g. The National Museum, Norway and the New Carlsberg Foundation in Denmark. In addition, she has created several public works in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Greenland, Iceland and the UK.

Participant involvement is used in different ways in several of Marit Benthe Norheim's projects. This aspect and the element of mobility are further developed in *Life-boats* – a floating sculptural installation, made in concrete, launched in Aalborg in June 2016, hosted



by European Capital of Culture Aarhus. The sailing sculptures have visited over 70 ports throughout Denmark.

Art has always created images in which one can find strength to endure pain and torment – to be able to exist in what is most often called “the real world”, and at the same time be able to explore other worlds. The personal made universal is what art often tries to achieve – to find images that can be used to gain awareness or for reflection and something to identify with – to perhaps find the strength to endure suffering and to move on with new insight or understanding.

The common human field of experience, where we can share and give each other the opportunity to accept, and perhaps even celebrate, vulnerability as a condition we can become richer and stronger from, is what I am trying to explore. Through this, I hope to develop a way of telling human stories that strengthens the sense of humanity in us.



Remembering the significance of art and representation

On the second day of the workshop the participants traveled to the home and workshop of Marit Benthe Norheim. Driving into the courtyard of her countryside home, they were met with woman-shaped camping caravans. Benthe greeted the participants. She was shimmering in the sunlight, her blouse covered in gold-colored sequins.

She went right to work addressing one of the key questions that had been at the center of the project, and the participant's mind: What is the potential impact an artist can have on a person's life?

Starting with the woman shaped caravans, Benthe told of using her art as a means for communicating other people's experiences with hardship. She explained how refugee women had helped shape the interior of the campers, how they became vehicles for telling otherwise untold fates and lost existences.



Delving deeper into her workshop, she introduced the artists to her sculptures. Everywhere around her expansive barn turned-workspace where crying angels and mermaids. In the backend of the room were four cabinets decorated with pink

plastic diamonds. The participants were invited to sit on stools in front of a sculpture of a woman in agony giving birth.

Drawing from every corner of her workshop, guiding the artists focus to her different works, she took the participants through stories of personal tragedies, and stories of people who have been less than fortunate in their lives, either due to unfortunate circumstances or due to issues with their health, including her own daughter struggling with Borrelia, Lyme disease.

The artists were invited to open the cabinets and discover their contents: Shrines made for friends Benthe had lost.



While these stories unfolded, a theme kept reemerging: A theme of the power of being the voice for other people's experiences through art. What became clear, was how Benthe had become a mediator through her work, a megaphone for those with no reach to speak of, which refused to hide away issues that can seem too difficult to handle, too shameful to share, too complex to understand. She pointed to one of the cabinets:

“This I made for my friend. She had serious mental health issues. She was suffering from severe schizophrenia. At some point, she got pregnant, and she tried to the fullest of her ability

– working on her mental health – to make sure she would be assessed well enough to take on a parental role. During the birth of her son, doctors were standing in the room, discussing whether she would get to keep her baby after giving birth. After some time, recuperating in the hospital, they took the baby from her. I drove her home. She cried like a wounded animal all the way. You cannot understate the humiliation, the hurt, the absolute torture inflicted upon her by a system that insisted on treating her as her illness and not as a person. Years after her death, her son saw this shrine. He thanked me for giving a voice to his mother, for taking her existence and her struggles seriously, hoping that more work could be done to speak up about the illness and the people who suffer from it.”

In every story Benthe spoke with such clarity and conviction about art's potential for giving people a space, where they can experience a sense of autonomy outside of their diagnosis, outside of a system of boxes that are created to simultaneously help you, but also to define you from a strict set of parameters and rules that does not necessarily correspond with who you are, or how you perceive yourself. Art, thus, creates a space where you once again can become human alongside other humans, and where you get to define how your experience should be portrayed.



PIA SKOGBERG

Pia Skogberg has a BA in art history and works as general and artistic director at Kirsten Kjærs Museum in Thy, Northwestern Jutland. She often works at the intersection between traditional handicrafts and art and sees the arts as related on several levels to crafts and textile arts. The work of the hand. Immersion and concentration. The aesthetic learning process and the end result.

From childhood, Pia Skogberg was sewing and drawing and experiencing how needlework functions as a natural break in everyday life for the older generation.

After an academy preparatory course in her childhood city of Stockholm, she lived for two years in a settler community in Lapland where she learned how to renovate houses. She

traveled abroad and encountered other cultures, broadening her understanding of how life can be lived. In 1983, she moved to Thy and began to put down roots and build the networks that helped shape her career as a practicing artist, teacher and communicator.

Pia Skogberg is a member of BKF, Danske Grafikere and the Artists Association Riimfaxe.

Art has an intrinsic value, an expression, a message, a being. Good art does something to us. It touches our senses and sets thoughts in motion. But good art can also be ‘difficult’ and incomprehensible. It demands something from us. It asks and creates questions without giving concrete answers.

As a communicator, I see it as my task to build a bridge between sender and receiver and to be a listener. As an artist, my approach is different, sometimes intuitive and wordless, other times it is something thematic that preoccupies me.



Basically, I believe that mental well-being in relation to the potential of art is to allow oneself to be absorbed and amazed and to open one’s curiosity to the mysteries of life. My main task is to introduce, inspire, listen and make room for an open creative process without a formula for how a possible result should appear.





The artist as the frame

On the third day, the artists were transported through the hilly, North Jutlandic countryside to Kirsten Kjærs Museum, where their third teacher Pia Skogberg awaited them with her daughter Viola La Spina. The museum lies tucked into the edge of a forest. Through the trees you see the signature red painted walls. It is a building, where you can sense the ad hoc approach to expanding the museum's space that has happened over time, as it has an eclectic charm, that can be described as a summerhouse, a scout hut, and an art institution mashed together.

Our hosts welcomed us and ushered us into the museum's residency house and invited us to dine on homemade bread rolls and drink water. *"Eat up, we are heading into the forest"*. The participants were then each handed a bag, and the group, led by Pia, went out the door and headed into the woods. *"Now, it is important you all stay silent for the entire walk. Just focus on collecting things for your bag that you like"*. A line slowly formed, and soon all that could be heard was boots on the forest floor, rustling leaves, buzzing insects and the song of birds hiding away in the thickets.

The silence of the forest, and the simple task of collecting whatever they found interesting centered the participants' focus inwards, letting their own thoughts and experiences swell up in their consciousness. The day became a testament to the simplicity of giving space and time for people to just feel.

Later, though, the peace was broken by shouting. Some of the participants, the author included, had managed to get lost, even though they were all walking in a line. Even though it is worth mentioning, due to the humorous nature of the situation (maybe there is something to be said about the tendency of artists to be somewhat scatter brained?) it did not negatively impact the overall experience, nor did it ruin the intended effect of the walk.

At the end of the walk, the artists erected a small monument at the edge of the forest using the things they had gathered.

In the distance, Viola sat in waiting with a kettle and some cups: the participants were invited to a tea ceremony in the moss.

The day introduced a powerful, but also a rather unforeseen perspective to the artists.

What do we do when we are handed an empty cup? We fill it ourselves.

A day of silence and contemplation prompted much needed reflection and digestion of the previous days. During the tea ceremony, one of the participants shared with the group the difficult feelings she had been struggling with after the recent passing of her father. The cup flows over.

Imagining the task at hand, designing and facilitating an art event centered on mental well-being, had acquired a very action-orientated approach in the previous days. Questions such as: *"How do I engage, how do I unfold, how do I do it?"* had become prominent amongst the participants, and therefore there was a certain relief in understanding, that audiences themselves have rich inner lives and a great potential for reflection and expression. As the questions grew silent, the answers came by themselves. Facilitating a quiet moment could create a significant impact.

And so, the theme of the artist as a frame for facilitating reflections and gently guiding the experience of an audience emerged. We were reminded that by creating a space, where control is handed back to the audience, we give them something, that transcends the art work itself.



THE ARTISTS

and their events





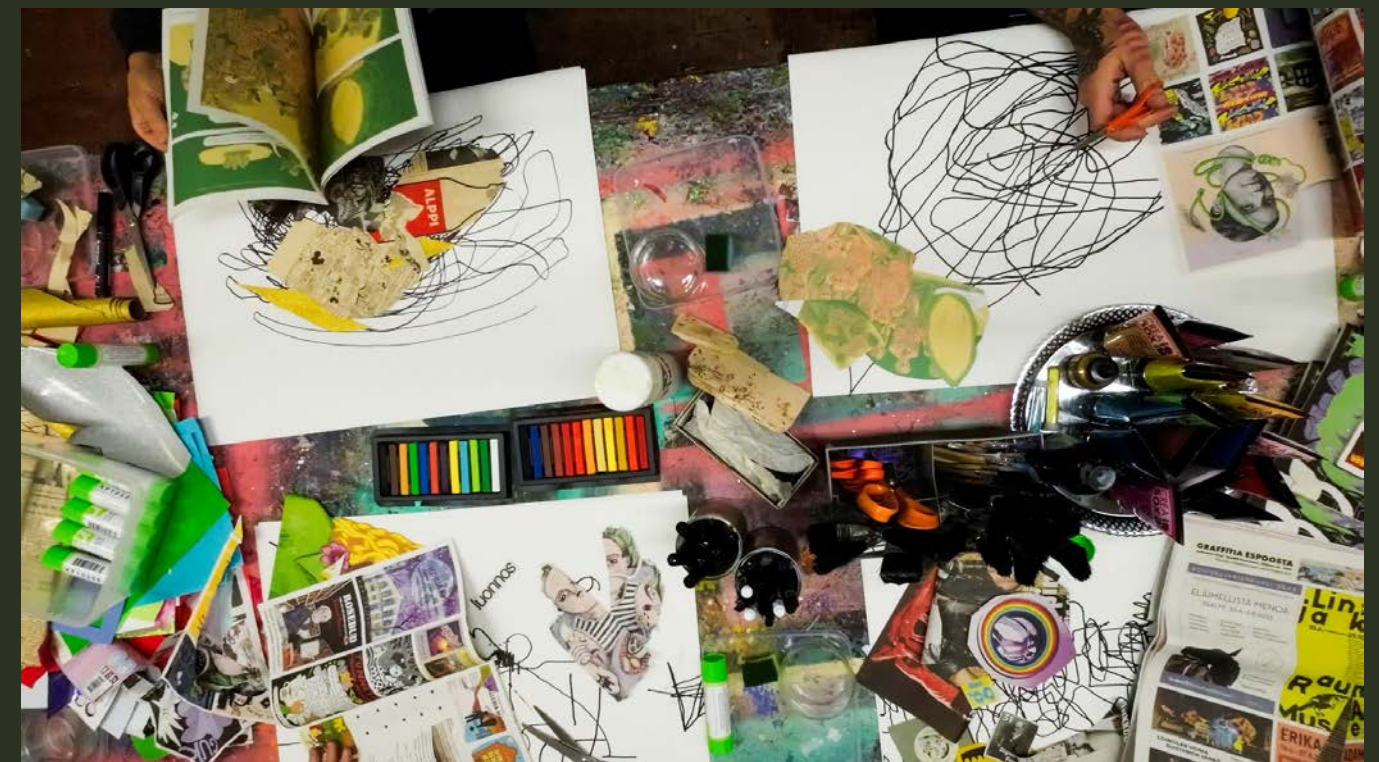
RIC RAPHAEL NITSCH

Sound artist

The feeling of jumping in a puddle. Most know it – this special feeling of happiness. To me this act and experience is descriptive of art's therapeutic potential. It is not merely play or expression, it is playful interactive experience, maybe even a subtle sense of belonging in this world? The puddle contains a certain kind of magic to the one who can see it. Within art there are myriads of ways to house this same enchanting force. This I wish to explore within the bounds of this project, using my background in music therapy. Playing music together can be like jumping in a puddle, can it not?



Ric created a sound workshop where the participants were invited to listen to and control a surround sound ambient music piece he composed. In a calm lounge setting the participants got comfortable and took turns experimenting with controlling and experiencing the different nuances and movement of the soundscape while the others listened. The workshop sought to delve into how an open and curious exploration of the aesthetics of sound can invoke a sense of calm and soothing in both the creator and the recipient. The technical possibilities of electronic music, making the experience of "playing electronic music" accessible without refined skills.



EKA TERIINA VEA KOSONEN

Visual artist/community artist

I am a visual and community artist from Kotka, and have been working in the art field since 2009, focusing particularly on mural projects and community art. As a graduate in visual arts, I am dedicated to the therapeutic aspects of art, promoting mental health and well-being through creative expression. My roles in art education for Kotka city projects and leadership positions at Kotkan Taiteilijaseura have deepened my commitment to using art as a tool for social engagement and personal transformation. My work aims to enhance intercultural understanding, community cohesion, and both individual and collective happiness.

In Eka Teriina Vea Kosonen's workshop – the Zen Zine, participants explored self-expression through collage-making in a calm, creative atmosphere. The workshop began with relaxation exercises, encouraging participants to release creative blocks and focus on the moment. Through guided activities like blind drawing with the non-dominant hand, participants were invited to embrace spontaneity and discover new ways to express their emotions. They then crafted unique, small zines using images, text, and drawings, creating visual stories without the pressure of perfection. The afternoon was filled with quiet focus, creativity, and a sense of shared reflection.



NINA ROSE MARKVARDSEN

Multidisciplinary artist

I’m Amina aka. Nina Rose. I am a multidisciplinary artist born in Denmark 1997, with Arabic and northern African roots.

My practice is about exploring the creative realm and how it can serve as a healing tool. This means you can experience me in performing arts like theatre, dancing, singing and the mixing realms in between.

Though I have a theater and acting background, my first artistic language was visual arts like drawing and painting. I have been a part of multiple art studios in Aalborg (DK) and started my own. I have also been the coordinator of a long series of events, focusing on exposing the underground performing arts in Northern Jutland.

My artistic universe is very dreamy, sometimes hopeful, sometimes chaotic and sometimes the only focus is the process, not the end result.



Nina Rose Markvardsen created a workshop revolving around using the basic principles of street art to make a space for the participants to actively use their bodies to create a collaborative piece of art. The participants collaborated in exploring how to connect each of their individual visual stories in three “portals” with spray paint on a wall build for the occasion. The goal was to create an awareness, a mindfulness and a kind appreciation for our bodies and all the things we are able to do and create because we have a body.

The participants had one hour of intuitive spray painting. By the end of the workshop, the team shared their reflections, and it was Nina Rose’s job to take those thoughts and enhance them with further spray painting after the workshop.





MARJA KANGAS

Published author/theatre and writing teacher /death doula

Art deals with the un-deal-able. Recently my own focus has been on death, presence and fleeting identities, and I ponder the question: “Who am I?”. I believe that happiness is our natural state, and it is only our minds that hide our joyful existence. Contemplating something as radical, final, and unknown as one’s own mortality can be a gateway to just being here now, and to a meaningful life. In our mind-dominated time, art is one of the best fields to explore this natural, yet incomprehensible state where reason, concepts or words cannot reach. Paradoxically, I work with text, dramaturgy, and literature. I am a published author, a theatre and writing teacher, and a death doula.



Matilda Palmu invited participants to dream and collaboratively make a world of dreams visible in the form of a flower-themed collage. The aim for the workshop was to have a little escape from everyday life through colorful creativity to an imaginary land, where the

uniqueness of each flower is celebrated and everything and anything is possible. The participants shared an afternoon together creating colorful and delightful flower collages that together became “The Garden”.

Marja Kangas’ workshop revolved around her work as both a writer and a death doula. Using creative writing exercises, she invited the participants to explore the theme of death, and in that the human experience of living: Thoughts on the afterlife, memories, fears, sorrows and gratitude was given form and looked at from a new perspective through poetical metaphors.



MATILDA PALMU

Visual artist/designer

I’ve always considered my creative practice my happy place. I dive into colors and fantastical landscapes and forget the world around me and travel into my dreamlands. Joy, play and a little bit of magic are the key elements to my art. I want to create utopian alternative realities where anything is positive, and the problems of the world are solved. This yearning for these colorful imaginary places comes from my own past with family trauma as well as from the state of our society – the contradiction of “happiness and despair” is present all around me. Instead of lingering in the darkness, I choose to fight against it! I often process heavy topics within my artworks, but the outcomes are usually quite the opposite of what one might expect: My works are cute, soft, colorful and happy! With my artworks I wish to brighten up people’s lives and sprinkle happiness around me and hopefully have a positive impact on people’s well-being.



BIRGITTE LUNDTOFT

Dancer/coreographer

How can art be an agency for mental wellbeing and happiness?

Exploring themes and concepts such as radical softness, weaving of body and place, (re)patterning, exploring nonlinear and polyrhythmic networks of things and beings, we will search for personal and public sensations of happiness.

How can personal definitions inspire and be guiding factors of a common spine moving through forest baths, still and shimmering ponds, inner landscapes and nervous systems that can regulate in a constant balancing act towards growth in the gross happiness index.

The theme of Birgitte Lundtoft's workshop was "rain", which worked as a reference point for moving with our senses and changing state. In the workshop a circle was formed, passing around a visceral collection of smells, sounds and objects that opened up the world of rain. Through a number of tasks, the participants were invited to move with their senses and surroundings. Focusing on how our bodies use all of our senses to perceive our surroundings and absorb information, the workshop created a space for the participants to curiously explore and use their intuition to pour their bodies through the room using the many phases of rain.





Nina Rantala created two workshops with migrant women in irregular situations. Participants in the first workshop were invited to sculpt a large root system together as a metaphor for growing and evolving in life. Using their imagination, dreams, hopes and creativity as inspiration, new roots “grew”, and with that seedlings, flowers, new life. The second workshop revolved around change: How to handle changes, accept them, work with them. Through the medium of kinetic sand, the women worked together and individually to feel, move and sculpt the ever-changing material. Both workshops encouraged conversation, togetherness, and empathy.

NINA RANTALA

Visual artist/sculptor

I'm a visual artist and a sculptor. My practice is based on interaction and communality. Typical characteristics of the theme in my art works are empathy, presence, feeling of safety and bodily thinking. I strive to create encounters where people have space to face themselves, reflect on their environment and on themselves as part of it. Continuing the dialogues started in these interactions are essential to me. We need to cherish and support the connections we make to ourselves, others, and the planet. Lately I have been working in multidisciplinary teams, bringing my artistic thinking and practice to the processes. Happy to be part of the Between Happiness and Despair!



SOLIDARY SOLITARIES

By Inga Gerner Nielsen

In the discussions opened by the project, *between happiness & despair*, this essay turns to look at those who hold space for those two sentiments to be felt and expressed through artistic processes. Participants who join art workshops may be guided to try the widened arrays of language for emotions, opened through poem, image, sound, movement. Part of my practice as a performance artist is dedicated to making the invisible visible. Together with an audience, I gently unfold their inner worlds. It is a beautiful place to be. And at the same time bringing others into that state of openness also adds an extra layer of work.

I created the project *In the Mirror of Care Work* as a way for us to simultaneously explore the potential and to make visible the muddled, conflicting feelings that come with a devotion to providing care through art. The project resulted in a book with the same name.

For the sake of reflecting with other artists about our work, I play with the image of us as a kind of staff or personnel working in the margins, or sometimes even embedded in the institutions of today's welfare state, asking the questions:

What kind of staff are we / or do you want to be? What are our working conditions? And what does the added layer of caretaking do to our artistic practise?

Last year, I first touched upon the latter question in a reading from my book, at *The Green Corridor*, an artist-run space in Brussels. To have accompanying art pieces enter into the discussions the book brought

up, my friend and visual artist Roshan Di Puppo presented a series of drawings titled:

‘I (DON’T) CARE’

I had asked her to share them, because of the ambivalence inscribed in their title and making. Often when working longer periods in Brussels, I stay in the old room of Roshan's daughter, who is the first of her three children to move out. I cannot think of a more caring person than Roshan, and that is exactly why I celebrate a practice she has developed: Sitting down at a table by the end of every workday, “when the kitchen is cleaned”, and dedicate herself entirely to her A3 sketchbook. From 7h30 to 8am she lets her hand scratch out whatever inner shapes of thoughts that need to be etched into the paper in front of her. A routine she established during the time she was studying for her visual arts degree. Roshan has an immense love of shapes; For circles, crooked squares, for a sudden mint green to enter scrubs of pencil grey, for pop art popcorn, oranges and stripes on top of stripes //...//...//

In the light of the topics found in *between happiness & despair*, we might also see this practice as necessary for her well-being in general. The title and the contextualization open a world that was meant to be just hers. Roshan had been doubting whether she was ready to share this part of her practice, but then found a way. She was encouraged by the kind, communal and caring atmosphere

The Green Corridor's hosts, Sam and Juan, have cultivated. Since 2022 they have been inviting artists to work in their beautiful small gallery in one of the small steep streets of the neighborhood Sct. Gilles. They also help facilitate a moment of sharing “where we are at” in our different processes in an event at some point during the residencies they offer. Their efforts point to a movement in art communities I've experienced, where we open our artistic research to each other. We come to know each other's work in very intimate ways. This insistence on vulnerability fosters a mode of solidarity amongst us. It signals a move against the paradigm of the fully polished art works, ready for sale and consumption on the art market.

However, creating vulnerable spaces for both ourselves, our peers, and our audiences to enter is a delicate balance. Sometimes we first need to turn away from the world to create our own. In the book *ON FREEDOME*, author of poem, prose and criticism, Maggie Nelson, ponders the aesthetic care as an intimate relation with the materials of the art piece. This kind of intimacy, which can later be shared with an audience, viewer and reader, often needs a confined, solitary space for the artist to be created.

For those who remain disproportionately engaged in providing care for others – which still typically means women – this caring may also entail figuring out how to suspend or offload the burden of caring for others long enough to be able to stand around in your studio with your smock on, paintbrush poised (Nelson 2021: 23)

It is not my aim, nor do I wish to reduce Nelson's line of thinking to an emphasis on caring as a burden. It is rather, to draw attention for the need to protect the solitary space, that may enable us to go on caring. As someone deeply engaged in building bridges for more artists to enter the healthcare sector, I feel a kind of responsibility to help myself and my colleagues not to lose that very sense of freedom from obligations,

that both artists and our audience may find in art making. Sadly, the active work of allowing ourselves that solitary space is still in fact extra *selfcare work*. Which is why I believe strongly that we need to help each other as a community in doing it. I call it *caring for the care giver*.

As the act of caregiving, amongst many, many things, involves a whole lot of logistics, I think we have to look very concretely at what we do and suggest that we mimic some of the structures of functioning care institutions. For me and peers in participatory performance, I have found the profession of nursing to be a productive way to communicate and contemplate my work as an interactive performer; Like the nurse, I come into a kind of waiting room and encounter the audience one-by-one. Here, I prepare them for how they will enter the installation. Inside it, like in the hospital, there are certain procedures planned. And by the end, the audience too needs to be prepared to exit the sometimes-*liminal* state they have been in and re-enter the normal realm of everyday life. I host conversations between nurses and performers, where we share stories from our experiences with audiences and patients. There is a lot we can learn from each other. The nurses get to know how we work dramaturgically and aesthetically with the encounter. And we get to ask them questions about how they manage to meet every new patient with the same dedication, how they sense every new person, and how they take care of each other as colleagues, as well as themselves after a long day at work.

The book, *In the Mirror of Care Work*, introduces a contouring of theories and extracts from nursing histories and metaphors. Together with nurses we use the project to look at how art work reflects in care work. One of the theories we apply in this investigation is emotional *labour*, a term introduced by sociologist, Arlie Hochschild in *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feelings* fin 1983. Emotional labour means either evoking or suppressing

feelings as part of your job. We make use of the term to focus on how, as performers, our artistic expertise relies on the ability to manage and induce emotions in direct interaction with the audience member. And to talk to nurses about how they make it to perform emotional labour at work – and then additionally at home, if they have children or others dependent on them.

It is perhaps exactly because I became a parent 8 years ago, that I started to feel an extra urge for defining and creating a structure for a, to me, almost exotic classical solitary mode of creation of the artist. With the birth of my daughter, more than ever, I felt the necessity of exploring both the logistic and the spiritual aspects of what my artistic practice needed. I could see that for me to create art works, I would need to find a way to sometimes reduce my normal emphasis of thinking of / or involving the audience at every level of their creation.

In the *Mirror of Care Work* is a way for me to continue working with participatory and immersive strategies. Because I really do love the kind of connection I feel with a participating audience, when we enter a place where we start to see what moves in our inner worlds.

To me, art is a way to connect and challenge the loneliness that comes with a highly functionalist and individualist society. It is a great joy to have nurses as colleagues now, and I am thrilled to create new methods together with them at the education at UCN Hjørring and Thisted. The two-edged sword I am balancing consists of speaking about – and exploring the great potential of this interdisciplinary work between art and health, whilst keeping a space open for us as artists to contemplate the ambiguity we feel when letting the artistic sphere meet the demands of the medical paradigm.

Through dialogues with nurses and the project hosts, we shared our complex feelings connected to both of our professions. I feel grateful knowing that the kind of caring,

vulnerable atmosphere, I have experienced in artist milieus such as The Green Corridor, and also very much in the encounters with the artists part of the between happiness & despair program, can also be opened to nurses and other care workers. There are so many fantastic individual communal practices of care and reparative methods being developed in various art scenes these years. And I find it vital that we find ways to expand and share them outside of art institutions. We just have to be aware that we are added an extra sense of responsibility and sometimes emotional labor onto our artistic process by doing so.

Like many artists before me, I continuously return to Virginia Woolf's call to women from *A Room of One's Own*, 1921:

That, to write, you need 500 pounds a year and a room of confined walls, away from the obligations of the social spaces in the home.

How can we answer Woolf's call now that many of our works in contemporary art today include opening up our practice as a social space of care? Let me attempt by ending on as pragmatic a note as Woolf, with a message to funders, art venues and hopefully to more health care institutions:

That, to engage a care working artist, you must provide care for the caregiver. You should double what you might think the pay could be: A salary for the artistic work in a participatory event. Plus, a salary similar for the pedagogical and emotional labour.

HOMAGE TO VULNERABILITY

By Marit Benthe Norheim

The project *between happiness & despair* went straight to my heart, when I was asked to be a part of it. It was a respectful approach to collaboration in the spaces in-between, where both the mentally vulnerable and the artists are allowed to draw on their own insights, express themselves, and share with each other on their own terms. In many ways, I see it as a natural extension of my own project under the overarching title *Homage to Vulnerability*, where, among other things, I am working on symbolic portraits of people who have deeply affected me. Where strength in fragility plays a role in how to carry heavy burdens.

I am working to find a way to bring out some of the invisible resources we have among us in the “cracks” of our welfare society, to promote the humane and empathetic in our communities.

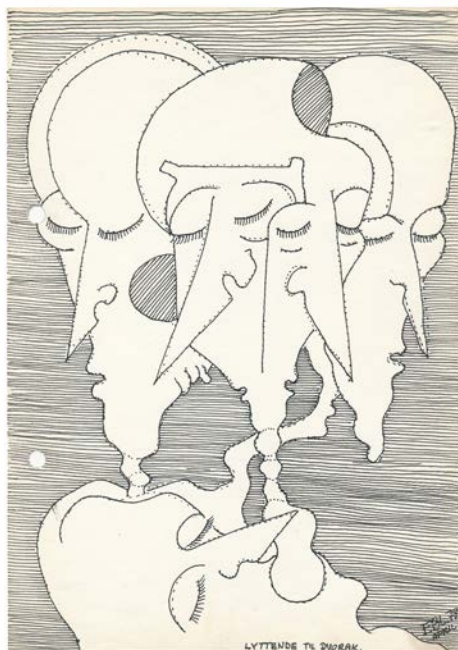
The personal made universal is something we, as artists, often strive for; in finding images that our artistic voices, often wordlessly, can convey.

Examples of my *Vulnerability Portraits* include:

ERIK BOMANN-LARSEN

((1952 – 2023) Erik had the diagnoses of hypersensitivity neurosis and borderline psychosis. He lived in the basement of his childhood home with his mother until he was nearly 50 and was intermittently admitted to psychiatric care until Solveig (a clerk at the local psychiatric hospital) became his “Sunny Road.” Erik spent his life writing and drawing as a witness to his own psyche,

on the edge of multiple realities. He is one of those people seen as failures in our culture, but who, in other cultures or at other times, would have been regarded as a wise man—a source to draw from. I have known him since I was 18, when he provided invaluable insight with his powerful artistic expressions. I edited some of Erik’s drawings and texts for my Postgraduate thesis at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. This work is now part of a book I recently published, titled *Researcher in Emotions*, which contains a selection of his texts and drawings. Below is a drawing and a couple of quotes from Erik Bomann-Larsen. Playing hide and seek in a cell without hiding places. All you do is hold your hands over your eyes and hope that no one sees you.



Playing hide and seek in a cell without hiding places. All you do is hold your hands over your eyes and hope that no one sees you.

I have worked myself into a belief-:

*that I am a psycho-religious scientific experiment:
And that makes all the shame and fright go into different boxes; from where I can talk, without losing my mask.*

*It is as though I can say: If I win enough courage to say the mask-less, whilst wearing a mask;
Then I can tell people everything, and they will have to respect me.*

KRISTIAN HILDEBRAND

(1924 – 2011) Kristian was an “Outsider Artist” and cobbler, but I believe he could just as well have been a Goddess-maker from an African tribe. He lived his entire life in Hjørring, in the small cobbler’s workshop where he was born. He referred to himself as an “illegitimate child”—something he suffered from his entire life. He was hospitalized in a psychiatric institution at times and withdrew from social situations. Kristian’s art was the art of necessity, often using cobbler’s stitches and leather, and an endless number of images. Eventually, to his great joy, he was taken seriously by Vendsyssel Art Museum, and he felt that the recognition fulfilled his life. I was involved in creating a book about him and his works while he was still alive and became a close friend of his. Vendsyssel Art Museum has given me large parts of his collection of drawings and sculptures.



HUMAN ARCHIVE

A subtitle of my *Homage to Vulnerability* project is *Human Archive*, which is a series of large cabinets based on personal portraits and objects that I sort and archive by theme; strict, clear, neutral cabinets, each covered with 12.000 large hand-placed glass beads, making them beautiful and awe-striking. The cabinets can be opened, and inside each one contains its own specially composed story. Filled with order or chaos, but perhaps containing precisely what is often hidden away. Not necessarily something one wishes to show, but what is a large part of being human—for better or worse.

One of the cabinets is a tribute to my schizophrenic friend from London, TERESA, who is no longer alive. She was a victim of incest and had to give her son up for adoption. But her son now seeks justice for his mother, which I hope that I can contribute to through my art. The cabinet contains letters, drawings, and stories about and from her life as I know it. Her son has tattooed an angel with headphones on his body as a tribute to her, and in a radio interview, he explains how he now understands, why she had to wear headphones to keep the voices in her head under control.

GIFT ANGEL

During the pandemic, I held a workshop titled *Gift Angel* for some residents at a home for vulnerable young people. It was powerful to experience their reactions to my sculptures, where the content and expression clearly moved them and led to conversations about their own situations. Several expressed gratitude that art could pay homage to people suffering from mental illness.

We built a large angel together, which we decorated with used gift wrap whilst talking about wrapping and presenting one’s personal story which might be something one thinks will not interest others. I showed them some of my sculptural angels who represent different sides of human emotions, to give viewers



opportunities to identify with an angel. At Christmas, we use angels to symbolize hope, comfort, and care, and creating an angel together just before Christmas—touching upon a time that can be difficult for many, seemed to be a relief. The response was open and direct, and after choosing whether they wanted to draw and cut out faces and wings or decorate the angel’s body, everyone eagerly threw themselves into the work. The two who chose to make faces both have severe psychiatric diagnoses. The faces they made for the Gift Angel bear marks of sorrow and pain but also have a duality and intensity that make the angel present and touching. It also received three completely different wings. The body was carefully adorned with a radiant collage of beautiful recycled gift wrap.

Meeting in a creative process with these young people, who are in intense life struggles, but who clearly can engage and communicate without words, reinforces my belief in the possibilities and importance of art. It has confirmed for me, that the stories we surround ourselves with help shape us as fellow human beings.

And if one dares to share both dreams and vulnerability — dares to let people in — then, much can change. I believe that awareness processes are important, and that those who find it difficult to express themselves, can experience other ways of entering their own narratives.



Art has always created images that one can find the strength to endure pain and suffering by — to be able to exist in what is often called the world of reality whilst also being in other worlds.



KULTURKRAFT is a pilot project that I am involved in with my husband, sculptor Claus Ørntoft: *Specially composed cultural experiences, supplemented with lectures, dialogues, and creative activities, will in an innovative way complement the medical treatment traditionally received in the hospital system.*

KulturKraft is a groundbreaking initiative for the inclusion of art and culture in care and rehabilitation. The content and execution of KulturKraft takes place in collaboration between Aalborg University Hospital and cultural and art providers in the North Jutland Region.

From the brochure of Kulturkraft.

We contribute as non-institutional artists with talks, tours and workshops in our studios, in

collaboration with a doctor, a philosopher and a musician. We are pleased to be part of this process, because we, as artists, work with existential issues and live for expressing ourselves. But it requires, that one is not afraid to invite people into one's own processes and to meet people where they are in their processes. We have had serious and chronic illness in our lives for several years, and therefore have experience in what is required in keeping hope alive.

TT, our daughter, Tonje is a composer, but also affected by a rare and serious illness where she cannot participate in life in the way, that most take for granted. She uses the image of the mermaid as a symbol of survival. Once in a while, she needs to symbolically dive deep into the sea before she resurfaces with renewed strength to endure her sufferings.

We often talk about viewing a situation from a heavy social-realistic-reality-TV perspective; or from a Shakespearean angle. The ingredients can be exactly the same. We have had several collaborations with her music and my sculptures.



EVERY BLUE

Song Lyrics by TT 2020/2024

The sunshine tomorrow
keeps me warm
That I'll shine tomorrow
gets me through the storm

I'm every blue
I'm not deranged
I miss you too
Some things never change
Cause I remember the lights

And every ray that burrows
Holds me warm for long
Where we could be tomorrow
is what drives me strong

But if I don't have tomorrow, to lean on
At least I can't forget
What finds me guides me home

If my paint spills over you
don't be afraid
I take comfort in the deep blue sea
the endless skies
my darlings eyes
And I see more than one side now

I'm every blue

*I would miss tomorrow
The early skies
The day that breaks a wave through me
Every chance that I could still be here
When the bluebird comes to sing the song for me*

I'm every blue

MEETING THE SILENCE

Creating space to see – to feel – to react – to digest.

By Pia Skogberg

Can the tools and methods of art be part of the solution to the paradox *between happiness & despair* describes?

Personally, I have no doubts. The doubts I do have are aimed towards the societal model we are all a part of – is there the will, insight and courage to realize what it takes?

The following text is based on the workshop, that was held in the nature around Kirsten Kjærs Museum in May 2024, where the selected artists in the project participated.

The intention of the day was to give the participants concrete examples of how an approach to the creative/artistic process, with a focus on silence as a tool, can be orchestrated. To strengthen the experience of “now”, the day was organized as a guided, caring journey, where the artists did not know the direction or the goal. The participants were invited to a quiet walk and collection of organic materials, as well as a tea ceremony, followed by a practical task, and a moment to share the experience. It all took place in the landscape around the museum. At the gathering after lunch, there were different reactions to the structure of the day, from frustration at loss of control to a feeling of letting go and a sensation of calm – an observation that is good to consider when working with artistic projects in vulnerable environments.

Silence as a tool, used to settle at a kind of zero point, functions as an opening, a reflection, to find a balance between the active and the passive. It is a space that is essential in its intrinsic value and a place from which new things can grow.

In the modern visual, sculptural, and architectural art fields, one operates with the concept of negative surfaces, shapes and spaces (negative spaces).

In the two-dimensional space, the negative plane is the space between two depicted objects (two “positive” planes), the background, or an illusion of something that creates distance. In the three-dimensional space, the term describes the space that forms around the sculpture/building mass.



Image: Sonja Ferlov Mancoba: “A l’écoute du silence. Homage to Steingrim Laursen”, 1969, bronze, SMK

An example of how the negative form in a sculpture creates space and works in interaction with the positive form in an overall composition.

This is a fully integrated and natural part of the considerations that go into an artistic practice. Perhaps the most important. It creates calm, balance and rest. It makes room for something an object, a line, a scale, a reflection, the active part, the visual expression and conceptual message. The whole is a composition, a collaboration within a given field.

In Eastern philosophy, the concept of “Ma” exists. “Ma” includes both the spatial as the space in-between, and the temporal, as a break. In art, “Ma” is clearly visualized in empty spaces, silence, and unused areas inviting reflection and giving the content a deeper layer.

The tea ceremony has roots in “Ma”. The tea-master guides the participants into a space where the focus is on being, feeling the silence, and letting thoughts and feelings pass through. The tea ceremony can, as in this case, be followed by an exercise that relates to the experience. After that, it is up to each individual whether and what they want to share.

I believe that a well facilitated tea ceremony can function as a tool in an art project, that operates with interpersonal relationships, where the core of the project is to give space to express yourself and to create a space in which you open up to new insights and alternative ways of thinking.

In the late 1990s, the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the concept of “relational aesthetics” in a book of the same title[1]. The term reflected the new art practices that came to make a mark on the themes of contemporary art.

Relational aesthetics and relational art functions today as overall terms for art that addresses itself directly to a target group outside the framework of the White Cube [the standardized gallery- and exhibition spaces, red.].

Relational art is a broad term for art projects with social, political



Pictures: “Art parade in solidarity with Palestine”, Samara Salam and Til Vægs, Copenhagen 2024, photo: I DO ART Agency[2]

An example of relational art, where a group of artists acts as the initiator of an art parade, where the participants have jointly made banners. Til Vægs (Against the Wall) is a platform for art in the public space.

and humanistic themes, which can be defined as a work of art that addresses the audience directly and invites active participation, co-creation, and an artwork that is created through dialogue with the artist. The work can, for example, be an event or a conversation. In this context, a tea ceremony can be used as a tool to strengthen the relational aspect of the artistic creation process.

So back to the initial question:

Can the tools and methods of art be part of the solution? Is there the necessary will, insight and courage to realize what it takes?

The willingness and insight to see art and culture as a factor that can help curb this increasing societal problem in the Western world is reflected in a report from the World Health Organization (WHO), 2019: “What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review”. The report is based on 20 years of global research in the field of art and mental health, as well as the role of art in improving health and well-being in society and in the individual



citizen/patient. It concludes that:

Although some countries have made progress in developing policies that make use of the arts to support health and well-being, many have not yet addressed the opportunities that exist for using the arts to support health, and for others policy activities have been time limited [...] [3].

The report by WHO emphasizes, that the beneficial effects of the arts should be recognized, that the increasing amount of evidence requires a political effort, and, not least, that cross-sector collaboration between performing artists, the health sector and other stakeholders is established.

So, the evidence is clear.

But how will it be realized in Denmark?

On the National Board of Health’s website, you can read that the top two factors for the cause of stress that can lead to stress-related illnesses in a workplace are: “Large workload and time pressure” and “High and unmanageable demands”[4].

Stress is the result of excessive strain of the brain. Time pressure and greater demands mean less time to take a break. The overall political message consists of financial cuts, that we have to work more, and that there is no ‘financial leeway’ to hire more staff in the professions that hold the responsibility of care work. The message should be turned 180 degrees – can we afford not to?

In a society where “noise” constantly competes for our attention, and where the established methods aim to create results and progress, the judicious use of temporal and physical spaces – the in-betweens – can be the key to the pause, the insight and the calm.

It is perhaps naive to believe that the methods and tools of art can heal or eliminate the mental strain that people in modern society suffer from. But one thing is certain: When the mind gets to catch a break, find room for rest, then it also creates room for curiosity and an excess of mental energy for the objective itself – for what really matters.

To you in charge of decision making and to everyone who wants to get to the root of the problem: Have courage, it requires a new perspective and social model to create change. It is NOT a quick fix. Nothing is.

[1] Bourriaud Nicolas. 2005. *Relational aesthetics (Esthétique relationnelle, 1998)*, Les Presses du réel, Dijon.

[2] Rikke Luna, Rikke Matias. 2024. “An artists parade for a free Palestine”, *Idoart.dk*, online.

[3] Fancourt Daisy, Finn Saoirse. 2019. “What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review”, *Health Evidence Network synthesis report*, p.67.

[4] Sundhedsstyrelsen. 2022. “Stress og arbejdsmiljø”, *Diseases, disorders and treatment*, online.

SNEAKY EYES ON *BETWEEN* *HAPPINESS & DESPAIR*

From an outsider’s perspective, I was able to observe up close the various events of the project *between happiness & despair* taking place in Denmark. Being the assigned photographer documenting the three workshops, I was far enough away from the activities to calmly observe what was happening without disturbing, but at the same time close enough to see the effects on the participants. Being in this role enabled me to feel the process partially, at least the atmosphere, without being immersed in it. The camera was also a useful tool, because it forced me to have a global view of the situation while being attentive to details: Interactions among the group, specific gestures, subtle reactions, changes in attitudes, etc.

I observed a certain solemn aspect before the beginning of each of the workshops, which is often attributed to contemporary art. However, this quickly disappeared when the artists introduced their workshop to participants. In their own way, each of them emphasized the importance of feeling comfortable for the next two hours, the purpose was to try something new together. They all outlined that they would be there to guide participants through the creation process and that the goal was to have a good time. So, the three of them first formed a space for discussion in order to let participants understand the following workshops. Each guided the group gradually towards the second space - dedicated to the moment of creation. The space of creation was finely framed: In Ric’s and Birgitte’s workshops, taking place in Theater Nordkraft, thanks to four speakers and white sheets around the room, and in Nina’s, which took place in a nearby park, thanks to trees.

For both the indoor and outdoor events, the space had been curated by the artists to create a feeling of security and control. Here lights played a significant role. Thousands of lights on a crisscrossing light chain created a starry ceiling in the theater, and in the park, light filtered through foliage making a nice atmosphere. In all three events the space was also closed off from outside noises thanks to music. The space of experience was built as a calm and safe environment, creating an immersive place away from the pressure of time and the outside world, where the participants could freely and fully experience the event. Each artist proposed that the participants should evolve within the creative space in a process leading either towards introspection or towards creative freedom through play, or towards the liberation of the body by overcoming their initial fear of being expressive.

Freedom was a term, I would say, that characterize those workshops the most. The goal was to provide a space of freedom of creation and feeling, that pointed precisely towards the link between art and mental well-being central to the project. It was possible to put it into action thanks to the sense of security offered by the places, by the facilitation of the artists, and by the openness of the participants. For instance, Ric insisted in his introduction on the fact that nothing could go wrong in the process of creation, thus participants had enough room to make mistakes, to try many possibilities. In Nina’s event, participants tried different possibilities offered by the spray cans applying the paint directly on the surface. These approaches immediately suppressed any pressure, even subconsciously, to make beautiful final artworks. They

just had to add more paint, and through this process they created more and more developed shapes.

Art offers a creative space for testing where mistakes are not only possible but favorable in order to progress. All focus was on the act of creation. The artists and participants were entirely immersed in the creative process.

Instructions were clear enough to guide them without limiting them. Here, artists were guides and facilitators for the participants. They allowed them to be able to draw on their creative faculties. The artists were there to lead participants to a space of creative freedom and disinhibition in order to achieve a high degree of experimentation. In general, artists can be the ones who provide others with tools to be able - and allowed to fully experiment with both the act of creation and engaging with emotions. Here, they were neither doctors nor therapists, they didn’t have the abilities nor the ambitions to lead the group to a cure. Creation opens time and space and makes introspection easier, not only to explore positive emotions and sensations, but all of them.

During her introduction, Birgitte pointed out something important to me. She insisted on the importance of self-care, and the participants were reminded that they were allowed to stop at any moment if they didn’t feel well. Unlike art therapy, here, the healing function was not an imperative required from art. Art has therapeutic potential, but the expected outcome at the end of the workshops was not to wash away illness. Just because the project “Between Happiness & Despair” is about the relationship between art and mental well-being doesn’t mean that art will bring only positive energy. It also means being allowed to experience other feelings than happiness or even tranquility. After Birgitte’s workshop, remaining participants gathered naturally to talk about their struggles with their mental well-being. This improvised and informal moment of group discussion served as proof that creation opened an introspective space safe enough for them to bring

out and share past events, or some issues they had had, and some they were still dealing with. Each one showed interest in each other’s stories and tried to understand how they faced the situation. The workshops didn’t require participants to feel immediately better thanks to art. It allowed them to open up and give them an opportunity to be in the role of creator.

At the end of Birgitte’s workshop, I took a look at what words participants chose to describe the event. The white handwriting on black pieces of paper spelled out: joyful, soft and strong, *briviba* (a Latvian word that can be translated to freedom), reanimating, emerge, experiencing, calm. Participants had different perceptions of the three workshops, but they were all active in shaping their own experience. Things were able to emerge thanks to an act of creation because creation requires you to engage. I am convinced it’s a universally shared ability of human beings. We all have the faculty of transformation, of creation, whether it materializes in art or not.

The artist Joseph Beuys conceptualized this faculty and the need to develop it. The most often used quote is: «Every man is an artist» («Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler»). It expresses the fact that each one possesses in themselves creative faculties which must be perceived and improved. I am convinced all humans are equal in those skills. Art must be accessible to everyone, not for everyone to become an artist, but rather for everyone to put into practice the principle of creation in their daily lives. Society must offer a space that provides free development of talents and personality for each human being - because it helps develop self-determination. Creation allows you to shape your own reality, it’s a way to change what’s around you and potentially change yourself. As much in the role of creator as in the role of the audience, thanks to art, the individual is able to set their choices and actions freely, choices which are usually restrained in other fields of society. Creation allows freedom and emancipation that are not only favorable but also necessary for humankind because it

leads to improved well-being.

I think creation is selfcare, being a creator is being your own healer and potentially other’s. Moreover, Beuys himself performed with the intention of introducing a therapeutic function as an artist, assigning himself to the role of healer in his various works (using felt, fat and honey). Beyond his practice, the therapeutic function is central in his conception of art, and it is intended to change the whole society. He defined in the 1970s the concept of social sculpture as a work of art («Gesamtkunstwerk»). Indeed, art has the potential to sculpt our society into a fairer reality, including bettering people’s mental well-being. But art is not a cure for contemporary ills, it’s not that easy, art is a help.

Marie Travers
Art Historian





How do you sum up something like between happiness & despair? I am sitting in my office chair at Kunsthal NORD, looking out at the autumn that has now truly claimed Aalborg. We are finishing up the last things for the exhibition in Denmark and putting the last touches on the magazine. I have had many difficulties figuring out how to end it all, what to say. Marie Travers, our art historian in residency, walks in with a new shade of pink paint she has blended for the walls in the exhibition. We gather and admire how close she has come to the color on our screens.

Being a project manager often means writing e-mails, planning, making phone calls, looking through budgets. It can be very tedious and tiresome. You become confined in an office, where you sit, acting as a little engine keeping everything running, fueled by coffee and the hope that it all will be worthwhile.

And then once in a while, it jumps off the pages and screens and comes to life. It is carried into an office in a freshly blended bucket of pink paint. A residency, meeting artists, really digging into the topics after a long and exhausting day, facilitating experiences for people who tell you: *This mattered to me. This made a small difference.*

I cannot speak for everyone involved in the project, and I cannot account for all the small details of what has happened the past year, but through the conversations I have had with artists and audiences alike, I can safely say that this project touched upon something important.

There is a need out there to be seen and heard, a need for community, and for spaces of quiet reflection. The deterioration of mental health and well-being in Europe speaks volumes in this regard. And I think we discovered something through this project that brings us closer to understanding how we as artists can help.

SO, WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The artist can help by providing tools and methods for active reflection.

The artist can help by creating a space for freedom of expression.

The artist can help by facilitating experiences that transform our perspectives of the world and of ourselves.

The artist can help by creating spaces that provide a moment of peace that might not be found elsewhere.

The artist can help by providing care through their work.

The artist can help create community.

THE ARTIST CAN HELP.

Lasse Fischer

THANK YOU

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Nina Rose Markvardsen
Ric Raphael Nitsch

**between
happiness
&
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*lies a space
for exploration
and growth*