

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF PARTICIPATORY ARTS PRACTICES AND MENTAL HEALTH E-MANUAL

An E-manual to Replicating the Workshop Experience



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A Guide to Replicating the Workshop Experience

Presented by
L'Altre Festival

This e-manual is based on the successful experience of the "Exploring the Intersection of Participatory Arts Practices and Mental Health" workshop, held in Barcelona. Designed to support cultural workers, professionals, and students, this guide provides step-by-step instructions to help you organize and facilitate similar workshops in your own community.

This workshop is a part of the project INclusive arts for Social Participation, Integration, Resilience and well-being in Europe (INSPIRE), co-funded by **Creative Europe** program, promoted by Nedomysleno, Fundacja Varszatovnia and l'Altre Festival.



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VARSZATOVNIA



WHY?

Constructing bridge between Mental Health and Arts: A Necessary Step for Wellbeing

The interaction between mental health and arts has become increasingly recognized as essential for fostering wellbeing. Both the World Health Organization (WHO) and key research bodies such as the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health, and Wellbeing have extensively documented the profound impact that artistic engagement can have on mental health. This synergy presents a unique opportunity to address mental health challenges while simultaneously enriching cultural experiences.

The Power of Art

Art has long been acknowledged as a powerful medium for self-expression, identity formation, and emotional release. According to the Creative Health Inquiry Report (2017), artistic engagement can effectively reduce anxiety, depression, and stress while enhancing resilience and overall wellbeing. Participation in creative activities has been shown to provide individuals with a sense of purpose, improve self-esteem, and foster social connections (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017).

Moreover, WHO's initiative on Arts and Health emphasizes that creative interventions—whether through theatre, music, dance, visual arts, or storytelling—offer non-verbal channels of communication that can be crucial for individuals who struggle to articulate their feelings.
(World Health Organization, 2019).

WHY?

Art Brut as a Bridge to Mental Health

A Creative Path Toward Healing and Inclusion

What Is Art Brut?

Art Brut—literally "raw art"—is a term introduced by French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe artwork created outside of the conventional art world. Often produced by individuals with mental health challenges or those marginalized from society, this form of expression is praised for its authenticity, emotional intensity, and freedom from artistic norms (The Art Story, n.d.).

Rather than focusing on technical skill or academic aesthetics, Art Brut prioritizes instinct, emotion, and personal narrative—qualities that make it especially valuable in therapeutic contexts.

The Mental Health Benefits of Creating Art

Creative expression has long been associated with psychological healing. As noted by Cass Art (n.d.), engaging

in visual art can trigger the release of dopamine—a neurotransmitter tied to pleasure and motivation—making art-making an effective tool for reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

More than a hobby, art becomes a way to:

- Express and process complex emotions
- Reclaim a sense of control
- Improve self-esteem and resilience
- Foster mindfulness and emotional clarity

This therapeutic journey emphasizes process over product, allowing individuals to connect with themselves in a safe, non-judgmental space (Cass Art, n.d.).

WHY?

Why Art Brut Works in Mental Health Contexts

Art Brut is inherently inclusive. Because it values raw, instinctive creation over polished technique, it invites participation from people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. This approach dissolves the barrier between "artist" and "non-artist," offering everyone a voice through visual expression.

Cass Art (n.d.) highlights how this open access to creative practice allows individuals to externalize their inner world—transforming emotional pain into visible, manageable forms. In this way, Art Brut becomes not only cathartic, but also communicative, helping people feel seen and understood.

Art in Practice: From Clinical Spaces to Contemporary Voices

The therapeutic power of Art Brut is evident in institutions like the Art Brut Center Gugging in Austria, where patients are encouraged to create freely as part of their psychiatric care. These artworks are publicly exhibited, affirming the creators' value and contributing to social inclusion (The Magazine Antiques, n.d.). Similarly, a study in a Chinese correctional facility found that inmates engaging in Art Brut-inspired sessions showed reduced emotional distress and improved self-expression (Wiley Online Library, n.d.).

Contemporary artists such as Pedro Strukelj illustrate the ongoing relevance of raw artistic expression. His emotionally rich visual narratives explore identity, vulnerability, and mental landscapes, echoing the core principles of Art Brut while resonating with wider audiences (Strukelj, n.d.). Such examples reinforce how personal creativity—inside or outside clinical environments—can serve as both a healing tool and a bridge for empathy.

Conclusion: A Creative Bridge to Healing

By embracing Art Brut as a therapeutic and inclusive practice, mental health initiatives can create more human-centered spaces where creativity supports emotional well-being. Art becomes not a luxury, but a necessity—a tool for empathy, resilience, and transformation.

Whether through structured programs or spontaneous acts of creation, Art Brut reminds us that every mark we make can be a step toward healing.

- Cass Art. (n.d.). The intersections of art and mental health & wellbeing. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from <https://www.cassart.co.uk/blog/the-intersections-of-art-and-mental-health-wellbeing/>
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WHO?

Facilitators: Artists, cultural programmers, educators, mental health professionals and people with mental health problems as facilitators.

Participants: Individuals with and without mental health conditions, cultural workers, performing artists, kids. This activity is open for everyone interested in the topic.

One of the key aspects often overlooked is the importance of participant selection. This is the foundation of all activities we conduct—**bringing together a diverse mix of individuals is essential**, and it requires deliberate effort. Working on this aspect in multiple ways is crucial, but it is also one of the most time-consuming parts of the process.

Careful planning is necessary to ensure a balanced mix of participants that fosters meaningful discussions and interactions.

70-100
participants

WHEN & WHERE?

Suggested Duration: One or two-day workshop.

Suggested Venue: Theaters, cultural centers, educational institutions, or community spaces.



REQUIRED MATERIALS

- ① Painting materials (brushes, acrylics, paper, etc.)
- ② Markers and large sheets of paper for group reflections
- ③ Audio-visual equipment (microphone, projector, speakers)
- ④ Cameras and photography equipment
- ⑤ Notebooks for participants to take notes

GOALS

1

Explore how participatory arts practices can promote mental health and well-being.

2

Develop inclusive and participatory artistic methods that address mental health issues.

3

Facilitate collective reflection and dialogue on the role of the arts in fostering inclusivity.

ACTIVITIES

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WHO IS MY AUDIENCE?	INTERACTIVE PAITING SESSIONS	DANCING STATUES	WHO IS THE OTHER?



Preparation Phase: WHO IS MY AUDIENCE?

This activity delves deeply into the context of cultural organisations to **understand their own audience**. Through qualitative research based on **open questions** addressed to the internal **organisational team**, it encourages reflection on who their usual audience is.

An **open debate** between different teams during 30 minutes will lead us to reflect about **who is our habitual audience**.

The big group is divided into smaller groups formed by 4 - 6 people, **representing different backgrounds and roles**.



Preparation Phase: WHO IS MY AUDIENCE?

This activity aims to **help us realize that our audience may be completely different from us** and that it is essential to consider whom we want to address while **gaining a deep understanding of their needs**.

In this debate, it is important to **invite a diverse group of people representing various roles**, including individuals with disabilities, migrants, and other vulnerable groups, **to share their experiences and perspectives**.

Creating a "safe space" free from judgment or labels is crucial. For this reason, **the debate should be open to everyone**, without requiring participants to introduce themselves beforehand.

The questions that we should answer are:

What barriers do they face in accessing my cultural organisation?

What do I think about our audience?
What are they like?

What kinds of topics are they interested in?



Please be as specific as possible, e.g., 'women aged 35-49 in urban areas' instead of 'adults.'



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INTRODUCTION AND EXPLORATION OF ART BRUT

Day one focuses on how participatory art and Art Brut can support mental health. Guided by an artist or artistic collective, participants explore personal expression, collective creation, and discussion as tools for emotional well-being.



Collective GGGG group and participants, Barcelona, Spain 2024

INTERACTIVE PAINTING SESSIONS

ACTIVITY 1: Free painting activity in mixed age/gender groups of 5 till 10 people



This activity lasts about 20 minutes.



Workshop participants during the free painting activity
Barcelona, Spain 2024



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INTERACTIVE PAINTING SESSIONS

This icebreaker activity helps participants who don't know each other get acquainted. It's important to form diverse groups, mixing participants as much as possible.

Assign each person a colored slip of paper upon arrival

They must then find and join others with the same color.

A large sheet of paper is placed on the floor, and participants begin painting **freely**, without specific instructions or guidelines.



DANCING STATUES

ACTIVITY 2: Dancing Statues activity that involves all participants.



This activity lasts about 15 minutes.



Workshop participants debating after watching *Efeito Colateral*
by Grupo Pendurados at L'Altre Festival
Barcelona, Spain 2024



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DANCING STATUES

This activity **encourages interaction** among all participants. Two facilitators lead the session—one manages the music, while the other gives instructions using a microphone.

Participants form a large circle and move freely to the music.

When the music stops, they freeze in a pose inspired by the performing arts.



"PAINT THE OTHER" WRAP-UP

ACTIVITY 3: Creation by pairs "paint the person you have in front of you"

This activity **promotes empathy and interaction** between people who don't usually work together. Participants take a moment to observe the person in front of them, then begin painting their partner's movements and facial expression.



"PAINT THE OTHER" WRAP-UP

The group is divided into pairs **that reflect diversity**—for example, a child paired with a professional painter. The instruction is: “Paint the person in front of you in motion.”

One partner paints while the other performs a movement; then they switch roles.

Once finished, all paintings are displayed for everyone to view and appreciate the results.



GROUP DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

ACTIVITY 3: Closing Reflection – Art & Well-being

To close the workshop, participants are invited to reflect on how they felt before the workshop, during the different activities, and after the experience.

- Summarize key points from both days.
- Provide a resource list for further learning.
- Gather participant feedback through a short survey.



Workshop participants at L'Altre Festival
Barcelona, Spain 2024



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INTRODUCTION AND EXPLORATION OF ART BRUT

Step-by-Step Instructions

①

Welcome & Objectives – Greet all participants warmly and introduce the workshop's goals and structure.

②

Art Brut Intro – Explain the history and philosophy of Art Brut, highlighting its role as a raw and authentic form of personal expression.

③

Creative Exploration – Facilitate small group painting sessions, encouraging participants to explore both personal and collective artistic creation.

④

Discussing Otherness – Lead an interactive discussion on the concept of "Otherness" and how it relates to art, identity, and building empathy.

Activity 4 WHO IS THE OTHER?

Step-by-Step Instructions

- ① **Prepare materials** – Gather stickers in two colors, small cardboard pieces, and pens or pencils.
- ② **Distribute stickers** – Give each participant a sticker of one of the two colors, ensuring an equal division as much as possible.
- ③ **Pair participants** – Ask participants to pair with someone wearing the opposite-colored sticker; if needed, an organizer can join to ensure everyone has a partner.
- ④ **Provide drawing materials**– Hand out a piece of cardboard and a pen or pencil to each pair.
- ⑤ **Start the exercise** – Instruct participants to carefully observe their partner and draw them.
- ⑥ **Encourage reflection** – Remind them to notice differences and similarities while drawing.
- ⑦ **Wrap up** – Conclude with a short discussion about the experience and **the importance of truly seeing others and being seen.**

Have fun!



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