

Evening Standard

Art for happiness – how culture can keep us healthy and sane (mostly)

Nancy Durrant

18 August 2021

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The Wellcome Collection is exploring happiness in its new dual exhibitions, but what role can museums and culture play in maintaining our mental health?

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By [Nancy Durrant](#) | [@nancydurrant](#) | 18 August 2021

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Unless you're [Jeff Bezos](#), who will presumably still be raking it in from a land yacht on [Mars](#) when the [earth is blackened](#) and the last elephant has been sacrificed to the rain gods, it's probably a safe bet to assume you've had a reasonably rubbish 18 months or so.

Even if you haven't been on the [NHS](#) front line, haven't lost a friend or family member to Covid-19, haven't lost your job, or had your hours cut, or missed the first months of your grandchild's life or fallen behind in your studies or spent your entire first year at university weeping alone in a shared flat with nobody to share it with because they're stuck in their home town - even if none of this has befallen you, there have been moments, haven't there? Moments, albeit maybe mercifully brief, that have felt like despair.

The relief, as we emerge into a new world of [vaccinations](#) and health [passports](#) eager to greet each other but not quite sure how, is palpable. But we're also asking ourselves questions - what have I really missed? Was my life really that great before? Was I happy - and what does that even mean?

These are ideas that curators at the [Wellcome](#) Collection were already thinking about, before Covid-19 was a tickle in a bat's throat. Once the pandemic hit though, says the museum's director Melanie Keen, "it wasn't just a question of, should we be doing an exhibition about happiness. It was like, what is our role as a museum? And in health and human experience this time? What is the role of museums in a moment like this?"

As time went on, she says, it felt more urgent for them to continue work on an exhibition "that looked at how we seek to find something which can sometimes be elusive, sometimes isn't a choice, in moments of adversity".

The result is a pair of exhibitions, Joy and Tranquility - part of a season titled [On Happiness](#), which attempts to investigate the varied and constantly changing parameters of what that word means.



University of Maryland, November 1971 / Steve Budman

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Happiness, this rather unhelpful “monolithic term” as the exhibitions’ co-curator George Vasey describes it, is a complicated matter; emotions are “socially; biologically; culturally constructed”. And you can’t understand happiness even as a concept, says Keen, “without all the other contingent parts, whether that’s grief or disappointment or uncertainty - they all fit together in this very jagged jigsaw”.

Objects in the Wellcome exhibitions range from 17th century engravings by the artist Charles Le Brun which depict what were thought of as ‘universally felt’ emotions (there are also later caricatures of them) or David Shrigley drawings responding to everyday moments of joy, to works by artists such as Jasleen Kaur, who uses video, sound and sculpture to poke serious fun at the way the wellness industry bastardises spiritual practices such as yoga, and Chrystel Lebas, whose immersive reproduction of a still and serene forest ends the Tranquility exhibition and releases visitors - if they can drag themselves away - in a state of calm.

Through these, the curators try to unpick all the myriad ways we think about what it means to be happy and how we try to “achieve” it (an odd word when you think about it, which says a lot about the mad pressures we put upon ourselves).

Shrigley understands, for instance, that laughter isn’t just an expression of joy, but also a coping mechanism - “you have to laugh or you’d cry” is a cliché for a reason. An Islamic medical encyclopedia transcribed in Isfahan, Iran, in 1632, contains the research of the physician Abu Ali Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), who lived between 980 and 1037 CE and considered psychological problems such as grief and melancholy to originate in the gut - which resonates strikingly with contemporary research into the connection between intestinal and mental health.

It’s all fascinating, and great fun, and you come out with a sense of, yes, relief that it all seems to be as elusive for everyone else as it is for you and there are perfectly good reasons for that, none of which have to do with success.

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There's a wider point to be made here though, about what not just museums but all the arts do for us in times of need, whether that be the peak of a pandemic or just one of those days when you're feeling a bit off.

People need culture. Under lockdown, the Wellcome found that engagement with their collections online and other digital offerings rocketed. Keen talks about her "perhaps utopian" ambition for people to "come away feeling changed" after a visit to the museum; to "come away thinking differently. I hope that something happens within that person, even if it's just saying to somebody else, I had this great experience and I hope you do too," she says. Museums "provide an opportunity for people to come together and think about their place in the world".

But all the arts do that to some degree - how much have you longed over the last year or two for the jostle and shove of a gig, singing in unison with a crowd of strangers to songs you know by heart? Or to quietly accept a tissue from a sympathetic audience member as you try not to snivel your way through a particularly button-pushy musical number; or the sense of heart-in-mouth as a ballet dancer leaps just that big higher than you thought possible?

Escape, transportation, respite, euphoria, losing yourself - these are all words and phrases we use to describe the feelings we get when we engage with a cultural experience, whether it be looking at a painting or witnessing a performance - or creating something ourselves. When we're feeling rotten, art can help us.

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Since May 2020 the Southbank Centre's initiative Art by Post, delivered in partnership with the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) and supported by leading international health bodies, including the World Health Organisation (WHO) and others, has provided more than 4,500 people at risk from social isolation, loneliness and digital exclusion with free cultural activities - the organisation will now send more than 600 of the works of art created through the project on a national tour, starting at the Southbank Centre. One participant describes the effects of the project like this: "Since starting the Art by Post and putting words down on paper, especially the poems, it seems to be much easier; you have brought out a part of me that has laid hidden for virtually all my life, so for that alone, I thank you."

The fact is though we've known this for a while. Organisations like Hospital Rooms, which since 2015 has been commissioning contemporary artists to work with healthcare service users (usually in severe psychiatric care) to create site specific artworks in their units, has a waiting list of healthcare providers across the country clamouring to work with them, impressed by the improvement in outcomes. The Creative Health report, published in 2017 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, called for "an informed and open-minded willingness to accept that the arts can make a significant contribution to addressing a number of the pressing issues faced by our health and social care systems."

A study published in November last year on how culture and leisure services reacted to the pandemic put it still more clearly. "The massive popularity of creative, cultural and leisure activities during lockdown demonstrates the true value of these often-squeezed services. In extreme circumstances, they have been priceless in preserving people's mental and physical wellbeing. We must not forget this lesson."

Well, quite. We need the arts and culture for several reasons but mostly because they are our unique way of processing the often unfathomable experience of life. It's not a glib response to suggest it should be prescribed on the NHS - social prescribing is something that serious organisations are advocating ever more forcefully.

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Regarding Forests, 2021, by Chrystel Lebas / Stephen Pocock

All of which makes it even more maddening and depressing that the government is going ahead with announced funding cuts to university arts education despite a general outcry from artists and musicians that accused them of “one of the biggest attacks on arts and entertainment in English universities in living memory”. The move is in addition to creeping cuts in arts subjects over the last decade which have, according to Maria Balshaw, director of Tate, speaking last year, “starved” state schools “of the resources to support access to culture and creativity for their pupils” while “private schools place a premium on a rich cultural education for their pupils”.

Art helps us to cope, find joy and move forward in a positive way when we make it, and it helps us to do that when we witness it. Even Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the extremely sciencey Director General of the WHO, says so: “As a science-based organisation, WHO puts a lot of emphasis on evidence and data. At the same time, we must acknowledge that art has the power to inspire and communicate in ways that guidelines, graphs and charts don’t,” he said when the Art by Post exhibition was announced.

His colleague Isabelle Wachsmuth, who has worked on the WHO’s Art Impact for Health initiative agrees, perhaps rather more poetically: “Art is a universal language. Art has no borders and promotes diversity in unity. It responds to our need to share, inspire, and transform. It transcends our perceptions and senses to reveal our infinite potential,” she says.

We need the arts now more than ever, to unpack what on earth just happened, what’s still happening, and what’s always happening (there’s always something, amirite?). It might not always bring us happiness per se, but it can get us a hell of a lot closer.

Joy is at the Wellcome Collection until February 27, Tranquillity until January 9; wellcomecollection.org. Art by Post: Unlocking creativity for our wellbeing is at Southbank Centre from September 20 to October 3; southbankcentre.co.uk/artbypost