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Tischler, Victoria ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0086-1906> (2017) 'It takes me into another dimension': an evaluation of mental health-themed exhibitions in outdoor urban areas. *Arts and Health*, 10 (1). pp. 1-16. ISSN 1753-3015

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'It takes me into another dimension': an evaluation of mental health-themed exhibitions in outdoor urban areas

Victoria Tischler

ABSTRACT

Background: A variety of cultural activities can be used to raise awareness of mental health issues that provide artistic opportunities for those experiencing mental illness, and for outreach to communities who are less likely to engage with the arts.

Method: This study evaluated the impact of two lightbox exhibitions in urban public spaces in London, England, using interlinked crosssectional surveys. Numerical data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis used to analyse textual data.

Results: The findings indicated that the artwork challenged negative attitudes towards mental illness, created empathy with artists and provided a forum for reflection about mental health.

Conclusions: This mode of exhibition raises awareness of mental health, reaches an audience that may be marginalized from mainstream cultural activity and helps build resilience and civic pride.

Introduction

Mental health and art

The use of art as a means of raising awareness of mental health and to counteract stigma and prejudice towards those who experience mental illness is an area of growing interest. A variety of research programmes, public engagement activities and cultural events attest to this.

There is an emergent vein of research investigating the arts and mental health, exploring for example the therapeutic utility of visual art, dance, music and singing (e.g. Morrison & Clift, 2012; Osman, Tischler, & Schneider, 2014; Young, Camic, & Tischler, 2016). This field is distinguished from formal therapies, e.g. art therapy, a licensed psychotherapeutic approach that uses art as a primary means of expression and communication (American Art Therapy Association, 2016; British Association of Art Therapists, 2016).

London's Wellcome Collection has hosted numerous mental health-themed exhibitions, for example, Bobby Baker's Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me 1997–2008 (2009), Brains (2013), States of Mind (2016) and Bedlam (2016) which feature personal, neurobiological, psychical and historical perspectives on mental distress. Bethlem Hospital's Museum of the Mind reveals the history of mental health care and displays the work of well-known artists who were patients at the Bethlem Royal Hospital including Louis Wain and William Kurelek.

A number of notable exhibitions have been held in British art galleries that exhibit the work of artists who have experienced mental illness. These include Inner Worlds Outside, Whitechapel Gallery (2006), Intuition, Whitworth gallery (2010), Art in the Asylum, Djanogly Gallery (2013), Alternative Guide to the Universe, Hayward Gallery (2013) and Radical Craft, Pallant House Gallery (2016).

Outsider art, a term coined by the art historian Roger Cardinal in his seminal text of the same name (1972), recognizes the work of untrained artists, and refers to those who have not typically attended formal art training. Many of these individuals have challenges in communication due to social exclusion, learning difficulties, mental or physical health problems. Decades before Cardinal's text was published, the French artist Jean Dubuffet collected art from asylums and prisons, terming it "art brut", loosely translated as "raw art". He recognized the purity of vision of those without artistic training, an educational influence he considered toxic. His collection was donated to the city of Lausanne in Switzerland in 1971, forming the renowned Collection de l'Art Brut. Outsider art has been recognized to be a major influence on artists associated with Surrealism, Symbolism, Dada and Expressionism.

Culture in the community

All publically funded galleries and museums in the United Kingdom are required to engage with a wide cross section of the public, including outreach to people who are less likely than others to visit cultural venues. This includes individuals with physical and mental disorders, and other disabilities. The expanded role of cultural institutions as vehicles of public health promotion has been noted and is increasing (e.g. Camic & Chatterjee, 2013).

The Museums Association has published guidance on how to use cultural spaces to enhance well-being (Museums Association, 2016) and venues have attempted to reduce the perceived distance

between visitors and displays in order to enhance cognitive and institutional engagement. See for example the work of Grøn at Trapholt museum in Denmark where visitors have been involved in curatorial activity (Jensen & Grøn, 2015).

A number of British galleries have demonstrated their commitment to mental health, for example, The programmes at Dulwich Picture Gallery¹ and Nottingham Contemporary² for people with dementia and Pallant House's Outside In³ for artists who experience marginalization. Others have established regular events to promote mental well-being, for example, Manchester Art gallery's⁴ weekly Take Notice mindfulness sessions.

Galleries and museums have a unique ambience due to their architecture and spatial arrangements. See for example Tate Modern's⁵ dramatic new 64.5-m building "The Switch House" (opened June 2016) that features angled concrete and a perforated brick lattice, allowing light to filter through the galleries in the evening. In a direct response to promote wider engagement, its 5th floor Tate Exchange⁶ is dedicated to community (incl. non-art organizations) activity. Cultural venues like galleries and museums may be considered akin to reverential spaces with therapeutic potential, the "temple of our times" in a secular world, according to historian and Member of Parliament Dr Tristram Hunt (2008). He states further:

there are fewer and fewer neutral spaces in our public realm for people to gather and reflect around art and objects which successfully encompass parts of their multiple, competing cultural hinterlands. The museum, as a quintessentially urban institution, is one such place.

The philosopher Alain de Botton writes of the utility of galleries as permissive spaces in which to explore universal themes such as love, sex, illness and death (de Botton, 2013). Previous studies indicate that gallery visitors feel valued and that exhibition spaces facilitate non-clinical experiences such as meaningful conversation (e.g. Camic, Tischler, & Pearman, 2014; Colbert, Cooke, Camic, & Springham, 2013; Tischler, Carone, & Mistry, 2016).

Visitors express a desire for experiential spaces that facilitate self-learning (McIntyre, 2009). Some people however are less likely than others to visit a gallery or museum. This includes those aged 75 and over, people from black and ethnic minority (BME) groups and those with chronic illness or disability (Dept for Culture, Media & Sport, 2013). Regular visitors to cultural institutions tend to be from higher socio-economic groups. Widening access has therefore become a pressing political and ethical issue (Belfiore, 2016).

Art beyond the cultural institution

A number of initiatives have addressed barriers to cultural engagement by increasing utilization of alternative spaces. Some examples are the Dragon Café⁷ a weekly meeting in a community venue in London that offers a range of creative activities; Free Space Gallery⁸, an organization offering art classes in two National Health Service venues in London; Paintings in Hospitals⁹, who work in a range of health and social care settings; Hospital Rooms¹⁰, a project working with artists to transform psychiatric environments; and Lime¹¹, offering a range of creative activities in clinical and community spaces.

Situating art in public spaces is one way of reaching those who are less likely to visit galleries or cultural institutions. Public realm sculptures take art into the community, for example, Anthony Gormley's commanding Angel of the North (1998) in Gateshead the fourth plinth in London and Maggie Hambling's Scallop (2003) on the beach in Suffolk. Some public art focuses on mental health issues, for example, Ekkehard Altenburger's House for a Gordian Knot (2013), to commemorate the opening of the Institute of Mental Health in Nottingham.

Multi-art form events such as the “Anxiety Festival” (2014) and “Acting Out” (2015) have been used to engage the community with mental health through visual art, music, literary and theatrical events as well as user-led events such as “Bonkersfest” (2006–2008), devised by Creative Routes that focused on art and madness.

Lightboxes

A lightbox is an illuminated format for displaying artwork. Boxes can be constructed in different sizes, containing transparent or translucent glass or acrylic and fluorescent or LED lighting. Images of artwork are printed on a semi-opaque white media, which is mounted to the glass or acrylic with clear adhesive film. The sheets are then slotted into the steel frame of lightboxes and lit up. The lightboxes are robust and weather proof and therefore can be situated in any public space where a power source is available. This means that they afford a flexible medium to take artwork to a range of communities.

Daily Life Ltd

Daily Life Ltd is an arts and mental health organization led by Artistic Director Bobby Baker. Daily Life Ltd aims to use high-quality art and creative activities to change public perceptions about mental health. The organization promotes, facilitates and nurtures the work of artists who have lived experience of mental illness.

Daily Life Ltd was formed in 1995. Its primary function until 2009 was to support the artistic activities of Bobby Baker. Since Baker’s highly acclaimed Diary Drawings exhibition in 2009, she decided that the principle focus of Daily Life Ltd’s activities should be on using her profile as an artist with lived experience of mental illness and recovery to help support others with similar experiences, to develop their work and talent. The organization also uses digital output to extend its reach beyond its geographical context.

Daily Life Ltd programmed two lightbox exhibitions in London to: showcase the work of talented artists with lived experience of mental illness, challenge and change attitudes towards mental health, and develop and foster relationships with partner organizations.

The exhibitions

Lightbox exhibitions were held in Dalston (October–December 2014) and Stratford (January–March 2016), both in East London. They were funded by Arts Council England (ACE)/Wellcome Trust and The Big Lottery Fund, respectively. The Dalston exhibition titled The Expert View (see Figure 1) showcased art created in workshops in which people with lived experience of mental illness (referred to as Expert Artists) and mental health professionals participated.

Artists from both groups were included. The resulting work was chosen and curated by Bobby Baker and Alice Carey. The aim was to consider the role of the expert and expertise in relation to mental health.

The second exhibition in Stratford Letting in the Light (see Figure 2) was inspired by a quote from Groucho Marx: “Blessed are the cracked, for they shall let in the light”. The project was a collaboration between Daily Life Ltd, Bethlem Gallery and Outside In. Bethlem Gallery, established in 1997, is based at the Bethlem Royal Hospital’s Museum of the Mind. Its programmes, events and exhibitions aim to foster collaboration and exploration as well as promote the careers and professional expertise of their artists. Outside In is based at Pallant House gallery and aims to provide a platform for artists who find it difficult to access the art world due to disability, illness or isolation. They host competitions, online galleries and exhibitions to develop and showcase the work of their artists. The work selected was a response to an open call to artists.

A selection panel chose the work included in the Stratford exhibition. The panel included Bobby Baker, a curator from Bethlem gallery and two artists with lived experience of mental illness. There were no set criteria for accepting work; however, the process was aesthetically driven and the artist text included was influential if it was especially well-written. One hundred and fifty artists submitted work and 35 were selected to take part.

Both exhibitions were publicized as showing work by artists who had experienced mental health issues. For example, the leaflet for “The Expert View” states:

This exhibition offers personal reflections on mental health and expertise by people in East London- psychiatrists, psychologists, support workers, doctors, nurses and a wealth of individuals with personal experience of mental distress.

For “Letting in the Light”, the leaflet stated:

These works will be brightening the Grove in Stratford throughout the dark winter months, and encouraging people to reconsider their preconceptions about mental health.

On the exhibition “Letting in the Light”, The Daily Life Ltd website stated:

*... illuminating our understanding of the experience of mental distress ...
... showcase extraordinary work by artists with personal experience of mental health issues ...*

Visitors approaching the work on the street would not be aware of this until (and if) they read the accompanying text and statements on the lightboxes or had read publicity about the exhibition.

Research aim

The evaluation aimed to assess the impact of two mental health-themed lightbox installations in urban public spaces.

Design/method

Design

This project comprised two connected cross-sectional studies. A short survey was used to gather feedback on both exhibitions. Daily Life Ltd staff and volunteers administered this.

All attended a briefing session prior to data collection so that the same approach was used.

Paper-based (both sites) and digital versions (Stratford only) of the survey were used to maximize the response rate.

The research utilized a multi-strategy approach (Bryman, 2006), that is the aim was to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose was twofold: for completeness, that is to gain a more comprehensive view of the impact of the light boxes and also to triangulate, exploring potential corroboration between quantitative and qualitative results.

Survey

The survey included: demographics; questions on the reason for visit; notable artworks; and responses to the exhibition theme and mental health in general. The surveys were identical (including the digital version) apart from one question about the theme of each exhibition that is reported elsewhere.

The survey was designed by a curator (not the author) in discussion with Daily Life Ltd staff to gather demographic data, to explore visitor responses to the exhibition and to mental health in general. The survey also gathered information on Daily Life Ltd that is not reported here.

The first exhibition and the data collection occurred prior to the author's involvement; hence, the survey was not piloted before use. A decision was therefore taken to replicate the study so that data could be compared across exhibitions, rather than design a new questionnaire.

Procedure

At both exhibitions, visitors were asked to complete the survey. For The Expert View, student volunteers from Queen Mary University of London ran evaluation sessions over a two-week period, each lasting approximately two hours. Visitors to Letting in the Light were approached on the street during the exhibition by Daily Life Ltd staff as well as students and staff from the University of East London. All research assistants attended a briefing session to ensure that the procedure and approach to data collection were consistent across the study.

Different times of day were chosen to try to capture a range of views, e.g. in the mornings, many mothers and children walked by as part of the "school run"; at lunchtimes, office workers were present. Others including invitees to the vernissage (launch party) were asked to complete the questionnaire via an online survey platform. The invitees included artists, local authority representatives and staff from a variety of arts organizations and community groups. They were invited via a group (e)mail out. The sampling was opportunistic. For paperbased surveys, respondents were given the choice to self-complete or for a research assistant to complete on their behalf. Most interview data were collected in public spaces, i.e. on the street, so it was deemed inappropriate to ask very sensitive questions, e.g. about respondents' own mental health.

Analysis

Free text data were transcribed in a Word document and subject to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis is theoretically flexible and gives structured guidance on making sense of textual data. The author adopted a social constructivist stance, that is accepting that meaning making is influenced by the society and culture that individuals' live within, that there are multiple perspectives that are equally valid and that language shapes meaning and discourse around a subject, in this case, mental health (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The analysis aimed to provide detailed and in-depth information about participant experience. Demographic data were input to a database file and descriptive statistics used to present results. Not all participants completed every question. Illustrative quotes are used to describe the themes derived from the data.

Results and discussion

Participant demographics

Demographic characteristics are described in Table 1. The exhibitions were successful in raising awareness with most respondents (106/158, 67%) stating that the lightboxes had got them thinking about mental health. Eighteen (11%) responded that the exhibitions did not make them think about mental health at all.

When asked if the exhibitions had triggered new thoughts about mental health, 85 (54%) responded "yes" or "yes-profoundly", 40 (25%) said "slightly" and 22 (13%) said "not at all".

This indicates that it may be possible to change attitudes and opinions using this type of activity.

Of those who responded to the question about why they were visiting the exhibition, the largest group were there as they worked locally (33, 20%), 29 (18%) had received a recommendation or had heard about the exhibition and a further 27 (17%) lived locally.

(see Table 1)

Qualitative findings

The free text responses support a largely positive impact on people's knowledge of, and attitude towards mental health. The comments were analysed thematically and are presented below. The themes are: Changing Attitudes, Empathy and Reflecting and Raising Awareness.

Each theme is described and illustrative comments included. The number next to each quote is a unique participant identifier.

Changing attitudes

The exhibitions challenged negative stereotypes and towards mental health. For example, respondents expressed surprise at the ability of the artists and quality of the work on show. In some cases, visitors indicated that they would change their attitudes and behaviour as a result of the exhibition, for example, by not labelling individuals as "mental", appreciating the artists' skill and ability and talking more openly about mental health.

Having [mental health problems] doesn't necessarily inhibit creativity. (74)

I now think differently. (88)

The exhibition shows that mental health does not define you. You can be an artist and show off amazing skills and creativity. (108)

It [exhibition] demonstrates sensitivity and creative power and observation, which were not things I relate to mental illness. (94)

A medical definition doesn't define a person. (138)

You don't look at them [artists] as mental people. (51)

Empathy

The comments indicated that visitors identified with the artists through the work on display. This included consideration of adversity, barriers to progress and the emotional toil of mental illness. This demonstrated the power of visual images to communicate complex and distressing information and to create connections between artist and viewer.

I find the images extremely evocative relating to the different states of mind one goes through on a daily basis. (4)

[It] brought [mental health] to the public in a very colourful and entertaining way, it is all of us! (39)

I already have a lot of thoughts about how difficult life must be for people with mental health problems. The exhibition made me realise even more. (79)

The talent, and there are other artists who haven't got qualifications or opportunity to study, which is not fair. (85)

The darkest and most troubling stuff we process without language can be transformed and reimagined through art. I'm proud to be amongst others brave enough to face demons. (143)

Reflecting and raising awareness

This theme suggested that the exhibition facilitated thought and reflection about mental health. It helped raise awareness of how common mental health problems are, offered insight into people's experiences and demonstrated how art may help communicate mental distress.

The respondents commented on the use of humour to break down barriers. The outdoor setting brought mental health into the public domain and made art egalitarian and accessible.

Art is both good for the do-er and the look-er. (15)

[I'm] thinking about how mental health can be open, public, honest and full of joy. (55)

It made me rethink the relationship between mental health and city planning, especially [the] recent neo-liberal approach with constant changes, construction, gentrification ... the relations between social vs. antisocial city planning and mental health. (52)
This is a good way to "show" information. (56)
There is a light on the other side of what they [artists] have been through. (64)
It brings the gallery into the mainstream, [it's] not so elitist. (65)
[It shows] the importance of bringing it [mental health] into the light and public domain. (69)
Its [artwork] so deep, it takes me into another dimension. (70)
Making art and looking at art can help a person to reveal aspects of self that is not ordinarily spoken about. (145)

Favourite artwork

Respondents were asked about their preferred works (the ones that "struck" them most) from both exhibitions. This gave more nuanced perspectives to elucidate the thematic results. Whilst some focussed on the details of the works, the overwhelming response was to express empathy with the artists.

Sixty-six people responded to a question about their preferred work from The Expert View. The five most popular works (all by Bobby Baker) were "The Daily Stream of Consciousness" (see Figure 3) (15/23%), "Cathedral of the Mind" (9/14%), "Sleep" (5/8%), "How many Hats can you Wear?" (5/8%) and "How to Live" (5/8%).

Comments in support of these works are included below:

[It shows the] flooding out of thoughts and emotions. (The Daily Stream of Consciousness)
It [gave me] a glimpse into what people must be feeling when they are really low and depressed. (Sleep)
It shows [me] how the world of someone depressed must be. (Sleep)
It reminds me of how I feel very often. (How many Hats can you Wear?)

Eighty-two respondents commented on their preferred work from Letting in the Light. The five most popular were Anna Berry's work "Fragile Viking" (14/17%) (see Figure 4), Greg Bromley's "Galactic Whisper" (8/10%), Lea Cumming's "Cascade" (6/7%), Bobby Baker's "The Cathedral of the Mind" (6/7%) and Sue Morgan's "Schizophrenia" (4/5%). The comments illustrate the impact of these works and why they were chosen.

I like the layers in it. Paper on ice and the way light travels across the photograph. (Fragile Viking)
I have a Nordic background so I can identify with it. (Fragile Viking)
The intricate patterns, the contrast of black with the bright colours, due to a personal interest in space. (Galactic Whisper)
It tells me how she [artist] feels inside. Its colour, its pattern, when she feels good, in her mind. (Cascade)
It shows how anyone can take control of their mind. (Cathedral of the Mind)

Further analysis

Free text answers were compared to responses on two questions: "Has this experience got you thinking about mental health?" and "Has seeing this exhibition triggered any new thoughts and feelings about mental health?"

Of those responding that they thought more about mental health after visiting the exhibition, eight specifically mentioned the work by Anna Berry "Fragile Viking", in keeping with overall results. One respondent commented on her work: *"There's darkness in the distance and light here, its beautiful"*.

Eighteen respondents stated that the experience had not made them think about mental health. Despite this, five of the same respondents made positive comments about the work, e.g. stating that it was "amazing" and that artists were "very talented". Three mentioned that Lea Cumming's vibrant and colourful work struck them most. Only two expressed surprise that the work was made by people with mental health problems.

Two stated that they worked in the arts and health field and gave that as a reason for not thinking about mental health due to their professional background.

Eighty-five respondents reported that the exhibition triggered new thoughts and feelings about mental health. In keeping with the main results, Anna Berry's Fragile Viking was the image that struck them most. One commented that after viewing it, they felt moved to get back in touch: *"with those struggling"* and *"I'm intrigued to know more about the artists"*.

Eighteen individuals responded that the exhibition had not triggered any new thoughts or feelings about mental health. Of those, two stated that this was because they were mental health professionals, e.g. *"not at all, I'm a psychoanalyst"*. Even so, no negative comments were made by this sub-group of respondents, e.g. one said of George Harding's work *"extremely captivating and kind of dark"*.

Discussion

The findings support the utility of public realm exhibitions to create awareness of, and discussion about mental health. Visitors empathized with the artists and gained an insight into the experience of mental illness. Empathy is one of the most powerful modes of communication; building understanding; solidifying relationships; and creating trust (e.g. Montague, Chen, Xu, Chewning, & Barrett, 2013). The artwork challenged negative stereotypes about mental illness as many expressed surprise about the high quality of the work on display. The public setting challenged the elitism of art galleries and reached an audience that may be considered marginalized from cultural activity due to high levels of social deprivation in the exhibition locales. One suggested that the approach created a space to consider the gentrification seen in current city planning, a particular issue in London but also likely to be relevant in other urban spaces.

This approach can build resilience through embedding cultural capital in communities (Pratt, 2015); however, it requires further exploration and analysis. In contrast to institutional funding, e.g. for physical gallery spaces, lightbox exhibitions are relatively inexpensive, warranting further investigation from a cost-effectiveness perspective. Other approaches have been used successfully to challenge mental health stigma, e.g. Time to Change. The lightbox exhibitions differed, as they were led by people with lived experience of mental health problems, and harnessed the power of the cultural "temple" that Hunt (2008) referred to, albeit in a more accessible setting, providing a neutral public space for people to gather and reflect on art work.

Analysis of free text comments indicated a largely positive evaluation of the exhibitions. In terms of artistic preference, The Expert View results were strongly in favour of one artist, Bobby Baker. For Letting in the Light, all but three works were specifically mentioned at least once, indicating that the selection of work was of interest to a wide range of visitors, with five different artists proving especially popular. This may be understood through the different methods by which work was produced and selected for the exhibitions. The work for The Expert View was produced in

one workshop session and was shown alongside Baker's already well regarded work, whereas the art included in *Letting in the Light* was a response to an open call. It was therefore more carefully considered and subject to a selection process that filters work of higher aesthetic quality, according to those on the panel.

The research is novel as it appears to be the first to examine the impact of exhibitions in urban public settings that address mental health. The study had limitations as the respondents were largely gathered through convenience sampling. Further research should address the impact of this type of exhibition in a variety of geographical settings, including different countries, and should systematically gather data throughout the day and at regular intervals during the exhibition in order to provide more representative results. Qualitative research approaches do not however attempt to prove representation; rather, they provide an in-depth perspective from a population of interest, in this case, visitors to two exhibitions.

In future, it would be useful to explore the impact of different mental health themes or other health topics using the same lightbox format. It would also be important to further investigate the impact of user-led (those with experience of mental illness) activities such as these compared to other activities curated by professionals without personal experience of mental illness. The author did not design the survey and therefore was restricted to working with the data collected. It is acknowledged that questions such as "did the exhibition trigger any new thoughts about mental health?" are not a robust way of gathering evidence of change in attitude towards mental health.

Future surveys should be piloted and in-depth interviews used to find out more about attitudinal shift and the ability of exhibitions to challenge and change attitudes. The completion of the survey by the respondent or a research assistant may have impacted on the responses given. This was however necessary as some respondents had learning and physical disabilities so required assistance to collect their views.

The decision to use a cross-sectional design was pragmatic as the data for the first exhibition had already been collected; therefore, this was replicated for the second exhibition. As a primarily qualitative study, the sampling was opportunistic and hence the findings make no claims of representativeness. The aim was to undertake a nuanced exploration of the impact of the lightboxes on a population of interest, in this case, exhibition visitors.

Future studies could replicate this approach in various areas, at different times and with lightboxes that elucidate different themes. Alternatively, a control group could be used and a sampling strategy engaged.

Future studies should develop a more comprehensive survey grounded in the literature that is piloted before the research begins. It would also be beneficial to use in-depth qualitative interviews to gather data, as the analysis was restricted to free text comments that were typically brief and could not be probed for more detail or explanation.

Those who provided feedback may have been positively biased towards the exhibitions as only a very small number gave negative feedback, for example, that the work was depressing or that the lightboxes had not made them think about mental health. Even when this was the case, further analysis of free text data indicated that a positive impact was still experienced, e.g. appreciating the work and encouraging reflection about mental health issues. These apparently contrary views would be important to investigate in future studies. Respondents were not asked if they had experience of mental distress. This could be considered for future studies as it may impact the responses given.

Although not reflected in the results, it was evident from informal comments about Letting in the Light that visitors experienced attachment to the exhibition and anticipated a sense of loss when it ended. For example, one visitor, who had Myalgic Encephalopathy (ME) and was a long time resident of Stratford, stated that he looked forward to walking past the lightboxes each day. He said that stopping and looking at them was the highlight of his day and that he'd miss them when they were gone. The importance of attachment in the development of human bonding and in empathizing with others suggests that the lightbox format may help build connections and understanding that could be further explored. The same visitor was witnessed approaching a staff member who was cleaning the lightboxes. He explained that he was defending the artwork as he thought that it was being defaced with graffiti. This suggests that exhibitions in public areas may build a sense of civic pride, evoking Waterfield's (2015) notion of "the People's galleries", referring to the rise of the regional gallery (1800–1914) as a liberal resource for working-class citizens. See also debates about cultural policies that promote regeneration of regional areas to combat inequality, enhance well-being and create cultural capital, e.g. (Oakley, 2015). Another visitor, a student studying locally, expressed surprise that the lightboxes were being taken down as they were popular.

One individual was witnessed crying in front of a lightbox. When approached by a volunteer, he said that the artwork reminded him of a friend who had experienced severe mental illness. Another person was seen taking a photograph of Sue Trickey's "Tree of Life". When asked why, he explained that he was so moved by the piece and the text accompanying it (the work is inspired by the tragic death of the artist's son in a car accident), he was planning to have an image of it tattooed onto his skin.

Several people asked where the lightboxes were going next and requested that similar events followed. They expressed shock that the exhibitions did not have recurrent funding and could not continue indefinitely. It should therefore be recognized that exhibitions can evoke feelings of attachment and can raise expectations for ongoing activity. Project organizers should address these issues in partnership with other stakeholders, e.g. Local Government. An opening party was held for each exhibition. A similar ending event (or finissage/grand finale) could be considered for future activities. This would enable attendees to reflect upon exhibitions, share experiences and help shape future activities.

Conclusions

Public lightbox exhibitions addressing mental health and featuring artwork by those who have experienced mental distress are an effective mode of raising awareness, and challenging stigma and prejudice associated with mental illness.

Future programmes should build on this area of work to engage the wider community with cultural activity and mental health issues, to build civic pride and to create opportunities for people with lived experience of mental illness to showcase their talents and to communicate their experiences.

Notes

1. Dulwich Picture Gallery www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk.
2. Nottingham Contemporary www.nottinghamcontemporary.org.
3. Outside In www.outsidein.org.uk.
4. Manchester Art gallery <http://manchesterartgallery.org>.
5. Tate Modern www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern.
6. Tate Exchange www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/new-tate-modern/art/tate-exchange.
7. Dragon Café <http://dragoncafe.co.uk>.
8. Free Space gallery <https://freespacegallery.org>.

9. Paintings in Hospitals <http://www.paintingsinhospitals.org.uk>.
10. Hospital Rooms <http://hospital-rooms.com>.
11. Lime <http://limeart.org>

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Figure 1 The expert view



Figure 2 Letting in the Light



Figure 3 The Daily Stream of Consciousness



Figure 4 Fragile Viking



Table 1. Demographic data.

<i>Exhibition</i>	<i>The expert view</i>	<i>Letting in the light</i>
Number of participants (158)	68	90
Age (mean)	36 (range 15–75)	35 (range 8–73)
Gender	26 female/42 male	48 female/33 male/1 other
Region (home address)	East London (31/25%)	East London (30/24%)
	London – other (15/12%)	London – other (23/18%)
	Other UK (7/6%)	Other UK 15/12%)
	Outside UK (4/3%)	Outside UK (0)