

Artist as undertaker: *Flower Tower* and community art at Caritas Christi Hospice, Melbourne

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Abstract

This paper discusses a community-based art in healthcare project implemented at Caritas Christi Hospice in Melbourne, Australia. It examines how the experience of weekly participation in creating a communal artwork facilitated well-being, by offering participants a forum that minimised their role as patients in end-of-life care and reframed their identity as creative collaborators. When the year-long residency started in May 2012, the aim was to combine studio-led research and meaningful engagement with the patients who attend palliative day care. This communal art project fostered collaboration and connectivity where the individual creative contribution was vital to the evolution of a larger communal artwork.

The article investigates how creative arts in palliative care promote well-being. The outcomes are evidenced in informal interviews, where patients were invited to recount their experiences of taking part in the project. Additionally, questionnaires were distributed to members of the public who viewed the communal artwork in progress in the hospice, and at the final exhibition in an art gallery. Questionnaire responses clarified the impact of the communal artwork on the public's perception of the role of art in healthcare settings. These interviews and audience feedback during the different stages of its evolution and display provide practical insights into the objectives and outcomes of the participatory artwork, *Flower Tower* (2012-13).

Keywords

Collaborative art, artist-in-residence, art in healthcare setting, palliative care hospice, socially engaged artwork, participatory creative practice, communal paper flower-making, collective ownership, art and death, rituals of mourning.

Introduction

Since 1995, St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne has awarded rent-free studios to artists for one year in exchange for artworks donated to the hospital's collection at the conclusion of the residency. The studios are located at Caritas Christi Hospice in Kew and were previously used as hospital bedrooms for patients.

I successfully applied for the artist-in-residence program and was granted the studio from 1 May 2012 – 1 May 2013 and I commenced the project in May 2012.

In the application process, artists outline their practice, intended aims and possible visual outcomes. I proposed that my residency would incorporate a community art project

in Caritas Christi's Day Hospice that would emulate the values introduced by the mission of the Sisters of Charity who founded St Vincent's Hospital: compassion, justice, human dignity, excellence and unity (Sheehan, 2006, p.153).

The hospice has developed and implemented a range of creative arts possibilities for patients and their carers as part of the palliative care day service. Many of these patients, during the final days of their lives, have created artwork, which they have given to their loved ones as keepsakes. These handmade items hold tremendous sentimental value and as an artist I interpreted them as memento mori or symbolic reminders of mortality. I reflected on how these artworks made by patients were