

What does art have to do with public health, and how can they work together?

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Last month was the first time that the [Public Health Summer School](#) (University of Otago, Wellington) has considered art, and its relationship to public health. The Symposium featured artists, arts academics, an architect, and public health practitioners and academics. In this blog we consider some of the issues raised and build the case for ongoing collaborations between the arts and public health. So what was the point of this eclectic gathering?

Contemporary public health faces a number of challenges. First, an array of emerging health issues arising from complex environmental and socio-economic processes, in particular, climate change and growing social and health inequalities. The solutions to these '[wicked problems](#)' require a concerted effort beyond the scope of a single discipline or sector of society.

At another level, the traditional public health 'way of seeing' has drawn critique for a tendency to privilege scientific evidence and a 'macro' view, over ways of understanding society and its beliefs which allow for more complex understandings of need and of lived experience. We think that some artists' practices can help to anchor this birds-eye view and create opportunities for shared language/solutions to the complex public health issues facing us all. The *Art and Public Health: wellbeing, social critique, and communication* [Summer School Symposium](#) aimed to start this conversation. The symposium was held on 24 February 2017 and had four sessions.

Session One: Public Health & Art in dialogue

After a welcome from UOW's Rautaki Hononga Māori, Toa Waaka, Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman took us on an art tour of Europe – illustrating how 19th and early 20th century artworks can tell us about topics pertinent to health today, such as poverty, poor housing and eviction ([see here for a related full free text article](#)).



Blanford Fletcher, The eviction, 1887, Queensland Art Gallery

She observed that contemporary public art can be more provocative in some parts of Europe than we see in New Zealand. For example a sculpture in front of the Swedish Parliament buildings, shows a man, deep in thought, on a small raft in water. Hands reach up from the water around him, pleading for help – a reprieve from drowning. This sculpture is an everyday reminder to these politicians of the human need that must be forefront in their work.



Photo by Philippa Howden-Chapman

As a scholar of the arts and practicing artist, Professor Anne Noble invited us to think about the ways that art and science can work together using a *transdisciplinary* approach, and particularly how artists can work with scientific methods to distil messages around climate change. She described art works by [Judit Hersko](#) involving calcification processes, to show in a gallery context, how ocean acidification from carbon dioxide emissions is corroding coral and shell ([see here for an article by Judit Hersko on the relationship between science art](#)). Professor Noble also profiled the work of US artist [Amy Balkin](#) who makes the commercialisation of pollution stark through *Public Smog*, a public park in the atmosphere which uses the processes of emissions offsets to purchase 'clean' air, making it inaccessible to polluters.



Amy Balkin: [Public Smog](#)

Session 2: Communication and dissemination: starting a conversation

Professor Nick Wilson and Dr Peter Gallagher talked to us about the relationship between movies and public health. On the one hand, popular movies can be a useful barometer of the place of health in society – eg, some aspects of smoking in [James Bond movies have changed dramatically over time](#). But Bond is still subject to secondhand smoke via his sexual partners who smoke, and smoking by villains might still be glamourising smoking for some audiences. This session also considered the value of movies as a useful way to teach medical students about public health themes, provoking thought through a relaxing and fun way to learn (for a related article see this [full free text one](#) and a [list of movies used in teaching](#)).



James Bond smoking

The Health Promotion Agency (HPA) works with designers to deliver public health messages to key audiences in a meaningful and impactful way. Russell Duncan, who leads HPA's

social marketing team, talked to us about the importance of framing and of targeted messaging in delivering these messages to greatest effect. [One of HPA's most successful campaigns](#) introduced a new phrase into the NZ vernacular; 'no beersies' is now a culturally codified 'opt out' for those wanting to say no to drinking alcohol with their peers.

Another presenter was [Toby Morris](#), a well-known New Zealand cartoonist, adept at making complex social topics accessible to a popular audience. His cartoon on inequality '[On a Plate](#)' went viral in international social media. This cartoon has also been picked up locally by Otago University's public health teachers as a platform for their students to unpick the processes and ramifications of economic and social inequality as 'lived reality'. By distilling this complex process through the life courses of two individuals, Morris takes an abstract concept and anchors it into a format that everyday people can begin to empathise with. We feel that there is great potential for public health to further utilise cartoons and satire in these powerful ways.



Toby Morris, On a Plate, 2015. [For the full cartoon see here.](#)

Session 3: The public sphere: public art and the public good

Public space and community formation are other aspects of the intersection of art and public health. These themes were highlighted during the Symposium in a discussion facilitated by Professor Michael Baker, a co-director of [He Kainga Oranga the Housing and Health Research Programme](#).

Architect [Sam Kebbell](#) is challenging the rigid definitions/notions of a clear division between public and private space. His development of the role of the front yard and side yard as intersectional spaces where the private meets the public, leads to a proposal to develop community by opening otherwise private spaces to community use, such as allowing thoroughfare for neighbours. Kebbell prompts us to think about how the spaces we define and inhabit come to influence our interactions with the people around us.

Sophie Jerram works with [Letting Space](#), and the [Common Ground Public Art Festival](#). These initiatives are concerned with the intersection of community, space, and social or environmental issues. The Common Ground Public Art Festival, which recently finished in the Hutt Valley, looked at the importance of water for the community, and staged a number of art installations and events to this end.

Session 4: Activist and political art: dispossession, society, and environment

The final session of the day was a chance for artists to speak directly about their work, facilitated by Simon Bowden from [The Arts Foundation](#). We invited three artists whose work cuts across issues linked in direct and more oblique ways to key public health, environment and social concerns: homelessness, climate change, and cultural dispossession. [Professor Anne Noble](#) talked about her work on bees in a current exhibition [ABEILLE/ABBAYE](#), at the Abbaye de Norliac in central France, which touches on the environmental issues that are challenging bees. Her work implicitly invites us to think about the implications for population health, in terms of food supply and environmental decline and biodiversity loss. [Shannon Te Ao](#) discussed his work, [Follow the Party of the Whale](#), a video installation of the artist in sites around Dunedin that are of relevance to the plight of the prisoners of Parihaka who were sent to Dunedin as indentured labourers in the late 19th century. The themes of dispossession and colonial impact that his work addresses, invoke consideration of the ongoing implications of these in the present-day health challenges of inequality and the enduring impacts of colonisation.

[Kalisolaite 'Uhila](#) is a Tongan-born artist, resident in Auckland, who devised an art work living as a homeless person outside the Pakuranga Art Gallery for two weeks. [Mo'ui tukuhausia](#) speaks to wider society's prejudice against homelessness, through the reactions the public had to 'Uhila's performance work. For 'Uhila, this was also a personal work, exploring the prejudice he felt against himself, and the ways in which this equates to externalised 'disgust' towards – the homeless person. With New Zealand's growing homelessness crisis, public health can find the issues it grapples with directly reflected in 'Uhila's work. His personal take on these issues reminds us to always recognise the individual impacts of the macro problems that we endeavour to find meaningful solutions for.



Kalisolaite 'Uhila, Mo'ui tukuhausia, Photo: John McIver. [For more, see here.](#)

What does this mean for public health and art?

In his germinal paper, *Kos, Dresden, Utopia...A journey through idealism past and present in public health*, Professor Johan Mackenbach reminds us that “the ethical foundations of public health are not always self-evident, and that critical reflection on these foundations was, is, and will always be necessary.” By stepping outside the discipline, and by enriching our macro view, with the implications of the personal, public health can remain self-reflective, and challenge itself to be answerable to the foundations of social justice and equity that many public health practitioners hold to be fundamental. This more nuanced view of the scope of public health offers abundant novel opportunities for public health to respond to emerging complex challenges, such as climate change and rising inequality. It calls on us to work across disciplines creatively and openly, finding new ways to express issues and solutions, and enabling meaningful change towards better health, and social and environmental justice. This is why we think it is important to understand how to engage with people working in creative fields such as the arts, and why we see this direction to be essential for Public Health, within future Summer School courses, and beyond.

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