

Perspective

Performance Art as Lifestyle: Art in Action for Health Promotion

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Academic Editor: Maria Kosma

Special Issue: [Movement-Related Performing Arts and Public Health](#)

OBM Integrative and Complementary Medicine
2025, volume 10, issue 3
doi:10.21926/obm.icm.2503033

Received: May 11, 2025

Accepted: July 24, 2025

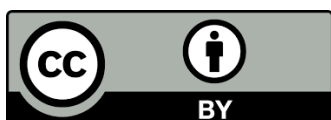
Published: July 28, 2025

Abstract

Performance art is both a visual arts practice and kinaesthetic approach to place-based health. The perspective of this commentary is to promote the attributes of performance art to showcase its capacity to extend people into new configurations of cultural engagement with beneficial effects. Performance art is an opportunity to engage both mind and body in actions that transform predictability and encourage wellness within the context of people's life studios (their everyday lives). Wellness is defined here in relation to connection, capacity, curiosity and a commitment to shaping lived environments with mental and physical agency. This is the performance of flexible minds and bodies which assert vitality in terms of purposeful living and social connectivity. This perspective article will showcase how a collaboration between a Northern Ireland performance art group (Bbeyond) and the Belfast School of Art for the Being Human Festival situated civic society as a scene for healthy living. The aim of this proposal is to consider how performance art may contribute to the promotion of public health as a form of civic art making that moves people.

Keywords

Performance art; public health promotion; social sculpture; live art; creative health; lifestyle medicine; neuroplasticity; festival participation



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1. The City as Canvas: Performance Art and Public Health

This perspective commentary considers the potential of performance art to promote public health within civic society. It highlights an event organised by the Belfast School of Art (Ulster University, Northern Ireland) for the 2024 Being Human Festival (<https://www.beinghumanfestival.org/about-us>) highlighting the theme of landmarks. The event utilised performance art within a community hub, as a proclamation of agency and pride of place. Place based health situates wellness within everyday living, offering opportunities to enhance quality of life through civic engagement, which can be associated with both event participation and event observance [1]. Attributes of wellness (connection, curiosity, communication and creativity) are activated by the performance of improvised actions that take us somewhere different within ourselves and our public homeplace. The significance of performance art is that it is unscripted and responds to situational experiencing. It utilises the attributes of a location for making in the moment. Encountering an everyday context through spontaneous movement actions, is a form of experimentation which extends people into new dimensions of space. When encountering performance art, the significance of being a bystander/passers-by/or observer can be linked to curiosity, which has implications for challenging habits of mindset and habitual patterns of physicality. This article is not intended to be a documentation of research, but rather a provocation and entry into considering the potential impact of performance art as a contribution to health promotion. When encountered within civil society, performance art may aid in the recovery of psychological repression and physical inertia.

Witnessing performance art should be considered a form of public health promotion, as observers may subsequently enact their own life with more ingenuity, versatility, and creativity. The link here is with enhancing life skills for adaptive living which can aid self-confidence and self-efficacy [2]. The goal is to promote a greater performance of life through an extended range of life experiencing. Performance art models unconventional behaviour through improvisations between people, place and materials. Improvisation is a “dynamic process involving a search for adaptive and creative solutions” which results in a greater variability of motor skills [3]. Improvisation challenges habitual and reactive physical responsiveness through in-the-moment investigations of possibility.

Performance neuroscience is articulating the potential of how physiology and cognition operate in tandem, implicating attention, creativity, perception, learning, problem-solving and decision-making [2]. Fox [4] argues for a health-based emphasis upon what a body can do, situated in a health assemblage that accentuates physical and psychological capacities [4]. This formulation is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s body without organs, or the body beyond boundaries of containment, organisation and regulation [5]. “Active experimentation involves trying new procedures, combinations and their unpredictable effects to produce a ‘body without organs’ or a ‘field of immanence’...in which desires, intensities, movements and flows pass unimpeded by the repressive mechanisms of judgment and interpretation” ([6], p. 92).

The performance art assemblage described herein, is a dynamic of becoming, an ecology formed by extensions into the environment—it is the living out of potential as an event within the midst of everything [7]. Production and making being constituted “at the moment of their interaction” ([7], p. 86). Performing new organisations of human behaviour, multiplicity and excess, resist

categorisation and empower the mind and body to become an “always-unfinished project” ([8], p. 349). The uncontained body has the desire to be “an active, experimenting, engaged and engaging body... [an] interaction of forces” ([8], p. 356).

2. The Being Human Festival: Art Lives Here

The Being Human Festival is a celebration of humanities research and public engagement produced by the School of Advanced Study at the University of London. A Belfast School of Art event titled, *Art Lives Here: A Manifesto of Art in Action*, was organised within a civic venue called 2 Royal Avenue in collaboration with performance art group Bbeyond. 2 Royal Avenue is a cultural hub located in the heart of Belfast city centre often referred to as an indoor public park. It is an accessible and inclusive space designed to be a venue for people—supporting arts, cultural and civic events for the citizens of Belfast [9]. The Being Human Festival theme of landmarks aligned with the significance of both the venue as a landmark within city life, and commemorations to honour the 175th anniversary of the Belfast School Art. The activation of a living art manifesto was aimed to promote a scene where everyone had a place in a display that was off the wall and in the centre of everything. The event aligned with Ulster University’s ethos—people, place and partnership—promoting the city as campus. The university invites engagements with community partners to encourage quality-of-life indicators, such as culture participation and belonging [10].

Performance art has a long history of civic practice within the Belfast School of Art, originating in a performative lecture by Joseph Beuys in 1974. Beuys visited Belfast at the height of the “troubles” a thirty-year sectarian conflict between Irish nationalists and British loyalists which designated the city into territories of allegiance. Joseph Beuys’ message was to pursue dialogue using performative actions to mediate public places of contention through physical improvisation. The art of movement making a statement through social interruptions that challenged conventionality and restrictions. The significance of his artistry was the capacity to challenge regimented behaviours to compose instead a public practice for the arts. Beuys described this concept as a social sculpture, a way for society to be shaped through artistic interventions that disrupted complacency [11, 12]. His reasoning also applies to the pursuit of health in terms of affect generation (an increase in responsiveness) and vitality. Rozanski [13] defines vitality in terms of purposeful living and social connectivity and the creation of a new mindset. A generative mindset embraces activism as a life ethos. It aligns physical and psychological health with the openness to try new challenges that “build a person by turning these new cognitive assets into enduring mindsets” [13].

3. How Do You Perform Living?

Performing life at capacity moves beyond limiting dispositions and diminished physicality. The concept of peak performance has an association to living in a state of optimal capability; it is a perspective that can be applied to public health promotion creating atmospheres of active experimentation [14]. Performance art utilises temporality as an emancipatory practice in the sense of not being fixed within time and space [15]. As a potentially trauma-informed practice, it is continually on the move beyond a fixed history of fear-based anticipations of risk. In the context of the historical conflict in Northern Ireland performance art offers an invitation to generate non-binary productions of life repertoire. “Individuals are freer, so they can create more complex and unusual movement patterns” which ease identity restrictions and inhibitions [3]. This expressive

potential can have applications for micro-political interventions which contravene historical precedents. Kunst [15] argues in favour of performance art's democratic ethos to promote agency and the gesturing of difference, or non-conformist approaches to life.

The performance art collective Bbeyond interacts with people and place as a dynamic interplay of deviation. They connect the dots of their performance environments by linking people to situations and each other. Their performances mobilise space through interactive activities which encourage people to go beyond surface appearances. Bbeyond provides a service to people in need of connection. They invite people to experience art out of bounds amidst life in the making. As a form of health promotion performance art is mindful of being in-the-moment, attending to the present without ruminations directed towards the past or future. Performance art challenges normative behaviour, inviting a full range of idiosyncratic, eccentric and unconventional actions. In this way it encourages experimentation with what we have at hand and what we can make within site specific contexts, situations and relational circumstances (Figure 1).



Figure 1 In the centre of everything. Photo Credit: David Copeland. Bbeyond at 2 Royal Avenue, Belfast. Being Human Festival (2024), Art Lives Here: A Manifesto of Art in Action. Alastair MacLennan appears on the right standing with glasses and red and white barrier tape.

As ambassadors for performance art in Northern Ireland, Bbeyond occupies a unique role within the Belfast School of Art as influential contributors to fine art teaching. Their legacy originates with Alastair MacLennan's performance art curriculum promoting expanded sculpture outside of the academy. "MacLennan...intended to open his audience to alternate ways of imaging and understanding everyday experience" [16]. His commitment to live art is expressed through impromptu and curated *actuations* (the operation of a performance art intention). Since the 1970's Alastair MacLennan and Bbeyond have intervened and responded to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

They have protested divisions and performed a duty of care supporting public relations. Their physical actions have also promoted reconciliation, interfusion and unification [17].

In making works of performance art in Northern Ireland, artists such as Alastair MacLennan have utilised elements of ritual activity based on materials and repetition to consider arts practices as a means for potential transformation, healing, and resolution of inner and outer conflict ([18], p. 73). MacLennan pioneered the performance of physical proclamations objecting to conflict, surveillance and subjugation. "Ritual activity enabled performance art in Northern Ireland to inhabit a liminal space that provided a subversion of social engagement in an environment otherwise dependent on socio-political group affirmations and loyalty" ([18], p. 84). The performance of ritual in this context had a rhythmic and self-regulating function, as a repetition of actions to soothe social anxieties. Liminality is middle ground; an in-between position of neutrality, in a state of being unfixed and unaffiliated. It is a subversive location within Northern Ireland as it exists without "codified signifiers" ([18], p. 84). Performance art enacts liminality as an occupation of boundary transgression, neither here nor there or anywhere, except as an inconclusive becoming.

A festival (in this case the Being Human Festival) is conducive to performance art in the way that it can challenge inhibition and offer opportunities for immersive experiencing and the negotiation of new perspectives (Figure 2). "The wellness factor of festivals resonates with ceremonial initiations for ourselves and each other, and a mutuality of response within cultural experience" ([19], p. 308). As a live art form, performance art encourages the abilities of participants to make a move within their surroundings. This is also an investigation into adaptability, absorption and neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to change its responses to stimuli that provoke reactive or habitual emotions and behaviours). New experiences prompt the development of additional ways to process information. Neuroplasticity re-shapes the brain's ability to reorganise and extend ways of considering the world [20]. Dynamic brains can be encouraged by challenging psychological and physical inhibition [21]. "A festival has multiple pathways meeting expressive circumstances, serendipity, and the unusual" ([19], p. 308). As an engagement intensity, festivals encourage neurogenesis (emergent spatial and cognitive navigation), which reorganises both mind and body into new orientations of learning and social manoeuvres.



Figure 2 Art in Action. Photo Credit: David Copeland. Bbeyond at 2 Royal Avenue, Belfast. Being Human Festival (2024), Art Lives Here: A Manifesto of Art in Action.

In the accompanying photographs (Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3), Bbeyond performance artists utilise wool, string and tape to form connections between people and place. Drawing lines with materials also formulates an architecture of holding and release. There is an activation of the body that escapes oppression, while being supported within a weave of artistic solidarity. Individual actions come together as a moving composition. There are no words spoken to describe the performance and it begins without an introduction. The activations are simultaneous and entangled without a plot or articulated aim. Occupying dimensions of public space is each performer's internal compass of navigation. Bbeyond initiates a multiplicity of viewpoints for people to observe within the welcome of 2 Royal Avenue. They encourage spectators to conceive of themselves as protagonists within a production of making. A gesture offered to a member of the audience is an invitation to become part of the assemblage of actions. This is not a ticketed event, but a group catharsis and inquiry into the playing out of unrehearsed and extemporaneous intentions that examine a continuum of being.



Figure 3 Art lives here. Photo Credit: David Copeland. Bbeyond at 2 Royal Avenue, Belfast. Being Human Festival (2024), Art Lives Here: A Manifesto of Art in Action. Photo of Bbeyond member Brian Patterson.

4. Performing Being Human

As a public scene, festivity encourages active citizenship. “When people become authors themselves, making the artistic work their own cause they imagine images of their own... which mediates between individual subjects and the world around them” ([22], p. 103). This social imagination can be conjured through an expression of seeking community with others. Live art also performs an audience. Observers participate through their empathetic resonance. “By subjecting the body and mind to a process of improvisation, performer and audience become experimental players in the larger scale performance of social living” ([23], p. 28). The social imagination speculates upon new approaches for inhabiting civic society. Spectators do not occupy a passive role in performance art but provide a surrounding for unpredictability.

Performance art creates a scene and an intention, and the script is a viewer’s own imaginings of what could be. Curiosity has been identified as a component of good health and a health asset within neuroscience research. It enhances interactions with the world, producing new neural pathways for learning [24]. Performance art grabs our attention to restore it. Its aim is immediacy and a new relationship with our own selves and society as a composition in the making. This rejuvenation of neural activity and fascination improves concentration and provides a means of imagining the art of movement as a form of civic practice. In essence, moving beyond the civilised body to become unfettered, active, and less regimented. Rather than staging our identities into a kind of orderly representation, performance art creates a context for identity extension, facilitating a freer range of behavioural possibilities.

Place based health recognises how health inequities require supportive measures, particularly in the context of generating health assets in civic society [25]. Health assets are places of welcome, promoting learning, social inclusion, belonging and mattering. These are services which encourage engagement within arts and culture, leisure, libraries, festivals and community venues. Psycho-social factors, such as purpose, socialisation and self-worth contribute to health promotion as protective factors against the impacts of adversity [25]. Performance art aligns with the aims of the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland to support lifestyle networks [26]. Lifestyle medicine also encourages the performance of life as a creative production, generating experiences as a *lifescape* composed of agency and self-efficacy [27].

5. Making a Move

Art Lives Here: A Manifesto of Art in Action was an activation of place for the purpose of creating a spectacle that brought people into an encounter with making a human art installation. Everyone was welcome and the strings that tied people together were not so much binding as interactive. This manifesto was not written with words but with physical statements that were proposals for living. Beuys situated live art as a trauma informed practice, loosening inhibition within ambiguous circumstances [23]. Performance art in a festival (promoting the human condition) evoked the creation of new routes of passage within everyday locations. Events like the Being Human Festival enables the freedom “to experiment with alternate lifestyles and practices that may persist beyond the return to the ‘default’ world” ([28], pp. 16-17). A festival makes special and brings together a community of strangers within a public homeplace [29].

Performance art generates a series of “ands” within a public staging that is generative and extending. The performance of place uses an improvised situation for making a move that is healthy in the sense of promoting capacity. Agility is a feature of both physical and mental health. As a social catharsis performance art is dispersed across a continuum of experiencing advocating for movement as a live art that performs people and place. Our position in society can be extended when the body is our art material. “Encountering territory and the territorial,” performance art “sets up actions or situations that demonstrate complexities, contradictions or commonality” [30]. Art Lives Here challenged conventions of how to physically occupy a city centre. By creating unrestricted lifeways, by taking people into its social movement, this *eventscape* was transformative within a city which historically encouraged people “to keep their heads down”. This legacy of returning to “unfinished business” is enacted by the performance group Bbeyond as they mediate divisions through civic interventions that challenge historical boundaries [17]. Alastair MacLennan reflects on the purpose of performance art, by saying “How do you perform living? By becoming the art material and the canvas in a space without binaries” [17]. The wellness factor of performance art is to value lived experience “as a catalyst of recovery” ([18], p. 95). Bbeyond nurtures physical dissent, for the purpose of going beyond complacency into publicising people’s consciousness of live art [31]. The Being Human Festival offered an opportunity to express the polyphonic voices of people in motion as an ethics of encounter and generosity that moved people to be the artists of their lives.

Acknowledgements

The author extends gratitude to Bbeyond performance art members Alastair MacLennan, Bronagh Lawson and Brian Patterson for their contributions and insights regarding the significance

of performance art becoming a catalyst for cultural and lifestyle activism. Dr. Chérie Driver (Associate Head, Belfast School of Art) was also a key influencer of this article in her role as curator of the Being Human Festival event, *Art Lives Here: A Manifesto of Art in Action*, which celebrated the 175th anniversary of the Belfast School of Art. Gratitude is also extended to the organisers of the Being Human Festival 2024 for supporting the production of this event and the artists of Bbeyond.

Author Contributions

The author did all the research work for this study.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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