

# How Can the Arts Shine a Light on Women's

## Wellbeing and Mental Health?

---

### WMHSIG ESSAY PRIZE 2021

**Jess Lochtenberg**

My aunt Anna is an artist—growing up I used to love going to her house where she would encourage me to paint. Sometimes I would grow frustrated when my hand would slip--my childish lack of fine motor skills would not allow me to produce the image held firmly in my mind. She would assure me: “in art, there are no mistakes” and encourage me to look at my perceived error and see if I could take the work into a new direction because of it. I followed this advice, and in this way, Anna taught me to unlock my creative brain.

Harvard professor Shelley Carson shares, “the more you study the brain... the more you realise everybody has the creative hardware, but some people find it easier to access it”.<sup>1</sup> Structured art-therapy, as well as free artmaking, can allow people to access their creative side, and this has documented mental health and wellbeing benefits for both healthy people and those suffering from a range of mental illnesses or adverse psychological symptoms. Domains of improvement include lowering negative affect and increasing positive affect,<sup>2</sup> reducing anxiety,<sup>3</sup> improving self-efficacy and facilitating social functioning,<sup>2,4</sup> and decreasing symptoms of depression and trauma.<sup>5</sup> To some extent, these benefits may be explained by a release of dopamine following sense of reward or pleasure from achieving a goal, such as finishing an artwork or creative project.<sup>6</sup> The more individuals practise artmaking and

familiarise themselves with a particular medium, the more they can predict outcomes during their art practise—correct prediction also activates dopamine circuitry.<sup>5</sup> However, when outcome prediction fails, for example when your hand slips on the page, it can lead to frustration, or perhaps a decrease of dopamine. Many famous creatives have suffered mental illness, and this has generated an archetype of the ‘tortured artist’, in constant anguish with their work. Certain cognitive propensities, such as neural hyperconnectivity and novelty seeking behaviours, are overlapping in creative individuals and those with psychopathology.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is a shared vulnerability which may partially explain this archetype. These neurobiological and psychological phenomena, however, account for a small part of the picture when looking at the therapeutic effects of creating art. We must also consider the conscious and deliberate practise of using art as a tool to alleviate psychiatric issues.

Yayoi Kusama famously said, “Every time I have had a problem, I have confronted it with the axe of art”. Kusama began suffering from visual and auditory hallucinations as a child—for example she would hear pumpkins talking to her and see a veil of dots over her



Kusama, Y. (1965). *Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field (Floor Show)*. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. <https://www.frieze.com/article/yayoi-kusama>

environment.<sup>8</sup> In her teenage years she discovered that drawing these hallucinations would alleviate the fear that accompanied them.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, she confronted her phobia of sex by filling her entire room, and later museums, with phallic sculptures.<sup>9</sup> As a performance artist, she also immerses herself in the artwork—in doing so she has created a personalised form of exposure therapy.

Kusama has voluntarily lived in a psychiatric hospital since 1977 and works in her studio across the road, externalising her psychological distress in a style she describes as “psychosomatic art”.

While artmaking and performance alleviates her psychiatric issues, the cathartic effects of Kusama’s work expand beyond the self and onto the viewer. After stepping into Kusama’s *‘Infinity Mirror Room – Filled with the Brilliance of Life’*, I walk along a reflective pathway suspended over a shallow pool, thousands of pulsating lights are reflected in the mirrored walls and water. Looking at my own reflection, engulfed in a galaxy of coloured dots—I become aware of the largeness of time and space, and the insignificance of the place I



Kusama, Y. (2019). *Infinity Mirror Room – Filled with the Brilliance of Life*. Tate Modern, London, UK. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kusama-infinity-mirrored-room-filled-with-the-brilliance-of-life-t15206>

occupy within it. My own fears and insecurities are dwarfed, and I feel still. The artwork, the universe, is indifferent to my concerns, and so am I. I leave Kusama’s installation better equipped to deal with the inevitable struggles of life.

From a scientific perspective, fMRI studies demonstrate that the experience of awe decreases activity in the default mode network—a neural region that is thought to make up our sense of self.\* Studies also show that experiencing awe improves our mood, activates the parasympathetic nervous system—making us less stressed, and decreases the production of

---

\* Interestingly, this is the same neural region that is disrupted by psychedelic drugs currently being approved for the treatment of numerous psychiatric disorders.

pro-inflammatory cytokines.<sup>10</sup> It is also hypothesised to increase prosocial behaviour, extending the benefits of art from the artist, to the viewer, and further into society.<sup>10</sup> One longitudinal study demonstrated that there is a link between art creation (visual, performance and literature) creation and consumption with prosocial traits and altruistic behaviours.<sup>11</sup> However, the prosocial powers of art may not solely rely on their awe-inspiring abilities.

Similar to awe—beauty can also have positive effects on our wellbeing. In a study by neurobiologist Semir Zeki, it was found that there is a positive correlation between how beautiful a subject rated an artwork or excerpt of music to be, and dopaminergic activity in the prefrontal cortex.<sup>12</sup> This neural activity is similar to what occurs when people experience feelings of love. One explanation for this phenomenon may be found in aesthetics philosophers Armstrong and de Botton theory that “The pleasure of pretty art draws on dissatisfaction: if we did not find life difficult, beauty would not have the appeal that it does.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, both creating and appreciating art can be a form of escapism.

Escapism has negative connotations in the context of psychotherapy—it is an attempt to nullify negative thoughts and emotions without working through them to reach catharsis. While Kusama’s work shows how art can be a tool to reach catharsis, escapism in art can also be understood as a healthy coping mechanism—it shifts the focus from life’s stressors onto peaceful distractions. Neoclassical painter Angelica Kauffman, a founding member of the



Kauffman, A. (1794). 'Self Portrait of the Artist hesitating between the Arts of Music and Painting'. Nostell Priory, West Yorkshire, UK.

Royal Academy of Art in London, has been criticised for her representation of women’s lives in the eighteenth century being frivolous. Her work *'Self Portrait of the Artist hesitating between the Arts of Music and Painting'*, features a centrally

placed young woman, dressed in white, fretting over what form of leisure she should choose to pursue, symbolically depicted by the two other women on either side of her. However, while Kauffman moved in elite circles, she was no stranger to hardship—her father was a skilled muralist, but relatively poor, her mother died when she was thirteen and she was tricked into marrying a con artist at the age of 26.<sup>13</sup> It would be an oversimplification to describe this work as depicting her frivolous pursuits—Kauffman is expressing her longing for a life in which these kinds of decisions were the only ones she needed to make. As a viewer, Kauffman’s artworks may evoke a sense of calm—but they may also trigger an empathetic reaction whereby one longs for an easier life.

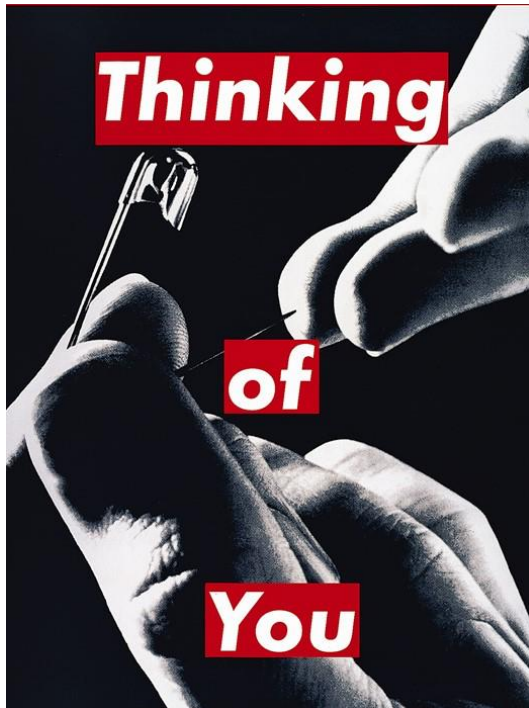
Art may not always be full of awe, beauty and idealism. In stark contrast, some artworks comment on societies flaws. Barbara Kruger’s artworks are eye-catching examples of this contrast. Kruger trained as a graphic designer, but quit the industry “because [she] had difficulty in supplying someone else’s image of perfection.”<sup>14</sup> Her works challenge internalised misogyny with slogans such as “I shop therefore I am” and “Your gaze hits the side of my face”. Her work ‘*Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*’ was a response to the new wave of anti-abortion laws that were emerging following the Roe v Wade Supreme Court decision. It was created for the 1989 Women’s March.



Kruger, B. (1989). *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*. Broad Museum [online]. <https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger/untitled-your-body-battleground>

Like her other pieces, ‘*Untitled (Thinking of You)*’ is reminiscent of propaganda in its physical quality and social effect—the anti-capitalist text lacquered in red juxtaposes an





Kruger, B. (1995). *Untitled (Thinking of You)*. Mary Boone Gallery, New York, USA

evocative black and white photograph of a safety pin pricking a finger. The text begs the question—who is the “you” being addressed? Based on the feminist themes in previous works, one reading is that the “you” refers to perpetrators of misogyny. The simplicity of the words in this piece make it relatable, and perhaps unite the audience in its relatability. When a woman creates an artwork that other women can relate to, the therapeutic benefits of creating and viewing the artwork may

be enhanced by a feeling of shared experience and mutual understanding. While Kruger defines herself as a feminist, she resists the term “women’s art”—she questions “does the term ‘women’s art’ suggest that all other art isn’t for women?”<sup>14</sup>

In this essay I have discussed several women artists and how they have demonstrated the benefits of art on their own health, and the health of the viewer. Firstly, the practise of creating art can be a therapeutic process and has several mental health or wellbeing benefits for those who engage in it. For Kusama, the benefits are derived through catharsis and exposure therapy. For Kauffman, her art may be used as a tool for wish-fulfilment. The display of these artworks then benefit society—either by evoking a sense of awe, by simply being beautiful, or by uniting women. My aunt’s words echo “in art there are no mistakes”—and I think of all the way in which the arts shine a light on women’s mental health and wellbeing.



## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Powell, A. (2011, March). Harnessing your creative brain. *The Harvard Gazette*. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2011/03/harnessing-your-creative-brain/>
- <sup>2</sup> Kaimal, G., & Ray, K. (2016). Free art-making in an art therapy open studio: changes in affect and self-efficacy. *Arts & Health, 9*(2), 154-166. doi: 10.1080/17533015.2016.1217248
- <sup>3</sup> Toroghi, L. (2015). The Effectiveness of Art Therapy On Housewives General Health, Anxiety and Self-efficacy in Tehran. *European Psychiatry, 30*, 852. doi: 10.1016/s0924-9338(15)30665-9
- <sup>4</sup> Tong, J., Yu, W., Fan, X., Sun, X., Zhang, J., Zhang, J., & Zhang, T. (2021). Impact of Group Art Therapy Using Traditional Chinese Materials on Self-Efficacy and Social Function for Individuals Diagnosed With Schizophrenia. *Frontiers In Psychology, 11*. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.571124
- <sup>5</sup> Schouten, K. A., de Niet, G. J., Knipscheer, J. W., Kleber, R. J., & Hutschemaekers, G. J. M. (2015). The Effectiveness of Art Therapy in the Treatment of Traumatized Adults: A Systematic Review on Art Therapy and Trauma. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse, 16*(2), 220–228. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26638352>
- <sup>6</sup> Carr, R. (2008). Neurotransmitters, Neuromodulators and Hormones: Putting It All Together. In R. Carr & N. Hass-Cohen (Eds.), *Art Therapy and Clinical Neuroscience* (pp. 76-91). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- <sup>7</sup> Carson, S. (2011). Creativity and Psychopathology: A Shared Vulnerability Model. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*.
- <sup>8</sup> Kusama, Y. (2011). *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama*. The University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>9</sup> Tagliabue, M. (2021, January). Why Yayoi Kusama's Mental Illness Was Crucial For Her Art Career. *TheArtGorgeous*. <https://theartgorgeous.com/why-yayoi-kusamas-mental-illness-was-crucial-for-her-art-career/>
- <sup>10</sup> Wong, S. (2021, June). Science with Sam: What is awe? *New Scientist*. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/0-science-with-sam-what-is-awe/>
- <sup>11</sup> Xiaonan, K., Konrath, S. & Goldstein, T. R. (2019). The relationship among different types of arts engagement, empathy, and prosocial behaviour. *Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts, 14*(4), 481-492. doi: 10.1037/aca0000269
- <sup>12</sup> Ishizu, T. & Zeki, S. (2011). Toward a Brain-Based Therapy of Beauty. *PLoS One; 6*:e21852. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0021852
- <sup>13</sup> de Botton, A. & Armstrong, J. (2013). *Art as Therapy*. Phaidon Press. London: UK.
- <sup>14</sup> Dinsdale, E. (2020, February). The power of Barbara Kruger's art, in her own words. *Dazed*. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/48055/1/the-power-of-barbara-krugers-art-in-her-own-words>