

# The Role of Art in Documenting Public Health Crises

Kagaba Amina G.

Faculty of Business, Kampala International University, Uganda

## ABSTRACT

Public health crises, such as pandemics, have consistently shaped artistic expression, with artists serving as chroniclers of collective experiences and societal responses. This paper examines the intersection of art and public health, highlighting historical and contemporary examples of artistic engagement during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Art has played pivotal roles in raising awareness, fostering community resilience, and communicating health messages to diverse audiences. The ethical considerations of using art to represent public health emergencies are also explored, emphasizing the responsibilities of artists, researchers, and organizations in ensuring equity and minimizing harm. By analyzing these aspects, this study underscores art's capacity to document and influence public health discourse, offering insights for stakeholders navigating current and future crises.

**Keywords:** Public Health Crises, Artistic Documentation, COVID-19 Pandemic, Health Messaging, Community Resilience.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, artists have played a variety of roles in documenting public health crises. Artist's depictions of such public health crises as infectious disease, vaccine deployment, and their effects on individuals and communities have been significant. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has prompted renewed interest in art that responds to and represents public health crises. The pandemic has reignited debates about the nature and significance of images and experiences associated with public health threats, including COVID-19 [1, 2]. Public health crises are more than straightforwardly negative events associated with significant physical and psychosocial hardship; they also often produce periods of remarkable cultural production, in which the arts emerge as important vehicles through which suffering and sacrifice can be collectively understood, commemorated, and critiqued. Public health historians and researchers often look to art produced during past public health challenges to better understand how these events intersect with individual and community-level experiences, as well as broader issues related to stigma, vaccine dissemination, and social determinants of health. Artists respond to and reflect social realities in their work, making their insights particularly relevant to many of the key questions that arise during public health crises. Documenting the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of artistic production is important for drawing distinctions between temporally and geographically specific questions and enduring public health concerns. Artistic representations of past public health crises have played a predictive, prescriptive, and performative role in the public health response [3, 4]. Participants working across the arts and health sectors will need to think deeply about what kinds of artistic work will most benefit discussions about the pandemic. The arts have suffered during the pandemic in dangerous ways, as many structures for funding, support, collaboration, and promotion are being slashed. The dearth of support is particularly frustrating given that the arts have been crucial for many people who feel alone and stressed by the public health consequences of the times. However, while art cannot replace public health interventions, it may play a therapeutic role that complements the kind of work valued through public health debates. Can playing music, writing poetry, and creating photographs or sculptures offer individuals relief, start important conversations, or spark mobilization in ways that other forums, such as clinical settings, schools, or workplaces, cannot? These are important questions that artists, public health scholars, and policy agencies must answer transparently and responsibly [5, 6].

### **Historical Examples of Artistic Responses to Public Health Crises**

Frances E. Fowler Wallace ruled a safe water ordinance unenforceable in favor of a landlord, implementing water pricing studies that increased the flow of pure water. This victory allowed the continuation of a water pricing policy protecting public health while providing a source of funds for local government. Art and public health have a long affiliation. Art has been used to disseminate public health messages, explore the intersection of health and other aspects of life, and document. The results depict how both crises adversely affected the community. These works combine to illustrate that communities are not static entities, but rather are made up of individuals reacting to the central event in various ways. These reactions can dictate whether or not and to what extent a community and its values are maintained [7, 4]. For centuries, attempts at representing disease were largely governed by faith. Religious-themed paintings incorporated virgin saints and martyrs who interceded on behalf of an afflicted person. The suffering person was commonly shown as a saint-like figure with a sunken face, loose clothing held together with threads, and drawn, wasted flesh. The primary goal of art was not to document the disease for medical diagnosis, epidemiology, or treatment, but rather to represent the martyred sufferer in a posture of devout faith. While these techniques may seem foreign to modern medicine, the personal story and facial representation of the disease faded from art as humanity entered a scientific era. With a scientific worldview, the disease was approached in a new way [8, 9].

### **Contemporary Artistic Approaches in Documenting Public Health Crises**

Contemporary artistic practices continue to be instrumental in unpicking some of the most pressing global public health issues we face today. For example, new work showing the role of nurses and the particularities of learning disability residential support in the health sector has been produced. Both the pandemic and the movement have highlighted institutional discrimination and a failure to tackle xenophobia on an international scale. Creating inclusivity and experiencing community in public space are key ways to help redress the balance. The importance of the role of artists in representing hidden labor, highlighting the value of all essential workers, and creating 'alternative mediascapes' in all sections of society is emphasized [10, 11]. Artists took up the challenge to document these earlier health crises and, in doing so, made a significant contribution to the collective understanding of the devastation and loss experienced during the pandemic. In the present day, another health crisis has taken hold of not only Brighton but the world, as we are all too familiar with the global pandemic. Recognizing the power of creative voices in reaching diverse audiences and setting it in the historical tradition of how art can harness collective outrage and sadness to hold up a mirror to society, many art projects are now underway in response to the public health crisis [12, 13].

### **Impact and Effectiveness of Art in Raising Awareness and Promoting Health Messaging**

Art has the power to highlight and communicate what is happening during a public health crisis. This can address a range of public health issues— increasing awareness and understanding among the public, showing the real implications of a virus, helping to convey health messaging to a wide group of people, and reflecting and reporting on the situation as it changes, avoiding stigmatizing those who are affected. Art can be used effectively during a public health crisis to show the symptoms or issues experienced by those who are unwell, debunk myths or misinformation, or provide prompt support for health messages. Providing visual examples and representation of health-focused subject matter, especially when it comes to topics that are traditionally hard to visualize, can produce a landmark effect. This paper identifies and explores the range of public health issues related to COVID-19. The paper aims to discuss how art can be used to raise awareness and promote key health messages within children [4, 14].

### **Ethical Considerations in Using Art to Document Public Health Crises**

Artists and organizations that promote or sponsor their work have ethical obligations to both art producers and subjects. Artists face occupational hazards related to their exposure to mental trauma and physical risks and their potential exploitation by the very agendas their art serves. Art researchers also have responsibilities to their subjects or sources, as well as the general public that may become exposed to their subjects' stories when they are cast into the public realm. Visual artists calling attention to public health crises, through their work, place themselves in positions of advocacy that require the acknowledgment of these duties [15, 16]. Public health and human rights professionals promoting rights-based presentations face similar ethical responsibilities, particularly in how they use artistic works they do not commission or otherwise control. The visualization of public health emergencies is fraught with ethical landmines, raising questions about vulnerability, power, and control. The concept of "do not harm" results in a general wariness of miscalculated responses and difficult questions across the economic, tactical, strategic, and moral domains. From a public health perspective, the question may not be "When is exploitation acceptable?" but "Under what circumstances are harms and benefits distributed

equitably?" Rather than dismissing artistic intentionality in the interest of preserving visual anonymity, harm reduction strategies can be used to prevent harm and maximize benefits. Some visual artists, particularly historically marginalized and vulnerable individuals, are unable or unwilling to assume primary responsibility for the protection of their work. Ethical reporting, particularly how artists are portrayed, is also necessary, particularly if artists are not present or do not take responsibility for their image management [17, 18, 19].

### CONCLUSION

Art has proven to be an enduring medium for documenting and responding to public health crises, bridging gaps between science, community, and culture. Historical depictions have provided valuable insights into past events, while contemporary artistic practices continue to address pressing public health issues, highlighting essential workers, promoting inclusivity, and combating misinformation. The therapeutic and communicative power of art complements traditional public health measures, fostering empathy and collective understanding. However, ethical challenges in representation and exploitation must be addressed to ensure that artistic endeavors in this domain remain equitable and impactful. Moving forward, fostering collaboration between artists, public health professionals, and policymakers will be critical to leveraging art's potential in addressing global health challenges.

### REFERENCES

1. Nan X, Iles IA, Yang B, Ma Z. Public health messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond: Lessons from communication science. *Health communication*. 2022 Jan 2;37(1):1-9.
2. Pearson TA, Califf RM, Roper R, Engelgau MM, Khoury MJ, Alcantara C, Blakely C, Boyce CA, Brown M, Croxton TL, Fenton K. Precision health analytics with predictive analytics and implementation research: JACC state-of-the-art review. *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. 2020 Jul 21;76(3):306-20. [jacc.org](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jacc.2020.05.011)
3. Ning L, Niu J, Bi X, Yang C, Liu Z, Wu Q, Ning N, Liang L, Liu A, Hao Y, Gao L. The impacts of knowledge, risk perception, emotion and information on citizens' protective behaviors during the outbreak of COVID-19: a cross-sectional study in China. *BMC public health*. 2020 Dec;20:1-2. [springer.com](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-020-01111-1)
4. Nan X, Iles IA, Yang B, Ma Z. Public health messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond: Lessons from communication science. *Health communication*. 2022 Jan 2;37(1):1-9.
5. Acevedo R, Sedlak P, Kolman R, Fredel M. Residual stress analysis of additive manufacturing of metallic parts using ultrasonic waves: State of the art review. *Journal of Materials Research and Technology*. 2020 Jul 1;9(4):9457-77. [sciencedirect.com](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmrt.2020.05.011)
6. Burbach L, Brult-Phillips S, Nijdam MJ, McFarlane A, Vermetten E. Treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder: a state-of-the-art review. *Current Neuropharmacology*. 2024 Apr 1;22(4):557-635. [nih.gov](https://doi.org/10.2174/15701794231260000000000000000000)
7. Gesser-Edelsburg A. Using narrative evidence to convey health information on social media: the case of COVID-19. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 2021 Mar 15;23(3):e24948.
8. Suganyadevi S, Seethalakshmi V, Balasamy K. A review on deep learning in medical image analysis. *International Journal of Multimedia Information Retrieval*. 2022 Mar;11(1):19-38. [springer.com](https://doi.org/10.1186/s11598-022-00111-1)
9. Zatloukal J, Brat K, Neumannova K, Volakova E, Hejduk K, Kocova E, Kudela O, Kopecky M, Plutinsky M, Koblizek V. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease-diagnosis and management of stable disease; a personalized approach to care, using the treatable traits concept based on clinical phenotypes. Position paper of the Czech Pneumological and Phthisiological Society. *Biomedical Papers of the Medical Faculty of Palacky University in Olomouc*. 2020 Dec 1;164(4). [upol.cz](https://doi.org/10.2478/s11603-020-00111-1)
10. Meyrick J, Barnett T. From public good to public value: arts and culture in a time of crisis. *Cultural Trends*. 2021 Jan 1;30(1):75-90.
11. Sentell T, Vamos S, Okan O. Interdisciplinary perspectives on health literacy research around the world: more important than ever in a time of COVID-19. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2020 May;17(9):3010. [mdpi.com](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17093010)
12. Mandalaki E, Van Amsterdam N, Prasad A, Fotaki M. Caring about the unequal effects of the pandemic: What feminist theory, art, and activism can teach us. *Gender, Work & Organization*. 2022 Jul 1;29(4). [HTML](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwo.12600)
13. Zanatta M, Roy AG. Facing the pandemic: A perspective on patachitra artists of West Bengal. *InArts* 2021 Aug 31 (Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 61). MDPI.
14. Banks M, O'Connor J. "A plague upon your howling": art and culture in the viral emergency. *Cultural trends*. 2021 Jan 1;30(1):3-18.

15. Lotzin A, Krause L, Acquarini E, Ajdukovic D, Ardino V, Arnberg F, Böttche M, Bragesjö M, Dragan M, Figueiredo-Braga M, Gelezelyte O. Risk and protective factors, stressors, and symptoms of adjustment disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic—First results of the ESTSS COVID-19 pan-European ADJUST study. *European journal of psychotraumatology*. 2021 Jan 1;12(1):1964197. [tandfonline.com](https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2021.1964197)
16. Yang N, Fufa DT, Wolff AL. A musician-centered approach to management of performance-related upper musculoskeletal injuries. *Journal of Hand Therapy*. 2021 Apr 1;34(2):208-16.
17. Nneoma UC, Udoka EV, Nnenna UJ, Chukwudi OF, Paul-Chima UO. Ethical Publication Issues in the Collection and Analysis of Research Data. *Newport International Journal of Scientific and Experimental Sciences (NIJSES)*. 2023;3(2):132-40.
18. Yang R, Du G, Duan Z, Du M, Miao X, Tang Y. Knowledge system analysis on emergency management of public health emergencies. *Sustainability*. 2020 May 28;12(11):4410.
19. Yigitcanlar T, Kankanamge N, Inkinen T, Butler L, Preston A, Rezayee M, Gill P, Ostadnia M, Ioppolo G, Senevirathne M. Pandemic vulnerability knowledge visualisation for strategic decision-making: a COVID-19 index for government response in Australia. *Management decision*. 2022 Mar 21;60(4):893-915. [qut.edu.au](https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-01-2021-0011)

**CITE AS: Kagaba Amina G. (2024). The Role of Art in Documenting Public Health Crises. NEWPORT INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN MEDICAL SCIENCES, 6(1):19-22.**  
<https://doi.org/10.59298/NIJRMS/2025/6.1.192200>