

Wash Your Hands: The Integrated Art and Health Space During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION — THE PANDEMIC

The streets feel empty – the strange senses of both peace and eeriness fill the air. There are barely any people walking outside, businesses have desolate “CLOSED” signs placed in the windows of their shops, and the hustle-and-bustle has seemingly vanished into thin air. Yet, while parts of the neighborhood have shut down, brighter colors and sports are also appearing and dotting the surroundings. There are tiny squares, large walls, and covered sidewalks starting to fill up with art. They bring a sense of tranquility and joy, with colorful paintings serving as gentle reminders to the community to wash their hands, to stay socially distanced, and to wear masks. But while the decorative designs dance around the neighborhood, one must also note the increase in sleeping bags and tents that line the streets. Unemployment has reached a record high, and people have been evicted from their homes, forced to settle somewhere – anywhere – to simply survive.

As the pandemic continues to influence our lives in countless ways, uprooting our daily routines, more and more flaws have been revealed; it has further peeled back the veils on racism, classism, sexism, ageism, and much more. To begin targeting such large societal issues that have been exacerbated during the pandemic, one should acknowledge the roles that many different realms can play in addressing these key flaws. Specifically, since the pandemic has also led to artwork popping up in cities such as Philadelphia, I will investigate the intersection that public art has played during a health epidemic. Thus begins the discussion of public art in public health. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind is what public art is trying to say about public health: What aspects of health is it targeting? Is it criticizing certain factors? What is it informing us about social disparities that lie within health?

BACKGROUND – SOCIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

First, to better understand what direct aspects of health that public art can analyze, we must investigate the longevity and depth of social disparities within health. However, social disparities, which involve race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, extend far beyond the realm of health.

Thus, when discussing these long-lasting impacts that racial tensions have led to, one must consider that “the 1964 passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Acts made discrimination by race in programs that receive federal financial assistance, including health systems, illegal. This federal law had important implications for health and well-being but in many respects was too late, as the imprint of historical discrimination on health had already been cast” (Essien & Venkataramani, 2020). Again, this long history of discrimination stems from generally lower socioeconomic status, which can be combined with discrimination based on race and ethnicity to exacerbate a lower quality of life. This entails greater eviction rates, substandard housing, higher stress levels which can contribute to heart disease and hypertension, greater rates of poverty, and a lack of access to healthy food and education (Foster et al., 2020), (Levine, 2021).

Moreover, specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, one can note the disproportionate impact of the virus on certain racial and ethnic groups. While earlier on, “lower rates of COVID-19 testing were reported among minority communities...emerging data illustrate that Black and Hispanic Americans are dying at far higher rates from the novel coronavirus than any other groups in the nation” (Essien & Venkataramani, 2020). Specifically, the CDC reports that when compared to White, Non-Hispanic individuals, African Americans have 1.1 times the case rate, 2.9 times the hospitalization rate, and 1.9 times the death rate; Hispanic individuals have 1.3 times the case rate, 3.1 times the hospitalization rate, and 2.3 times the death rate; and American Indian or Alaska Native individuals have 1.7 times the case rate, 3.7 times the hospitalization rate, and 2.4 times the death rate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). These enormous numerical These rate ratios further emphasize the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on illness, morbidity, and mortality of racial and ethnic groups; these effects can be traced back to the socioeconomic statuses of these individuals, such as minority communities having lower levels of employment and wealth. Furthermore, one can even note how COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy stems from, and will continue to reveal, such racial biases that exist within society (Bunch, 2021). A combination of obstacles in relation to access, lack of education, and general distrust among these minority communities leads to lower vaccination rates in these minority groups (Levine, 2021), (Ndugga et al., 2021). This hesitancy, which is highlighted in the fact that about 14% of African Americans trust the safety of the vaccine and 34% of Latinos plan to receive it (Sinha, 2021), can be traced back to the inhumane treatment of African Americans in unethical experiments, such as the Tuskegee Study (CDC, 2021). Thus, when specifically looking at race and ethnicity, we can note the disproportionate effects on minority groups. Additionally, since race and ethnicity are also correlated with socioeconomic status, societal inequities are further reinforced.

PUBLIC ART IN PUBLIC HEALTH – *WASH YOUR HANDS* PROJECT

To begin investigating the manifestation, and tackling, of these social health disparities in art, we will look into the *Wash Your Hands* project in Philadelphia. As part of the *Art in Action: COVID-19 Response* venture under the Mural Arts Philadelphia program, the *Wash Your Hands* project highlights four murals along with handwashing stations throughout the city. Each mural is created by a different artist – Nile Livingston, Dora Cuenca, Symone Salib, and NDA (Given, 2020), (Streets Dept, 2020), (Mural Arts Philadelphia, n.d.). As a collaboration between the nation’s largest public art program, Mural Arts Philadelphia, and the local non-profit organization, Broad Street Ministry, this project “offer[s] guidelines from the Center for Disease Control for staying safe and healthy during the pandemic, as well as resources for those who may not have a home to stay safe within, and affirmations for Philadelphians who may need an extra boost” (Given, 2020). Having handwashing stations installed at each mural’s location further enables the city’s citizens to actively engage in health and safety actions. While these murals aim to provide resources and information for the general public in Philadelphia, they also provide more resources to and acknowledgement of the homeless population in Philadelphia.

Figure 1



Note. One of the four handwashing murals; painted by Dora Cuenca; located at Broad Street Ministry (Mural Arts Philadelphia, n.d.).

When further analyzing this specific mural by Dora Cuenca (Figure 1), placed along a fence and right next to a few trash cans, one can note the joyful colors demonstrated in the mural. Instead of scaring people away with bold colors that denote danger (such as the color red), the mural

draws people in with its welcoming presence. In addition, the handwashing stations provide multiple paper towel rolls and hand sanitizer dispensers, allowing multiple people to utilize and access them at the same time. Particularly of note is the distinct text in the mural – it educates people about the pandemic, allowing them to learn how to protect themselves and others.

These murals, paired with their handwashing stations, demonstrate an intersection between public art murals and public health interventions. Ultimately, to better understand this intersection, this leads us to the question: **What role does *effective* public art play in the realm of health equity in illuminating or even addressing social disparities in relation to the pandemic?**

DEFINING ASPECTS OF PUBLIC ART – SCOPE AND GOAL

To begin addressing this question and placing these handwashing murals in context, we must recognize the multiple variables that contribute to effective public art. Specifically, we can identify two key variables – the reach of the artwork and the goal of the messaging.

Firstly, we must discuss the reach of the artwork. When recognizing the intersection of public art in public health, one must acknowledge a point presented by UK professors interested in the intersection between arts and health, Dr. Clive Parkinson and Dr. Mike White: “The international arts and health conversation needs to be about extending knowledge, partnerships and awareness on a global scale, in a reciprocal way that allows for work around the social determinants of health to be culturally relevant, equitable and geographically specific, rather than a one-size-fits-all foreign policy” (Parkinson & White, 2013). This statement illustrates the impact of art in health awareness and policy on a global level; it recognizes that art is an effective manner of communication in a large-scale approach. In contrast, public art can also be viewed at a community-level scale, in which projects impact people at a local level. To clarify these terms, in this case, a community-level project corresponds to one that reaches individuals within the neighborhood, city, or surrounding area, while a global-level project corresponds to one that can reach multiple cities, states, and countries. Furthermore, to dive a bit deeper into what these two types of projects – global-level and community-level – entail and imply, one must investigate the extent, and effectiveness, of their impacts.

To recognize this, firstly, while large-scale projects may raise greater awareness and reach more people, one must acknowledge what this usage of art in a global manner requires and implies – support from governments and authority figures can easily fund such large-scale projects, but at the same time, this can allow for manipulation of such art. Specifically, if funding is directly connected to the artists’ works, the artists can sometimes feel limited to a certain scope in order to gain the

approval of the organizations that provide the funding. For instance, participating in art projects funded by the Wallace Foundation and Royal Society of Arts can lead to artists feeling as if they cannot truly, and openly, express themselves¹⁴. Furthermore, “many artists working in health care settings express concern that their practice will be reduced by administrators and researchers to a functional product or process,”¹⁴ once again highlighting the concern of the manipulation of art to fit a certain image. These global-scale projects contrast community-level projects, in which perhaps the reach is not as wide, but the impacts may be more direct (and honest); these local projects can lead to greater impacts, albeit on fewer people. Specifically, when considering the *Wash Your Hands* project, these murals are centered in Philadelphia, meaning that the people who are able to see, and are thus influenced by it, are those living in Philadelphia. As we begin to dive deeper into analyzing this Philadelphia art project and the effectiveness of art, we must consider: How can one aim to find the balance between the scope of public art in health and keeping the art form “pure” with the message clear and transparent? Is a global-level project or a community-level project more effective? What are the different issues that can arise within each type (global-level versus community-level) of project?

Secondly, beyond discussing the scope of a public art project in health, we must recognize the end goal of the messaging of the project. Within the health realm, and specific to the pandemic, art can serve three main goals: to express grief and loss, to thank healthcare workers, and to disseminate information. I will investigate the role of art in disseminating information. The *Wash Your Hands* project is able to disseminate visual information and statements through art, as well as provide resources and direct action items through the handwashing stations that it entails (Crimmins, 2020). To provide context for these handwashing stations, one should note that this type of hygiene intervention is a method utilized in public health approaches (Willmott et al., 2016). For instance, in a large-scale trial that provided and promoted handwashing stations, conducted from 2011-2013 among greater than 60,000 households in Bangladesh, the researchers found that “people who had soap/soapy water plus water present at their handwashing station, irrespective of intervention allocation, had lower prevalence of respiratory illness” (Najinin et al., 2019). Thus, this illustrates the effectiveness of providing such handwashing stations as a type of intervention to improve general health. As illustrated in NDA’s mural (Figure 2), the accessibility of hygiene resources, such as a handwashing station, coupled with informative murals allows people to easily take steps towards improving their own, and community, health.

Figure 2



Note. Another one of the four handwashing murals; painted by NDA; located at 2774 Kensington Ave (Mural Arts Philadelphia, n.d.).

To tie together these two ideas regarding the scope and goal of a public art project in health, we will first ground them in their connection to the homeless population in Philadelphia (the target audience of my case study). In this case, the scope is community-based, and the goal is to educate individuals about measures to stay safe during the pandemic. To provide context, one should note that, as academic researchers from Pennsylvania universities state, the “pandemic has also affected the nonprofit organizations that provide people experiencing homelessness with basic needs such as food, clothing, and medical care” (Ha et al., 2021). This observation contrasts the decrease in resource accessibility to the increase in the homeless population, as more people become unemployed due to the pandemic. Furthermore, one should note that this is a concrete example of the social disparity of classism, which persists within the healthcare system. In addition, the correlation between the types of minority groups discriminated against in healthcare and the types of minority groups prevalent in homelessness is evident – oftentimes, these are African American or Hispanic American individuals. However, these handwashing murals allows for “people [to] engage with the murals and use the handwashing stations,” encouraging them to also “become a part of the messaging and effort to end the pandemic” (Ha et al., 2021). Referring back to NDA’s mural (Figure 2), one can note that its location allows it to be both visible and accessible to all locals of Philadelphia, including the homeless population. Similarly, the distinct directions to “wash your hands for at least 20 seconds” serves to disseminate information to the public. Thus, this demonstrates the local scope and informative messaging, aimed to address and try to bridge the social

disparity of classism (and also inherently racism, which is tied to socioeconomic class).

REPRESENTATION IN ARTWORK

To expand on the impact of this artwork on the target audience, we must also discuss representation within the public art and public health realm. In typical health advertisements and films, white actors are often selected (Whittler, 1991), (Stewart, 2018), (Kaufman, 2018), (El Hazzouri & Hamilton, 2019). For instance, in health advertisements such as those focusing on obesity in Super Bowl commercials, there are “discrepancies between actors...in Super Bowl commercials and the US population,” thus leading to issues with “internalized weight-stigmatizing attitudes” and the inability to connect to the messages demonstrated in these ads (Lydecker et al., 2017). In addition, in drug advertisements such as Viagra (Andy, 2009), Voltaren (Chris Salt Music, 2018), and Humira (kmcheng, 2020), the most commonly represented individuals are white males. Again, this lack of diverse representation illustrates a lack of connection between the public and health messaging in general. However, one should note that recently, more steps are being taken to bring greater representation to the health messaging and advertisement front, as a majority of marketers are recognizing the need for diverse representation (“Diversity in Advertising,” n.d.), (Abraham, 2020). In contrast, these public art projects aim to better represent the people affected and thus enable a better understanding and acceptance of health messaging.

Figure 3



Note. Another one of the four handwashing murals; painted by Nile Livingston; located at 1700 Block of East-Bound Vine St (Mural Arts Philadelphia, n.d.).

To dive deeper into understanding the type of role that representation can play in the effectiveness of art, we can look at Livingston’s mural (Figure 3). Located near large populations of the homeless in Philadelphia, we can see how the first face that pops out is one of an African American’s. Furthermore, when looking closer, the two people sitting down – and staying six feet apart – are a female and male. This equal gender representation further highlights the impact of these murals; again, they are more inclusive and representative of what people in the community look like. Oftentimes, when people see others that look like them, they are more likely to feel both heard and seen, and thus also more willing to follow advice. This then leads to more targeted, community-specific advice. As Livingston states, “we are forced to acknowledge our glaring economic disparities” (Livingston, 2020); she illustrates these economic disparities through accurate representation of affected individuals, working to encourage beneficial health practices.

This can even be contrasted to the current signs that address the pandemic; oftentimes, there are empty or blank faces (Figure 4). While these empty portraits are inclusive and demonstrate that the advice applies to everyone, it can also make it harder for people to relate to the empty faces portrayed in advertisements and messaging, which in turn limits knowledge translation and the acceptance of the public health intervention.

Figure 4



Note. Example of empty faces and people in COVID-19 messaging (“Prevention Warning,” n.d.).

MESSAGING IN ARTWORK

But beyond representation, we must also acknowledge the role that messaging plays in effective artwork. When discussing messaging, perhaps the best way to do so is by investigating the mural painted by artist Symone Salib (Figure 5).

Figure 5

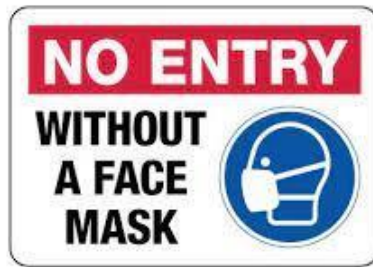


Note. Another one of the four handwashing murals; created by Symone Salib; located at 839 South Street (Mural Arts Philadelphia, n.d.).

This mural, which states “do what you can when you can,” in addition to its colorful stripes and dots, and happy smiles on the figures’ faces, illustrates joy. The bright pink, purple, and blue colors add a sense of child-like playfulness and happiness; at the same time, the words emphasize a sense of responsibility that each citizen of the community holds. Thus, this highlights the encouraging responsibility that joyful messaging can entail. Furthermore, in an interview discussing her artwork, Salib states that she utilizes art to stimulate joy as opposed to “the anxiety produced by the 24-hour news cycle” (Vital Strategies, 2020).

Here, she draws on happier emotions instead of more negative ones like fear. Thus, this also raises the question of using joy rather than fear in messaging to promote public health awareness. Is a joyful mural more effective? Or is perhaps a scary one more effective? She also highlights that she wants to use art to “[build] community along the way,” (Vital Strategies, 2020) which brings us back to the impact and importance of community-level projects. Her emphasis on community building can also be seen through choosing figures that are representative of the community. Thus, this ties together the idea of addressing social disparities through disseminating information while also considering accurate representation at the local level.

Figure 6



Note. “NO ENTRY” standard pandemic messaging example (“COVID-19 Signs,” n.d.).

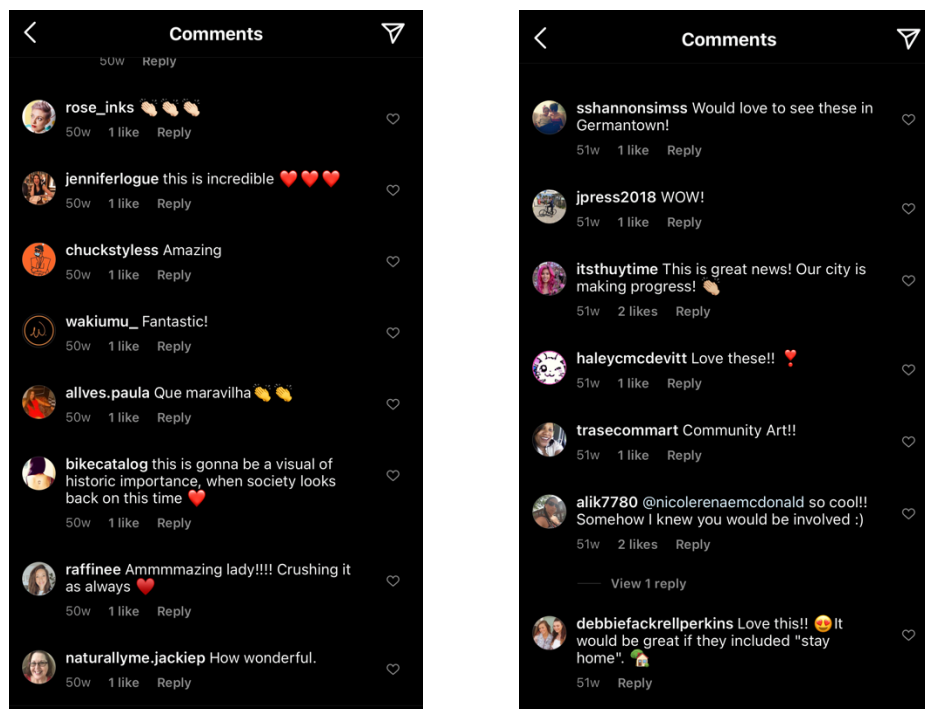
Furthermore, Salib’s joyful messaging can be contrasted to standardized pandemic messaging. For example, this image (Figure 6) illustrates a much more aggressive type of messaging, such as stating “NO ENTRY” in all capital letters and highlighted in red. The red almost seems to illustrate “danger,” eliciting fear from people; Salib’s work elicits joy instead. Furthermore, when investigating the impact of shame-based messaging, one can note that while effective to an extent, joyful messaging can have a greater impact. In a report by a team of Brown psychology and neuroscience professors, when investigating messages regarding social isolation during the pandemic, the findings revealed that “while successful prosocial messages depend on strong, positive emotional engagement, effective threat messages leveraging fear-mongering language are less reliant on the strength of emotional reactions” (Heffner et al., 2021). This deep-rooted emotional response driven by positive messaging hits closer to home, thus meaning that it is a more reliable mechanism in which to drive social change and behavior. To further provide context, in investigating negative impacts created by shame-inducing messaging, researchers acknowledge that “interventions that risk stigmatizing could backfire by exacerbating health disparities rather than reducing them,” (Brown-Johnson & Prochaska, 2015) especially as those “messages [can] have a counterproductive effect” (Bunarto, 2013). By utilizing more joyful messaging, this decreases the risk in creating negative effects and stigmas around actions, encouraging more beneficial behavior.

AUDIENCE REACTIONS AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED REFLECTIONS

To further investigate the effectiveness of this project, in recognizing positive, direct messaging, one can explore audience reactions. Thus far, they have been extremely positive and uplifting. Throughout social media, the parties involved – which include the artists, Mural Arts Philadelphia, Streets Department, Broad Street Ministry, and HAHA Magazine – have posted various pictures and captions about this

project (Broad Street Ministry, 2020), (HAHA MAGAZINE, 2020), (NDA, 2020), (Streets Dept, 2020). In response, people have applauded these efforts, with an Instagram post by user @streetsdept (Streets Department) racking upwards of 2,000 likes with glowing comments (Streets Dept, 2020) From comments such as “SO EXCELLENT AND SO NEEDED” (by user @alishainthebiz) (Streets Dept, 2020) to “Such a wonderful idea 🙌 we're in this together❤️” (by user @jovanitha_oilartist) (HAHA MAGAZINE, 2020), audience reactions illustrate how impactful this community-level, accurately representative, and joyful messaging truly is. Furthermore, this project has also encouraged others to implement similar art projects in their own communities; thus, we can see that while the scope of this project is community-level in terms of the actual, physical placements of the murals in Philly, this project is also able to influence and reach many more people digitally.

Figure 7



Note. Examples of comments found on @streetsdept’s post (Streets Dept, 2020).

When diving deeper into some of these comments posted here (Figure 7), we can note that there is much support and awe at the artists and artwork, with one person even saying “Would love to see these in Germantown!” (by user @sshannonsimss). Especially with the expansion of social media usage and the digital realm, it’s important to recognize that

perhaps it's not necessary to solely label a project as "community-level" or "global-level"; in reality, a project can be both. Thus, while perhaps the community-level scope of the *Wash Your Hands* project is the most prominent, in which the direct approach immediately impacts the lives of many through hygiene interventions, this case study is also able to influence and serve as an example for the greater community. Granted, one should note that the type of people that follow these social media accounts are more local or established within the art realm; perhaps the next step would be to take these projects to a larger-scale social media account or platform. This allows us to recognize the limitations that exist within this digital type of global-level scope, providing a different understanding of effectiveness by encouraging others to promote similar, local-level projects within their communities.

In addition, we must also recognize how these community-oriented ideas can encourage individuals to work together; people are willing to serve their community with these art murals acting as a form of connection between them. When I first saw these handwashing stations, I was reminded of the handwashing stations currently set up within the Stanford dining halls. While there is no decorative art accompanying the stations in the dining halls, the similar setup of the handwashing stations encourages a sense of community and civic responsibility; personally, when I see other people washing their hands, it serves as a reminder for me to do so as well to protect the community as a whole. Similarly, I think that with these handwashing stations in Philadelphia, people are encouraged to wash their hands when they see others doing so; in a way, one could even argue that this is positive peer pressure, especially since these murals are placed in such public locations.

In general, this combination of a more conventional public art approach, such as through murals, as well as a more conventional public health intervention, such as through handwashing stations, proves that this intersection can act quite productively, synergistically, and effectively to contribute to norm setting and improving health outcomes.

While there is no perfect formula for creating effective public art in public health, one should note that community-oriented artwork not only allows for efficacy, but it also reinforces the impact of the role of art. It allows for art to target social disparities, and this combination of providing a direct action and resources for people to do so right away is ultimately able to aid in the betterment of the community. The effective approaches of utilizing public art are complex, but throughout this case study, we can undoubtedly investigate one way in which public art successfully addresses issues in public health. In the future, expanding on such intersections could further allow for more productive approaches to targeting health disparities, encouraging others to do the same. However, the caveat to this all is that in order to successfully effect change, we must work together – as responsible humans, compassionate neighbors, and above all, as a community.

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