

## RECOVERY STORIES – AN ARTS ASSEMBLAGE

The presented art assemblage is the result of an arts-based-research project examining how the recovery colleges in Flanders have made a difference in the lives of people with mental health problems.

**Recovery Colleges** are educational community-based initiatives that offer a unique approach to learning and mental health recovery. They are designed to support individuals experiencing mental health challenges, as well as their families, friends, and the broader community. Rooted in principles of empowerment and self-directed learning, Recovery Colleges offer a range of courses that focus on mental health, well-being, personal development, and recovery. All courses are co-delivered by an expert with lived experience and a professional expert (Hayes et al., 2022).

**Arts-based research (ABR)** is a research methodology that integrates artistic processes and forms as a way to explore, understand, and communicate knowledge. It involves using the creation of art—such as visual arts, music, dance, theater, poetry, and other forms—as both a method of inquiry and a way of presenting research findings. ABR seeks to expand traditional approaches to research by using the sensory, emotional, and symbolic power of art to engage with complex social, cultural, and personal issues (Leavy, 2015).

For this research project, I invited trainers from the recovery colleges to share materials, creations, or artworks that expressed how the Recovery Colleges had made a difference in their lives. In total, 18 trainers submitted their creations (poems, drawings, paintings, songs, photos, collages, etc.) via email or WhatsApp. Some also included additional information explaining their choice of art. If any details were missing, we followed up with the participants for clarification.

These creations were reviewed, listened to, described, and analyzed by myself as the researcher, a co-researcher and expert-by-experience from the EQUALITY//ResearchCollective, the trainers who provided the materials, and the coordinators of the Recovery Colleges. This occurred at different stages and in varied ways throughout the analysis process.

To represent the diversity of these artistic expressions, I chose film as the medium. It allowed me to respectfully capture the richness, complexity, and vulnerability of the stories shared. As a researcher, you not only feel gratitude for people's willingness to share their personal stories and creations, but you also become emotionally connected to their experiences—it touches you deeply. This connection drives you to engage with each image, text, interview, poem, or impression with great care, revisiting and re-experiencing them.

You seek ways to further understand the stories and artworks, sometimes adding elements like sound, color, music, silence, or text, aiming to stay as true as possible to the artist's original intent. Yet, you also strive to convey the full, complex narrative that represents the diversity of the contributors. This is a scientific process of exploration—one filled with confrontation, uncertainty, and rediscovery. The result of this experience is captured in the art assemblage/film.

1. Relevance to mental health and community art

From a mental health perspective, the process of creating and sharing art helps foster emotional release, self-awareness, and connection with others, which are crucial elements in the recovery process. The assemblage highlights the transformative role that recovery initiatives in mental health care can play in empowering individuals to regain meaning and purpose in their lives. It also sheds light on how art can serve as a therapeutic tool, offering both creators and viewers new insights and pathways to healing.

In terms of community art, the assemblage underscores the importance of collective participation and representation. The collaborative process, involving the trainers, co-researchers, and coordinators, demonstrates how art can build a sense of community by bringing together diverse voices and perspectives. The resulting film not only honors the individuality of each artist but also reflects the shared experiences of vulnerability, strength, and growth. This makes the assemblage a valuable contribution to community art, where creativity becomes a means to foster social inclusion, break down stigmas around mental health, and encourage collective engagement.

Through this lens, the arts assemblage is both a therapeutic and socially engaged form of art, relevant to broader discussions about mental health, recovery, and the role of art in community-building.

The arts assemblage is a short film of 14 minutes. I share with you the link to both the Dutch and English version.

- [Recovery Colleges Flanders - Art assemblage](#)
- <https://vimeo.com/905101986?share=copy>

Showcasing this arts assemblage to European politicians is important because it brings real, lived experiences of mental health recovery into a political space, providing an opportunity to rethink mental health care policy on a broader level. Here's why it would spark meaningful conversation:

- The arts assemblage offers a deeply personal and emotional portrayal of the recovery journey, moving beyond statistics and reports. By seeing and hearing the voices of individuals who have faced mental health challenges, politicians can develop a more nuanced understanding of mental health as an issue that affects individuals' dignity, autonomy, and humanity. This personal connection could encourage policies that prioritize person-centered care, where people are seen as individuals rather than patients.
- Many participants in the assemblage express how recovery initiatives, such as Recovery Colleges, have transformed their lives by empowering them to take control of their mental health, shifting from a medicalized, "patient" role to a more autonomous, holistic approach. This challenges the traditional psychiatric system and presents a case for broader implementation of recovery-oriented practices across Europe. Politicians could be inspired to promote similar initiatives in their own countries or regions, leading to reforms in how mental health care is delivered.
- Assemblage reflects the frustrations many participants have had with conventional psychiatric treatment, where they felt reduced to their diagnoses. By bringing these

voices to politicians, it opens up a conversation about the need for reform in psychiatric care, focusing on more compassionate, inclusive, and person-led approaches. This could lead to a reconsideration of funding, resources, and training for mental health professionals to better support recovery models.

- Mental health is a growing concern across Europe, and there is a need for innovative approaches. The arts assemblage serves as a creative, tangible example of how alternative, community-based programs can successfully complement traditional healthcare systems. By showcasing this to politicians, it can lead to conversations about investing in mental health innovations that emphasize recovery, dignity, and empowerment, and about developing funding structures that support these types of initiatives.

By presenting the arts assemblage, you not only initiate a conversation about the present state of mental health care but also spark critical reflection on how Europe can embrace more humane, inclusive, and innovative approaches that truly serve the well-being of its citizens.

## References

Hayes, D., Henderson, C., Bakolis, I., Lawrence, V., Elliott, R. A., Ronaldson, A., ... & Slade, M. (2022). Recovery Colleges Characterisation and Testing in England (RECOLLECT): rationale and protocol. *BMC psychiatry*, 22(1), 627.

Patricia Leavy (2015). *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.