

**Age of Creativity Conference 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2019**

## **Ageing across the life course**

### **A call for an Arts Perspective**

**Information for delegates**

**Art, activism and ageing.**



## Background

Although there has been a move in recent years to consider the part that Art may play with regard to ageing it has almost exclusively been to focus upon older people or intergenerational programmes, (often for the enjoyment/benefit of older people). The issues have been around, celebrating age through the arts, the “benefits of art” – taking up art activities or empowering folks or giving agency to people of age or assisting with quality of life – e.g. art in care homes, focusing upon living with dementia.

This is of course valuable and worthwhile but it doesn’t change the status quo.

We currently developing a programme of activity to explore, provoke and challenge the arts to consider ageing across the life course.

## Purpose

We need as many strategies as possible to challenge and change our thinking about the implications of an ageing society, and in particular our own attitudes to our own ageing. Art activism and creative social action can contribute when it focuses on drawing attention to our inherent ageist tendencies and implicit fear of personal ageing; an outcome which is inextricably tied up with the “othering” or objectifying of older people! Creative social action can provide the jolt to our inner mindsets, disrupt the status quo and liberate us to aspire to become the older people of the future!

Art can be an agent of social change. *“the ability of aesthetic experience to transform our perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions.”*<sup>1</sup> Activist art is a term used to describe art that is grounded in the act of ‘doing’ and addresses political or social issues. (Tate, 2017)

**“Art offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery....The arts offer opportunity for perspective, for perceiving alternative ways of transcending and of being in the world.”**<sup>2</sup>

## Impact of Demographic Change

We are experiencing massive demographic changes across the globe; our societies are ageing however there is little public focus on the implications upon our lives other than simply noting that people are living longer and to highlight the problems of there being more older people. This is not the sort of deep analysis or debate that we need to be having. We aren’t focusing upon the impact of an ageing society across the life course, for example, or the fact that one in three of today’s babies are likely to live to see their 100th birthday. Should there not be much more consideration of how that could affect how we think about our life trajectory, our attitudes to the outer world as well as our inner world?

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<sup>1</sup> Kester G. One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context 2011

<sup>2</sup> Greene, M. (1995). Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change. the Jossey-Bass Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

## Challenging Ageism

Above all we need to challenge ageism. Although there's considerable activity raising this issue within the "age sector" we could do more to challenge ageist mind sets. In particular we should look to ourselves, changing our attitudes to our own ageing not simply focus upon "other" older people. We create 'otherness' in older people by our perceptions of 'later life'. Recent analysis by the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows that negative or ageist attitudes towards older people are widespread. They negatively affect older people's physical and mental health. The lowest levels of respect were reported in high income countries. "This analysis confirms that ageism is extremely common. Yet most people are completely unaware of the subconscious stereotypes they hold about older people," said John Beard, WHO Director of Ageing and Life Course. (World Health Organization, 2017)<sup>3</sup> "Like sexism and racism, changing social norms is possible. It is time to stop defining people by their age. It will result in more prosperous, equitable and healthier societies."

Ageism doesn't only operate at the political level; it has a profound impact on the personal level as well. As Robertson (2014, p44)<sup>4</sup> notes "We must not underestimate the seriousness of these negative ageist beliefs. Indeed, they can have a life-threatening impact. A piece of groundbreaking research published in 2002 by Becca Levy in America revealed a strong causal link between the negative attitudes that people held towards their own ageing process and their subsequently reduced lifespan. The research showed unequivocally that: - "those with a negative outlook towards their own ageing died, on average, 7.5 years earlier than other people with a more positive view".

It is important to note that age stereotyping starts at a very young age and is reinforced across the lifespan. Robertson (Robertson, 2017)<sup>5</sup> notes that "Research suggests that internalization starts at a very young age; children as young as 6 years can display awareness of old age stereotypes. Not only are children aware of the concept of 'older', they show a common distaste for the idea. When asked how they would feel about becoming an older person, 60% of children studied gave responses that were rated negatively (e.g. 'I would feel awful') (Burke, 1981–1982; Seefeldt et al., 1977). From this early start, implicit age stereotyping tends to be strengthened over the rest of the life course by repetitive exposure."

## Re-framing Ageism

Change however is possible. There is well evidenced research emerging which provides some pointers as to how ageist messages can be re-framed. Eight of America's leading ageing-focused organizations recently commissioned research on how to create a better public understanding of older adults' needs and contributions to society — and subsequently to improve the lives of all people as they age. The resulting report (The Frameworks Institute, 2017)<sup>6</sup> "Reframing the issue requires disrupting the 'othering' of older

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<sup>3</sup> 3 World Health Organization (2016). Discrimination and negative attitudes about ageing are bad for your health. [online] Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2016/discrimination-ageing-youth/en/> [Accessed 2017].

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, G. (2014). How to age positively: a handbook for personal development in later life. p.44.

<sup>5</sup> Robertson, G. (2017). Ageing and ageism: the impact of stereotypical attitudes on personal health and well-being outcomes and possible personal compensation strategies. *Self & Society*, 45, pp.149-159.

<sup>6</sup> The FrameWorks Institute (2017). Finding the Frame; an empirical approach to reframing aging and ageism. [online] Available at: [http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/aging\\_elder\\_abuse/aging\\_research\\_report\\_final\\_2017.pdf](http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/aging_elder_abuse/aging_research_report_final_2017.pdf) [Accessed 2017].

people and sending the message that older age, like any other time in life, involves both challenges and opportunities. Why? Our research shows that negative assumptions about aging held by the public lead them to disassociate themselves from aging and take the fatalistic stance that nothing can be done to improve aging outcomes.”

### **The use of a life course approach in breaking free from negative attitudes towards ageing**

Written by Hannah McDowall for the Centre for Policy on Ageing.

#### **What is a life course approach?**

When a person's situation is made sense of in relation to the experiences of the life they have lived and the possibilities of the life ahead of them. The term **life course approach** most often shows up as a research methodology, as a means of understanding or tracing back the causes of the range or differences experienced in later life. For example the retirement transition; some may experience this as very positive, if they have a well developed social network, sufficient income and a developed sense of purpose, whereas others may not, if they are anxious about loss of income, have a limited social circle and their sense of purpose is primarily formed around work. A life course approach would interpret these differences through looking at the life already lived (different opportunities in earlier life, different social choices, family construction etc etc) and it would look into the future to explore how the journey thus far might inform what is to come. Another example is the use of a life course approach to understand health inequalities in later life, E.g. diet and exercise throughout life as an indicator of health outcomes later in life.

The most ambitious use of a life course approach is the one explored by Alan Walker (2018, Journal of Soc Pol, vol 47, 2, 253–273) who asserts that in order for the significant issues of an ageing society to be truly addressed, UK social policy needs to be re-framed using a life course approach. He argues that only this radical approach will enliven a truly preventative approach to health and wellbeing i.e. by supporting people in X way early life then we will prevent or delay Y outcome in later life. The current framework in which ‘age group specialism’s shape the social policy landscape and parts of the arts funding landscape makes sense in many ways but leaves a preventative and all-age agenda flailing. A vacuum where a strategic focus on ageing across the life course should be enabling us to act on the things in early life which enable us to age well in the years far beyond.

#### **Why is CPA interested in a life course approach?**

Whilst CPA has always held a life course perspective on ageing, over the last year we have been especially provoked to explore how a life course approach might address persistent negative attitudes towards ageing.

In 2015 CPA became grantees of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation as part of their Transitions in Later Life programme. The focus was the development of therapeutic emotional resilience building interventions at the retirement transition to prevent loneliness

and isolation later down the line. Whilst this programme was framed within a *life transitions* approach it is also consistent with a life course approach (if we intervene at this early stage we will prevent something else at a later stage).

We were keen to give it a go but wondered if the focus on preventing loneliness away off down the path was somewhat unambitious. If we might enter into a space of deep appreciation of the life lived and openness to future possibilities what might happen right now? Might we start reaping benefits right away?

The course we designed to support pre-retirees aimed to have an immediate positive impact. And so it did. We tasted the potential of a life course intervention to open up new possibilities, beyond the existing expectations of the participants. And I say 'tasted' because alongside this honey, we also experienced how internalised ageism; the conscious and unconscious limited expectations of what might be possible at this life stage governed what pre-retirees allowed themselves to dream into.

And we weren't alone, the seven other grantees of the TILL programme running similar pre-retirement interventions elsewhere in the UK and Ireland were coming up against the same thing. For each of us, exposing and unravelling these attitudinal barriers became a major 'job' of the courses we offered. We all wondered. What if people had been given the chance at multiple points across their life course, to reflect on how the dynamic nature of ageing was affected their identity, including the influence of cultural stereotypes and expectations from family and friends? What kind of a different place we would be in by the time we reached retirement, or any other life transition for that matter?

Age is a protected characteristic. But ageism is a minority oppression unlike the oppressions we would usually associate with identity politics (e.g. gender, race, class, disability etc) as this is an identity which changes throughout our lives. Ageism is an 'ism' against an identity we once held or will hold in the future should we be lucky enough to live a long life. The hunch we hold is that a life course approach might itself be a way of cracking this open to make conscious this ageism and how the age group specialism of social policy colludes in its perpetuation, pitting one group against another.

Our question now is whether a life course approach might totally re-frame our negative attitudes towards ageing.

Artist expression is an exciting medium to do that within because it has the potential to pull these scattered thoughts out of the conceptual and into the imaginable.

### **Imagining a culture in which our attitude towards ageing was positive**

One social policy framework we have found useful as a parallel example to help us imagine what embracing a life course framework might feel like is that of the trajectory of feminism

within International Development. This trajectory is described as the shift from WID (Women in Development) to GAD (Gender and Development). Across of WID to GAD discussion exists in the International Development literature, the vast majority of which goes beyond what is useful for comparison here, but a top level appreciation is illuminating when thinking of how a life course approach may shift attitudes towards aging. (I recommend Pearson R. Rethinking Gender Matters, in Allan T and Thomas A, *Poverty and Development into the 21st Century*, 2000, Oxford University Press). The emergence of the WID perspective in the early 1970s, stimulated by women's movements in the global north, asserted the need for women (who are subordinates and excluded from many opportunities) to have equal rights and labour opportunities to men, that through better education and positive discrimination the established expectations of women and their labour might be undone resulting in a better lives for women in the developing world.

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach focuses on the dynamic nature of the relationship between men and women as it is socially constructed. GAD is a jump on from WID, because it moves beyond a cocooned discussion of the marginalisation and subordination of women and instead examines the lives of men and women within broader systems of gender relations. GAD challenged the WID focus on women as an important 'target group' and 'untapped resources' for economic development. With GAD there came a new way of thinking; that both men and women are *socially constructed*. And, that it is the social activities which define (and are defined by) them which powerfully perpetuate their gendered experiences and identities.

May we be in a similar position now with respect to our own social construction of 'age' and 'ageing'? There is persistent evidence of the negative attitudes we hold towards ageing as a nation (see **The Perennials** reference below) which formulated around a story of linear decline. Our 'ageing' organisations are concerned with the imminent 'threat' of an ageing society. By which they mean a growth in the proportion of people over the age of 50. The focus of policy and practice on 'older people' (akin to women in a WID approach) limits our ability to see how our identities and attitudes are socially constructed. How the limits suggested on us at different ages from the outside and the limits we put on ourselves because of our 'age' aren't objectively real they are part of a social story.

A Life Course approach might take us out of that stuck 'older people are a problem' story to something akin to a GAD perspective where the dynamics of attitudes towards ageing might be understood, challenged and celebrated across the full length of the life course.

## Links to related articles, reports and videos

**1. It's time to talk about ageing** A guest blog from Professor Alan Walker, Professor of Social Policy & Social Gerontology at The University of Sheffield, on how the creation of a social policy for ageing could lead to a better later life for all.

<https://ageukblog.org.uk/2018/05/31/its-time-to-talk-about-ageing/> Alan Walker CBE, FBA, FAcSS Professor of Social Policy & Social Gerontology,

**2. Why Ageism Never Gets Old** The prejudice is an ancient habit, but new forces-silicon valley, Hollywood and beyond-have restored its youthful vitality. By Tad Friend. New Yorker November 2017 Issue. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/11/20/why-ageism-never-gets-old>

**3. Millennials Show Us What 'Old' Looks Like** | Disrupt Aging | AARP We posed that question to millennials and asked them to show us what "old" looks like. Then we introduced them to some real "old" people. Watch what happens when folks let go of their outdated beliefs and embrace the idea that aging is not about decline - it's about growth. Learn more about our efforts to #DisruptAging : <http://www.disruptaging.aarp>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYdNjrUs4NM>

**4. Let's End Ageism** Ted talk by Ashton Applewhite 2017 It's not the passage of time that makes it so hard to get older. It's ageism, a prejudice that pits us against our future selves -- and each other. Ashton Applewhite urges us to dismantle the dread and mobilize against the last socially acceptable prejudice. "Aging is not a problem to be fixed or a disease to be cured," she says. "It is a natural, powerful, lifelong process that unites us all."  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/ashton\\_applewhite\\_let\\_s\\_end\\_ageism](https://www.ted.com/talks/ashton_applewhite_let_s_end_ageism)

## **5. The Royal Society for Public Health & Gulbenkian new report! That Old Age Question.**

A reA report published by RSPH in partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation has revealed the extent of ageist attitudes across the UK, and how they harm the health and wellbeing of everyone in society as we grow older. RSPH is calling for action to tackle intergenerational isolation, end the stigmatisation of older people, and undo the media clichés that keep ageism alive and well. RSPH evaluated ageist attitudes across 12 main areas of life, finding that the public are most ageist about memory loss, appearance, and participation in activities (both physical and community).

The report highlights the extent to which old age is viewed by many as a period of decline and ordeal, and calls on stakeholders in the media, government, voluntary sector, and schools to take action to reframe the way our nation views ageing in a more positive light. Key findings of the report include:

- \* Ageist views are held across the generations, but are most prevalent among millennials (aged 18-34), who have by far the most negative attitudes to ageing of all the age groups
- \* Almost a third of the public (30%) believe "being lonely is just something that happens when people get old", while a quarter (25%) of 18-34 year olds believe it is "normal" for older people to be unhappy and depressed
- \* Two in five 18-24 year olds (40%) believe there is no way to escape dementia as you age

<https://www.rsph.org.uk/about-us/news/a-quarter-of-millennials-believe-depression-normal-in-older-age.html>  
<https://www.rsph.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/010d3159-0d364707-ae54e29047c8e3a.pdf>

## **6. The Future of Ageing**

Published 7 July 2016 From: Government Office for Science

The Foresight report looking at the challenges and opportunities of an ageing society. This report brings together evidence about today's older population, with future trends and projections, to identify the implications for the UK. This evidence will help government to develop the policies needed to adapt to an ageing population.

"Factors throughout an individual's lifetime affect how they age. To improve outcomes for people as they age – whether in skills, health, employability, housing and assets to fund retirement – requires interventions from an early age, and an understanding of the impact of policies through the life course."

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/535187/gs-16-10-future-of-an-ageing-population.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/535187/gs-16-10-future-of-an-ageing-population.pdf)

7. **'The Perennials'**, Ipsos MORI's global study carried out in partnership with the Centre for Ageing Better, finds Britons are "overwhelmingly negative" about growing older and that just three in ten (30%) UK adults say they are looking forward to later life. Half (50%) say they worry about getting old.

<https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/news/ipsos-mori-ageing-perennials>

8. **A global campaign to combat ageism:** Bulletin of the World Health Organization 2018;96:299-300. doi: <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/96/4/17-202424/en/>

To be effective, the global campaign to combat ageism must tackle individual and social attitudes, stereotypes and behaviours towards people on the basis of their age, as well as the laws, policies and institutions that either perpetuate ageism or do little to stop it.

The global campaign to combat ageism will provide a platform to change attitudes towards age and ageing and to work together to build a world inclusive of all ages. These changes are essential to ensure health and wellbeing across the life course and will only be possible through concerted, evidence-based action.