

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: <i>Misbehaving Bodies</i> : encouraging collaborative awareness of health diversity at the Wellcome Trust		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Sept 2017-December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Oreet Ashery	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor of Fine Art	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Sept 2017-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 30 May 2018-31 July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p><i>Misbehaving Bodies</i> was an exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, sited in the Wellcome Trust (the UK's largest charity), that brought together Ashery's social practice artwork with that of iconic feminist artist Jo Spence. The exhibition challenged audiences and Wellcome staff to feel and think differently about health and encouraged the acceptance of illness as a part of life.</p> <p>Ashery's collaborative development – together with curators at the Wellcome – of the exhibition, its design, and an innovative public programme inspired the Wellcome to work in newly collaborative ways with contemporary artists, influencing the Collection's professional practice to embrace artists' framing of difficult social issues. It spurred the Wellcome to think about health diversity in new ways and made senior staff more aware of the need to take care of their own and their team members' health.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Ashery's socially engaged art practice involves working with individuals, groups and communities to promote self-knowledge and encourage minor narratives, resulting in biopolitical fictions. Prior to arriving at the Ruskin, Oreet Ashery's artworks <i>Revisiting Genesis</i> (2016) and <i>No-Nothing Collaborative Storytelling in the Dark</i> (2017 onwards) questioned how generative storytelling within 'safe spaces' might create powerful moments of social agency. Her reputation for publicly addressing illness and death was recognised by her receipt of the 2017 Jarman Award.</p> <p>Ashery was invited, shortly after arriving at the Ruskin, to exhibit at the Wellcome Collection (R1), in dialogue with a key figure in the history of feminist art, Jo Spence, who died of breast cancer and documented her illness through her art. For the exhibition, which included a commission from the Collection of GBP45,000, Ashery produced a new film, <i>Dying Under Your Eyes</i> (R2), that documents her personal process of accepting her own father's illness and death, including an artistic collaboration with his palliative care nurse. Like <i>Revisiting Genesis</i>, this newer film explores the sociopolitical, practical and emotional implications of the processes surrounding death and dying in the digital age. It seeks new ways to represent illness and death, attempting to break down binaries of health and sickness, and actively, through artistic practice, asking how one might make the 'abject body' visible in our present era, which places so much emphasis on wellness.</p> <p>Ashery also created a specific, intimate installation to house her and Spence's works, including 'soft architecture' and immersive seating, allowing a safe space for contemplation of difficult</p>		

issues. This design – enabled through unique collaborations with Wellcome staff and Kohn Architects – rethinks Michel Foucault’s influential concept of heterotopia, transformative ‘other’ spaces, which reflect and upset dominant structures. Ashery staged a Long Table in the centre of the exhibition – a flexible performance space – where workshops and social practice discussions were held (R3), spurring the engagement of audience members with the exhibition’s subject matter, and inviting a sharing of their own lived experiences with illness and health around topics like ‘self-care and survivance’. Finally, Ashery co-created with freelance curator Persilla Caton a series of performative public conversations that explored the exhibition’s themes of death and dying in the digital age (R4). An artistic monograph made possible through the support of the Arts Council England among others (total GBP20,000) was published by Mousse Press to disseminate Ashery’s research (R5).

Misbehaving Bodies, the resulting exhibition at the Wellcome, which aimed to effect change by bringing illness and death into open public discourse, was honoured with a Turner Bursary in 2020. An exploration of chronic illness, *Misbehaving Bodies* marked a further step for the Wellcome into the contemporary art space. Shortly after opening it was reviewed widely including in *The Guardian*, *art-agenda*, and *Architectural Digest*.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 [Exhibition] Rodriguez-Munoz, B., and Vasey, G., (2019), *Jo Spence and Oreet Ashery: Misbehaving Bodies*, Wellcome Collection, London. 30 May 2019 – 26 January 2020. Highlights available at https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/XFHHSUAAAU_pE70

R2 [Digital or Visual Media, available on request] Ashery, O., (2019), *Dying Under Your Eyes*, Wellcome Collection, London until January 2020. Newly commissioned for the Wellcome, Ashery’s work explores, from a personal perspective, the aging, illness and death of the artist’s father.

R3 [Other- live panel response, transcription available on request] Ashery, O., Jones, H.C., Millis, A., Playford, V., Rage, R., Warr, J., Weaver., L and Zamman, R., (2019), *Long Table Discussion on Care and Survivance*, 31 October 2019. A social practice artwork centred on self and collective care.

R4 [Other - live panel response, transcription available on request] Ashery, O., Giaxoglou, K., Kasket, E., and Sampson, A., (2019), *Death, Dying and Digital*, 7 November 2019. A social practice artwork about digital death co-created with Persilla Caton.

R5 [Book, listed in REF2] Ashery, O., and Vasey, G., (eds.), (2019), *How We Die is How We Live Only More So*, Mousse Publishing, London. (ISBN: 9788867493919)

Award: Turner Prize Jury, (2020), *Turner Bursary*.

In lieu of the cancelled Turner Prize, the jury selected Ashery as a recipient of 1 of the 10 bursaries awarded for the significance of their contribution in British Contemporary Art. Ashery was selected for her contribution to *Misbehaving Bodies*.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Challenged Wellcome visitors to confront the social complexities associated with illness and death

Misbehaving Bodies (*Timeout*: ‘absolutely what the Wellcome Collection should be spending its money on. When compared to the sterile, bleached world of medicine – and the sugary pink of cancer charities and “women’s health” – this strange, messy, flawed, incomplete, artistic, female take on sickness is more than welcome’); *The Guardian*: ‘an invigorating – if ultimately heartbreaking – experience’) (E1) has prompted a large and diverse cross-section of the public interested in contemporary culture and science – as well as audiences who experience illness – to confront the social complexity of illness and death and to rethink the social dimension of fundamental aspects of existence that are often regarded as private. Former Wellcome Collection Curator (Curator 1): ‘The Wellcome Collection is a free venue situated next to University College Hospital and, as such, receives many audiences who have visited the

oncology wards and waiting on loved-ones who may be using the Wellcome as a respite space'. (E2)

Misbehaving Bodies was visited by an average of 809 people a day: 166,560 in total (E3). Curator 1: 'It's exceeded our expectations with regards to footfall' (E4); 'a significant number for an exhibition dealing with such political work' (E2); indeed, the first four months of *Misbehaving Bodies* were the most successful ever at the Wellcome, with over 57,000 visitors in September 2019, up 40% from September 2018 and 55% from September 2017. The exhibition was extended beyond initial planning to an eight-month run, the longest ever for a contemporary art exhibition at the Wellcome Collection.

A Wellcome Curator (Curator 2) observed: 'Something very impactful happens when people encounter this work... when the private and public merge: it makes audiences confront their own vulnerabilities'. (E5) Visitor Experience Assistant (VEA) 1 comments: 'The visitors I spoke to felt the exhibition stirred something in them, an awareness of death. For me, the exhibition was an encouragement to live'. (E6) Another, (VEA 2) noted that audience members shared a sense of solidarity around some quite personal experiences. 'They seemed to feel that this was an acceptable space to feel vulnerable'. (E7) Curator 1: '*Misbehaving Bodies* was a gallery as a community space, to congregate and ask questions about how to grieve and value vulnerability publicly' (E2).

At the exhibition's exit, Ashery explicitly invited audiences to reflect on the question 'Do you consider yourself healthy?' and to deposit their responses; hundreds were received. Wellcome Curator 1: 'I'm struck by how few of the respondents – of all ages – consider themselves "one hundred per cent" healthy. Themes addressed include mental and physical health, exercise, friendship, diet, disability, feelings of self worth, chronic pain and terminal illness'. (E2) Many responses questioned the binary of 'healthy/ ill', and evinced resilience: 'My health isn't perfect ... Seeing an exhibition of people who will soon die makes me realise how healthy I am'. 'We are so complex, can all of us be healthy all of the time? Thank you for making me think about my body.' 'Am I healthy? Am I not healthy? I am neither. I am alive'. (E8)

Participants in Ashery's Long Table social artwork described feeling free to express themselves: 'there aren't many spaces like this'; 'this has somehow become a safe space for me' and shared difficult personal experiences of loneliness due to ill health, as well as positive ones around care for self and others: 'you're taking care of yourself [when you] take care of your community, and I think we do that in sharing personal difficulties, so thank you'. (E9) Another participant observed: '...chronic illness can be extremely performative, the way we present ourselves as disabled people... it helped me root myself in the art world... it was extremely refreshing to me [as] that's all I'm looking for'. (E10) Another lauded the discussions' removal of the taboo of death and has since used *Dying Under Your Eyes* as an educational resource for Health & Social Care practitioners at the Open University. (E11)

Changed the Wellcome Collection's long term approach to exhibition planning and encouraged new ways for staff think about health diversity

Misbehaving Bodies also encouraged the Wellcome to work in newly collaborative ways with contemporary artists so that they might play an increasingly important role in open debates about public health. Curators and policy-makers at the Collection have been emboldened by new experiments with Ashery to involve artists in future exhibition-making in ways they have not done in the past – enabling lasting and growing impact into the future. Curator 1 asserts that it was 'crucial that the exhibition foregrounded the voice of the artist, creating a space for the public to reflect on how they think and feel about healthcare themselves'. (E2) Curator 2: 'This collaboration with Oreet gives the Wellcome team confidence and pride in working with contemporary artists – something that has not always come naturally in our institution'. (E5) Similarly, the Wellcome Head of Live Programme observed that the conversations 'can be quite taboo... [together with Oreet], the live programme was always conceived to be about depth of engagement, so that people had truly meaningful opportunities to share... something that we don't often do in exhibitions programming'. (E12)

The exhibition was a first for the Wellcome in two ways: Ashery was the first artist to co-design the exhibition, and she was the first to co-design the public programme. Positive experiences have encouraged curators at the Collection to repeat the model. Curator 1: 'Viewers did not enter a neutral white cube environment but rather a space defined by the artists' personalities. . . this was very much *their* space. . . we wanted people to feel immersed in the work and not on the outside looking in . . . a place where people felt like they were being "hugged"'. (E2) Curator 2: 'It was unique to include the artist as part of the design team, and it was a leap of imagination for us. If an architectural firm had designed the show, perhaps it wouldn't have felt like the "safe space" that Oreet created'. (E5) They are now thinking about involving an artist in their next process. The Head of Live Programme agreed that Oreet's artist-led public programme was '...a departure from how we usually work... good practice... has evolved as part of this, that we can learn from and continue to develop in the rest of what we do'. (E12)

Working collaboratively and creatively with Ashery also allowed curators of the Collection to tackle emotionally and socially difficult work which they might not otherwise have embraced. Curator 2: 'We've learnt a lot as an institution, going forward, about giving space to an artist, about giving them the freedom to experiment around socially sensitive topics'. (E5) Wellcome Head of Live Programme: 'It felt really important, the agility and flexibility to mould how we programme with [Oreet] based on where her ideas are taking her, and that's... an approach we'd like to continue.' (E12) Curator 2 continues: 'The curatorial team had concerns about the fact that Jo Spence publicly refused chemotherapy... which confronts Wellcome Trust science. Oreet's intergenerational response allowed a framework through which to present a variety of points of view.' (E5)

Due to Ashery's sustained artistic engagement with questions around illness and health, death and life, and because of her dialogue about self-care –both private and public– *Misbehaving Bodies* spurred the Wellcome to think about health diversity in new ways. Senior staff charged with shaping the direction of the Trust's public programme noted *Misbehaving Bodies*'s profound impact on their thinking about health. Curator 1: '[Oreet's] work feeds into a pressing conversation about who the institution is for, who it represents... intellectually who we are'. (E4) Curator 2: 'The concept of diversity in art institutions is normally thought about in terms of gender, race and access, but not health diversity. Our internal curatorial conversations about Oreet's show have influenced the direction we are marching towards'. (E5) The Head of Live Programme asserted, '[*Misbehaving Bodies*] has taken that ambition for us to think about lived experience... [and to] move away from an overtly medicalised understanding of health to a social model of health... [It] was a huge building block in how we newly position ourselves, in terms of how we talk about healthcare, how we talk about health diversity, how we talk about individuals within healthcare systems and what we understand by "health"'. (E12)

Fostered a new understanding and approach for the Wellcome Collection, as a public organisation, to support its own staff

Because *Misbehaving Bodies* addressed sensitivities around health, illness and care, emphasising lived experiences, the Wellcome implemented innovative methods for caring for staff. Curator 2 noted: 'Being in conversation with Oreet and her work taught me a lot about the responsibilities we have as a public organisation to look after people'. Curator 1: 'A budget was allocated for a programme of wellbeing during the project. . . Early on during my involvement we invited the cancer charity Maggie's to act as consultants on the project . . . Maggie's undertook a series of workshops with Wellcome Collection staff and became sounding boards throughout the project... a clinical psychologist from the Oncology Care Team at UCLH, was brought in to lead a wellbeing workshop for staff and various stakeholders. [She] talked about her experience of working with people recently diagnosed with cancer who were undergoing treatment and proposed a series of self-care techniques'. (E2)

The Exhibitions Project Manager and Freelance Consultant commented: '[We] wanted to prepare our visitor experience team to feel as though they could cope with any difficult

conversations that might come up... The need for support has [since] been really high on our exhibitions team agenda'. (E13) The VEA team was prepared with conversations about how to cope with the emotional impact of the exhibition on visitors. They received formal training from the Samaritans emphasising listening skills. Curator 1 attests that 'there was feedback from colleagues that [these sessions] were valuable in creating an environment in the institution and a space outside of the delivery schedule for discussion and to air concerns. This often invisible work – caring for stakeholders and colleagues – needs capacity, time and money. Co-curating this exhibition has highlighted the need for these processes to be embedded at the outset on all projects at all institutions. . . the support opened up a safe space for people to talk on the subject'. (E2). The VEA team was also given opportunities to reflect, in informal 'tea and biscuits' group sessions inspired by Ashery's social practice, on their experiences with the work, in order to emotionally digest what they had found difficult. (E6)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- E1. Press coverage of the exhibition:
- Confirms *TimeOut* review of the exhibition (no publication date)
<https://www.timeout.com/london/art/jo-spence-and-oreet-ashery-misbehaving-bodies-review>
 - *The Guardian* review of the exhibition (31/5/19)
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/31/misbehaving-bodies-review-jo-spence-oreet-ashery-welcome>
- E2. Article authored by Curator 1, 'Misbehaving Bodies: exhibiting illness', *Curating Medicine* (Issue 14) *Science Museum Group Journal* (15 Dec 2020). DOI: [10.15180/201402](https://doi.org/10.15180/201402)
- E3. Email from the Exhibitions Project Manager at Wellcome Trust verifying statistics (16/07/2020)
- E4. Audio recording of interview with a former Wellcome Collection curator (Curator 1). (10/9/2019) [available on request]
- E5. Signed letter from a Curator (Curator 2) at the *Wellcome* Collection (1/11/2020)
- E6. Audio recording of interview from Visitor Experience Assistant 1 (3/7/2020) [available on request]
- E7. Statement from Visitor Experience Assistant 2 (2/12/2020)
- E8. Collated responses from the exhibitions 'Do you consider yourself healthy?' open forum (30/5/2019-26/1/20)
- E9. Collated responses from the exhibitions Long Table event on care and survivance (31/10/2019)
- E10. Email from a Central Saint Martin's student; participant in Long Table discussion (29/11/2020)
- E11. Email statement from the Lecturer in English Language and Applied Linguistics and Associate Head of Curriculum & Quality at the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University; participant in Long Table discussion (27/11/2020)
- E12. Audio recording of interview with the Head of Live Programme at Wellcome Collection (28/2/2020) [available on request]
- E13. Signed letter from the Exhibitions Project Manager at Wellcome Trust (10/11/2020)