


# Art-Based Learning in the last stage of life: An exploratory study on how cancer patients create meaning in relation to artworks

*Palliative Medicine*  
2023, Vol. 37(8) 1280–1282  
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DOI: 10.1177/02692163231180655  
journals.sagepub.com/home/pmj



Silvia Russel<sup>1,2</sup> , Gerben Westerhof<sup>3</sup>, Michael Scherer-Rath<sup>4</sup>,  
Fabiola Camuti<sup>5</sup>, Sabrina Kamstra<sup>6</sup>, Zarah M Bood<sup>1,2</sup>, Niels van Poecke<sup>1,2</sup>,  
Jeroen Lutters<sup>5</sup> and Hanneke WM van Laarhoven<sup>1,2</sup> 

## Background

A diagnosis of advanced cancer can be described as an *unexpected disruption of someone's life story*, an experience of *contingency*.<sup>1</sup> To address an experience of contingency, a new sense of direction and coherence in life needs to be found. One's story of life needs to be rewritten, which requires creative thinking. This process may be supported by a specific art-perception method: Art-Based Learning. Art-Based Learning is a step-wise process of observing an artwork, creating a new narrative related to this artwork, and connecting this narrative to the personal situation.<sup>2</sup> Art-Based Learning is designed to stimulate creative thinking through four steps: 1. Formulation of a personal question. 2. Observation of details of an artwork. 3. Imagination of a story based on the artwork. 4. Sharing the art-perception experience and reflection on the link with the personal question with a fellow participant. We aimed to explore how persons with advanced cancer could benefit from Art-Based Learning to deal with contingency experiences and stimulate meaning-making.

## Methods

To enable patients to view art works, an art-exhibition was curated by three art curators. To increase accessibility for the participating patients, the art-exhibition was located in the hospital where the patients were treated. The exhibition, entitled "Light," consisted of 21 artworks; photos ( $n = 15$ ), paintings ( $n = 2$ ), and prints ( $n = 4$ ) in a mix of landscape, portrait, black/white, colored, and abstract

works. The Art-Based Learning session lasted 1 h and all participating patients were individually guided through all steps by an art-guide. The study was exempted from ethical approval by the Amsterdam University Medical Centre Ethics Board, METC (Date: 03.12.2020, ref. number W20\_089 # 20.116).

Participants with non-curable cancer in a good health condition (WHO 0 or 1) were invited consecutively, after being informed by a member of staff, by telephone by SR (female, social scientist, and more than 10 year experience as a professional performative artist), who explained the purpose and procedures of the study. As a first step, four patients were invited to participate and assess feasibility of the Art-Based Learning approach in within an hour. Next, an additional three patients were invited to participate. From these three patients, extensive data was collected by SR, viz. verbatim transcripts of expressions during Art-Based Learning, field notes on visual behavior, and short (max 10 min) feedback interviews. For participant characteristics, see Table 1.

The collected data was analyzed by SR using both an inductive, as well as a deductive approach. As an inductive approach we chose Holistic Content Analysis (HCA).<sup>3</sup> In HCA, reading and re-reading the data usually results in three to four individual main themes. HCA is particularly suitable for doing justice to patients' stories as a whole. We also used a deductive approach to see how we could describe art-perception relations in Art-Based Learning from a theoretical framework about relating to the world. We found Resonance theory particularly useful as it describes the possibility of a transformation in

<sup>1</sup>Cancer Center Amsterdam, Cancer Treatment and Quality of Life, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Department of Cancer Treatment and Quality of Life, Cancer Center Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology, Health and Technology & Story Lab, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

<sup>5</sup>Department of Art Education as Critical Tactics, ArtEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, The Netherlands

<sup>6</sup>Department of Art Affairs, Amsterdam UMC, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

### Corresponding author:

Hanneke WM van Laarhoven, Department of Medical Oncology, Amsterdam UMC, University of Amsterdam, Meibergdreef 9, Amsterdam AZ 1105, The Netherlands.

Email: h.vanlaarhoven@amsterdamumc.nl

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics and personal quotes.

	Bart	Cornelia	Angelique
Age	76	44	64
Art experience	–	++	+++
Cancer type	Sigmoid	Rectal	Pancreatic
Cancer stage	IV	IV	III
WHO	0	1	0
Contingency experience	“How will the disease progress and what will the approaching end be like?”	“Where is my soul after death and how can I still be connected to my loved ones?”	“What does light mean at this point in my life, and how can I keep it alive?”
Holistic content analysis	God is color and light “...God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.”	Creating color in life “...a life with a lot of color, which I had. And I want to keep and have that now too. . .”	Toward the light “...Because I try to bring light back into everything. . .”
	Preparing for dead and eternal life “...when you see my ailments, you know that it is coming to an end. . . You can pray for that and then wait and see what God decides. . .”	Creating meaning in life “...we are planning. . .a kind of walk-in house. . . it gives me a purpose. . .because. . . I am not going to die at all. I am chronically ill. . .”	Moving away from darkness “...the day before, I dread it. . . and it hits you and you feel that darkness. . .”
	Beauty in life and in eternity “... The richness of colors that there is in all of creation that is so wonderful and beautiful. . .you know it will be beautiful when you die and go to Jesus, more beautiful than you can imagine. . .”	Creating past, present and future “... I also hope that there is something more, because then I can just be there as a soul. . . I dare to trust that that exists. . . because that would make it a whole lot easier. . .”	Beauty and eternity “... the old is actually also a certain form of beauty, but also has transience in it. . .”
Deductive analysis	Contact “... I chose the most colorful work”	Contact “...The artwork selected me. . .”	Contact “I was attracted to the artwork because of the light”
	Active response “... It is food for thought when you see all those colors and then all those memories come up again. . .”	Active response “... Those spatters up there. . . those are my metastases, my peritoneum you know, it was not deliberately. . ., it just came naturally, those thoughts. . .”	Active response “Those bright spots catch my eye, because I think it is also related to my own theme”
	No Transformation “... I leave it like this because I can continue to fantasize a lot more here. . . it is very subjective. . .”	Transformation “... I became aware that, this is my past, this is my present and that is my future. . . I am now aware of that. . .(cries).”	Transformation “Light means warmth, power and courage. . . The light in the middle keeps me standing, it is within yourself, especially now. . . surrounded by darkness (cries)”
Uncontrollability	Uncontrollability	Uncontrollability	
Bart gave a unique and personal interpretation of the artwork, then stopped meaning making, with no transformation	Cornelia gave a unique and personal interpretation of the artwork, leading to a transformation	Angelique gave a unique and personal interpretation of the artwork, leading to a transformation	

the world relation.<sup>4</sup> Resonance theory takes emotions, cognition, and bodily actions into account. Resonance relations are characterized by moments of: (1) Contact (being affected by something in the world), (2) an active response, (3) Adaptive Transformation (emergence of a new personal perspective), and (4) Uncontrollability (the resonant relation may or may not occur and the type of transformation is unpredictable). In Resonance

Theory, art relations are described as resonant relations par excellence.

### Findings

All patients were found to be able to create a personal narrative within the projected time frame and indicated that this was meaningful for them.

Using Holistic Content Analysis we identified three individual themes for each of the participants, as indicated in Table 1 and illustrated with quotes. These themes were found to relate to the participants' experiences of contingency as formulated in their personal question. In the art-perception processes, we were also able to identify all four resonance characteristics: contact, active response, transformation, and uncontrollability (cf. Table 1 for illustrating quotes).

## Discussion and conclusion

This is the first study which indicated that Art-Based Learning can facilitate cancer patients in the palliative phase to express an experience of contingency and to create new meaning in relation to an artwork. This could be achieved within a 1 h session, underscoring the feasibility of this approach in a palliative care context. Future research with larger groups of patients should indicate whether the Art-Based Learning approach provides long term benefit for patients in terms of meaning making. Specific research questions include the influence of the specific theme and artworks chosen for the exhibition, the effect of providing multiple sessions to patients rather than one, and the potential of a digital exhibition with a digital home-based Art-Based Learning session. As such, Art-Based Learning has potential to support meaning making in patients with advanced cancer.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was financially supported by the Regieorgaan SIAKIEM-hbo (grant number KIEM.VRIJ.04.134).

## ORCID iDs

Silvia Russel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7375-5872>

Hanneke WM van Laarhoven  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3546-9709>

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