

The 7th International Symposium for the Arts in Palliative Care

Encountering the arts in life, death and grief

Friday 20th November 2026

#StColumbasArts # PalliativeArts



Abstracts

(Update 5th October 2026)

Please note that the symposium programme and abstracts below are subject to minor changes. The final booklet with the abstracts, including the poster abstracts, will be published nearer to the Symposium date.

Bringing death back into life – how engagement with the arts nurtures dialogue about existential themes

Wolfgang Schmid, Jill Halstead, Christiaan Rhodius & Lin Stafne-Pfisterer

This panel explores how engagement with arts across hospice, community, and museum settings in Norway can help bring conversations about life and death back into everyday life. Using storytelling as its core approach, the interdisciplinary panel brings together perspectives from end-of-life care and education, curatorial practice, and music therapy, to discuss how the arts can open spaces for reflection, connection, and meaning-making. Drawing on exhibitions such as *Modern Gothic* and *Don't Be Afraid!* at the National Museum in Oslo, Lin shares stories about how audiences engage creatively and critically with themes of death and vulnerability. Christiaan shares insights from the programme *Explore Life and Death with Munch* at the Munch Museum, where encounters with art prompt participants to reflect on their own experiences of mortality. Jill and Wolfgang present their audiovisual essay *Last(ing) Music – An Essay on Music Therapy at the End of Life*, telling the story of Kari and how a meaningful song supported relationships, memory, and identity as she approached death. Through these diverse narratives, the panel shows how intimate encounters with the arts can create safe spaces for dialogue, learning and ethical reflection, encouraging more open conversations about the existential questions we share.

Wolfgang Schmid is Professor of Music Therapy and Head of Research and Deputy Leader of the Grieg Academy, University of Bergen. In his practice-based research, he critically examines how individuals and communities use music to care for themselves and others when facing terminal illness, loss and bereavement. He integrates qualitative inquiry, artistic research and autoethnography to co-develop questions and insights with the people he encounters. Recent projects include Care for Music, an international ethnography funded by the AHRC (UK), and IMAGINE, a community-engaged, arts-based initiative examining how music-engagement fosters compassionate, relational attitudes to care in societies at large and in health-care education.

Jill Halstead is Professor of Music at the Grieg Academy, University of Bergen, where she leads the Grieg Research School in Interdisciplinary Music Studies, a four-university consortium on Norway's west coast. Her work combines creative practice and research within feminist traditions, examining how musical participation is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. She has led participatory projects with marginalised communities, including older adults, and composes for film and dance theatre addressing ageing, dis/ability, and loss. Recent projects include Social Acoustics and the EU-funded Music4Change initiative (2022–2025), exploring listening as a social and relational practice and advancing sustainability in music.

Christiaan Rhodius is a Dutch medical doctor, specialized in elderly care and palliative medicine. Together with his wife and four children he lives and works in Oslo, Norway. In collaboration with MUNCH (the Munch Museum, Oslo) and the University of Oslo he initiated an experiential learning program, called 'Explore life and death with Munch'. This program helps to unlock 'the secret' of death by engaging with art. <https://blogs.bmj.com/spcare/2023/03/02/how-edvard-munch-helps-unlock-the-secret-of-death/> Christiaan is examiner in the specialist course for palliative care (a two-year course for medical specialists) in the Netherlands. He is the author of the book '*Omdat we leven*' and several articles. His writing and (contributions to) podcasts tend to circle around topics like humanities mortality, 'the palliative paradox' – the importance of connection while having to let go, improvisation, communication and art.

Lin Stafne-Pfisterer, Cand.phil. Art History, University of Oslo and Senior Curator Learning at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, Norway, where she has been since 2013. Curating exhibitions and mediation programs, lectures and research represent main tasks. She is dedicated to exploring audience participation and art encounters in museums. Exhibitions may function as a third solemn, social and experimental space where people meet and interact through perception, participation, reflection and dialogue. Lin will discuss the work on the exhibition "Gothic Modern. From Darkness to Light" at the National Museum in Oslo in 2025, which gave a new understanding of art history and the modernists' view of the Middle Ages in general and Gothic art in particular. The modernists were concerned with existential questions about life and death and the human being as part of nature's life cycle. In Gothic art, they found strong emotional expressions meant to touch the viewer. Emotional images confronted viewers with universal human questions, such as the fear of suffering, hunger, pain, and death, but also forgiveness, love and sex. Around the turn of the 20th century, Arnold Böcklin, Edvard Munch, Marianne Stokes and Käthe Kollwitz, among others, were inspired by older art and existential questions. Drawing on theories of acceleration, resonance, emotional communities and meaning making, Lins work is part of a research project at the National Museum: Art Resonance and existential Experiences. Artists and Audiences as modern Pilgrims.

Everything we love we will lose

YARA + DAVINA

Artist Duo YARA + DAVINA will talk about their recent exhibition Everything We Love We Will Lose, which was commissioned by National Trust Clandon Park and Lightbox Gallery and Museum. This exhibition responded to shared narratives of loss and explored the contemporary and historic art of grieving. Working closely with women who have experienced pregnancy and baby loss, experiences the artists have had themselves, YARA + DAVINA shaped the exhibition through poetry, conversation and the healing power of shared making. The artists drew inspiration from local stories and objects from the Lightbox and Clandon collections, including mourning lace, and ceramic fragments that serve as poetic reminders of breakage, resilience and what it means to be remade.

The exhibition featured newly made artworks, including a tattoo design inspired by considering a contemporary take on wearing grief. A floral tribute collectively made by YARA + DAVINA and local florists represented the tools we use to grieve and support ourselves and each other through loss.

The commission also includes two new epitaph benches, each engraved with participants' reflections on how they wish to be remembered, revealing how we want to live now. The benches will be installed at Lightbox Gallery & Museum and in the garden at Clandon Park.

YARA + DAVINA are a social practice artist duo, who began their job share whilst in the throws of early motherhood. They create ambitious public artworks that respond to site, context and audience. Unfailingly inventive, they use formats from within popular culture to make works which are accessible and playful. From turning manhole covers into WOMAN WHOLE covers to creating football scarves inspiring unity over division, they root their works in the everyday, using a lightness of touch and humour to make works that are both poetic and universal. Recent commissions include Yorkshire Sculpture Park, National Trust, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Somerset House, Old Diorama Art Center with Camden Council, and Policy Lab. Their exhibition Everything We Love We Will Lose at Lightbox Gallery, Woking, co-commissioned by the National Trust explores grief and loss, with a focus on pregnancy loss. <https://www.yaraanddavina.com/>
Studio YARA + DAVINA

Bringing young musicians into a hospice environment: Insights from a school-hospice partnership

Robert Baxter, Bruce Armstrong & Giorgos Tsiris

What can young musicians bring to a hospice environment? How does their musical performance contribute to the musical care and broader organisational wellbeing of the hospice? What is the impact of such work on the young musicians themselves and on their school community? Drawing on the partnership between St Mary's Music School and St Columba's Hospice Care, this presentation will attempt to address these questions. The presentation will be followed by a musical performance by pupils from St Mary's Music School.

Robert Baxter is a regular guest conductor with Scottish Ballet and has conducted productions of Cinderella, Nutcracker, Swan Lake, The Scandal at Mayerling, Dexter, Streetcar Named Desire, Snow Queen, Mary Queen of Scots, Crucible and Starstruck in theatres across the UK and abroad. Graduating as a trumpet player he has performed, recorded and toured with every orchestra in Scotland and many abroad. He conducts regularly for the RSNO and has recorded numerous film sound tracks for Netflix including the soundtrack for Life on Our Planet. He has been Musical Director for diverse groups including Belle and Sebastian, Colours Classical and Celtic Connection concerts. Robert is founder of Kessington Hall, a rehearsal and performance space in Glasgow and is chair of the Scottish Schools Orchestra Trust. He was appointed as Artistic Director for St Mary's Music School in 2024 having previously taught at RCS Junior department and the Music School of Douglas Academy. Upon graduating he was delighted that a brass quintet that he played in worked regularly for the Council for Music in Hospitals. This work led to performances throughout Scotland where he and his colleagues saw first-hand the benefits of live music in these settings.

Dr Bruce Armstrong is a Music Therapist with St Columba's Hospice Care. Following a career in academic Sociology, including research on the history of racism in Scotland, he found his way into the world of support work, counselling, and therapy. Since then, he has worked for over thirty-five years in various health and social care settings, including HIV/AIDS, Sexual Health, Learning Disability, Mental Health, and Palliative and End of Life Care. Throughout this time, he has been involved in community music and asset-based community development work, with a particular interest in ways in which music can enable personal and collective reflection. His role at St Columba's Hospice Care brings together many of these strands of experience.

Professor Giorgos Tsiris is Director of Education, Research and Creative Arts at St Columba's Hospice Care, and Professor of Music Therapy at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK. He has co-led award-winning death education initiatives promoting intergenerational connections through music and the arts.

Visualising care networks in palliative care – who’s missing from the picture?

Puck Hoitinga

Understanding continuity of care in palliative care requires insight into the complex network of healthcare professionals, family members, and organisations involved in a patient’s care. As part of a longitudinal qualitative interview study on continuity of care at the end of life, we developed a simple visual mapping exercise using paper-based pictograms representing care settings, healthcare professionals, patients, and relatives. At the start of each interview, participants are invited to create a visual overview of the people involved in their care and how they relate to one another.

Originally designed as an interview icebreaker and conversation starter, the method proved valuable in its own right. The resulting care-network maps help participants reflect on their care arrangements, reveal who is perceived as central or peripheral, and make changes over time visible across repeated interviews.

In this interactive workshop, participants will learn about the development and use of pictogram-based care-network mapping and will have the opportunity to create and discuss maps themselves. Together, we will explore how simple visual methods can enrich qualitative research, facilitate conversations about continuity of care, and make otherwise invisible aspects of care networks visible.

Puck Hoitinga is a general practice trainee and PhD candidate at Amsterdam University Medical Center, The Netherlands, where she studies continuity of care at the end of life. The first phase of her PhD consists of a longitudinal qualitative interview study with palliative patients and focuses on how they experience the organisation of their care, the relationships they have with healthcare professionals, and how care is coordinated across settings and providers.

Creative encounters with finitude

Zoi Simopoulou

This workshop offers the space to sit with questions that emerge in the face of life’s finitude and to creatively reflect on them. Confrontations with the boundaries and limitations of human existence can break down the perceived coherence and continuity of our personal biographies, bringing up existential and spiritual questions around meaning and belonging.

We will use collage-making as a creative means to attend to the power of the pieces and the life in/of the fragments. This process will facilitate a creative contemplation of such questions by means of working intuitively with images and words by choosing, cutting out, piecing and placing together, and gluing. Participants will be invited to engage in individual collage-making as a means of associating on finitude and share their reflections on the artistic process with the group.

Zoi Simopoulou is a Lecturer in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh and an Art Therapist. She is currently an Honorary Research Fellow at St Columba’s Hospice Care exploring existential-spiritual encounters in palliative care

An embodied encounter with life, death and grief

Sally McRae & Sara Coffey

In this accessible experiential dramatherapy session, we will explore life, death and grief through creative and embodied encounter, we will engage with what can be difficult to name, staying close to experience rather than explanation. We will attend to what emerges in the moment, both individually and in relation to others.

Working in a contained and projective way, there is no expectation of personal disclosure. Instead, we will focus on creative process and what it becomes possible to notice when we meet life, death and grief through the arts.

Open to all symposium participants. No previous arts experience needed.

Sally McRae is the dramatherapist at St Columba's Hospice Care. Her interdisciplinary background includes work in theatre, television, live event production, and the teaching of yoga and meditation, providing a broad foundation for her therapy work. Her research interests centre on the application of dramatherapy in palliative and end-of-life care.

Sara Coffey is a dramatherapist based in London with a specialist interest in palliative and end-of-life care, supporting people affected by terminal or life-limiting conditions and working with grief and loss. She holds roles at North London Hospice and Chai Cancer Care, the Jewish community's national cancer support organisation. She is also a Creative Arts Supervisor and has a small private practice. When not working, she can usually be found doing yoga, at the theatre or dashing around London on her bright pink folding bicycle!

“Love You - Bye”

Georgia Apsion

Starting the conversation. An introduction to using creativity, art and play to talk about death in a way that celebrates life.

I'd always wanted to make a film, so I enrolled on a screen writing course. Advised to write about what I know, I drew on my experiences of caring for elderly parents, and the inevitable family dynamics of who does what.

What started out as me fulfilling a creative ambition, became a personal healing process, showing me how I could feel grief and joy together.

The feedback from the film has surprised, humbled and inspired me: people watch the film and then want to talk about the story, to talk about what they might want, to think about the end of life in a different way, to start the conversations.

This workshop will start with the short film “Love You - Bye” starring actress Annabelle Apsion (Call The Midwife, Shameless, Soldier Soldier) followed by group discussion and an opportunity to share ideas, experiences and get creative. Although this is not a grief support group or a counselling session, there will be an open, group-directed discussion aimed at breaking the taboo surrounding mortality, with the invitation to play, to process sensitive, difficult and inevitable things.

Georgia Apsion is a stand up Comic, Film maker and Rosen Method Somatic Therapy Practitioner based in Brighton UK. Her first short film "Love You - Bye" is a playful and tender exploration of Love, Loss and Control.

Encounters and endings in group music improvisation

Bruce Armstrong

Improvising music together in a group can provide a way of exploring feelings about relationship and loss. In this workshop, we will play music together using a range of easy-to-play instruments, our bodies and/or voices. Through an embodied approach to improvisation will explore and reflect together on how we –as individuals and as a group– find way to endings, musically and interpersonally. There is no need to have previous experience of playing an instrument in order to take part.

Dr Bruce Armstrong is a Music Therapist with St Columba's Hospice Care. Following a career in academic Sociology, including research on the history of racism in Scotland, he found his way into the world of support work, counselling, and therapy. Since then, he has worked for over thirty-five years in various health and social care settings, including HIV/AIDS, Sexual Health, Learning Disability, Mental Health, and Palliative and End of Life Care. Throughout this time, he has been involved in community music and asset-based community development work, with a particular interest in ways in which music can enable personal and collective reflection. His role at St Columba's Hospice Care brings together many of these strands of experience.

Portraits of the self (in-person)

Willy Gilder

Self-portraits can be powerful means of exploring identify and emotions. Throughout history artists have drawn their own self-portraits often creating a visual diary and leaving a long-lasting legacy. In this workshop, you will learn how to create a portrait for yourself – a picture that looks like you, and one that says something about how you feel. No previous art experience necessary.

Willy Gilder is a retired radio journalist and an artist who lives with neurodivergence. He has shown his series of self-portraits at the Hospice's gallery. He lives in Edinburgh.

Exploring life and death with Edvard Munch – an improvised dialogue

Christiaan Rhodius & Wolfgang Schmid

All of us are mortal, making death a universal topic. At the same time, one's own death is highly personal and unique. In this online arts-based workshop, we invite participants to encounter paintings by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch and explore life and death as intimate yet collective phenomenon that are common to all.

Edvard Munch himself experienced ill health and lost his mother and sister at an early age. Much of his work therefore centres on illness, death, and dying. He was criticised for this thematic focus and for the intensity of the emotions conveyed in his paintings. Munch however saw his art as something 'to learn from and live after'.

As we meet Munch's art in this workshop, share personal observations and engage together in an improvised dialogue, we co-create a new, unique experience.

The workshop is co-lead by Christiaan Rhodius and Wolfgang Schmid, both of whom bring longstanding experience in palliative care and a shared interest in how arts engagement can stimulate everyday conversations about life and death while supporting more holistic approaches to end-of-life care education.

Christiaan Rhodius is a Dutch medical doctor, specialized in elderly care and palliative medicine. Together with his wife and four children he lives and works in Oslo, Norway. In collaboration with MUNCH (the Munch Museum, Oslo) and the University of Oslo he initiated an experiential learning program, called 'Explore life and death with Munch'. This program helps to unlock 'the secret' of death by engaging with art. <https://blogs.bmj.com/spcare/2023/03/02/how-edvard-munch-helps-unlock-the-secret-of-death/> Christiaan is examiner in the specialist course for palliative care (a two year course for medical specialists) in the Netherlands. He is the author of the book 'Omdat we leven' and several articles. His writing and (contributions to) podcasts tend to circle around topics like humanities mortality, 'the palliative paradox' – the importance of connection while having to let go, improvisation, communication and art.

Wolfgang Schmid is Professor of Music Therapy and Head of Research and Deputy Leader of the Grieg Academy, University of Bergen. In his practice-based research, he critically examines how individuals and communities use music to care for themselves and others when facing terminal illness, loss and bereavement. He integrates qualitative inquiry, artistic research and autoethnography to co-develop questions and insights with the people he encounters. Recent projects include Care for Music, an international ethnography funded by the AHRC (UK), and IMAGINE, a community-engaged, arts-based initiative examining how music-engagement fosters compassionate, relational attitudes to care in societies at large and in health-care education.

Responsiveness to grief and loss through creative arts therapies and integrative modalities in a pediatric medical/surgical hospital

Todd O'Connor

This presentation explores how grief and loss are addressed through multiple approaches in a pediatric medical/surgical setting. It will examine key factors that shape how families experience and cope with grief in acute intensive care. You will learn about the development of a diverse, flexible, and impactful multimodal program at the Kravis Children's Hospital designed to meet the unique needs of children and their families. Emphasizing the importance of community formation and identity in healing, the presentation will also highlight the crucial role of creative arts therapies and other specialties in building, sustaining, and revitalizing community connections during times of loss.

Todd O'Connor is a Program Coordinator and the Creative Arts Therapy Supervisor in the Child Life and Creative Arts Therapy Department in the Mount Sinai Kravis Children's Hospital in New York City. In his role, he nurtures partnerships across disciplines that support the development and implementation of creative arts therapy programming in both inpatient and outpatient areas of the hospital; oversees a graduate music therapy internship program; and develops clinical research protocols, which explore the impact and efficacy of medical music therapy in partnership with physicians and other interdisciplinary specialists in pediatrics. In his clinical work, he provides support to pediatric patients and their families in contexts that include general ICU care, post-surgical support, chronic illness, pain management, procedural support and end-of-life care. Todd earned his master's degree in music therapy from New York University in 2006 and completed post-master's certification as a Level I Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapist.

The importance of outdoor spaces at a children's hospice: an arts and therapeutic play perspective

Rachel Drury & Donna Nicoll

The concepts of childhood and play often go hand-in-hand. As such, it should come as no surprise that the outdoor spaces in children's hospices are a significant consideration in the care of the babies, children and young people it caters for. Despite this, most studies to date exploring outdoor spaces in hospice care focus on adult hospices, and even those with a focus on paediatric care rarely seek the voices of the children themselves, instead relying on staff and family perspectives. Rachel House Children's Hospice is about to undergo a significant rebuild and this talk will explore the intersections between art, creative play and nature. From a rights-based approach we will reflect on how the arts and play therapies integrate with outdoor spaces, how children's voices are listened to and what they tell us about the kind of outdoor space they want and need, and how their voices have shaped the redesign of their hospice.

Dr Rachel Drury (she/her) is a researcher and creative artist working in the field of music psychology and therapeutic arts. She is Co-Programme Lead for the MA Music Psychology programme at the RCS and the music specialist for Rachel House Children's Hospice in Kinross (CHAS). As a creative artist, Rachel's work has been performed at major festivals both nationally and internationally, and she regularly works with national arts companies in the UK as a consultant on creative projects and training opportunities for artists. Rachel's research interests include rights-based approaches in the arts, particularly within paediatric palliative care.

Donna Nicoll is the Play Service Coordinator at CHAS, managing the Therapeutic Play Team. Donna is a Healthcare Play Specialist with over 25 years' experience working in the hospice setting, supporting children with life limiting conditions and their families. Donna has provided a wide range of play experiences and activities for children of all ages and abilities as well as memory making opportunities. Donna now supports practitioners and uses therapeutic play techniques to support children to process trauma, manage behavioural challenges and improve well-being. Her work takes place in the hospice, or community. Her team organise sibling events throughout the year and a sibling residential yearly.