

Using Images and Sound

Artists Uniquely Convey Patient “Voices”



Photo credit: Mark Dimmock

Artists Tim Wainwright (left) and John Wynne during the exhibition of their work *I Am Not the Cancer* in Brussels, Belgium in 2013.

John Wynne collaborated with the late photographer and film maker Tim Wainwright on *Transplant* (2007-2009) and *Transplant and Life* (2016-2017). John and Tim were artists in residence at two world-leading centers for transplants in the UK, Harefield Hospital, and the Royal Free Hospital in London, where they recorded, photographed, and filmed patients, the devices they were attached to or had implanted in them, and the hospital environment.

How was it that you and Tim decide to focus on transplantation?

In 2005, after finishing two other hospital-based projects, one with cancer patients, and one with people suffering from severe mental illness, Tim Wainwright started to develop ideas for an art project to work with

heart transplant patients. He applied unsuccessfully for a grant, but was encouraged to develop the ideas and re-apply. Tim’s mentor on the project, who was aware of my work with sound, suggested he seek out a collaboration with me: we re-wrote the proposal and got support from Arts Council England to be artists in residence at Harefield Hospital for a year, and later to produce and exhibit the resulting work.

Were *Transplant* and *Transplant and Life* related?

Transplant, the earlier of these two projects, was based on our residency at Harefield Hospital, one of the world’s leading centers for heart and lung transplantation. Over the course of a year, we recorded and photographed at the hospital while researching and developing ideas leading to various outcomes. These included a 24-channel sound/photography installation and a published book of essays and interviews which also contained a DVD video – essentially a linear version of the installation. Other outputs included a surround sound video called *ITU*, shown in the UK, Ireland, Germany and Canada, and a half-hour composed audio documentary for BBC Radio 3, *Hearts, Lungs and Minds*, which won an award at the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago.

Later, when we were asked to work with abdominal transplant patients – kidney, liver, and pancreas – at the Royal Free Hospital in London, we said we also wanted to revisit some of the patients from our work with heart



Photo credit: John Wynne

The Crystal Gallery at the Hunterian Museum, London, during the *Transplant and Life* exhibition (2016-17)

and lung patients and to include them in the project that became known as *Transplant and Life*. Not all the people we worked with 10 years earlier had survived, but many of them had, and we included some of these in the new project. *Transplant and Life* was originally an installation in the Hunterian Museum in London, where we were asked to make work that would bring the patient voice into the medical museum, a space normally dominated by specimens, clinical hardware and medical heroes. The exhibition included large lightbox photographs, and the participants' voices could be heard via special devices that I attached to the glass cabinets so that the glass itself was the source of the sound. The exhibit was accompanied by a digital guide designed to enrich the visitor experience via QR codes throughout the exhibition and to provide access to images, sounds and information not available in the museum. This guide is available online, and it includes interviews with experts in the field as well as photographs and recordings of the patients and living donors we worked with.

After Tim's unexpected death from pancreatic cancer in 2018, I was asked to make a new work for an exhibition called *Spare Parts* at Science Gallery London. *Birds I wouldn't have heard* is an installation based on a 90-minute film featuring the abdominal transplant participants we worked with as well as five of the heart and lung recipients from the earlier project. I used Tim's photographs and video footage from the *Transplant and Life* project, weaving still and moving images with voice and field recordings to explore the breadth and depth of emotions and experiences we witnessed while in residence at the Royal Free and Harefield transplant centers.

How were the exhibits received by others?

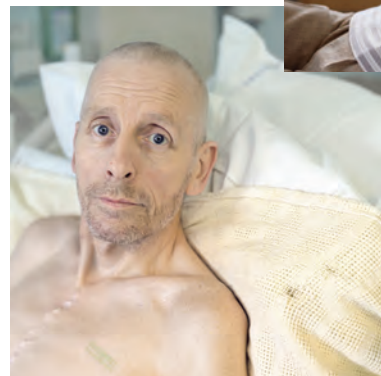
While we were working with heart and lung transplant patients, we were posting images and recording clips online, and in the evaluation process that was necessary for the continuation of the project, both patients and their families were very positive and supportive of the work we were doing. There were several comments to the effect that "I wish someone had told me some of this before I had my transplant." We shared the experiences of patients who wouldn't normally have been heard and those of patients on the waiting list, so it was seen as a



Susan Clarke (liver transplant) 2016



Maureen Beglar (while on the waiting list for a lung transplant) 2008



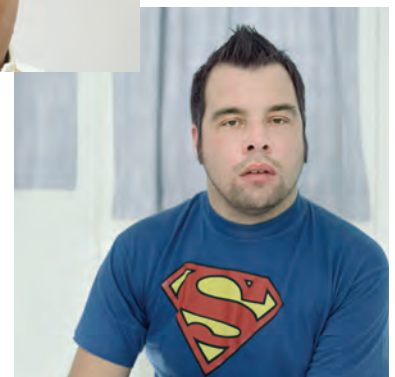
Ian Wood (before his successful heart transplant) 2007



Katie McIntyre (before her successful liver transplant) 2016



Sanjay Joshi (10 years after his successful heart transplant) 2016



Rob Longrigg (lung transplant) 2008

Portraits credit: Tim Wainwright



Ed Dowie, right, during one of his regular dialysis sessions (2016). Ed had several unsuccessful kidney transplants when he was very young, and despite having been on dialysis for 20 years, leads an active life as a musician and composer.



View of the lightboxes in the Crystal Gallery through some of the hundreds of specimens on display at the Hunterian Gallery (2017)

Photo credit: John Wynne

valuable resource. Claire Marx, President of the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) commented that our work was of direct value to her as a clinician, and applauded our placement of patient testimony at the center of the Hunterian Museum, the public face of the RCS.

A few visitor comments also praised the installation:

“Incredibly moving – here about 2 hours, felt totally immersed in the experiences of these patients. Also reading the literature with the sound as background left me feeling as if I had been actually sitting in the ward!”

“A poignant & provocative exhibition. Personal & public in its implications. Images enhanced with their acoustical narratives. More art that makes a difference like this one please.”

Can you elaborate on your sound contributions to Transplant and Transplant and Life?

The transplant projects were a truly collaborative endeavor with Tim Wainwright: we shared the creative decisions and practical work equally throughout. We found that people spoke more freely if we recorded them without a camera on them, which is why we wanted to use still images with sound rather than video. We separated the photographic capture from the audio recordings and tried to establish an almost meditative atmosphere to help people forget about the microphone. As well as the portraits, Tim took images of the hospital environment, and I did the same with sound, using recordings from around the hospital and, in the later project, around the homes of patients we visited, as well as

their voices. My voice recordings are very much like close-up photographs: they reveal details of emotion and personality, and at times the signs of illness can be heard through the physical, resonating body.

Particularly with the first Transplant installation, I wanted to use sound to guide people around the gallery. In fact, one comment in the gallery visitors book summed this up beautifully: “The way you move through the exhibit is shaped by the audio; a nice change from just following a wall. In spending time in the hospital and speaking to patients, my observations confirmed anthropologist Tom Rice’s assertion that in hospitals sound takes on “a more affective quality because of the drought in other sensory modalities.” Particularly if they are restricted to bed, what a patient sees is very limited, smells are generally overpowered by disinfectant, and the food is bland. Consequently, hearing becomes arguably the most important sense for understanding the environment and making sense of one’s experience.

Do you feel your understanding of the transplant community improved/changed from working on this project, and what were your takeaways?

As with many of my projects, I saw this work as an opportunity to learn about something I knew little about to start with. With the first project, getting approval from the hospital ethics committee was a somewhat arduous process, but during that time we learned a great deal of valuable information about the medical and psychological issues surrounding organ transplants, as well as

Photo credit: John Wynne



Installation view of *Birds I wouldn't have heard* at Science Gallery London in 2019

some of the more practical matters to do with hygiene around people with compromised immune systems. I've worked with and recorded about 70 patients, and of course I felt more of a personal connection with some than with others, but almost without exception I found their experiences and thoughts both fascinating and inspiring. Due to the increase in social media since our initial work, there's probably more of a 'community' of transplant patients than there was at that time, but I still think our work can be of value to those who have had or are approaching an organ transplant. Participants were incredibly generous in sharing their thoughts and emotions with us, at least partly in order to help others in similar situations. C



Birds I wouldn't have heard at Science Gallery London, showing liver transplant recipient Thomas Gaskin (2016)

Photo credit: John Wynne

John Wynne is a Canadian/British artist and emeritus professor at University of the Arts London. His award-winning, often research-led work is made for museums, galleries, public spaces, and radio. His diverse artistic practice includes socially engaged projects as well as site-specific installations and sculptural works. Although his work has a strong visual impact, it is always led by his interest in sound.



Find out more about John Wynne and his work, including links to the films and other resources mentioned in this article, at www.sensitivebrigade.com



Ian Wood (see also pg. 56) prior to his heart transplant in 2007. He lived with these external ventricular devices for a year before his transplant. We worked with him again in 2016, when he was the only patient we worked with who retrospectively questioned his decision to get a transplant.