

# MUSEUM OF THE DEAD

## *The Blueprint*

An outline for a workshop and exhibition,  
Using art as a medium to celebrate the memory of the deceased



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# Introduction

## *The Aim*

We are a group of RCA students currently studying Architecture, Fashion, Service Design and Painting. Over the last four months we have been conducting research into the social attitudes and emotions surrounding cultures of death and bereavement. Using this to create a making-based art therapeutic workshop, to help others better understand the death of a loved one and the negative emotions surrounding grief. As an Across RCA group, we used ourselves as the participants and completed a 'model' workshop. This is outlined and documented below, along with our research to show the importance of our workshop for individuals and within communities. Here, we then propose that this is to be used within institutions such as museums and public art galleries alongside their current programmes and collections to help build connections with their communities, and aid visitors and staff with often traumatic emotions that are not usually spoken about.



# Introduction

## *Grief*

Grief and bereavement are a human experience that everyone will encounter throughout their lifetime. This experience can bring about heightened emotions that many people can move through, however, bereaved individuals may also experience more severe symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Clinical psychologists Rachel E Weiskittle and Sandra E Gramling's research into the therapeutic effectiveness of using visual art modalities with the bereaved states that these are identified as intense, negative, and complicated symptoms of grief and "Those bereaved may also endorse physical manifestations of their distress, such as increased fatigue, greater propensity for developing illness, and overall poorer physical health outcomes than their non-bereaved counterparts." (Weiskittle and Gramling 2018). As well as this, grief can "catalyse a myriad of functional complications, including decreased academic performance, job productivity, and quality of life." (Weiskittle and Gramling 2018).

*“Approximately 10–15% find themselves “stuck” in a persistent state of intense, complicated grief.”  
(Weiskittle and Gramling 2018)*

This was the foundation for creating something that could use the arts to care for and provide an opportunity for the bereaved to work with their grief, make sense of these emotions, as well as commemorate and form connections with the deceased within a supportive environment. Weiskittle and Gramling’s research continues to state the importance of continuing bonds with the deceased as it helps create a sense of clarification and understanding of the loss and a “meaningful connection to the past.” (Weiskittle and Gramling 2018). When using these methods, evidence then suggested that the bereaved who made these bonds and connections were more successful at moving past and making sense of the emotions and the negative experience.

In addition to this, with our team having international origins, we looked at our own differing backgrounds and cultures surrounding death when considering these ideas. For example, the UK’s often Christian-centric funeral services with options of scattering ashes or burial and the laying of flowers are similar to Polish traditions of the placing of candles and flowers on the grave. The Chinese afterlife centred traditions include the burning of paper money during the funeral which is seen as a way to make financial of-

ferings so that the deceased’s spirit can access heaven.

These events can act as a ritual for saying goodbye to the deceased, but they still have their shortcomings by often not dealing with the emotional aspects of the grieving process.

For example, in China social attitudes surrounding death mean that it is not spoken about and avoiding thinking about it is encouraged. Within the UK and Poland, the often Christian-based traditions can fail to fit the attitudes and beliefs of a large proportion of the population. The amount of the population of England and Wales in the 2021 Census who reported they have no religion reached 37.2 per cent, up from 14.8 per cent in 2001 (Roskams 2022), thereby allowing for dissatisfaction with the Christian-centric way in which the dead are commemorated.

So, as well as our workshop acting as a therapeutic space to care for and help those experiencing negative symptoms of grief, it could also be a space within which art and making is an alternative method to honour and commemorate the dead for those whose beliefs and attitudes don’t align with the current traditions and legacy services.

# MANIFESTO



# MUSEUM OF THE DEAD

To remember

To commemorate

To create

To heal

To celebrate

To be together

To feel

# PART 0

## *Participation*

*This acts as an example of the information participants in the workshop will receive prior to taking part.*

The Museum of the Dead is an in person physical making workshop that acts as a therapeutic space within which people suffering from grief can take part in group exercises to create artefacts or artworks. The aim of this is to form a better understanding of the emotions surrounding grief, as well as to form meaningful connections to the past and to remember and commemorate a loved one. The workshop will also act as a space within which participants can share their experiences while engaging in something creative, with ideas and processes that could be taken outside the workshop and engaged with as a therapeutic exercise at home through the artistic methods covered.

The workshop will take place in four stages over several weeks:

The first part of the workshop will be a list of questions which each participant should consider before taking part in the physical making. These questions will help to form a complete understanding of the topics that will be brought up during the workshop, help each participant consider the emotions they are dealing with, as well as help generate ideas and ways of making for the workshop.

Within the second stage of the programme, there will be a structured and supported making exercise where each participant will be making a 20 x 20cm wooden frame. This structured making will act as a supportive space within which participants can begin conversations with others. This frame will become a container for each participant to place or transcribe their ideas, memories and emotions as well as acting as a base that allows everyone to begin from the same place. The third stage of the workshop will be the physical making of the artworks or artefacts. This will consist of the participants considering their thoughts or answers to the workshop questions and using these as a tool to transcribe the emotions of grief into a tangible object within, on, or around the wooden frames made previously. They will be able

to use whatever materials or processes feel right, such as painting, drawing, collage, sculpture etc.

Finally, in the fourth stage, these artworks and artefacts will be exhibited as part of a 'Museum of the Dead', acting as a therapeutic process by putting participants' emotions out into the world and becoming a form of commemoration. The works made within the workshop will be shown alongside historical examples of artworks and artefacts that were used as artistic and theoretic methods to help deal with grief.

After the exhibition participants can take their artworks home, and the Museum will document the exhibition with the consent of each of the participants.

Throughout the workshop, if participants no longer want to take part there is no obligation or pressure for them to continue. In addition, if there are any stages participants wish to skip, alter, or take space and time to feel more comfortable participating in, this will be accommodated for.

Useful links and helplines:  
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>  
0808 808 1677

# PART I

## *The Memory*

*These questions are the first part of the workshop, and each participant would receive them. To give the participants time to consider and think about the questions in a space that is comfortable, the questions would be sent via email one week before the start of the in person making workshop.*

The questions below are about your experience with grief, and thoughts and memories of someone who has passed away. We would like you to consider some answers to or thoughts surrounding these questions and keep them in mind for the rest of the workshop process. All the questions are open ended and optional, there are no wrong answers.

It is possible that these questions may bring up negative emotions or memories, so if you feel that you don't want to answer any of the questions, or feel that you no longer want to take part in the workshop, you can stop your participation at any time with no questions asked.

Who would you like to commemorate?

What is your relationship to this person?

What is your favourite story about this person?

What is a routine thing you did with this person?

What is a smell that reminds you of this person?

What sound or music reminds you of this person?

What is the flavour or dish that reminds you of this person?

What is the texture or piece of clothing that reminds you of this person?

Do you still have any objects that belonged to them?

Are there any places that hold memories of this person?

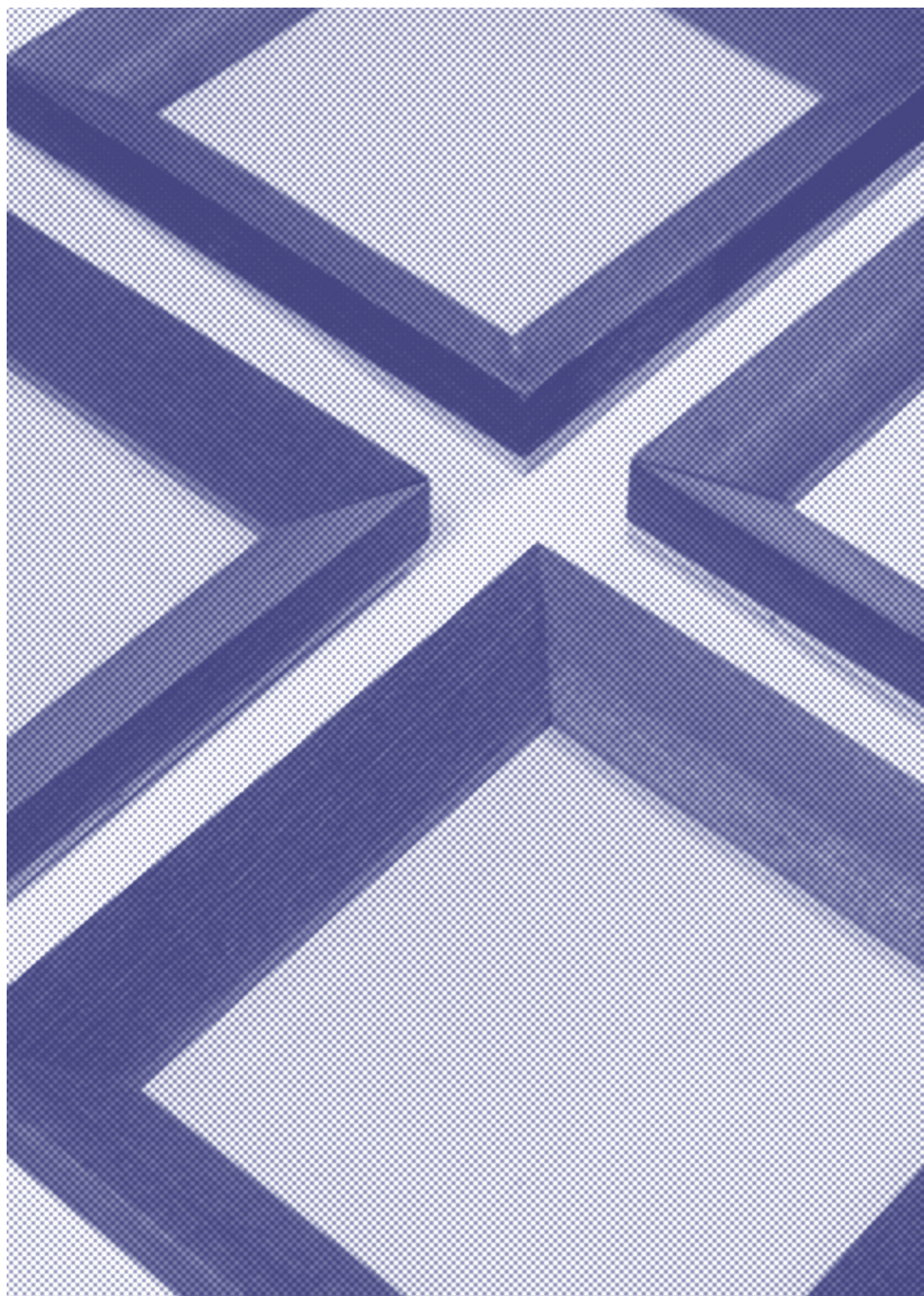
# PART II

## *The Workshops*

*The workshops would occur over a few weekly sessions, to allow emotions to grow and to develop a sense of community among the group of participants. The workshops should have an informal character, with no obligation to take part in all of the sessions. The space should feel welcoming, if possible the hosting institution should prepare a table with snacks and hot beverages.*

### Session I

During the first sessions each of the participants will prepare a wooden frame that will make a base for next actions. The base will allow different types of artforms, 2D and 3D, to be later inserted into it. We believe that it is important for the first session to be very specifically directed, so the participants have time to get comfortable with the tools, space and each other.



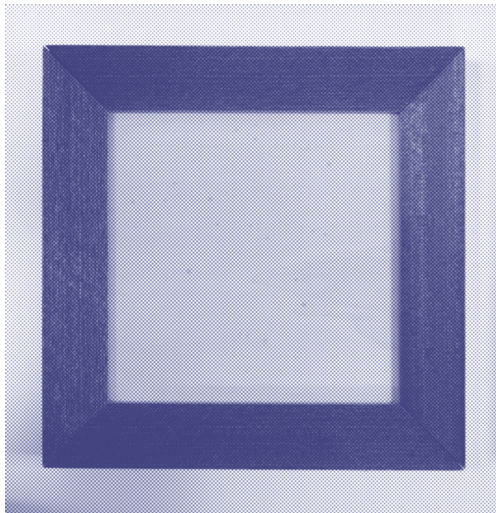
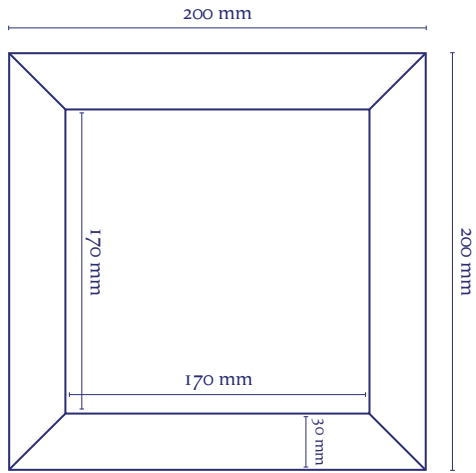
# FRAME

## *The Base*

*Materials for the frame and guidelines for assembly should be prepared prior to the first meeting by the institution conducting the workshops. Here is an example of a frame that we used during our workshops, but it could vary depending on the local needs.*

We suggest making the frame from wood, as it would add presence, significance and importance to the art piece. Here we represent an example of the frame that we believe is just enough for the workshops, not too big so it wouldn't intimidate the participants, but big enough to allow different techniques of art making. The frame can be displayed in different positions: vertically, horizontally, hanging or standing.





# PART II

## *The Workshops*

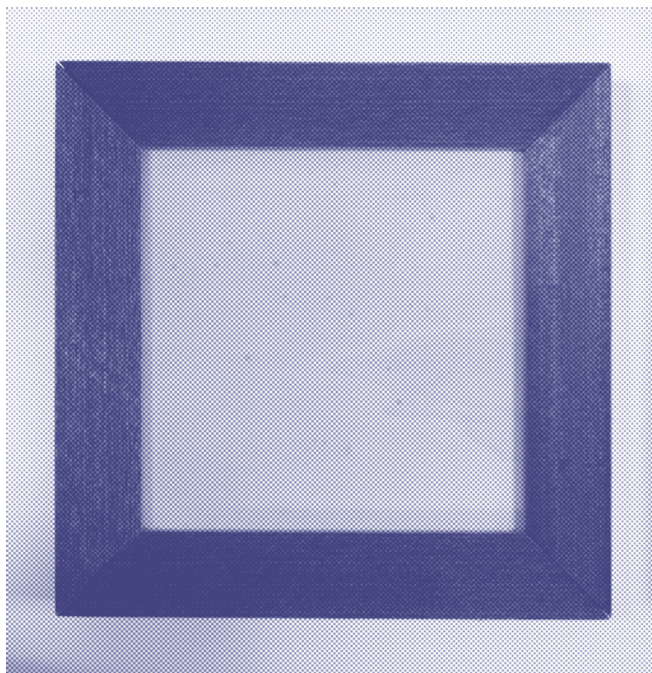
*Each session can be divided into smaller parts and take time over more than one meeting depending on the needs of the community.*

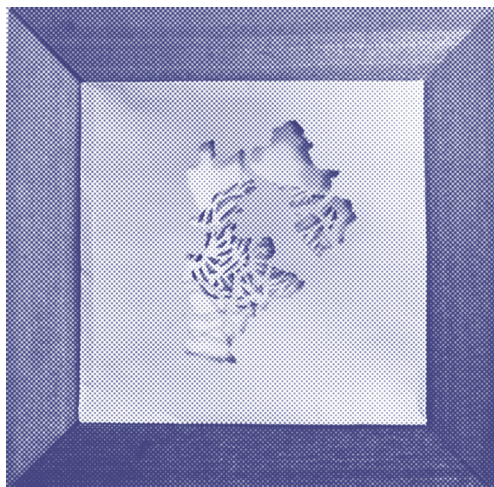
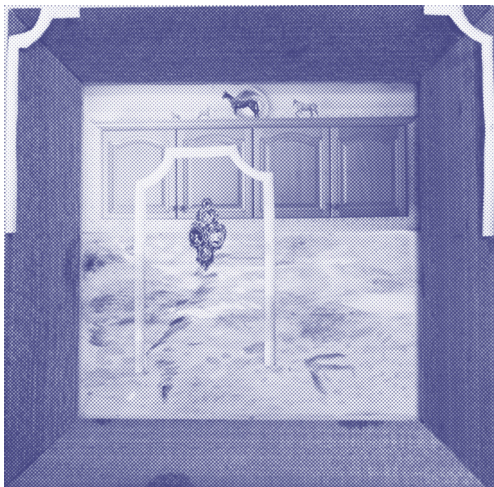
### Session II and III

Participants will start creating their artworks, using techniques of their preference. Each session should be led by an art technician that will help participants achieve their ideas. The institution should provide materials needed for artworks and space to store them in between each session.



*The act of making created a comfortable and therapeutic space that allowed open conversations about the themes of the workshop, other university work and our favourite films. The act of making these artefacts and artworks also allowed us to reflect on past memories in a calming and therapeutic way, as well as having fun while we did it.*





# PART II

## *The Workshops*

*Last session is an opportunity to summarise the outcomes and privately celebrate the achievements, before opening the exhibition to families and other visitors.*

### Session IV

After finishing the artworks, participants will meet for one more session to write down descriptions for their work. The writing could be specifically about the work, or could also be a description of memories related to the celebrated relationship. During the last session, participants will also decide on the way they want to exhibit their work.



# PART III

## *The Exhibition*

*The exhibition should be a joyous celebration of the memory and participants. The institution should prepare a suitable space and treat it as any other vernissage.*

Finally the work is exhibited and celebrated. Participants should invite their family and friends to share this special moment. The exhibition should stay open for some period of time, previously agreed with the participants and the institution.





# PART IV

## *After Life*

After the exhibiton, with permission of each participant, each artwork would be 3D scanned and showcased online at the official website of the Museum of the Dead, along with the writing. The phisical pieces would go home with their makers. We hope that, it could become a new tradition to comemorate ones we have lost. A tradition that celebrates memories and shared rituals, and encorugaes to display them.



# References

## Wellcome Collection The Museum of Broken Relationships

Visits to museums such as the Wellcome Collection acted as interesting case studies for this, as they showcase contemporary artworks and new and relevant technologies alongside historical examples by displaying the works in an accessible and easily readable way.

The Museum of Broken Relationships is a physical and virtual exhibition space with the aim of sharing the symbolic possessions and stories that encapsulate a relationship or its breakdown, from friends and marriages to parental relationships. Both act as examples of how intuitions deal with exhibiting and showcasing quite often traumatic stories and events, by doing this with the aim of helping and educating those who participate and view them, and acting as an example of how we see Museum of the Dead operating within the real world.





# Bibliography

Weiskittle, R and Gramling, S. (2018) 'The therapeutic effectiveness of using visual art modalities with the bereaved: a systematic review'. National Library of Medicine. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5798551/> (Accessed: 20/11/2022)

Roskams, M (2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Office for National Statistics. Available at: [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=This%20coincided%20with%20an%20increase,\(14.1%20million\)%20in%202011](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=This%20coincided%20with%20an%20increase,(14.1%20million)%20in%202011) (Accessed: 25/02/2023)



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