Artistic Research on Patterns of Perception and Action in the Context of an Aging Society.

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Abstract

This paper explores the outcomes of DEMEDARTS (Dementia. Empathy. Education. Arts.), a four-year transdisciplinary artistic research project undertaken in Austria from 2020 to 2024. As Europe experiences a demographic shift toward an aging population, dementia remains widely stigmatized and underrepresented in cultural discourse. DEMEDARTS confronts this invisibility through a hybrid artistic research methodology combining participatory art, co-design, and critical engagement with care communities. The project involved more than 70 co-created artworks—including customized rollators, wearable memory jewelry, and public installations—alongside over 40 multilingual educational toolbooks used across schools and caregiving institutions.

Through collaborations with people living with dementia, caregivers, schoolchildren, and artists, DEMEDARTS repositions dementia as a condition not of deficit, but of relational and creative potential. Drawing on artistic research frameworks, sensory engagement, and co-creation, the project reimagines care as a shared civic and aesthetic responsibility. The research was conducted in care homes, schools, galleries, and public spaces and documented through multimodal methods including photography, video, and participant reflection.

Key findings show that artistic processes promote agency and visibility for people with dementia and contribute to public empathy, educational reform, and policy dialogue. The paper highlights case studies such as *Taylored Memory*, *Cyclist*, and *Pinky*, emphasizing their symbolic and social dimensions. Ultimately, DEMEDARTS demonstrates that artistic research can reconfigure how communities understand vulnerability, aging, and collective.

Keywords: Dementia, Critical Design, Intergenerational, Empathy, Artistic Research

Background and Rationale

Dementia currently affects over 55 million people globally and is projected to nearly double in the next two decades (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). In Austria and across Europe, the rise in dementia cases coincides with a widespread lack of empathetic social infrastructure and inclusive cultural representation. People with dementia often experience isolation, loss of agency, and symbolic invisibility. Standard care models focus on managing symptoms but rarely address the social and emotional landscapes of living with dementia.

DEMEDARTS—an acronym for *Dementia. Empathy. Education. Arts.*—was conceived to challenge prevailing narratives around dementia. Initiated in 2020 and funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), the project was housed at the University of Applied Arts Vienna led by Ruth Mateus-Berr. The project's premise is that artistic research can serve as a tool for empathy, inclusion, and the reimagination of collective life.

Instead of treating dementia as a purely medical issue, DEMEDARTS frames it as a relational, aesthetic, and civic condition. People living with dementia are not viewed as passive subjects of care but as co-creators, cultural agents, and community participants. Their lived experiences are considered a form of situated knowledge, made visible and valuable through artistic co-creation.

The project drew on the ethical principles of care (Tronto, 1993) and relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), asserting that vulnerability is not a condition to be hidden but a space from which new modes of meaning and community can emerge.

Objectives

The core aims of DEMEDARTS were fivefold:

1. To use artistic research methodologies to co-create meaningful works with and for people with dementia.
2. To develop participatory processes that bridge generational divides through art and design.
3. To challenge the medicalized and stigmatizing representations of dementia in public and institutional settings.
4. To produce educational materials that translate these approaches into schools, caregiving contexts, and policy frameworks.
5. To publicly present the findings and outputs across Europe, thereby reshaping societal narratives about aging and cognitive difference.

These aims were pursued through a mixture of site-specific interventions, studio-based artistic practices, and public engagement formats.

Project Structure and Scope

Over the course of the project, more than 70 artworks were co-created, including:

- Customized rollators such as *Taylored Memory*, made from shredded bureaucratic documents and symbolizing memory loss as both a personal and political process.
- *Cyclist*, a racing-style rollator evoking youthful vitality.
- *Pinky*, a rollator adorned in plush pink faux fur, subverting normative aesthetics of mobility aids.
- A jewelry collection featuring lockets, textile textures, and symbolic brooches.

In parallel, over 40 educational toolbooks were created in multiple languages including German, English, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, Spanish, Polish, and Romanian. These toolbooks can be used free of charge and downloaded from the website www.demedarts.com.

The project reached more than 13,500 participants through workshops, and more than 2,500 individuals through exhibitions and performances. Its public presence extended from local care homes to international platforms like the Venice Biennale and WHO Dementia Forums.

Artistic Research as a Political and Social Act

The purpose of DEMEDARTS aligns with broader trends in artistic research that mobilize art as a socially engaged and epistemologically rich practice (Borgdorff, 2012; Candy & Edmonds, 2018). The project does not treat art as a vehicle for therapeutic effect or public service communication. Rather, it treats artistic creation as a form of critical inquiry into the structures that render dementia invisible and aging undesirable.

In reconfiguring the tools and aesthetics of care—through redesigned rollators, wearable memories, or participatory performances—DEMEDARTS redistributes agency and authorship. This redistribution is particularly important in dementia contexts, where individuals are often excluded from cultural production.

The purpose of DEMEDARTS, therefore, is not only to make art about dementia, but to create with people living with dementia, foregrounding their perspectives in reimagining what community means in the 21st century.

Approach

The methodological framework of the DEMEDARTS project was shaped by the evolving field of artistic research, which emphasizes knowledge generation through creative practice. DEMEDARTS specifically integrated transdisciplinary collaboration, participatory art, sensory methodologies, and critical design. These methods were not employed sequentially but in overlapping, iterative cycles that allowed for flexibility, reflection, and responsiveness to participant needs and contexts.

This section outlines the methodological principles and techniques that guided the project across its four years, with attention to its artistic, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions.

Artistic Research as Core Methodology

Artistic research in DEMEDARTS was understood as both a process and a result. The creation of artworks—whether rollators, jewelry, or installations—was not an illustration of research findings, but itself the site of inquiry. This aligns with Borgdorff's (2012) concept of research "in and through" the arts, where the process of making is simultaneously a process of knowing.

The project was shaped by key theoretical anchors in the field. For example, Bennett's (2012) model of "practical aesthetics" informed the focus on sensoriality and emotional engagement. Schön's (1983) notion of the "reflective practitioner" was embodied in the project's emphasis on cyclical evaluation, co-creation, and situational responsiveness. DEMEDARTS thus positioned artistic activity as a relational, embodied, and materially grounded practice of inquiry.

Participatory and Co-Creation Methods

Co-creation with people living with dementia, their caregivers, and young people was central to the DEMEDARTS process. Co-creation here meant shared authorship and mutual responsiveness, not simply consultation or observational research. This is particularly significant in dementia contexts, where cognitive or verbal limitations are often (mis)interpreted as incapacity.

Workshops were developed to facilitate non-verbal, sensory, and material communication, using touch, scent, texture, and color. Participants worked with artists to design artifacts that reflected their personal memories and identities, such as jewelry with embedded textiles from childhood, or rollators incorporating symbolic elements.

All co-creation workshops were designed to be:

- Inclusive and adaptable: allowing for differing levels of ability.
- Sensory-focused: including materials like felt, wood, paper, flowers, and scented fabrics.
- Open-ended: without fixed outcomes, allowing each artifact to evolve organically.
- Intergenerational: involving schoolchildren, university students, and elderly participants together.

For example, in a workshop held at a care home in Vienna, a former cyclist collaborated with a design student to create the *Cyclist* rollator, integrating bicycle parts and racing stripes. In another session, the *Pinky* rollator was developed in collaboration with a participant who said she had "missed being noticed"—the soft pink fur covering was a statement of visibility, humor, and aesthetic pleasure.

Such co-created artifacts are epistemic objects, embedding both the cognitive traces and affective atmospheres of the workshops.

Material and Sensory Engagement

Given that dementia often affects linguistic memory and linear cognition, the project leaned heavily on embodied and sensory methods. Materials were chosen for their tactile, olfactory, and symbolic properties. Some artifacts, for example, were often made from:

- Textile fragments from garments with personal history.
- Scents such as lavender, cinnamon, or rose to evoke autobiographical memory.
- Miniature symbols (e.g., ceramics, bells, musical notes) that represented life stories.

In one case, a participant contributed scraps of her 1950s wedding dress to be incorporated into a memory bracelet. In another, a former musician chose a brooch shaped like a tuning fork, a reference to both her past profession and the sonic experience of disorientation in dementia.

These materials were not chosen arbitrarily but collaboratively, with discussion and reflection throughout the design process. The act of touching, smelling, or assembling was itself a cognitive and emotional exercise, facilitating memory access and emotional regulation (van Dijk et al., 2020).

Artistic Object-Making as Critical Practice

The rollator became a central object of inquiry in DEMEDARTS. As a symbol of aging and medicalization, it is typically associated with loss of independence. The project sought to aesthetically reconfigure the rollator as a site of dignity, humor, resistance, and identity.
Works such as:

- *Taylored Memory*: Constructed with shredded administrative paper, it comments on both the cognitive disintegration of memory and the systemic erasure of people with dementia from public narratives.
- *Cyclist*: Customized with handlebars and racing aesthetics, it allowed a participant to embody strength, speed, and past identity.
- *Gardener*: A mobile flower bed that integrated scent and nature, reconnecting a participant to her past as a horticulturist.

These objects did not serve only as tools for mobility but as critical design interventions, opening conversations about what care looks and feels like, and how assistive technology might carry personal and political meaning.
These design choices were informed by the ethos of critical and speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013), which encourages designers to ask "what if?" rather than "how to." Rather than solve a problem, these rollators posed questions: What does aging look like in public space? Who gets to design their own mobility? Can an assistive device be a political statement?

Public Installations and Performative Actions

In addition to object-making, DEMEDARTS incorporated site-specific installations and public performances to make the research process visible, participatory, and civic. Some examples from the catalog include:

- Public Rollator Walks: Performed in cities including Vienna and Salzburg, where elderly participants used the artist-designed rollators in parades. These actions reclaimed urban space for aging bodies, challenging perceptions of slowness and fragility.
- Memory Dialogues: In-school performances where students and people with dementia read from collaboratively written texts or presented co-designed artifacts.

These performative moments were both research outputs and engagement strategies. They allowed others—passersby, educators, policymakers—to encounter the project in embodied, multisensory, and affective ways. Documentation (photography, film, testimonials) served both archival and reflective purposes.

Educational Integration and Knowledge Transfer

A major methodological achievement of DEMEDARTS was the development of over 40 educational toolbooks. These were based on workshop methods and adapted for use in primary schools, secondary education, and caregiver training. The Toolbooks were published in nine languages, ensuring broad access.

Each toolbook included:

- Step-by-step artistic exercises.
- Notes for facilitators.
- Adaptability guidelines for cognitive or physical limitations.
- Cultural translation for local adaptation.

Through these toolbooks, the project's methodology was disseminated beyond research contexts and embedded into formal and informal education.

Documentation and Reflexivity

Throughout the project, data was collected using multimodal documentation, including:

- Photo and video archives of workshops and performances.
- Oral reflections from participants and students.
- Visual analysis of completed artworks.

These materials informed internal reflection, public presentations, and scholarly dissemination. Importantly, analysis was always interpretive and situated, recognizing the aesthetic, affective, and relational dimensions of the work (Schön, 1983).

The project embraced ambiguity and multiplicity in its outcomes. Rather than measure success through behavior change or therapeutic gain, it looked at transformation in aesthetic expression, self-representation, and public perception.

Results

The DEMEDARTS project produced a range of outcomes across artistic, social, and educational domains. Each of these outcomes reflects the central goal of using artistic research to reimagine forms of collective life in response to the growing demographic and ethical challenges surrounding dementia. The following section discusses the project's main findings through the lenses of artistic production, participant empowerment, public dissemination, and policy relevance, supported by specific case studies.

Artistic Production: Materializing Memory and Identity

The artistic output of DEMEDARTS includes over 70 distinct works. These span multiple media and formats: rollators, jewelry, installations, performance-based actions, and graphic publications. Each object embodies a material metaphor that reflects personal narratives, emotional states, and collective critique.

Case Study: *Taylored Memory*

Taylored Memory is a customized rollator constructed from shredded bureaucratic documents. This object acts as both symbol and provocation—the shredded paper alludes to cognitive disintegration and memory loss while also referencing systemic erasure and institutional neglect. The participant who co-developed the rollator had a history in clerical work, lending personal resonance to the piece. As an artwork, it draws attention to how memory is not only neurological but also socio-political.

Case Study: *Cyclist*

The *Cyclist* rollator emerged from collaboration with a former competitive cyclist. The design incorporates racing handlebars and wheel designs, transforming the assistive device into a vehicle of pride, strength, and identity. Rather than hide the rollator as a medical

necessity, the *Cyclist* makes it a site of affirmation, allowing the user to reinhabit an identity rooted in movement and vitality.

Case Study: *Pinky*

Pinky, wrapped in plush pink faux fur, serves as a critique of sterile healthcare aesthetics. The participant who inspired the design expressed a desire to be seen, admired, and touched. The rollator's softness and flamboyance challenged expectations and invited joyful public interaction. By subverting traditional expectations around aging and utility, *Pinky* exemplifies how critical design can introduce humor, beauty, and intimacy into assistive technologies.

These objects were not static or private—they were exhibited and activated in performances, installations, and public walks, thereby transitioning from personal aids to civic interventions.

Jewelry and Wearable Memory Objects

Another stream of DEMEDARTS output centered on custom jewelry co-designed with people living with dementia. These works serve as portable memory archives, incorporating textures, scents, and symbolic forms that trigger autobiographical recall.

For instance:

- Lockets contained fragments of poems or song lyrics significant to participants.
- Bracelets embedded with textile patches from childhood garments stimulated tactile recognition.
- Brooches were cast in forms like birds, kitchen utensils, or musical instruments—icons representing personal histories.

One participant, a retired seamstress, contributed silk threads from her wedding dress to create a brooch shaped like a thimble. Another, once a pianist, chose a music note motif and infused her locket with lavender oil, recalling the scent of her childhood piano bench.

These memory objects became conversation starters, encouraging participants to narrate their lives with pride. By wearing these pieces in public or during group meetings, participants curated their identities actively, even when verbal memory waned.

The jewelry's role extended beyond symbolic communication—it reconfigured the social dynamic between caregivers, students, and individuals with dementia. When students asked participants about the meaning behind a particular brooch or bracelet, new relationships formed through aesthetic dialogue rather than clinical hierarchy.

Public Engagement and Performance

The DEMEDARTS project emphasized visibility, interaction, and disruption of public space. Its performative component involved city-wide rollator walks, gallery exhibitions, and installations that engaged diverse audiences.

Public Rollator Walks

One of the most iconic formats was the public rollator walk. These events took place in Vienna, Linz, and other Austrian cities. Participants, often elderly and mobility-impaired, walked together using artist-designed rollators such as *Cyclist*, *Pinky*, and *Taylored Memory*. Accompanied by music and sometimes students, these walks created spectacles of slowness, strength, and solidarity.

They challenged the exclusion of aging bodies from urban visibility. Passersby often stopped, engaged, asked questions—conversations that rarely occur between the elderly and strangers in public settings. For the participants, it was a moment of reclaiming space and attention.

Exhibitions and Installations

DEMEDARTS was exhibited in multiple venues, including the Venice Biennale and Austrian design forums. Installations included:

- Photo essays documenting rollator creation.
- Video loops of jewelry co-design sessions.
- Participant testimonials and poetry displayed alongside objects.

These exhibitions positioned the project not as charity or healthcare outreach, but as legitimate contemporary artistic production. This framing validated participants as cultural producers, not only "subjects" of research.

Educational Tools and School Engagement

A parallel result of the project was its pedagogical dissemination. Over 40 toolbooks were co-authored with educators and adapted for diverse learning environments. These small publications covered:

- Artistic methods like drawing, scent-mapping, and collage.
- Workshop design principles for working with elderly populations.
- Ethical considerations in intergenerational dialogue.

Examples include *Drawing Dementia*, which uses intuitive mark-making to express feelings associated with memory loss, and *Listening to Memory*, which guides sound-based co-creation activities.

These toolbooks were distributed in nine languages and piloted in:

- Austrian primary and secondary schools.
- Art and design universities.
- Caregiver certification programs.

More than 13,500 participants engaged with DEMEDARTS workshops, and over 2,500 attended performances and exhibitions. Post-event surveys indicated increases in:

- Empathy toward individuals with dementia.
- Willingness to engage intergenerationally.
- Interest in combining art and social practice.

Conclusion

The DEMEDARTS project exemplifies the transformative potential of artistic research in addressing the pressing societal, emotional, and political dimensions of aging and dementia. In an era marked by demographic shifts, rising rates of cognitive illness, and increasing social isolation among the elderly, DEMEDARTS proposes a new model for inclusive, community-centered responses. By centering co-creation, critical design, relational aesthetics, and participatory pedagogy, the project illustrates how art can operate as a method of inquiry, a platform for visibility, and a vehicle for social justice.

Over its four-year span, DEMEDARTS generated a body of artistic work that functioned both as research outcomes and as lived interventions. These works—customized rollators, wearable memory jewelry, performative installations, and multilingual educational toolbooks—embody what Borgdorff (2012) describes as "thinking in and through art." They are not simply by-products of a theoretical framework, but epistemological events in themselves, each contributing to the redefinition of how dementia is seen, felt, and acted upon in public space.

A central insight of the project is that dementia is not only a medical condition but also a cultural one. It reshapes relationships, affects identities, and exposes the limitations of societies structured around autonomy and productivity. By engaging people with dementia as co-creators rather than subjects of observation or treatment, DEMEDARTS repositions them as cultural agents, capable of shaping their narratives, aesthetics, and environments.

This reorientation carries profound implications. In contrast to clinical approaches that often treat memory loss as a disappearance of self, DEMEDARTS highlights memory as a distributed, material, and social phenomenon. Through objects like the *Cyclist* rollator or memory-embedded jewelry, the project shows how identity can be externalized and reconstituted through design. These artifacts act as prosthetic memories (van Dijck, 2007), enabling individuals to carry, share, and perform fragments of their stories.

Moreover, these co-created works do not just represent personal history; they also critique broader systems. *Taylored Memory*, for example, made of shredded bureaucratic documents, speaks to the politics of forgetting—not only neurological but also institutional. It comments on how systems of care, recordkeeping, and policy often erase the very people they purport to serve. This dual symbolic function—personal and political—is central to what Dunne and Raby (2013) describe as critical design: using objects not to solve problems but to raise questions and stimulate reflection.

The public activation of these objects further amplifies their impact. By exhibiting the rollators in galleries, parading them through city streets, and featuring them in performances, DEMEDARTS inserted aging bodies and assistive devices into visual and civic culture. These actions disrupted the invisibility that typically surrounds dementia, making it instead a shared concern and a site of creative encounter. Passersby stopped to ask questions, students documented and reflected on their experiences, and policymakers took notice. In this way, art became not just a mirror but a medium of civic transformation.

Importantly, DEMEDARTS did not frame these performances as therapeutic or merely awareness-raising. Instead, they were treated as aesthetic events in their own right, positioned within contemporary art discourse. This framing validated the contributions of participants with dementia not only as recipients of care but as artists, designers, and performers. Such validation is especially powerful in a world where cognitive difference is often equated with incompetence or irrelevance.

The pedagogical dimension of DEMEDARTS deepened its reach. The creation and distribution of over 40 toolbooks in nine languages extended the project's impact beyond workshops and exhibitions. These publications translated the principles of artistic co-creation into practical guides for teachers, caregivers, and facilitators. Importantly, they maintained the ethos of open-ended engagement, encouraging users to adapt the materials to local contexts and individual needs. The multilingual nature of these tools also reflects a commitment to cultural translation and accessibility, critical in addressing the diversity of aging populations across Europe and beyond.

From an educational standpoint, the project fosters what Greene (1995) terms "wide-awakeness": a capacity in learners to see and feel the world anew. When students engage in intergenerational workshops, listen to the stories behind a memory brooch, or co-design a symbolic rollator, they are not only acquiring knowledge—they are cultivating empathy, aesthetic sensitivity, and ethical imagination. These are precisely the capacities most needed in societies grappling with polarization, care deficits, and the loss of civic connection.

The impact of DEMEDARTS was also felt at the level of institutions and policy. By collaborating with Austria's national dementia strategy and being featured in the WHO's Global Dementia Observatory, the project made a compelling case for the integration of artistic research into health and social policy. This represents a major shift. Too often, art is relegated to the margins of policy—used for decoration, communication, or morale-boosting. DEMEDARTS insists that art is not ancillary but central to ethical decision-making and inclusive design.

This positioning is particularly timely as governments and healthcare systems confront the limits of their current approaches. As population aging accelerates and care infrastructures strain, there is growing recognition that technical and biomedical solutions alone are

insufficient. What is needed are practices that address the relational, cultural, and emotional dimensions of care. DEMEDARTS offers such practices, and importantly, shows how they can be scaled and institutionalized through toolkits, exhibitions, and interdisciplinary partnerships. The project also contributes to a broader reimagining of what community means in the 21st century. In many European contexts, community is increasingly fragmented—by generational divides, by digital mediation, and by economic precarity. DEMEDARTS counters this trend by creating spaces where people of different ages, abilities, and disciplines come together in creative purpose. These are not utopian spaces; they are modest, local, and contingent. But they offer a glimpse of what Bourriaud (2002) describes as "relational aesthetics": moments of shared meaning-making that produce new social configurations.

In doing so, DEMEDARTS affirms that care is not just a private responsibility or a medical category—it is a cultural and civic practice. One that must be collectively imagined, aesthetically negotiated, and ethically sustained.

In closing, DEMEDARTS offers a robust, replicable, and deeply human model for how artistic research can respond to urgent societal challenges. It combines methodological innovation with ethical sensitivity, theoretical insight with practical application. It shows that aesthetic practices are not luxuries but necessities, especially when confronting conditions that threaten to reduce life to deficit or decline.

The project's legacy lies not only in its artworks or publications but in the relationships, questions, and capacities it generated. These will continue to shape how communities care, learn, and imagine futures of dignity and inclusion. In a time of global aging, growing health disparities, and widespread loneliness, DEMEDARTS reminds us that art still holds the power to gather us, to teach us, and to keep us human.

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