

Where Real Change Happens: Arts As Advocacy in Edinburgh

The launch of the 13th Out of Sight, Out of Mind (OOSOOM) exhibition at Edinburgh's Summerhall felt very special: the air buzzed with excitement and a sense of accomplishment. The venue was filled with artists, their families and friends, proudly taking photos by the artwork. There were tears shed witnessing a display of some of the loved ones' hardest moments, and speeches full of emotion; a communal reflection and celebration of people's diverse stories, expressed creatively through the arts. For over 13 years, OOSOOM has become an institution in Edinburgh's cultural calendar, with many, me included, looking forward to it every year. Despite its longevity, each edition is distinct and builds on previous learning to become even more accessible and impactful. The thoughtfulness and positivity that surround the exhibition were evident from the very moment of stepping into the Summerhall venue.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind is the annual focus of the Arts As Advocacy, a collective advocacy project facilitated by CAPS Independent Advocacy. Created and led by and for people who experience mental ill health, it provides a platform to come



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together and use voices to share stories through the arts. Every year, OOSOOM collates artwork by hundreds of people with experience of mental ill health. In Scotland's advocacy landscape (and beyond),

it is a unique venture, blending independent advocacy principles and practice with the transformational power of the arts and truly inclusive participation.

Behind the scenes is the Planning Group, who make the exhibition happen every year, leading its organisation, curation and delivery. Drawing on their lived and living experience, group members have identified a need for people affected by mental ill health and discrimination to tell their stories. Doing so through the arts - without dictating the format or judging quality or value - is an inclusive, person-centred and trauma-informed way to provide that platform. Facilitating this process takes real skill and commitment. The group is volunteer-led, with only one paid coordinator (and a couple of paid exhibition/media assistants around the exhibition time). The coordinator provides a frame and essential support, while being led by group participants' needs and priorities in all they do. It is a strong example of high quality, independent collective advocacy - an area where CAPS leads best practice.

Each year, the Planning Group puts a great deal of thought into accessibility, effectively creating conditions where each artist, volunteer, and visitor can engage to the full extent of their ability and capacity at a time. Examples of this thoughtfulness are in the clear, accessible communications surrounding the exhibition and events; a dedicated area with large-print and Easy Read descriptions, ear defenders and lanyards signalling preferred levels of interaction;



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and an audio-descriptive exhibition tour developed jointly with the “See with Me” art group for visually impaired people facilitated at the Edinburgh’s Fruitmarket Gallery.

Collaboration with organisations across Scotland is central to the curation process. In 2025, 19 organisations participated, enabling OOSOOM to reach people beyond its immediate network and to break down geographic, attitudinal and structural barriers to participation.

This approach also creates value through knowledge-sharing, connecting different efforts to support people experiencing mental ill health and discrimination, and building an even bigger, more impactful platform.

Participating artists receive essential support, if needed, and are encouraged to share any part of their story, on any topic (not always mental-health related), in whatever medium feels right for them. Many choose to respond to the annual theme chosen by the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival. This year’s theme - “Comfort and Disturb” - inspired by quote by César A. Cruz: “Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable”, clearly resonated with many, adding another layer of meaning to the work on display. This open, inclusive approach resulted in an incredibly diverse collection - 394 artists exhibited in 2025!

That diversity is a core strength: showcasing the uniqueness of human experience while surfacing themes that unite us – loss and hope, illness and recovery, search for purpose and belonging. Artists were centred as a collective; there was no “headliner,” and every story was celebrated equally.

These stories clearly resonate with many. For some visitors, the works mirrored their own experiences, reassuring them that they are not alone. For others, including health professionals from the Royal Edinburgh Psychiatric Hospital and a GP trainees’ group who visited, the exhibition offered a different perspective on the people they support, perhaps contributing to more compassionate care and a deeper understanding of what it is like to live with a mental health condition.



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For everyone, it raised awareness of mental health crises and discrimination, effectively facilitating a public dialogue about issues that affect more and more people in Scotland.

The exhibition's impact was also evident in the volume of feedback gathered through "What does it mean to you?", a dedicated space that invited visitors to reflect on the theme and share thoughts with organisers. It proved a powerful way to include thousands of people in the conversation: the exhibition welcomed 2,647 visitors in only 16 days.

Further conversations were sparked by the "OOSOOM Uncovered" event, which brought artists and visitors together in an informal atmosphere to discuss the artwork. There, I met members of the "See with Me" group, taking part in the exhibition for the first time. Showing off their contributions to friends, they spoke about the hope and sense of belonging the group provides in an increasingly insecure world. Seeing their work displayed as part of the collective made them feel proud and accomplished - and glad their stories could be heard by wider audiences.

Continuing this dialogue is vital. The 2022 Census shows a significant rise in people reporting living with a mental health condition (around 11.3%, up since 2011); National Records of Scotland recorded 792 probable suicide deaths in 2023; and mental health detentions are on the rise. OOSOOM provides a compassionate, community-led space to connect, reflect, and affect real change.

Back at the launch, the jubilant atmosphere was tempered by mentions of funding cuts and the very real possibility that the 13th edition could be the last: the possibility was referenced in speeches and whispered in side conversations. To anyone visiting, the case for continuation is obvious. While organisers are doing everything possible to secure future funding - and promising avenues are emerging - the future remains uncertain at the time of writing.

Collective advocacy enables people to come together and act on issues that affect them. OOSOOM shows why lived-experience leadership matters and why breaking down barriers to participation is essential. Everything about the exhibition - from the annual theme to collaboration with organisations across Scotland; from venue accessibility to event design and communications; to its informal, positive atmosphere - serves a clear purpose and demonstrates genuine skill in gathering people around a shared issue. OOSOOM proves that art can be a powerful vehicle for collective advocacy - centring people's stories, building connection and reducing stigma. This is where real change happens.

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