Wellness



Wellness | The arts can lift the

spirits, soothe a troubled soul or a

broken mind. But is that always

true? Peter Aspden considers the

transformative power of culture

n the modern age, art is held to account as rarely before. Our muse-tunns, galleries, concert halls must point to visitor numbers, popular acclain and financial robustness to help justify their continued existence. Together, they assemble figures to show the first point of the f

and inculcates a sense of the common good. That applies equally to the first night of a new Wagner production and the bacchanalian raves of rowdier nights out.

night of a new Wagner production and the bacchanalian raves of rowdier nights out.

This justification can appear irresistible. The role played by the arts in helping to heal mental (and other) illnesses is well-chronicled and persuasively argued. Many aspects of well-being — is there a more scrutinised concept today? — are associated with some form of artistic expression. A casual coffee is better enjoyed listening to a carefully curated soundtrack. Even a routine journey on the London Underground can be enhanced, rendered life-affirming, by posters of poetry and conceptual art riddles.

And take that ultimate signifier of healing and self-care, the massage, it used to be accompanied by nothing more artful than the sound of pumelled muscle and a pungent whilf of hear trub. It is not like that any more. On a CD entitled Ultimate Massage Relaxation, highlights include "Yoga Dreams (with oriental futuse"); "Tai Chi (wellness music)"; and "Peaceful Ocean (New Age"). Music here serves to soften us, just as surely as the climax of the Last Night of the Proms stirs us. Weare alswes

ness music)'; and "Peacetul Ocean (New Age"). Music here serves to soften us, just as surely as the climax of the Last (light of the Proms strie us. We are slaves to the rhythm, putting ego and anxiety saide for a moment of sublime detach-ment, or a for a quick feel of sweaty, human solidart six er so successful at making us feel good, why is there that merest hint of disapproval, of guilt even, when we pronounce a work of art to pos-sess little more than a "feelgood" factor? Are we, after all, sceptical of the trans-formative magic of art? Could it be that while we acknowledge its power, we are also a little afraid of its ability to distract us from more serious causes? Religious fanatics have long mis-trusted the uneftered flow of freely expressed art, for precisely these rea-

Shashai's desert installation 'A concise passage', Desert X Al Ula, Saudi Arabia

Below: art can allow us to 'put ego and anxiety aside for a moment of detachment, or a quick feel of sweaty, human solidarity'

sons. As have others, Stendhal was so alarmed by the effect of art that he gave birth to a whole new psyche-shrodding syndrome. "I was in a sort of escatage," the French novellist wrote of his encounter with Florentine art while visiting the Italian city, "Everything spoke convirtly to my soul...! had palpitations of the heart...! life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling," Who knew that Renaissance painting could have the same effect as a small pill with a smiley face on it?

We mostly think of the distraction of art as a good thing, the implication being that we are transported to a more special, stimulating and morally superior realm than that offered by our compromised existence.

But what if that is not the case? This was the question posed most eloquently by literary critic and essayist George Steiner, who died this week at the age of 90. He wrote of the irony that Germany, the most richly civilised of all countries, should not only succumb to

the vicious populism of Nazism, but also devise a uniquely barbaric means

also devise a uniquely barbaric means of mass genocide.

"We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that a can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning," Steiner wrote in his 1966 essay collection Language and Silence.

"In what way does this knowledge bear on literature and society, on the hope. That culture is a humanising force, that the energies of spirit are transferable to be the steel of the

Even a routine journey on the London Underground is rendered life-affirming by posters of poetry

to, real concerns all around us. "The cry of tortured Lear, the torment of Gloucester and Cordelia, blot out the world. We do not hear the cry in the street," he wrote. reet,"he wrote. In 2011, UK neuroscientists per-

world. We do not hear the cry in the street," he wrote.

In 2011, UK neuroscientists performed an experiment to find the most "relaxing" song in the world. Participants tried to solve stressful puzzles as they listened to a range of music, while their biological reactions were measured. The winning number was the eight-minute long "Weightless" recorded by the Manchester band Marcoin Union. It turned out that the song had been made in collaboration with sound therapists, designed to induce something close to a trance state, helping to slow heart rates and lower blood pressure among its listeners. The study — commissioned by a bubble bath company — reported a "65 per cent reduction in overall anxiety" when "Weightless" was played.

Perhaps that song ittle provides a clue asto what art can, and can't, do.

There is, pharmaceutics aside, no greater way of soothing the troubled soult han a profound engagement with art. Butthere is also no guarantee that it will relax us all the way to moral enlightemment. It may do; but not necessarily. There is a rupture between truth and beauty, those traditional concerns of art, and ethies. The heavenly melodies of a Mozart sonata cannot bridge that chasm. They can put us in the mood, but never tell us the present of the something different from soot, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something different from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something officerent from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something officerent from soot, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something officerent from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something officerent from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something officerent from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something different from so calating the comes something different from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something different from sport, fashion, all other forms of calating the comes something di



Six artful wellness solutions: organic dance, stitching, sound baths, calming DJs, outdoor retreats, slow looking

Biodanza, worldwide
Who would have thought Lady Gaga's
directive in her 2008 single "Just Dance"
would become an important tenet in the
journey towards mindfulness? Biodanza
is a dance form that uses organic
movement to reduce stress and inspire
a deeper connection with oneself.
Empathy is a key goal of the class; a
group of people randomly twisting their
bodies into different shapes demands a
quick development of spatial awares
and of those around you. London-based
practitioner Su almes also takes James also and of those around you. London-based practitioner Sue James also stakes the idea of 'finding one's voice' literally, offering voice and percussion workshops where participants can tune into their inner rhythms by stretching their vocal cords in live drumming sessions. shakelondon.co.uk

Embroidery as Healing, Maha Rose



Brooklyn in 2013, stressed-out, over-caffeinated New Yorkers have been seeking refuge at Maha Rose, a healing centre that offers a range of alternative and esoteric therapies. They also offer

increasingly popular way to reconnect with the physical; brushing up on your needlework skills might be just the thing for anyone who is searching for a seamless combination of hobby and meditation. and meditation. talabarbotinkhalidy.com, maharose.com

dystopian headquarters or villain's lair than a high-end spa, but its menacing facade belies the haven of relaxation within Inside, cool Berliners can float in ultra-modern thermal baths illuminated by calming light shows. Soothing sounds, however, come not in the form of whale serenades or lapping wees, but live D sessions. This unlikely overlap between wellness and nightlife in our unbareful of in Berlin. where many is not unheard-of in Berlin, where many clubs serve restorative ginger shots and smoothies to pep up ravers in the early hours. If a 24-hour techno immersion

Artful Retreats, Crete
In ancient Greece, theatre and music
were not merely frivolous entertainment,
but were believed to be essential
rituals in which the spirit could be
rejuvenated through cathartic release.
Penelope O'fanoudaki takes a page
from the ancients by offering art
retreats in ber native Crete and in retreats in her native Crete and in Switzerland, where she lives. By pitching up easels in olive groves and on alpine hillsides, Orfanoudaki, who herself came from a high-stress corporate background, hopes to help those who lead hectic lifestyles unwind and reset artfulretreats.com

Crystal Sound Lounge, London These days, you can't throw a stone in a major city without hitting a gong, such is the number of "sound bathing" services

that have popped up. Sound baths, or sound healing, is based on a theory that sonic vibrations can help improve sleep quality, decluter the mind and generally induce a more mindful state. London's Crystal Sound Lounge offers your standard gong bath but also combines



Embroidery therapy in New York

or millennial wellness devotees —
crystals: a great way to achieve Zen
when everything hertz.
crystalsoundlounge.com

Slow Looking at Tate, UK
How often is a visit to a gallery or
museum actually a meditative,
relaxing experience? Particularly at
weekends, bodies crowd in front of still
fifes and jostle over wall texts; it's
enough to make many of us want to
white at though to the code fixing of the enough to make many of us want to whitz: through to the cool refuge of the gift shop. Last year, however, Tate published its "Guide to Slow Looking", encouraging visitors to take 10 minutes analysing each of a few artworks intensely stather than briefly skimming over many. Other museums joined Tate in a bid to inspire a more conscious and rewarding art experience. There's even an Art of Slow Looking podcast even an Art of Slow Looking podcast – for slow listening, presumably.