

CHAPTER 8

THE ARTS AS A FORM OF COMFORT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Society turns to the arts for comfort, escape, healing, entertainment and intellectual challenge. By attending performances, festivals and events, visiting museums and galleries, studying the arts formally or informally, or producing art either professionally or for leisure, the arts assist with building a sense of individual and community identity. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only denied global societies and audiences with opportunities to engage with the arts in live settings, but it has had a profound effect on the arts sector, with institutions closing their doors, festivals and events cancelled, and the production of art either severely restricted, in hibernation, or at worst abandoned. Millions of artists and arts workers around the world are now unemployed and given the short-term, casual and project-driven nature of much of the sector, many are unable to access government support initiatives designed for more conventional business models. While there are many current challenges for the arts as a result of the pandemic, there has been significant engagement with the arts during lockdown periods, largely through digital technologies and virtual formats. This continued engagement with the arts proposes that once COVID-19 is brought under control, the sector will rebuild and prosper again.

Keywords: Arts, artists, COVID-19, pandemic, tertiary art education

1. The Crisis that is COVID-19

The current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global societies is severe and the long-term future for many countries, economies and cultures remains unclear. While yet to reach the catastrophic mortality rates of the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920, where tens of millions of people died (Hodgson, 2017), current global infection rates and fatalities continue to rise. All areas of modern society are suffering moderate to severe impacts, be they social, cultural or economic. For the arts sector, which struggles at times to achieve recognition, the immediate impact of COVID-19 has been devastating (Boland, 2020). Around the world, many of the greatest institutions for opera, ballet, music and theatre, as well as galleries and museums, have closed their doors or suspended their programming. In the contemporary art space, countless music festivals, rock/pop concerts, art fairs, outdoor sculpture exhibitions, film and television studios and other art institutions have all either had to be partially or completely shut down. Millions of artists around the world are now unemployed and facing a bleak future, with the current and next generations facing significant career scarring and increased risk of mental health conditions. This bleak future is underpinned by the as yet unknown full economic cost of COVID-19 and the ongoing effect this will have on all industry sectors. Given the arts sector often survives on limited budgets, with a heavy reliance on audiences, the public purse and corporate and private sponsorship, there may be a significantly reduced resource base to support the arts as global societies set out to recover and rebuild (Midgette, 2020).

At the time of writing this chapter, countries were reeling from the ongoing human cost of COVID-19, with more than 120 million confirmed cases of the coronavirus and almost three million deaths worldwide, these figures growing at a daily rate (John Hopkins University and Medicine, 2020). The French President, Emmanuel Macron, even claimed that “We are at war ... the enemy is here, invisible, elusive, it progresses” (Macron, 2020). The initial lockdown of societies around the world meant that a range of economic sectors were severely paralysed, including the airline, entertainment, education, tourism, sports, retail and hospitality industries. The arts sector in many countries faced almost complete closure, with the exception of the organisations or individuals who already had a strong digital presence and engagement with online audiences. Keller (2020) laments how the pandemic “has silenced the world’s concert halls and opera theatres” (para. 1). Several of the most significant art institutions around the world have been unable to restart live performances and shows (Bedell, 2020; Brown, 2020a). New York City for example, home to some of the most famous art, music and performance venues, is still grappling with containing outbreaks of the virus (Danner & Stieb, 2020; Scott,

2020). Lockdowns have also recently occurred in other major cities, such as Melbourne, Brisbane, Beijing and Leicester, as further waves of the virus have occurred (de Courten et al., 2020).

2. The Arts and Times of Crisis

The arts have provided comfort and respite for centuries, as societies and communities deal with major events such as war, recession, plagues, famine and natural disasters. Artists in history have produced iconic works in response to some of the world's most serious events. Lockdowns have occurred numerous times in history and have had an influence on the artwork of the time. For example, during the period of the "Black Death" between the 14th and 17th centuries, the Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck created the well-known work *St Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-stricken of Palermo* (1624). This depicts St. Rosalie "being held aloft by angels with her hands outstretched in an intercessory manner as she gestures downwards ... one angel holds a black skull, a symbol of Black Death, while another angel points to it" (Tabone, 2020, para. 7). Several of the great composers wrote works in response to major world events, including Haydn whose *Mass in Time of War* (1796) was written during the European War, Tchaikovsky whose *1812 Overture* was written to commemorate the Battle of Borodino in 1812, and Chopin's *Military Polonaise* which was composed at the outset of World War II and played frequently on Polish radio to rouse national protest against Germany's invasion (Classic fM, 2018). In theatre, the great plague in Europe influenced Shakespeare's works of the early 1600s, such as *The Winter's Tale* (Shapiro, 2015) and *Measure for Measure* (Kelsey, 2016). In literature, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* collection of novellas, written in the mid-14th century, documents the tales of a group of young women and men sheltering from the plague in a countryside villa. The work is regarded as perhaps his greatest and a masterpiece of Italian prose (Britannica.com, 2020). These and other creative artefacts linked to global traumas remain as permanent records of history and a way for humanity to reflect and contemplate the meaning of world events.

The great wars of the 20th century led to significant creative responses through the arts. Many artists initially welcomed World War I due to such reasons as patriotism and the belief that oppressive regimes would be removed and a more open-minded and peaceful society achieved (Farrell, 2017). While some artists resisted the onset of war, others enlisted with passion in the hope that they could make a strong contribution to their country's future. Artists created new work while involved in combat, ranging from artefacts displaying enthusiasm for the goals of the war, to lamentations and mournful representations of loss and trauma. Art

posters about the war were “being created and circulated at an unprecedented level – the likes of which were not seen before” (Art Fervour, 2020). Otto Dix’s *Der Krieg* cycle of works, published in 1924, is regarded as one of the most powerful representations of the horrors of war and reflects his direct experiences as a young German soldier sent to the western front. Following the signing of the armistice agreement on November 11, 1918, artists continued to create visual works representing the ongoing loss and trauma associated with the major death toll caused by the war, as a way of reflecting on man’s inhumanity (Farrell, 2017).

The arts and artists have also been a vehicle for predicting the future, in what has proven uncannily accurate in the current pandemic through the 2011 film *Contagion* which has “striking similarities to the [current] outbreak that has managed to cripple virtually the entire earth” (Nepales, 2020, para. 1). *Contagion* focusses on a virus that likely came from a bat, that caused flu-like symptoms, that was fraught with disinformation, required social distancing and that ultimately killed millions. Viewings of *Contagion* increased significantly during lockdown, the film offering a way for audiences to perhaps better understand their current reality. Another view is that people have experienced heightened levels of stress and anxiety, hence are drawn to the themes in the film (Morris, 2020).

It is certainly the case that “people across the globe are turning to the arts for much-needed connection and comfort” (Hoe, 2020, p. 1). Netter (2020) reflects on how “the arts and their contribution to our wellbeing is evident and, in some ways, central to coronavirus confinement for those of us locked in at home” (para. 1). Law (2020) describes how people currently “seek comfort – anything to settle our heart rate and combat the stultifying dread and silence of self-isolation. And we always find that comfort in the arts” (para. 7). In their study of the impact of the current pandemic on older adults, Kelly (2020) describes how the elderly are turning to the arts, with a “surge in creative arts – poetry, dance, music, visual – all inspired by this unusual moment in history” (p. 337). In order that people in lockdown can engage with the arts, numerous art institutions, museums and opera houses around the world have expanded their digital offerings to offer virtual experiences and extend their reach geographically (Keller, 2020). Consumption of music has grown, for example Behr (2020) describes how subscriptions to online platforms such as Spotify have increased significantly during lockdown. Similarly, engagement with other digital entertainment platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ and YouTube has increased over the course of the pandemic.

Contemporary artists in a range of disciplines have also responded to the current pandemic. One area is the work of graffiti artists and muralists (Billock, 2020). Some of the new creations include a mural in Berlin of the character Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy

from 2001-2003, Gollum worshipping a roll of toilet paper with the caption “my precious” (Billock, 2020). Others that were created include a health-care worker in prayer, a road mural raising awareness of the importance of staying home to save lives, and one which depicts a woman with injuries on her face, highlighting the potential for domestic violence to increase during lockdown (Billock, 2020). In Italy, one of the most heavily impacted countries in the initial stages of the pandemic, thousands of people took to their balconies during lockdown to play music, to sing collectively, all with the goal of boosting morale (Thorpe 2020). While famous Italian opera singer Andrea Bocelli drew heavy early criticism in relation to his comments challenging the severity of COVID-19 and the strict lockdown, he also performed a major solo concert in Milan to send a message of hope and to raise funds to help hospitals (BBC news 2020). Rock musicians have also responded, such as the Rolling Stones who wrote *Living in a Ghost Town* as a direct representation of the impact of the pandemic on life in lockdown, exemplified in the following lyrics (Genius.com, 2020):

*You can look for me
But I can't be found
You can search for me
I had to go underground
Life was so beautiful
Then we all got locked down
Feel a like ghost
Living in a ghost town, yeah*

World renowned musician, lyricist and Nobel prize winner Bob Dylan also wrote and released *Rough and Rowdy Ways* while under lockdown, his first full album in nearly ten years. According to Snapes (2020), many critics have declared it one of Dylan’s best albums, with its sociocultural messages and political references documenting a record of the extraordinary events occurring at this time. Other more humorous artistic creations have emerged, such as the unknown person who altered the famous Michelangelo painting *The Creation of Adam* to show God with a bottle of hand sanitizer in his hand, Alice Bellchambers’ version of a famous war poster to read “Your country needs you *to stay at home*” [Author’s italics] (Art Fervour, 2020) or the Australian street artist LUSHSUX whose mural displays “Chinese president Xi Jinping wearing a hazmat suit while saying ‘Nothing to see. Carry on’” (Mitman, 2020, para. 6). The documenting of the pandemic through art has been a feature of the global lockdown and will likely be ongoing for some time. For example, the Smithsonian Museum in the United States and the National Museum of Australia each invited their audiences to share their experiences of the pandemic through creative work, in order to provide future

generations with a deeper understanding of how it has shaped society (UNSW Art & Design, 2020). These are just two examples of projects around the world designed to enable the public to contribute to historical records of the pandemic and to convey their understanding of the event through art.

3. The Economic Cost of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has been described as the greatest economic disaster since the Great Depression (Rajah & Tooze, 2020). The arts sector continues to suffer economic fallout due to its reliance on audiences and ticket sales, the majority of which has ceased under lockdown rules. While numerous governments have put in place cultural recovery or support programs, there is still significant concern in relation to whether these programs are simply delaying an inevitable disaster (Guardian writers, 2020). In terms of the non-profit arts sector in the United States, a recent report proposed that the financial loss over the 12-month period from March 2020 was likely to be in the vicinity of \$6.8 billion dollars, creating a “watershed moment for arts and cultural organisations” (Voss & Robinson, 2020, p. 6). The Royal Opera House in London had a 60 percent drop in income after the shutdown began in March 2020 (Savage, 2020). In Australia, the film and television industry lockdown has meant that “about \$2bn worth of production is in a state of suspended animation” (Westwood, 2020, para. 9), while losses in the live music sector are said to be in the millions and increasing (Fairley, 2020a).

The impact on jobs in the arts and artists’ income in numerous countries has been profound. In the three months to May 2020, job vacancies in the arts and recreation sector in Australia fell by 95% (Wright and Duke, 2020). Hoe (2020) argues that the pandemic “will have a profound impact on the long-term viability and sustainability of Singapore’s arts ecosystem” (p. 3). The global art fair market, which provides millions of dollars in sales for visual artists, is yet to see the full effects of the pandemic on its core business model. For example, 73.8% of survey respondents in China reported in the first quarter of 2020 that their art business would be very unlikely to survive beyond three months due to the shutdown of their industry (Archer and Challis, 2020). In the UK, it is estimated that the creative sector – one of the fastest growing areas of the economy pre-pandemic – is facing a loss of income in the region of 74 billion pounds, with approximately 400,000 jobs likely to be lost. The study by Oxford Economics also claims that the arts sector “is expected to be hit twice as hard as the wider UK economy” (Brown 2020b, para. 3), this impact described as placing the UK at risk of a cultural catastrophe (Pickford, 2020). In the US, the leisure and hospitality sector – which includes the arts, entertainment and recreation – was the hardest hit across the three months

February-April 2020, with over 40 million workers losing their job(s), representing nearly 50 per cent of the industry (Paine, 2020). In Europe, it was cited in mid-April 2020 that 50% of the workforce (1.7 million jobs) in the arts and entertainment sector were at risk, the second highest area of employment behind accommodation and food (Chinn et al., 2020).

4. The Impact on Tertiary Arts Education

In addition to the impact on public art institutions and community-based arts, the discourse suggests there will likely be a significant to severe impact on University and College art schools. Rosenberg (2020) goes as far to suggest that “the coronavirus crisis could be the final nail in the coffin for many struggling US liberal arts colleges” (para. 1). In the UK and Australia, art schools face similar challenges to stay financially viable, with the majority of institutions closing campuses and having to move to online education methods. The shift to online delivery for art schools has been a serious challenge for many, while those that have had active digital platforms have been able to adapt far more easily (Boucher, 2020). Challenges have included accommodating students who have had to return to their home country and who are in a different time zone, making synchronous delivery problematic, as well as the difficulties associated with demonstrating particular artistic techniques through videos and without the capacity to work one on one with students who work with art tools, music instruments and digital cameras for example (Flaherty, 2020).

There have also been other significant disappointments for art students, in that public events such as graduating exhibitions, musical performances and theatre productions have been cancelled due to social distancing requirements. For example, the Provost of LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore described how “almost 200 live performances and recitals, film screenings and exhibitions (the most awaited celebration in the calendar)” had to be urgently transitioned to digital platforms (Purushothaman, 2020, para. 2). In the UK, almost 5000 students at the Royal College of Art in London signed a petition arguing against the decision to move all courses online and graduating degree shows to virtual spaces, the students requesting the College postpone courses until it was considered safe to return to face to face learning (Shaw, 2020). These are just two examples of the significant and rapid changes that have occurred in tertiary arts education as a consequence of the pandemic, which have been further complicated by a major degree of uncertainty about how long it will be before education can resume in full face to face mode. There are, however, some who argue that the disruption has provided “a significant opportunity for reflection; to consider these questions of what and why, that will define the post COVID-19 art school” (Slatter, 2020, para. 1).

Despite the various challenges that tertiary art schools are facing as a result of the pandemic, there is ongoing commentary regarding the importance of arts education for the future. Huang and Zhu (2020, p. 1258) describe the importance of including at least some elements of arts education for all University students – not just arts majors – and they refer to the benefits in cultivating innovation and a “creative sense of unique subjectivity”. Sunday (n.d, p. 98) refers to art education as a “powerful tool for national revival”, while Mulholland (2019) proposes that there are now opportunities to revisit the way learning occurs in the 21st century art school.

5. New Ways of Working for Artists

Artists are typically risk takers, in that they invest considerable numbers of hours or even years developing creative products, hence around the world new models of delivery have quickly emerged or expanded. In terms of the performing arts, this has included strategies such as making digital archives public, and establishing new YouTube channels (Midgette, 2020). Musicians have collaborated virtually in creating new work, rediscovering old music, fundraising to attempt to secure the survival of venues and to support other organisations and charities (Behr, 2020). Numerous grass-roots works have emerged. One of the most significant involved centenarian and World War II veteran Colonel Tom Moore, who by covering the track *You'll Never Walk Alone* as popularised by Gerry and the Pacemakers, raised over 29 million pounds for the National Health Service in the UK (Behr, 2020). Live streaming has expanded significantly, for example, the Royal Opera House in London has presented live relays of several key ballet works, continuing the tradition started in the first decade of the 2000s by the New York Metropolitan Opera House and the National Theatre in the UK (Williams, 2018). While live streaming can cater to large audiences and therefore has potential for profit making, there is a general view that it is a second-best option as compared to live attendance and that the income potential is not significant due to the challenges of implementing ticket sales in the online space (Hoe, 2020; Williams, 2018).

There have been adjustments to some of the older models of delivery in response to the pandemic. Lulkowska (2020) discusses the future for film, and suggests that “perhaps the most exciting news is the renaissance of drive-in cinema” (para. 12). Another recent initiative has seen the world-renowned Turner Prize amended from one major winner to ten bursaries of 10,000 pounds each, suggesting that it may be a “step towards a more diverse and equitable industry” (Brown, 2020, para. 1). Artists are making a concerted effort to respond to the current global situation and what is likely to be a very different world in future.

6. The Future for the Arts after COVID-19

As Midgette (2020) questions, is the “flood of online creativity the wave of the future – or just a stopgap measure?” (para. 2). If it is a sign of the future, and institutions around the world continue to migrate to the online environment to deliver content (Cragg et al., 2020; Hoe, 2020), it will result in a highly competitive market for capturing audiences (Midgette, 2020). Fairley (2020) also sees a challenging road ahead, with references to the need for new rules around live interaction in art spaces, the loss of work opportunities due to years of ongoing economic hardship, and a future with yet to be seen challenges for the next generation of artists who may have less options for presenting their work. Voss and Robinson (2020, p. i) propose that art institutions need to consider the following four questions as they look to survive into the future:

- “What might the next year look like?”
- What is the source of our strength?
- How will we manage our people and revenue propositions to confront the new reality?
- When our doors reopen, whom will we gather?”

There are a number of unknowns in terms of the future for the arts. In relation to the visual art fair market, which in 2019 was estimated to be worth US\$64.1 billion, numerous events have been postponed or cancelled, and attendances at events that have gone ahead have dropped significantly (McAndrew, 2020). This sub-sector may take many years to recover. The future for major public events such as light shows, gallery exhibitions and outdoor performances is unclear, given the significant unknowns relevant to ensuring how to put in place adequate social distancing measures. Another factor that is yet to play out is in relation to the typical audience age for traditional performance genres such as opera, ballet and theatre. Given it is mostly older generations, Midgette (2020) questions whether people are “going to want to come into a theatre or concert hall, to sit cheek by jowl with others in a crowd of hundreds or even thousands, many of them senior citizens, many of them coughing?” (par 8).

Hands (2020) proposes that as the crisis starts to come under control, “it is an opportune time to rethink the value of the arts, and how we speak about their financial and artistic success” (para. 19). This would be an important step forward, given artists have long been recognised for their abilities to contribute new ideas, to problem solve and to build communities as part of urban regeneration for example (Clark and Madgin, 2017). The arts therefore offer a means of supporting and assisting communities not only during but in the aftermath of the current crisis. The arts will be needed for individual and collective healing,

for building communities, for stimulating debate, free thinking and for creating permanent creative representations of one of the most traumatic periods in recent history. As argued by the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “Creativity builds the resilience we need in times of crisis” (Azoulay, 2020, para. 4). There is no doubt that in the near future, artists around the world will explore and create extraordinarily meaningful work that responds to the current pandemic and that will provide a powerful mechanism by which the world can reflect, seek comfort and hope for the future.

While the global art world has suffered very significantly, history proves that the arts will endure given the passion, persistence and agency that artists bring to their work. Millions of people around the world have potentially engaged more with the arts while in lockdown than they have previously; the capacity of the arts to provide comfort is powerful. The arts sector will survive and eventually thrive again; the arts will be needed as part of the rescue package to build the ‘new normal’, whatever this may be, with the sector positioned to play a lead role in the revitalisation of the global economy and the health of developed and developing nations. Artists are willing and ready to tackle the world’s greatest challenges, armed with tenacity, passion and connection to the human spirit. We need our artists, art workers and the arts sector now more than ever; while currently severely challenged, artists and the arts will continue to shine a light and bring hope for a brighter future.

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