

EDITORIAL

Arts Entrepreneurship Internationally and in the Age of COVID-19

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What brings the two halves of our expanded, double issue together, other than rigorous scholarship and shared commitment to our growing field, is this moment of crisis and change. During our editorial process, the world went into quarantine, and like many arts scholars we found ourselves asking how the journal's field-building aims would contribute to the resilience of arts organizations facing unparalleled crisis. Dance studies and arts policy scholar Sarah Wilbur writes eloquently of the challenges facing her as a professor for in an op-ed for Duke University Arts¹:

My biggest challenge, honestly, was trying to avoid showing my own sense of devastation in seminar about the dire and still-changing statistics on the US cultural workforce under COVID-19. We already know: 30 percent of museums that have closed will not reopen²; a projected \$4.5

¹ Wilbur, S. (2020). "It's Hard to Stay Optimistic." *Duke Arts*. <https://arts.duke.edu/news/sarah-wilbur-it-is-hard-to-stay-optimistic/>.

² Merritt, Elizabeth (2020). "Three New Scenarios for Financial Survival in 2020." Center for the Future of Museums Blog. <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/04/13/three-new-scenarios-for-financial-survival-in-2020/>.

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billion in losses among arts nonprofits is expected in the next fiscal year³; and institutions are laying off cultural workers⁴ and implementing pay cuts. In the performing arts, widespread cancellations, residency deferrals, and contractual defaults are leaving the majority of gigging artists more unemployed than ever.

Wilbur continues by offering caution towards “a celebratory stance toward the adaptive resiliency of artists amidst the mass estrangement and economic losses of the present” and credits her concern to the high risk of exploitation of creative resilience at play right now under COVID conditions of production.

Arts entrepreneurship has been written about in this journal as a source of resilience, optimization, and opportunity creation in its winter 2015, summer 2015, and summer 2016 issues. Wilbur’s ambivalence points to tasks remaining before us, tasks that span a broad variety of practices and interdisciplinary fields.

Seeking to gain timely responses to the current crisis, we reached out to a variety of scholars working in the arts and arts entrepreneurship and asked them to comment on the future of our field. In a piece that she posted on her blog, *Creative Infrastructure* (“A COVID-19 Prompt from *Artivate*”)⁵, founding editor Linda Essig, dean of arts and letters at California State, Los Angeles, observes that the current rescue efforts being made by the US government—“direct payments; expanded unemployment insurance; and paid sick leave”—offer clear testimony that “collective social action is a more effective and efficient way to achieve human well-being than market-based exchanges.” Speaking specifically to the arts, Essig continues with a hopeful note with respect to equity in the cultural economy:

The other thing we see happening in the short term is a reliance on artists and their irreplaceable unique creative products to help humanity through this crisis through music, media streaming, literary arts, and online galleries. We are living without sports but not without the content available on Netflix or Hulu. If my first hope is fulfilled, my second hope is that people will connect the value they are finding in the arts with the value they are finding in collective social action to build economic and social structures that support the arts and artists. We need to heed Arlene Goldbard’s (and others’) calls for a “Works Progress Administration for the Arts,”⁶ but in a way that does not take us back to the 1930s but instead moves us forward to the other side of neoliberal capitalism. I don’t presume to know what that will look like, but I am hopeful that it will look better for artists tomorrow than it did yesterday.

³ Dafoe, Taylor (2020). “The Coronavirus Pandemic Has Costs American Arts Organizations an Estimated \$4.5 Billion So Far, a New Study Claims.” *Artnet News*. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/arts-organizations-lost-4-5-billion-pandemic-says-ambitious-new-study-1829262>.

⁴ Jacobs, Julia (2020), “Natural History Museum Slashing Staff with Layoffs and Furloughs.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/arts/design/natural-history-layoffs-virus.html>.

⁵ Essig, Linda (2020). “A Covid Prompt from *Artivate*.” *Creative Infrastructure*. <https://creativeinfrastructure.org/2020/04/04/a-covid-19-prompt-from-artivate/>.

⁶ Essig, Linda (2011). “What Paul Krugman and Arlene Goldbard Have in Common.” *Creative Infrastructure*. <https://creativeinfrastructure.org/2011/01/04/what-paul-krugman-and-arlene-goldbard-have-in-common/>.

In “The Unspoken Cost and Future Loss of Quarantainment,” Scott Blackshire, curator for the Tobin Collection of Theater Arts at the McNay Art Museum, uses a portmanteau to describe, like Essig, the avidness with which performers have stepped up to maintain content, even before the details are worked out:

Social distancing—the current hallmark of good citizenship—positions artists to utilize technology to reach audiences that are clamoring *en masse*, searching the web for their quarantainment. Artists respond to their deafening demands, and work—mostly for free—to present captivating, profound, and hilarious performances that exude emotional complexity in spite of stark online environments—like that of the Dafne string quartet broadcast from an empty Teatro la Fenice in Venice; or an actor’s short-form, improvised performance/online birthday party; or the #stayathome edition of *Saturday Night Live*. Pandemic notwithstanding, working for free is not sustainable. Messages supporting professional artists heard above the louder-than-usual online din during this crisis are buoyed by values and beliefs that mirror artists’ needs. Cindy Sadler, a classical vocalist, teacher, and entrepreneurship mentor, reminds clients and social media followers that artists need money. She urges audiences to offer donations for the ever-growing number of free online performances. Professor, author, and playwright Lisa B. Thompson is a supporter of artists’ unions. Her work reminds artists to question social and institutional values and be mindful of economic inequities. A more spirited perspective on the COVID-19 state of the arts comes from actor and graduate student Roberto di Donato. He gives a cerebral take. “I’ve fully dove into chaotic thinking, and I feel more drawn to alternative thought,” he shared. Also, “I started giving less shits.” Assuredly spoken, but despite giving less shits he’ll still need money. So, Less Shits/More Money—a roadmap, for all in need of a new, postpandemic path, worth consideration.

Diane Ragsdale, assistant professor and program director for arts management and entrepreneurship in the College of Performing Arts at the New School, titles her piece “What are we noticing?” to introduce a *mindful* entrepreneurial mindset to guide our way forward:

In a short video, “Atlas of Creative Tools”⁷, made available online in late March 2020, choreographer, educator, and sage Liz Lerman discusses cultivating what she calls a “toolbox mentality”—your own set of ways of working. She differentiates two approaches to building a toolbox using a swimming metaphor:

I can teach you how to swim. We can walk slowly into the pool. And we can start practicing our breathing. And then we can practice our arm movements and practice our kicking. We do all the stuff to become good swimmers. Working from the shallow end into a point where you’re suddenly in the deep end and you’re swimming. That’s one way to think about a toolbox.

But a *toolbox mentality* would be something like this. I’d throw you in the deep end. And you don’t know how to swim. You would start thrashing around. You might notice

⁷ Lerman, Liz. “An Atlas of Creative Tools: 3 Samples.” <https://vimeo.com/300088026>.

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that if you *cup your hands* you can keep your head up longer. . . . You might notice if you *add your legs* you can keep your head above water. You might even notice that keeping your head above water *is a good idea*.

This is really how the toolbox mentality works. It's you *noticing*.

You're in the deep end.

Things are happening.

You're surviving.

How is that possible?

Lerman's point: it's the *noticing* that is important.

In response to COVID-19 already one can see different toolboxes emerging—different survival strategies that expose not only radically different value systems and purposes but radically different proximity to extinction. This crisis is giving us the opportunity to see our sector with new eyes. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in an article for the *Guardian* published on April 7, 2020:

A disaster (which originally meant “ill-starred”, or “under a bad star”) changes the world and our view of it. Our focus shifts, and what matters shifts. What is weak breaks under new pressure, what is strong holds, and what was hidden emerges.⁸

Over the coming days, weeks, and months, this pandemic will reveal the weak, strong, and hidden in our arts and culture ecosystems. Moreover, in the struggle to survive, we are likely going to see hundreds if not thousands of different toolboxes emerge—from artists, organizations, funders, cities, service organizations, and states. If we are *courageous* and *smart*, we are going to *notice*:

- What is collapsing, what has structural integrity, and what invisible beauty or harm is being revealed?
- Who or what are we stewarding and protecting? Who or what are we leaving behind?
- Which newly emerging practices and structures are keeping us alive for now but are not sustainable? And which hold the potential to make us far more resilient and relevant in the future?

Ragsdale's call is ultimately optimistic with respect to resilience and capacity of arts entrepreneurs to build a new future.

At the University of Michigan Ashley Lucas, associate professor of theatre arts and drama and director of the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), points to the challenges remaining for artists working at the intersection of arts and prison abolition and social justice more broadly. While not explicitly about the field of arts entrepreneurship, her work points to the once-vibrant and still-vital projects where artists, both leading and participating, have been transformative

⁸ Solnit, Rebecca (2020). “The Impossible Has Already Happened: What Coronavirus Can Teach Us About Hope.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/what-coronavirus-can-teach-us-about-hope-rebecca-solnit>.

and are still very much needed:

I spent the last seven years traveling to ten different countries to see as much theatre in prisons as I could. My forthcoming book *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration* (Methuen Drama, September 2020) describes the remarkable, diverse, and inspiring work that I witnessed inside places that are meant to flatten out people's individuality and free will. In spite of the myriad and overwhelming challenges that they faced, the incarcerated people that I met found ways to make really great performances. They also used the theatre as a means to accomplish other things, like building community, developing professional skills, creating social change, and maintaining hope as a means of survival. Now in the COVID-19 pandemic, incarcerated theatre makers face new and even more daunting challenges. Prisons throughout the US and many other parts of the world are quarantined. All programming inside the walls has ceased. Even so, social distancing in prisons is impossible. Testing for the virus happens sporadically and in limited numbers. In all prisons—especially those with severe overcrowding—the disease spreads like wildfire, killing prison staff and incarcerated people alike. No one is allowed to make theatre under the present conditions, and when the prisons are closed to outsiders, most of us who offer programming in prisons have either very limited or no contact with the incarcerated folks with whom we work. No one knows when we might be able to enter the prisons again, much less restart rehearsals and theatre workshops. Like people with incarcerated loved ones all over the world, we wait and pray. Those who survive will have much to say about what the pandemic has taught us. This crisis makes plain things we already knew—that prisons have always been public health disasters, that caging people diminishes public safety, that concentrating things like disease and violence on a captive population inevitably results in those things radiating out into the rest of society. The Cook County Jail in Chicago and Parnall Correctional Facility in Jackson, Michigan, have now been cited as the two largest institutional epicenters for COVID-19 in the US, as the disease ravages the incarcerated populations and travels outside the walls on the backs of the staff who enter and leave daily. We in the theatre—incarcerated or not—have been trained to bear witness and to tell stories of what we know and what we hope the world could be. The theatre makers trapped inside the walls during this pandemic nightmare have much to teach us, and those of us who are their allies in the free world must do all we can to make sure that others can see and hear what the folks inside have to offer to all humanity. When at last the gates open again, we should be standing at the ready to welcome our sisters and brothers home or to go inside and begin devising new plays. As Boal taught us, we should begin rehearsing for a better future, yet again.

As all of these responses indicate, our way forward will be complex. Much remains to be witnessed and experienced, theorized and researched, organized and advocated for, as well as reflected upon and written about, and we remain committed to interrogating how arts entrepreneurship can better serve its vast field.

