ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

The pandemic and beyond

PASCALE AEBISCHER
AND RACHAEL NICHOLAS

Adaptation and resilience in the performing arts

Adaptation and resilience in the performing arts

The pandemic and beyond

Edited by

Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas

Manchester University Press

Copyright © Manchester University Press 2024

While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in Manchester University Press, copyright in individual chapters belongs to their respective authors, and no chapter may be reproduced wholly or in part without the express permission in writing of both author and publisher.

An electronic version has been made freely available under a Creative Commons (CC BY) licence, which permits commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the author(s) and Manchester University Press are fully cited. Details of the licence can be viewed at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 5261 7240 2 hardback

First published 2024

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cover design: Abbey Akanbi, Manchester University Press

Typeset by Newgen Publishing UK

Contents

Series preface: The pandemic and beyond – Pascale Aebischer, Fred Cooper, Des Fitzgerald, Karen Gray, Caroline Redhead, Melanie Smallman and Victoria Tischler vii
List of figures xxv
Contributors xxviii
Acknowledgements xxxii

Introduction: Adaptation and resilience in the performing arts – Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas 1

Part I: Digital adaptation

1 The present and future of digital theatre – Richard Misek 23
2 Dancing into the metaverse: Creating a framework for ethical and ecological telematic dance practice and performance – Daniel Strutt 42
3 Breaking the fifth wall: Creating theatre on a telepresence stage – Steve Dixon and Paul Sermon 65

Part II: Crisis and the creative workforce

4 Weariness, adaptability and challenging 'viability': Creative freelancers and pandemic resilience in South Yorkshire – Sarah M. Price, Stephanie E. Pitts and Renee Timmers 93
5 Reboot. Upskill. Rethink: A case study of digital adaptation in the creative workforce – Pascale Aebischer 114

6 Once upon a pandemic: Tales from the 2020s – Paul Heritage, Poppy Spowage and Mariana Willmersdorf Steffen (2063) 135

Part III: Reimagining the live event

7 Reconfiguring dramaturgies of place: Local authority event management during the COVID-19 pandemic – Giselle Garcia 161

8 Reinventing live events, reinventing communities – Sarah Pogoda and Lindsey Colbourne 181

Index 205

Series preface: The pandemic and beyond

Pascale Aebischer, Fred Cooper, Des Fitzgerald, Karen Gray, Caroline Redhead, Melanie Smallman and Victoria Tischler

In the first days of 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began to spread across the globe. It prompted a concerted international research effort which set out to understand not just the workings of the virus, but the ways that we responded to, lived and died with it. This led to a significant body of work being produced at speed, in which arts and humanities played a crucial role. In the UK, *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to Covid Research and Recovery* was established by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) early in 2021 to coordinate this research effort.[1] Over the span of two years, *The Pandemic and Beyond* grew into a virtual hub that enabled over seventy COVID-19 research teams funded by the AHRC to meet, exchange ideas and work together to ensure that their research would make a difference on the ground.[2]

This series is a legacy of this collaboration and bears witness to an extraordinary period, in which arts and humanities research became an integral part of the UK's research response to an emergency, leading to tangible changes in the role, purpose and methods of the arts and humanities, and laying important human foundations for recovery. It is divided into four volumes, each corresponding to four research clusters co-produced during the coordination process. A first group focused on working with professionals and policymakers in the creative industries to investigate the existential struggles of creative workers and organisations impacted by the ban on live in-person performance, and to devise new ways of connecting people through live arts while trying to build more inclusive and sustainable industry structures. A second set of research teams connected arts and creative practitioners with cultural and

community organisations, as well as care settings, with whom they worked to alleviate the social and mental health impacts of public health restrictions. These projects drew on arts- and nature-based activities to forge pathways for improving mental and physical health for individuals and communities. A third cluster examined the informational and epistemic experience of a pandemic that was a whirlwind of often deeply confusing and contested data. Artists, designers and linguists explored design solutions and devised how public health messages could be formulated so that they would reach the communities most severely affected by the spread of the virus. A final group of researchers concentrated on scrutinising legislation and guidance issued in haste, and grappled with thorny questions of rights and responsibilities, seeking to underpin developing scientific understanding with values-based frameworks that offered a more nuanced approach to balancing risks and benefits.

The richness of this research portfolio stems not only from its breadth but also from the ingenuity of the teams involved, members of which rapidly applied their expertise and creativity to a problem few had foreseen, working with communities whose vulnerabilities and prior marginalisation had been exacerbated disproportionately by the pandemic (Ryan, 2022: 198). What was initially perceived principally as a public health crisis was impacting on the population in myriad ways that branched well beyond physical health; encompassing mental health, but also social cohesion, cross-generational justice, trust in governance, and economic distress. Looking back over the first few years of the pandemic, the authors of a report for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) conclude that the 'pandemic was a watershed moment for the Humanities because the importance of the variety and quality of individual human experience rose to the surface in our collective re-evaluation of priorities' (Thain et al., 2023: 13). Arts and humanities research concentrated on the human impacts of the crises that intersected in this moment, working to resolve them, mitigate harms and examine some of the most fundamental human questions across macro and micro crisis contexts, from the national and international to the local and hyper-local. As these volumes show, this work was characterised by cross-fertilisation between disciplines and an emphasis on partnership working. It featured collaboration; between academic and public institutions, but also, notably, with community groups and

frontline organisations, such as those representing health and social care. Collaborations also extended to industry, and regional, sectoral and national policymakers. We know from analysis of surveys of those involved in *Pandemic and Beyond* research that for many this involved drawing on existing relationships, which deepened and strengthened as the fluctuations of the pandemic necessitated constant dialogue and increased accountability on all sides (Aebischer et al., 2022: 26–29). For others, the pandemic resulted in potentially fruitful new connections, and the promise of further research, work that continues to be relevant and have impacts on policy and practice.

All of this required new ways of working, and the ability to reconcile the theoretically conceptualised and deliberative methodologies associated with humanities research, which often take years to mature into publication, with quick and direct application, which often left little scope for fine calibration and reflective writing. The temporal demand for research outputs, and their new or altered audiences, exerted intense and immediate demands on researchers. Policymakers expressed an appetite for actionable findings to support decision-making, and frontline workers, while exhausted and short of time and resources, were desperate for support; research, in consequence, was predominantly pragmatic and focused on solutions. This meant a sometimes uneasy pivot to new ways of working and new modalities and timescales for doing and sharing work. Researchers did not always find it easy to reach those for whom their findings might have been most relevant, but many published policy briefings or held private meetings to share their insights and recommendations with potential user groups. Some projects embedded researchers within policy or service delivery organisations, narrowing the gap between research and practice still further. Work was often cyclical or iterative, with results shared earlier and more frequently, for example through pre-prints or the release of preliminary findings; if not a direct prerequisite for funding, the word 'rapid' in the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) COVID-19 call certainly implied that researchers had to reconsider how and when in the life cycle of a project potentially significant knowledge was shared. There was a flowering of online engagement and dissemination as research was translated into a rich variety of deeply practical resources. These included frameworks for action, advice for

public health messaging, interventions that responded to real-time problems such as the isolation of residents and staff in care homes or the design of personal protective equipment (PPE), and co-producing guidance for employers of artists performing in digital live shows from their homes.

As *Pandemic and Beyond* researchers explored the dynamic nature of individual and collective experiences of the pandemic, they also demonstrated a particular sensitivity to those for whom its effects have been felt unequally, and for whom suffering has been most profound. Readers will find this concern consistently exemplified throughout these volumes. Indeed, our brief to the authors in this series invited them to create a space where those voices could be part of the conversation. Such work was by no means easy to do. It was ethically complex, requiring heightened reflexivity and cultural competency. It was complicated by the requirements for social distancing and the need to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of both participants and researchers. As one research leader put it: 'you cannot build diversity into a project from scratch under these conditions' (Aebischer et al., 2022: 27).

Carrying out research during a pandemic necessitated innovation and adaptation at all levels. This is reflected in the research methods adopted: mixed, interdisciplinary and often participatory or arts-based, with projects bringing immediate benefits to participants and communities even as policymakers were targeted with written work. In many of the projects, more reflective and long-form modes of writing were either not part of the research design or postponed to a later date, to allow for retrospective analysis and evaluation. Meanwhile, the nascent field of arts and health was propelled to the foreground by the pandemic. A growing evidence base demonstrates the importance of multiple artistic modalities (including music, visual art, poetry and drama) in supporting health and wellbeing for a range of physical and mental health conditions. In these contexts, research by *Pandemic and Beyond* teams was able to highlight the vital role of artistic and creative practice through exposing the dangerousness of working conditions for frontline staff, including for the predominantly female workforce in social care settings. Arts-based projects were able to offer practical tools and emotional support for care workers, while helping to alleviate the isolation that many felt when confined to their homes

by re-creating artistic activities that were delivered via post, online or outdoors. With remarkable speed, researchers working with arts and cultural providers pivoted to developing suitable resources and freely shared their work with collaborators and user groups.

At times, however, things moved frustratingly slowly, while structures around the research (including university recruitment, facilities, ethics and funding) creaked and failed to keep up; at other times, the most fundamental changes and compromises to research design had to be made at speed, to respond to events as they happened. When this research was at its best, there were refreshingly democratic opportunities for everyone involved to learn and apply new skills and take on new responsibilities. At their worst, however, the conditions in which research was conducted during the pandemic replicated existing structural problems in the academy. A great deal of the work was done by early career researchers on short-term contracts, for example, and researchers found themselves giving more than their contracted hours to this work, alongside their commitments to delivering newly remote or hybrid teaching, often while caring for home-schooled children or dealing with the impacts of the pandemic on their own networks and home environments. While it was often deeply rewarding, many researchers, like others in the population generally, found the lack of a distinction between home, work and the stresses of pandemic life difficult to negotiate. Remote working proved methodologically, physically and mentally challenging. However, as these chapters demonstrate so clearly, it led to the rapid creation and deployment of new tools and technologies for data collection, analysis and collaboration. These, in turn, are exerting pressure on funders and policymakers in UK Higher Education to adapt their frameworks to recognise the value and complexity of this type of crisis- and solutions-oriented collaborative response in arts and humanities research.

The work presented in this series as a distinctive and coherent portfolio is, of course, just part of a much wider programme of research to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and to address the COVID-19 emergency that was funded through UKRI.[3] While the projects within the *Pandemic and Beyond* portfolio were all designed, in line with the parameters of the original rapid-response funding call, to take a largely UK focus, a range of other projects and funding calls cast their gaze further afield.

For some existing projects with an international focus, this 'created new opportunities for exploration of existing topics' that were exacerbated by the pandemic (Pirgova-Morgan, 2022: 27). Other schemes which are not represented in these volumes, for instance the UKRI Global Research Challenges/Newton Fund, brought together researchers in the UK and in low- and middle-income countries. More than forty such collaborative projects sought to gain insights and provide support during the pandemic, including projects aiming to improve engagement with COVID-19 public health messages to develop online psychological support through the arts in Rwanda; and to find ways of engaging vulnerable communities in Brazil on the consequences of the pandemic. This range of international projects is likely to offer an opportunity for further reflection, comparisons, dialogue and lessons in the future.

At the same time, we should not forget that despite the COVID-19 pandemic being, by definition, a global phenomenon, it has also been markedly culturally specific, local and hyper-local. Even in purely scientific terms, the identity of the virus itself has not been a global constant. Different strains and variants have emerged in different geographies and populations, and symptoms and morbidities have varied from country to country, creating very different patterns of disease across the world. Similarly, our responses to the pandemic and our standards of evidence and certainty – alongside modes of reasoning, ways of knowing and understanding – vary across cultural contexts, as we encounter different policymaking arrangements and civic communities. This is clear from the comparative work of the 'Lex Atlas' research in the *Pandemic and Beyond* portfolio, whose researchers examined dozens of countries' legal responses to the pandemic (King and Ferraz, 2021–23). Lessons learned in one country do not, therefore, translate cleanly to others.

Even within the UK, the response to COVID-19 was not uniformly governed or experienced. Nor did the disease spread evenly across the country. Time and time again, low-income households and communities, as well as groups with pre-existing vulnerabilities, felt the worst effects of both the disease and the measures put in place to protect the population. This pandemic was perhaps also one of the most challenging instances in which the arrangements for devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the powers of the Westminster Government to oversee or

coordinate national responses, were put to the test, prompting comparative analysis of the different modes and mechanisms of parliamentary review across the UK. This was complemented by scrutiny of data-driven approaches to decision-making and research that probed ethical and human rights issues. A deep delve into the situation in the UK provides us with valuable insight into the state of the nation – as well as our collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic – in the early twenty-first century.

While arts and humanities research on COVID-19 in the UK is ongoing, and many are now engaged in the more considered process of retrospective analysis and critique, this series, produced at the endpoint of the rapid-response funding period, does represent a significant milestone. As such, it offers an opportunity to reflect on the multiple temporalities and intersectional crises that have characterised the first two years of the pandemic, along with the wider epistemic structures and infrastructures at stake in the delivery of this research portfolio. While COVID-19 had a fairly temporally precise beginning in the final days of 2019, at least as a distinct viral emergency, and was formalised as a global emergency with the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of a pandemic on 11 March 2020, it can also be understood as, at least in part, the product of a deeper crisis in terms of anthropogenic climate change and how we interact with the non-human (Gupta et al., 2021). COVID-19 has been a profoundly transformative, rupturing crisis, with over two million dead in Europe alone (WHO, 2022b). Worldwide, anxiety and depression increased by 25 per cent (WHO, 2022a), and access to professional services was challenging; over 100 million lost their jobs (WEF, 2021), and while some accessed furlough and insurance payments, freelancers and those in the gig economy were often ineligible (Fowler, 2020). COVID-19 identified and shone a light on 'key workers', who were defined as those whose work was deemed essential during the pandemic and who often turned out to be poorly paid, socially marginalised and previously 'invisible'. These workers included healthcare professionals as well as bus drivers, food retailers, refuse collectors and care home staff. While healthcare staff were routinely celebrated in the UK, most notably through the 'clap for our carers' phenomenon, this was not accompanied by material changes in stagnant pay or harmful working conditions, and others – such as

domiciliary workers in care homes with older people – remained largely invisible.

As the virus began to transform the ways that we live and die, it pulled a series of overlapping crises and temporalities into tension, muddying any clean imagining of a shared pandemic trajectory. When the UK government announced extensive restrictions to movement and social life in the spring of 2020, disability scholars and activists noted that many disabled people had effectively been in 'lock-down' for years (Shakespeare et al., 2021). Likewise, COVID-19 intersected with deep-seated inequalities in race and health, landing disproportionately among people who had their ability to resist the virus eroded by generations of structural racism, and who were knowingly figured as disposable and exposed to greater risk than their white counterparts (Qureshi et al., 2022). Whole groups of people, including frail older people and those with underlying health conditions, were disproportionately negatively impacted. Other long and slow disasters and matters of justice (such as poverty, burnout in healthcare workers, or our inability to sufficiently care for the old) further altered the temporal bounds of the pandemic and fragmented our experiences of pandemic time (Baraitser and Salisbury, 2020). For doctors, nurses, cleaners and porters in overstretched hospital departments, time sped up (often in catastrophic ways); for those who were shielding or placed on furlough, the opposite was frequently true.

Among this profound and intractable messiness, attempts to impose a temporal order on the pandemic have always done a particular kind of political work. Across the conception and execution of these four volumes, rates of infection, illness and death have been in considerable flux; the state of the pandemic at the date of publication is impossible to know as we write this introduction in early 2023. We do know, however, that pandemics rarely – if ever – cleanly end (Greene and Vargha, 2020). The overlapping contexts and crises detailed above also frame wildly divergent apprehensions and realities of risk. Any intimation that we are becoming 'post-pandemic' must be met with a question the arts and humanities are uniquely poised to ask: for whom? The bereaved, still shielding, sufferers from 'long COVID', carers and healthcare professionals, after all, will continue to live pandemic time in different ways (Callard and Perego, 2021). One role of the arts and humanities amid this crisis

is (or has been) to make and preserve *meaning* out of what has been experienced. In each of these volumes, 'rapid-response' arts and humanities work has had to navigate these slippery experiences of time. If many of our projects responded to the pandemic first in ways that were 'quick and dirty', acting to comprehend, forestall, or inform the present, the research assembled here is more inclined to the future, seeking to take a tentative and reflective step back from the immediacy of the pandemic while acknowledging its ongoing nature.

The format of the crisis-driven rapid-response call is itself an unusual approach to the organisation of arts and humanities research, with its distinctively longitudinal and reflective modes of relating to social problems. In one sense, this speedy deployment of the arts and humanities at a moment of crisis is welcome: it positions researchers within these disciplines as having skills that are critical for intervening in moments of emergency and lifts humanities research out of the epistemic position of providing commentary or representational analysis after the event. It thus refuses the disingenuous political position that cultural, literary, historical and theory-informed analysis is incompatible with the crisis resolution. Indeed, as this is a moment in which arts and humanities research is *itself* widely understood to be in crisis (see Thain et al., 2023), this instrumentalisation presents important new possibilities, and perhaps one or two pitfalls, for scholars within these disciplines. The assumption – implicit in the funding announcement – that research in the arts and humanities is already collaborative, engaged, pragmatic, problem-oriented, public-facing and interdisciplinary, an image which many in the humanities research community have been promoting for some years, often in the face of opposition from colleagues, is itself worthy of note.

This also follows a long-standing trend in which humanities research, whose structures have predominantly been based (somewhat stereotypically) on the model of a lone scholar, working diligently on their idiosyncratic topic over a period of years, is remade to resemble a more scientific model. Such a 'scientific model' notably involves the organisation of a project into research teams and work packages, the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries that are not methodologically salient, larger amounts of money being awarded to smaller numbers of research teams,

the need to clearly articulate the public impact of research, and responsiveness to government and industry priorities. This trend has been clearly accelerated by the reorganisation of humanities research infrastructures during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as we noted above, led to a much greater degree of collaboration, with several authors working remotely to write together, crossing institutional, geographical, disciplinary and hierarchical boundaries. The epistemic effects of such reorganisation have been real – and mixed. The organisation of research, after all, plays a large role in governing not just the type of writing possible in such circumstances, but also what research can and cannot be done. While the funding that framed the *Pandemic and Beyond* portfolio opened up many new possibilities for humanities researchers, it simultaneously foreclosed others. Scholars without a desire to work in teams, whose research did not need significant money or have clearly defined short- to medium-term impacts, will have struggled to contribute; a significant loss that mostly remains invisible. This portfolio showcases many new opportunities, but it also hides the opportunity costs – not only for humanities work directly on COVID-19, but for humanities research generally, as already scarce resources were poured into immediate responses to a single public health crisis.

In the context of a UK government research funding strategy which, as the March 2023 HEPI report notes, 'appears to downplay the position of the Arts and Humanities in the UK's ambition to become a "science superpower" ' (Thain et al., 2023: 19), there is a wider political dimension to this, too. The COVID-19 crisis also coincided with a series of crises around Brexit, one of the most prominent of which concerned the possibility of the UK's participation in (or exclusion from) the EU's Horizon research programme. This created a context in which research was wielded openly as a token of national competitiveness, and international collaboration was reframed as a luxury that could be removed at a government's whim. While the UK focus of the *Pandemic and Beyond* research shielded this portfolio from some of these pressures, we nevertheless continuously faced the need to demonstrate, in a political climate ill-disposed to critical humanities thinking, the relevance, success, impact or transformational potential of this body of research. Against this backdrop, it was often tempting to frame our work

to make it align with (party) political slogans such as 'build back better' or 'levelling up' to demonstrate a willingness to engage with political priorities. The need to establish such 'synergies' is now a common and perhaps unavoidable feature of research coordination and curation efforts such as that of *Pandemic and Beyond*. Indeed, the research we share through these volumes should also be understood in the context of a wider, global attack on the humanities, whether departmental closures in the United Kingdom, the driver for teaching efficiencies in Denmark, or legislative attacks in countries such as Hungary and the United States. The quick pivot to rapid-response work on COVID-19 is both an affirmative rebuttal to such attacks (our work is indeed both important and useful) *and* a frank recognition of how successful they have been (our work is only viable to the extent that we can successfully position it as both important and useful). Our work, then, while bearing witness to the importance, usefulness and practical applicability of arts and humanities research in crisis contexts, also situates itself within broader national and international debates about the role arts and humanities play in fostering and sustaining the creative and open-ended critical thinking that underpins democratic political structures.

The *Pandemic and Beyond* series

The aim of this series is to preserve the breadth of the approaches taken by *Pandemic and Beyond* researchers in addressing the crisis, showcasing a form of arts and humanities research that has learned how to respond to, and mitigate, COVID-19 as it unfolded, and that has constantly adapted its methods and research questions to ongoing developments and the needs of research participants. Reflecting the variety of the *Pandemic and Beyond* research portfolio, the chapters we have selected range from in-depth reflection on schools of thought and social and governance structures that have influenced approaches to the pandemic to those that are much more 'hands-on'. These latter chapters address subjects sometimes sidelined in conventional academic writing, as their focus on working structures, industrial practices and lived experience does not always lend itself easily to conceptual debates and theorisation.

Written from the retrospective vantage point of late 2022 and the first months of 2023, these chapters offer a rare insight into the findings and often invisible facets of research projects whose primary focus was rapid on-the-ground impact, knowledge exchange, and direct engagement with communities, organisations and decision-makers. The chapters we collect not only offer reflection on what the research teams achieved, but also on what could be learned from their experiences to guide future responses to ongoing, accelerating and emerging crises, whether in relation to climate, migration, violent conflict, the threat of vaccine-resistant coronavirus variants, or other pathogens that could develop into new pandemics. The result is a series which models how, in responding to a crisis, the creativity, cultural sensitivity, community-reach and knowledge base of arts and humanities researchers can be one of the best tools to understand a novel virus in all its dimensions, steer policy and alleviate suffering on the ground.

In our volume *Adaptation and Resilience in the Performing Arts*, we explore how live performing arts in the UK innovated during public health restrictions to everyday life to overcome the obstacles to co-presence and performance in shared spaces that were a side-effect of pandemic mitigation measures. The volume explores the financial hardship and mental health impacts experienced by industry professionals as governmental discourses regarding the 'viability' of arts careers, alongside the difficulties of connecting with networks and accessing arts opportunities, put a particular strain on creative workers and freelancers in the UK at a time when some Latin American countries were leading the way in valuing and supporting the arts. Against this backdrop of existential struggle for creative workers, this volume celebrates the ingenuity and creativity of artists and researchers who applied themselves to finding both digital and analogue solutions to the problem of co-presence, and who, in so doing, broadened the access of previously marginalised communities to live performing arts. It highlights projects that explored how motion-capture and green screen technologies can enable performers to come together despite geographical distance and interact in a shared virtual space to create new work, and how such digital work affects their art, wellbeing and ability to reach wider audiences. It also champions the value of local initiatives in outdoor spaces and suggests avenues for artists and local governments to

reimagine towns and cities as performance venues in which diverse communities can gather to celebrate their location and ability to communally enjoy art amid a pandemic.

The mobilisation of existing natural, community and cultural assets and resources to support individual and community wellbeing – conducted at speed and often using novel modes of delivery – was a notable feature of pandemic responses across the UK. Our volume *Creative Approaches to Wellbeing* presents detailed examples of research looking at how these kinds of activities sought to address issues such as the challenges of isolation, to support health and care workers, or to create spaces that could enable coping, recovery or renewal. Common to the chapters here are reflections on what it means and what tools and systems might be needed if we are to develop resilience during and after such crises in future, alongside examination of ideas of 'vulnerability'. Authors bring to these discussions a particular focus on the experiences of those most marginalised during the pandemic because of mental or physical ill-health, age, or due to deep-seated structural and systemic inequalities. Individual contributions include an interrogation of the idea of 'togetherness' itself; an invitation to consider the benefits of 'walking creatively', a study of the work of small organisations in promoting health through interaction with urban nature; and investigations of the contributions of the cultural, museum and literary heritage sectors to wellbeing. Looking forward, authors invite us to consider how adaptations to ways of working for individuals, within organisations, and even at the level of a whole city region, could lead to changes in provision and lessons for practice.

Knowing COVID-19 looks at how different kinds of knowledge and meaning have been created and communicated, and the repercussions this has had – and continues to have – for how COVID-19 is managed, experienced, understood and remembered. Knowledge-making, it suggests, took various forms, and these are reflected in the diversity of chapters this volume curates. In the first instance, it demonstrates a rich humanities tradition of constructive critique, as 'official' communications around 'staying home', 'keeping distance', safety on buses, lateral flow testing, and vaccine hesitancy are tested and interrogated. Through this collective work, we see one of the clear, indisputable values of the humanities; their attentiveness to the human, and the clarifying or

reflective power this might have had with greater embeddedness in policy and information design. In the second instance – and frequently both are accomplished in the same short chapter – this volume collects a series of interventions which set out specifically to create and sustain meaning, particularly when dominant cultural narratives over the pandemic rely on those meanings slipping away from political or popular memory. Thus, we have rich and detailed explorations of the experiences of museum workers, people told to 'stay home', older victims of gender-based violence, people with deafblindness, and racialised nurses working in the NHS; as well as extensive reflection on what it was like to make the projects which formalised this knowledge work. Taken as a whole, this volume critiques and redefines pandemic epistemologies, assembling a partial blueprint for making future crises legible.

Finally, *Governance, Democracy and Ethics in Crisis-Decision-Making* explores what it means to be in a situation in which rational or epistemic framings of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on data and scientific ways of knowing the world, rub up against more entangled accounts. In these accounts, humans, the virus and governance arrangements coexist as a broader, relational whole. Human connections, personal fulfilment and social groupings are inextricably intertwined with matters (and meanings) of governance, ethics and authority, the rule of law, the economy and, crucially, public health. Looking at issues ranging from the authority of the WHO and the power of data during an emergency, to the role of public engagement as a source of policy evidence, we reflect on what it means to govern *ethically* in a pandemic, and whether the expected standards and norms of public life, evidence and decision-making should be different in times of crisis. We also reflect on how the long tail of the pandemic seems impossible to disentangle from a reduced trust in power and authority, creating an urgent need for ethics to move beyond normative assertions of the law and regulations. Our authors provide some suggestions as to how these things might be balanced more ethically and effectively in the future.

In 2020 and 2021, when televised government briefings on COVID-19 remained commonplace, ministers insisted time and again that they were 'following the science' (Colman et al., 2021). Even when critics called the accuracy of this rhetorical device into

question, they rarely troubled the governing logic that, were we only willing to follow it, scientific and medical evidence offered an unclouded route map through the pandemic. However, '[c]oping with the pandemic was (for the lucky majority who were not severely ill) not so much a medical crisis as an existential one' (Thain et al., 2023: 13); indeed, given the complex interplay of social, cultural, ethical, economic and political framings of health, illness and disease, there is no such thing as a purely medical crisis (Ryan, 2022). The *Pandemic and Beyond* series reveals how the arts and humanities research community rose to the challenge of this complexity, growing in confidence as it became increasingly clear that our methodologies, forms of knowledge and creative mindsets were key not only to tackling this all-encompassing human emergency, but, in so doing, to alleviating human suffering. As one of our researchers commented:

> What has been evident across our COVID-19 research projects is that arts-based research methods and approaches can generate much more nuanced narratives, capture the complex experiences and engage people that wouldn't otherwise find research accessible. Whilst of course medical research in such a crisis is fundamental, so too is understanding different people's experiences, responses and how their lives have been impacted so we can make more effective policies and support people's recovery and resilience looking forward. (Aebischer et al., 2022: 30)

If, as another *Pandemic and Beyond* researcher put it, this work 'has been a game-changer' in revealing the skill and generosity of the research community (Aebischer et al., 2022: 29), then it is also a call to action in the future, as we face a multitude of ongoing and emerging crises, from climate to migration and economic decline, which demand collective and civic responsibility and the willingness to continue to combine nuanced and context-sensitive thinking with a solutions-focused approach.

Without the vast collective knowledge, experience, methodological tools and expertise on which this type of research draws, our responses to ongoing challenges and future crises can only ever be impoverished. Expecting politicians of the future to say that they are 'following the humanities' might be wishful thinking. A pandemic response which made more extensive use of the kinds of evidence and interventions on show in these volumes, however,

would have been far more attentive to questions of power and justice; understood how, why and when particular people felt – and became – less safe; had a far better handle on how we engage with public health advice or vaccination drives; and begun from a richer knowledge of what the arts can do to keep us feeling human in the most difficult of circumstances. As a recent essay on climate change suggests, the arts and humanities have to be equal to the series of interlocking emergencies which frame our present historical moment (Pietsch and Flanagan, 2020). Over the past three years, scholars and practitioners have painstakingly built a 'pandemic humanities' – and a pandemic arts and cultural sector – which demonstrates that the arts and humanities are more than equal to the task. Creating the conditions for this work to (continue to) thrive must, surely, constitute one of the best forms of crisis preparedness we have.

Notes

1 Funded by UKRI/AHRC from February 2021 to February 2022, grant reference AH/W000881/1. The project's legacy website is housed at https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk/ and will be maintained until February 2028.

2 *The Pandemic and Beyond* was responsible specifically for the AHRC segment of the research portfolio created by the UKRI call, first published on 31 March 2020, for 'ideas that address COVID-19'. A version of the call updated on 21 September 2020 is available at www.ukri.org/opportunity/get-funding-for-ideas-that-address-covid-19/ (last accessed 4 February 2023).

3 For a map of projects focusing on COVID-19 funded by UKRI, see https://strategicfutures.org/TopicMaps/UKRI/research_map.html (last accessed 4 February 2023).

References

Aebischer, Pascale, *et al.* (2022), *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to Covid Research and Recovery*. Final Project Report. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10871/132640 (accessed 30 March 2023).

Baraitser, Lisa and Laura Salisbury (2020), 'Containment, delay, mitigation': Waiting and care in the time of a pandemic [version 2; peer review: 2 approved]. *Wellcome Open Res* 5, 129. DOI: 10.12688/wellcomeopenres.15970.2

Callard, Felicity and Elisa Perego (2021), How and why patients made Long Covid. *Social Science & Medicine* 268, 113426. DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113426.

Colman, Elien, *et al.* (2021), Following the science? Views from scientists on government advisory boards during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative interview study in five European Countries. *BMJ Global Health* 6, e006928. DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2021–006928

Fowler, Damian (28 March 2020), Unemployment during coronavirus: The psychology of job loss. BBC Worklife. Available at: www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200327-unemployment-during-coronavirus-the-psychology-of-job-loss (accessed 30 February 2023).

Greene, Jeremy A. and Dora Vargha (2020), How epidemics end. *Boston Review*, 30 June. Available at: www.bostonreview.net/articles/jeremy-greene-dora-vargha-how-epidemics-end-or-dont/ (accessed 30 March 2023).

Gupta, Saloni, Barry T. Rouse and Pranita P. Sarangi (2021), Did climate change influence the emergence, transmission, and expression of the COVID-19 pandemic? *Frontiers in Medicine* 8, 769208. DOI: 10.3389/fmed.2021.769208

King, Jeff and Octávio Ferraz (eds) (2021–23), *The Oxford Compendium of National Legal Responses to COVID-19*. Oxford: Oxford Constitutional Law, https://oxcon.ouplaw.com/home/OCC19. Last accessed 4 February 2023.

Pietsch, Tamson and Frances Flanagan (2020), Here we stand: Temporal thinking in urgent times. *History Australia* 17.2, 252–271. DOI: 10.1080/14490854.2020.1758577

Pirgova-Morgan, Luba (2022), Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on GCRF and Newton Projects: A research report by PRAXIS: Arts and Humanities for Global Development. Leeds: University of Leeds, PRAXIS: Arts and Humanities for Global Development 2022. Available at: https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/178/2022/06/University-of-Leeds-PRAXIS-COVID-19-Report-Final-Single-0422.pdf (accessed 30 March 2023).

Qureshi, Irtiza, *et al.* (2022), Healthcare workers from diverse ethnicities and their perceptions of risk and experiences of risk management during the COVID-19 pandemic: Qualitative insights from the United Kingdom-REACH Study. *Frontiers in Medicine* 9, 930904. DOI: 10.3389/fmed.2022.930904

Ryan, J. Michael (2022), Coda: Global consciousness of COVID-19: Where can we go from here? In Irene Gammel and Jason Wang (eds), *Creative Resilience and COVID-19: Figuring the Everyday in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 195–200.

Shakespeare, Tom, Florence Ndagire and Queen E. Seketi (2021), Triple jeopardy: Disabled people and the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Lancet* 397.10282, 1331–1333. DOI: 10.1016/S0140–6736(21)00625–5

Thain, Marion, *et al.* (2023), The humanities in the UK today: What's going on? *HEPI Report* 159, March. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/The-Humanities-in-the-UK-Today-Whats-Going-On.pdf (accessed 30 March 2023).

WEF (2021), Covid employment global job loss. World Economic Forum, 4 February. Available at: www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/02/covid-employment-global-job-loss/ (accessed 20 February 2023).

WHO (2 March 2022a), COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. WHO News Release. Available at: www.who.int/news/item/02–03–2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide Accessed 20th Feb 2023.

WHO (12 May 2022b), Two million confirmed deaths from COVID-19 in the European region. WHO News Release. Available at: www.who.int/europe/news/item/12–05-2022-two-million-confirmed-deaths-from-covid-19-in-the-european-region (accessed 20 February 2023).

Figures

Unless otherwise stated, all rights are reserved. For permission to reproduce any of these images please contact the rights holder.

2.1 Screenshot from the second Goldsmiths Mocap Streamer showcase performance 'Dancing in the Metaverse', November 2021. 43
2.2 Dancers Alexander Whitley, Tia May Hockey and Nicola Henshall dance together in May 2021 in a scene called 'Bubblegum'. 51
2.3 Dancers Jack Thomson and Hannah Burfield in a performance designed as a dance battle called 'Bird of Prey'. 54
2.4 Nicola Henshall and Tia May Hockey explored a hide and seek dynamic in a fantasy woodland scene in May 2021. 58
3.1 After sharing some 'magic mushrooms' the three Improbable actors (from top left to right, Angela Clerkin, Adedamola Bajomo and Cassie Hercules) laugh hysterically as they appear strangely doubled in each other's Zoom boxes, turned upside down and on their sides. 67
3.2 Visitors from Singapore, Alex Kong (left), Indumathi Tamilselvan (centre right) and Nurulhuda Hassan (right), dance and sing gospel songs to bring Paul Sermon in the UK (centre left) out of his dark mood, in *Telematic Quarantine*. 69

3.3 Creation Theatre actors (left to right) Graeme Rose and Giles Stoakley fill the empty seats in Cézanne's 'The Card Players' and attempt to impress their audience member visitor (centre) with a simple, yet impossible game of catch the ball. 70
3.4 Phoenix Dance Theatre performer Reynaldo Santos pulls Mirabel Hung-Smith out of a mossy hole in a woodland in 'Experiments in Wonderland'. 71
3.5 Guttersnipe Theatre's girl-band SHUGA FIX (left to right, dancing, Grace Church, Molly McGeachin and Polly Pedder) take to the stage live for their Triple Threat Teen Award performance, complete with triangular pre-recorded video versions of themselves. 73
3.6 The taxi driver (Matthew Lewney) reads an address on a piece of paper handed to him by his passenger (Stefania Pinato) in Red Ladder Theatre's 'TAXI'. 75
3.7 The tiny figure of Ariel (Dee Kathleen Egan) appears like a bee on a huge red flower ten times her size, while the VR-helmet-wearing botanist (Zhi Xu) observes and pokes at her with his finger, in DAP-Lab's 'The river of no one'. 76
3.8 Sharp Teeth Theatre performers Alice Lamb (left) and Tom Fletcher (centre left) re-enact different murder scenarios, silhouetted to disguise their identity. 77
3.9 In 'Black|White', the silhouetted performers Daniel Charon (left) and Charles Lane (right) meet in the middle with their two neighbourhoods superimposed behind them. 78
3.10 As rain falls outside, Anna Fenemore leans in through a window with a toy watering can to fill up the corridor with water as Gillian Knox looks on, in Pigeon Theatre's 'Where are the children?'. 78
3.11 Hands rub away chalk to reveal a forest scene, as Cassie Hercules sits by a campfire in the foreground, reading out a story from a book in Improbable's 'Outside the Frame'. 79

3.12 Finding themselves miniaturised on the television console, Pigeon Theatre's Anna Fenemore (left) and Gillian Knox (right) decide to attempt to get inside the TV – and succeed. 84
5.1 Caliban (P. K. Taylor) and the dinosaur. *The Tempest*, dir. Zoë Seaton for Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020. 118
5.2 Caliban (P. K. Taylor) peering through the 'trapdoor'. *The Tempest*, dir. Zoë Seaton for Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020. 122
5.3 Ferdinand (Ryan Duncan) and Miranda (Annabelle May Terry) 'touching'. *The Tempest*, dir. Zoë Seaton for Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020. 122
5.4 Antonio (Kofi Dennis) and the Duchess (Annabelle May Terry) in *The Duchess of Malfi*, dir. Laura Jayne Wright and Natasha Rickman for Creation Theatre, 2021. 124
6.1 Young person participating in an in-person session as part of the Far Apart UK workshops delivered by National Theatre of Wales (Wrexham, Wales), 2021. 138
6.2 Spoken word draft by a young participant of the in-person session part of Far Apart UK workshops delivered by Battersea Arts Centre (London, England), 2021. 141
6.3 Urban art intervention by a young participant of the Far Apart Latin America workshops delivered by Crear Vale la Pena (Buenos Aires, Argentina), 2020. 145
8.1 *Utopias Bach* Penrhyndeudraeth, November 2020. 190
8.2 *Utopias Bach* Collaboratory Zoom Exquisite Corps, February 2022. 195
8.3 *Geocache Bach*, June 2021. 196
8.4 *Utopias Bach* Gwalchmai by Beca, Nia and Llyr, July 2021. Example of micro-utopia and edible garden/play area created by children at Ysgol y Ffridd, Gwalchmai, May 2022. 198

Contributors

The grant reference numbers in this list refer to the Arts and Humanities Research Council codes used for research projects that are registered in the UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) gateway for publicly funded research and innovation (gtr.ukri.org). This is where key data points about the research projects in the *Pandemic and Beyond* portfolio these researchers contributed to can be accessed, including size of award, funded period, abstract, and outcomes.

Pascale Aebischer is Professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Performance Studies at the University of Exeter. *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to COVID Research and Recovery* (AH/W000881/1); *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit for Small to Mid-Scale Theatres in England* (AH/V008102/1).

Lindsey Colbourne is an artist, facilitator, trainer, adviser and designer of participatory processes. *Re-Inventing the Live Arts Event with Local Arts Communities: COVID 19* (AH/W00416X/1).

Fred Cooper is Senior Research Associate on the Wellcome-funded Epistemic Injustice in Health Care Project (EPIC), University of Bristol. *Scenes of Shame and Stigma in COVID-19* (AH/V013483/1).

Steve Dixon is President of LASALLE College of the Arts, University of the Arts Singapore. *Collaborative Solutions for the Performing Arts: A Telepresence Stage* (AH/V013890/1).

Des Fitzgerald is Professor of Medical Humanities and Social Sciences in the Radical Humanities at University College Cork. *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to COVID Research and Recovery* (AH/W000881/1).

Giselle Garcia is Lecturer in Dramaturgy and Performance Studies, London College of Music, University of West London. *Outside the Box: Open-Air Performance as a Pandemic Response* (AH/V015230/1).

Karen Gray is Senior Research Associate, School of Policy Studies, University of Bristol. *COVID-19: Impacts on the Cultural Industries and Implications for Policy* (AH/V00994X/1); *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to COVID Research and Recovery* (Grant number: AH/W000881/1).

Paul Heritage is Professor of Drama and Performance at Queen Mary University of London and Director of People's Palace Projects. *Far Apart UK: Looking beyond Lockdown to Understand How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue to Support Young People's Wellbeing during COVID-19* (AH/V015613/1); *Far Apart But Close at Heart: How do Arts Organisations in Latin America Support the Mental Health of Young People Online during a Global Pandemic?* (AH/V006517/1).

Richard Misek is a Professor in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen. *COVID-19: Widening Access to Arts and Culture through Video Streaming* (AH/V012835/1).

Rachael Nicholas is Membership and Engagement Manager at Vitae. *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to COVID Research and Recovery* (AH/W000881/1); *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit for Small to Mid-Scale Theatres in England* (AH/V008102/1).

Stephanie E. Pitts is Professor of Music Education at the University of Sheffield. *Responding to and Modelling the Impact of COVID-19*

for Sheffield's Cultural Ecology – a Case Study of Impact and Recovery (AH/V008668/1).

Sarah Pogoda is Senior Lecturer in German Studies at Bangor University. *Re-Inventing the Live Arts Event with Local Arts Communities: COVID 19* (AH/W00416X/1).

Sarah M. Price is Lecturer in Music Industries at the University of Liverpool. *Responding to and Modelling the Impact of COVID-19 for Sheffield's Cultural Ecology – a Case Study of Impact and Recovery* (AH/V008668/1).

Caroline Redhead is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, The University of Manchester. *When Pandemic and Everyday Ethics Collide: Supporting Ethical Decision-making in Maternity Care and Paediatrics during the Covid-19 Pandemic* (AH/V00820X/1).

Paul Sermon is Professor of Visual Communication at the University of Brighton. *Collaborative Solutions for the Performing Arts: A Telepresence Stage* (AH/V013890/1).

Melanie Smallman is Associate Professor in Science and Technology Studies and Co-Director of UCL's Responsible Research and Innovation Hub. *UK Ethics Accelerator: Coordinating and Mobilising Ethics Research Excellence to Inform Key Challenges in a Pandemic Crisis* (AH/V013947/1).

Poppy Spowage is Research and Development Associate at People's Palace Projects. *Far Apart UK: Looking beyond Lockdown to Understand How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue to Support Young People's Wellbeing during COVID-19* (AH/V015613/1).

Mariana Willmersdorf Steffen is a Research Assistant and Oca Blue Lead at People's Palace Projects. *Far Apart UK: Looking beyond Lockdown to Understand How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue to Support Young People's Wellbeing during COVID-19* (AH/V015613/1); *Far Apart But Close at Heart: How do Arts*

Organisations in Latin America Support the Mental Health of Young People Online during a Global Pandemic? (AH/V006517/1).

Daniel Strutt is Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths (University of London). *The Application of Motion-Capture Technology in Telematic and Virtual Dance Performance through a Framework for Long-Distance Remote Communication* (AH/V009826/1).

Renee Timmers is Professor of Psychology of Music at the University of Sheffield. *Responding to and Modelling the Impact of COVID-19 for Sheffield's Cultural Ecology – a Case Study of Impact and Recovery* (AH/V008668/1).

Victoria Tischler is Professor of Behavioural Science, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, at the University of Surrey. *Using Multisensory Culture Boxes to Promote Public Health Guidance and to Support the Wellbeing of People with Dementia in Care Homes* (AH/V006991/2); *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to COVID Research and Recovery* (AH/W000881/1).

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding *The Pandemic and Beyond*, and for Dawn Greenberg and Sharon Brookshaw's cheerful and valuable hands-on support offered throughout the gestation of these volumes. The University of Exeter provided support in the shape of study leave as well as funding for policy engagements, the publication of these Open Access volumes, and for our wonderful intern Blakeney Clark, who helped with copy-editing the chapters. At the University of Exeter, too, Adam Watt, Philip Schwyzer and Jo Gill were instrumental in making tricky things happen.

At the MUP end, it has been a pleasure to work with Thomas Dark, Shannon Kneis, and Laura Swift. Thank you to Jane Robson for careful copy-editing work.

We would furthermore like to thank all the members of the *Pandemic and Beyond* team who shaped the project between 2021 and 2023 and whose contributions it is impossible to disentangle from our thinking. The team consisted of:

Principal Investigator: Pascale Aebischer
Co-Investigators: Des Fitzgerald, Sarah Hartley, Benedict Morrison, Victoria Tischler
Post-Doctoral Research Assistants: Karen Gray, Rachael Nicholas, Eleanor O'Keeffe
Media Team: Garth Davies and Ciaran Jones (University of Exeter Press Office); Blakeney Clark, Olivia Rees and Paula Navarro Flores (Student Interns)
Lived Experience Panel: Ronald Amanze, Alexandra Kulanthai, James Oprey, Susanne Syme

Policy Support: Marina Altoé and Emma Rundle (Policy@Exeter); Trevor MacFarlane (Culture Commons)
Advisory Board: Kamaldeep Bhui, Luna Dolezal, Bilal Dunoo, Evelyn O'Malley, Jeff King, Ben Walmsley

Thanks are also due to the inspiring researchers in the 'Bridging Distance in the Creative Industries' cluster who shared their work-in-progress, resources and stories with us. Throughout the project, Ben Walmsley went beyond the call of duty in sharing information, resources and offering advice.

The work on this book took place throughout a pandemic in which we were more reliant than ever on the kindness and support of those around us. Pascale would like to thank David, Rhiannon and Glyn for making room for a project that was often overwhelming and for being there when things were tough, and Rachael for continuing with this book project long after her life had taken an exciting new direction. Rachael would like to thank Chester for being a happy obstacle to editing, thank Claire, Ian and Janet for help with childcare, thank Olly for his patience and support, and Pascale for being a tirelessly supportive PI, co-editor and mentor.

Introduction: Adaptation and resilience in the performing arts

Pascale Aebischer and Rachael Nicholas

At the start of 2023, live events are said to be thriving: talking to the Artistic Director of the Theatre Royal Plymouth, which had just finished its 'best season ever', and other live events organisers in South West England, Emma Ruminski concludes that live events are selling out and audiences are flocking back to theatres and sports fixtures, hungry for culture and life in general to return to 'normal' (Ruminski, 2023). This impression would seem to be corroborated by economic data: citing estimates by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), a report for the House of Lords Library suggests that 'in 2022, music, performance and visual arts contributed an estimated £11.5bn to the UK economy' and that in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector 'had recovered to above its 2019 level' (Hayes, 2023).

The long-awaited and hoped-for recovery of live performance, however, is neither pervasive nor solid. Under the surface, the tectonic plates of the UK's creative industries have shifted, and deep fault lines have emerged. Live performing arts have suffered from 'the converging challenges of COVID-19, Brexit, and the legacy of austerity' that exposed structural weaknesses in the industry (Shaughnessy *et al.*, 2022: 1; see also Kolb and Haitzinger, 2023) and made international touring into so mighty a logistical and administrative challenge that the National Theatre 'shelv[ed its] plans to tour productions to mainland Europe' (Slawson, 2021). Symptomatically, Cornwall-based touring company Kneehigh, a regional theatre company with an international reach and reputation, has wound down, citing 'changes in artistic leadership' (Gayle, 2021); Oldham's 138-year-old Coliseum is shutting its doors and London's Riverside Studios, a key venue which over decades had

built up a reputation for fostering exciting new live theatre and dance, has entered administration (Halliday, 2023; Wiegand, 2023). They join the growing number of performing arts organisations that are quietly folding across the UK.

Arts Council England's reshuffle of its National Portfolio Organisations for 2023–26, which involved a redistribution of funds outside of London in alignment with the UK Conservative government's 'levelling up' agenda, has sent additional shockwaves through the world of theatre and opera. Three major opera companies – i.e. organisations that serve local and national communities and that employ large numbers of highly skilled singers, musicians, dancers, technicians – were among the headline losers (Kenyon, 2022), leading to online petitions, heated debates within the sector, an adjournment debate in the House of Commons (Brader, 2022), and eventually some partial back-pedalling by the Arts Council (ENO, 2023). In theatres, cast sizes have noticeably shrunk, and industry professionals speak of greater rates of illness among casts and crews and more costly cancellations or postponements of shows than were common before the pandemic. And whereas pandemic mitigation measures in 2020–21 meant that disabled audiences and people who are often excluded from participation in the arts were able to perform in and watch shows online, very few theatres continue with the online provision, with the recovery, supported by financial incentives in the form of taxation,[1] focusing predominantly on in-person shows (Walmsley *et al.,* 2022: 44). This is just one example of the ways in which, as a House of Lords report acknowledges, 'a policy landscape characterised by incoherence and barriers to success' is, at the start of 2023, still hampering recovery for the creative sector (House of Lords, 2023: 3).

Adaptation and resilience in the performing arts investigates a range of aspects that contribute to shaping the policy and industrial landscape of theatre and dance as they emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. The volume's narrative arc takes us from thinking through questions of digital access and innovations in telepresence that have the potential to transform live performance practices of the future, through the experiences of the creative workforce and freelancers during lockdowns, to examining analogue live arts and performance programming in rural and urban areas and reflecting on the lessons that might be learned regarding how better to integrate

communities and the artists who live within them to create vibrant local cultures. While no sector of the creative and cultural industries remained unaffected by the pandemic, live performance was left particularly vulnerable to public health restrictions banning people from gathering in groups. Since in-person live attendance is central both to live performance's ethos and business models, theatre and dance took longer to recover than, for example, film and TV production, which was able to resume in the UK from July 2020 with COVID-safe protocols in place (Walmsley *et al.,* 2022: 31).[2] Barred from in-person performance indoors, theatre and dance companies and venues struggled to survive.

Some companies hunkered down and waited for the storm to pass, using the 'pandemic pause' to reflect 'on the social value and civic role of theatre' and 'accelerate their anti-racism and diversity action' (Gray and Walmsley, 2024). We are more concerned in this volume with the parts of the sector who rapidly adapted their working practices, organisational structures and the spaces in which they were able to connect safely with audiences, whether digital or outdoors, and who either adapted planned projects or created new work that responded to the pandemic environment (Busby *et al.*, 2023: 5). Many pivoted to delivering local arts for health and wellbeing activities, such as those outlined in the *Pandemic and Beyond* volume on *Creative approaches to wellbeing*. In fact, throughout the pandemic, the performing arts industry remained alive and made itself more visible than ever through energetic lobbying activities designed to counteract some of the harmful effects for the sector of pandemic mitigation measures, along with funding decisions that seemed to privilege buildings over people, permanent staff over the self-employed and freelancers, the 'crown jewels' of British cultural institutions over smaller and regional companies. Grassroots groups like Freelancers Make Theatre Work also prominently took issue with the perceived hostility of government and government-sponsored campaigns to professions in the arts (Gilmore *et al.,* 2024b; see also Chapters 4 and 5 in this volume).

It is also clear that the impact of the pandemic was not felt equally across all cultural organisations: the pandemic both 'aggravated and accelerated existing inequalities and longer-term trends across the arts and cultural sector' (Walmsley *et al.,* 2022: 4). Built-in inequalities resulted in significant variation in the way that

organisations were able to adapt. While some larger and financially buoyant companies were able to weather the storm by furloughing staff, pausing the production of new live performances, and securing Cultural Recovery Fund grants and loans, smaller companies desperately sought to generate alternative funding streams to stay afloat, whether through new live productions delivered in 'COVID-safe' ways, or through new partnerships (e.g. with charities, gaming companies or health service providers) and sources of R&D funding. In doing so, some smaller companies found ways of reaching new and more geographically spread-out audiences and were able to open up new markets, including overseas (e.g. Aebischer and Nicholas, 2020: 88). As Gemma Kate Allred and Benjamin Broadribb observe, 'the individuals and collectives who created digital productions during the pandemic' were motivated not only by a desire 'to keep theatre alive [...] but also out of a need to survive. They simply did not have the financial reserves or the funding to shut down indefinitely' (2022: 3).[3]

The lack of financial reserves also hit individuals in the creative and cultural workforce. Within the broader workforce, those younger than 25 and those without degrees, along with female freelancers, were the most likely to drop out of the industry altogether (Feder *et al.*, 2024). Freelancers were affected more than any other group, both in terms of financial and mental health impacts (Siepel *et al.*, 2021: 23; Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2021; Maples *et al.*, 2022; see also Chapters 4 and 5 here). Throughout the UK, already precarious creative and cultural workers faced many barriers to accessing support, with multiple policies and schemes announced in a piecemeal manner creating significant obstacles to securing funding (Gilmore *et al.*, 2024a). As a consequence, formal and informal networks and resources, such as those detailed in Chapters 6 and 8 in this volume, became particularly important for helping organisations and the cultural and creative workforce to adapt to frequent changes in guidance, support mechanisms and audience behaviours (Walmsley *et al.*, 2022: 22; Gray and Walmsley, 2024).

For many artists, organisations and local authorities, the pandemic represented a significant opportunity to re-evaluate their values, aims and objectives. Organisations used the pause in 'normal' activity to ask: 'who is this for?' and 'how do we do it?'

(Walmsley *et al.,* 2022: 19). For artforms which often located value in the liveness of the in-person encounter, lockdown restrictions forced a reflection about how theatre and dance might be of value in the absence of physical proximity, co-presence of performers and audience, and dancers' fundamental reliance on touch and 'kinaesthetic empathy' (Tsitsou, 2022: 27). As such, the pandemic represented a significant intervention in decades-old debates about liveness, and while digital and online theatre was establishing itself in mainstream culture and raising questions about the essence of theatre and liveness already in the run-up to the pandemic, the hiatus in in-person performance brought about by lockdowns and social distancing measures accelerated these trends. The opportunity to experiment with new ways of creating community and presence at scale and for more practitioners to engage in made-for-digital theatre that did not rely on physical co-presence between the performers has led to practical and theoretical re-examinations of 'liveness' and its connection to physical or virtual community and co-creation (e.g. Allred, 2022; Fuchs, 2022: 5–10; Pietrzak-Franger *et al.,* 2023), and to a growing body of literature that is focused on critical analyses of live performances and viewing practices during the pandemic (e.g. Aebischer, 2022; Allred *et al.*, 2022; Bissell and Weir, 2022; Chatzichristodoulou *et al.*, 2022; Fuchs, 2022; Gammel and Wang, 2022; Liedke, 2023). These debates and analyses inform but do not overdetermine the contours of the work undertaken by the contributors to this volume.

In response to urgent calls from policymakers and industry professionals for the evidence on which to base policy and business decisions, the research teams within the *Pandemic and Beyond* portfolio grouped together as 'Bridging Distance in the Creative Industries' began, between mid-2020 and 2022, to explore the adaptations and innovations within the broader creative sector: from libraries and heritage sites via museums and exhibitions to theatres and dance. Their interventions made a tangible difference to policy decisions, professional practice and sectoral strategies.[4] Additionally, data on audience attitudes and the impact of the pandemic and remote ways of working on the creative workforce were needed at speed to feed into the decisions that organisations were forced to make about how to get through the crisis, as well as shaping the policies to support the industry. The sector itself, via commercial and other agencies

and grassroots advocacy groups, produced multiple surveys and reports to meet this need and chart how the creative industries and their audiences adapted as the pandemic progressed (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2021; Underwood *et al.*, 2022).[5] Within the *Pandemic and Beyond* portfolio, a large collaborative research team at the Centre for Cultural Value (University of Leeds), led by Ben Walmsley, worked with cultural agencies and policymakers to systematically analyse the datasets collected by both agencies and the project's own audience researchers, sociologists, statisticians and arts management specialists.[6] This work has now resulted in the publication of the seminal report *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK Cultural Sector and Where we Go from Here* (Walmsley *et al*., 2022) and a book, *Pandemic Culture* (Gilmore *et al*., 2024a), the most comprehensive study to date of how the industry, its workforce and audiences have been transformed as a result of the pandemic.

The UK-wide research featured in *Culture in Crisis* and *Pandemic Culture* provides the broader creative industry context for the eight chapters in this volume, which take a more narrowly focused approach by exploring adaptations, performances and impacts of the pandemic on live performing arts by specific groups of artists or by investigating particular impacts on audiences and the creative workforce. The research projects we feature here responded to the urgent need for evidence regarding the viability of programming performances in digital media or the open air. Often building on their existing networks in theatre and dance, both in the UK and internationally (specifically in Singapore and Latin America), our research teams, many of whom straddle the divide between academia and practice, worked with creative practitioners and adjacent professions, such as local authority event managers, to understand the skills and technological innovations that such a pivoting towards digital and outdoor performances would require. The researchers are interested not only in the digital and analogue adaptations made during the pandemic, but also crucially in the material conditions of working in this way and in the physical, artistic and mental health impacts of changes in the artists' working practices and the consequences these may have for theatre and dance in the years to come. 'Digital performance', in particular, is explored here as an embodied set of practices that require physical

and psychological adaptations as performers come to terms with collaborating with others through technologies of telepresence that generate unexpected forms of connection and intimacy and impose new physical regimes and rules of engagement. The essays in this volume model a range of methodologies that include practice-as-research, qualitative analysis of survey and interview data collected from individual companies and subsections of the industry, and a critical look back at the UK's pandemic response from a future vantage-point. Approaching the impact of the pandemic on live performance from such different angles affords multi-faceted insights into adaptations by companies, technological innovations, changes in working practices and the comparative benefits and drawbacks of policy responses in the UK and Latin America.

Interestingly, these insights are sometimes at odds with the dominant narratives about the creative industries during the pandemic. The resulting friction is productive in that it forces a reconsideration of generalisations such as that 'digital distribution' appeared not to have been 'the great equaliser or diversifier that much of the sector was hoping it was' (Walmsley *et al.,* 2022: 68; see also Feder *et al.*, 2023: 41, 52), highlighting the necessity to drill down further into the data and their analyses to understand what we can learn from practice that bucked those trends. In our first chapter, Richard Misek focuses on specific performances and emerging technologies and demonstrates that digital experiences were highly valued by the audiences who did engage with them during the pandemic: for many within those audiences who had previously had to grapple with severe barriers to access, digital distribution of live performance did contribute to mental wellbeing and to making live arts more accessible. While the assessments in the middle section of this volume regarding the mental health impacts of the pandemic on freelance workers and young people in the UK add yet another piece of corroborating evidence to the well-understood grim overall picture sketched out above (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), the research teams examining digital and analogue adaptations found examples of grassroots innovation, values-led practice, creativity and community resilience that are beacons of hope (Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8).

As this suggests, against the backdrop of the devastating impact of the pandemic on the live performing arts, our authors share the learning about forms of adaptation and resilience that avoid relying

on the self-exploitation of precariously employed creative and cultural workers which Roberta Comunian and Lauren England powerfully exposed and denounced in the first year of the pandemic (2020: 116–117; see also Walmsley *et al.*, 2022: 64). Working at pace to provide insights that fed into organisational and policy decisions and technological developments, the primary focus of the research presented in this volume is on adaptation, survival and forms of non-exploitative resilience, modelling a type of solutions-focused performance research that combines analysis with drawing out conclusions and recommendations for practitioners, industry organisations and policymakers. Our authors concentrate on industry structures, collaborative approaches to local authority engagement and creative practices that foster more sustainable, wellbeing-focused and inclusive creative communities. This book, then, affords insights into innovations and practices which, with the right kind of policy support and funding environment, constitute a road to recovery that is values-led and imbued with the sense of 'creative optimism' that was shared by many live performance artists during the pandemic (Svich, 2020: 3).

This volume is organised into three parts: it begins with digital dissemination and innovations, moves on to consider the pandemic effects on the creative workforce and ends with hybrid and analogue adaptations. What unites the essays is a shared sense of purpose that was strengthened by the authors' exchanges in the course of the *Pandemic and Beyond* workshops and podcast conversations they participated in. That shared purpose is evident in the values of inclusion, community, innovation, equity and care that inform their reflections on the impacts of the pandemic and the lessons that can be learned to prepare the live performing arts and the communities they serve for future crises.

The opening essay on 'The present and future of digital theatre' sets the stage for the section of the book that is concerned with digital adaptations. Noting that the ability of digital cultural provision to diversify arts consumption during the pandemic seems to have been limited, Richard Misek homes in on the ways in which digital dissemination of live performance had significant benefits for *existing* audience members who had previously been presented with greater, often invisible, barriers to engagement with the arts. Complementing empirical evidence analysis with qualitative

research allows Misek to produce a more granular and nuanced understanding of the accessibility benefits of digital and hybrid forms of performance and to conclude that quality, including in the 'booking journey' that takes the audience from the box office through to the performance, is a key determinant of engaging older audiences. In the wake of the pandemic, disabled people and the d/Deaf, as well as older participants and those unable to travel to venues because of sickness or caring responsibilities, now see streaming as an accessibility feature. The current reduction in the number of streamed performances, which Misek argues is mainly due to the high cost of such provision, has a potentially devastating effect on these audiences, who are not explicitly catered for by the new R&D initiatives that, as we emerge from the pandemic, push the sector towards immersive AR, VR and XR technologies. These technologies, Misek concludes, may themselves offer new creative ways of increasing the accessibility of live work: as his case study of Sacha Wares and John Pring's *Museum of Austerity* for English Touring Theatre demonstrates, it is possible to integrate multiple digital accessibility options within an artwork or performance as a feature that is intrinsic to the experience.

A similarly hopeful and ethics-led approach to immersive technologies, here in the shape of practical experimentation and innovation involving motion capture, also informs Daniel Strutt's essay, 'Dancing into the metaverse: Creating a framework for ethical and ecological telematic dance practice and performance'. Strutt worked with a team of dancers and creative technologists to create an open-source software tool, the 'Goldsmiths Mocap Streamer'. The tool allowed dancers from different locations to share a virtual third space in which their avatars, animated by the data collected by the motion capture suits they were wearing while dancing, were able to interact meaningfully with one another and virtually 'touch'. Against the backdrop of the pandemic and the climate emergency, and in relation to the history of cybernetic and telematic theory and practice-informed thinking, Strutt explores the technology's ability to mitigate the need for touring and lower the barriers to access to collaborative digital spaces. His essay advocates a 'technoetical' approach 'that weighs audience experience and artistic aspiration against environmental impact'. Key to his thinking are the reflections of the dancers involved in this project, who discuss their

experiences of virtual presence, touch, gravity and immersion, and how the technology acts as their 'poetic collaborator'. The dancers' accounts of how the technology afforded an augmented sense of proprioception that enabled non-normative modes of dance embodiment, and that involved a distinctive affective and embodied investment in the avatar and its kinaesthetic possibilities, which was furthermore dramatically heightened when their avatar began to interact with and experience empathy towards other dancers' avatars, contribute much-needed evidence of the artistic and even activist potential alongside the experiential impact of digital technology on the artists who use them.

Steve Dixon and Paul Sermon's essay picks up on Strutt's preoccupation with giving artists the technological tools to connect and 'touch' in a shared virtual third space and exploring the new creative modalities afforded by those tools. 'Breaking the fifth wall: Creating theatre on a telepresence stage' shares the learning from a research collaboration between UK and Singapore-based project leads who used videoconferencing tools to provide ten professional theatre and dance companies in the UK with a stage platform for live online performances for which the project team designed visually immersive sets. This, then, was an alternative to Zoom and to the 'boxed-in' aesthetic for performance that was dominant in the first lockdown and that limited performers in their scope of movement. The chapter documents the various approaches to scenography and visual design adopted for each of the company 'residencies', and the artistic experimentations that resulted in ten live online performances. These performances serve as a starting point for a reflection on technologies and techniques that used a combination of twentieth- and twenty-first-century videoconferencing and vision mixing softwares along with physical green screens to create live shows that could be streamed to audiences live and that, in one configuration, could incorporate audience members into the production. The effects generated during some of the experimentations resulted in what Dixon and Sermon term '*theatre+*': a transformative hybrid live performance mode that has a distinctive aesthetic and ontology and is capable of creatively expanding what is possible on an analogue stage, enhancing the performers' own sense of proprioception and emotional connection with their scene partners in the process.

While the first three chapters thus map out how digital spaces and virtual co-presence may render the creative practitioners more resilient and adaptive in a post-pandemic geographically dispersed global creative community, the second part of this volume looks at the working conditions in the creative industries during lockdown and thinks about how to foster workforce and audience resilience through adaptations to networks, industry working practices and audience engagement. As Sarah Price, Stephanie Pitts and Renee Timmers document in 'Weariness, adaptability and challenging "viability": Creative freelancers and pandemic resilience in South Yorkshire', the ways in which freelancers were left particularly vulnerable by gaps in initial rounds of government support had wide-reaching impacts on the creative ecology. The authors' quantitative data analysis and interviews with creative freelancers in the Sheffield City Region reveal the deleterious effects of government rhetoric regarding the 'viability' of creative professions. With many interviewees stressing that working in arts, culture and heritage was intrinsic not just to their professional but to their personal identity, the government's 'viability rhetoric' cut deep, prompting feelings of self-doubt, loss of identity and questions regarding their contribution to and place within society. Despite prominent campaigns in support of the arts throughout 2020, almost half the project's survey respondents reported feeling less valued than before the pandemic, making it particularly difficult for them to be 'resilient' when 'responsibility is put on the individual worker to be able to withstand a global pandemic, rather than critiquing the insecure employment structures in which they operate'. With public opinion and freelancers' own perception of their value to society so strongly affected by government pronouncements, the authors advocate targeted funding to reboot the careers of the freelancers most negatively affected by the pandemic alongside a fundamental reassessment of how arts are presented in public discourse (including in schools). They call for policies by government and funding councils to be supported by more accurate data and by involvement of freelancers in decision-making processes, to ensure that risks are absorbed by the industry rather than individuals.

Many of these concerns are picked up by the next chapter, in which Pascale Aebischer revisits the infamous 'Fatima's next job could be in cyber' advert which questioned the viability of creative

professions in October 2020. 'Reboot. Upskill. Rethink: A case study of digital adaptation in the creative workforce' concentrates on the experiences of the creative workforce (freelancers and permanent staff) employed by Oxford's Creation Theatre, often in partnership with Big Telly (Northern Ireland), throughout the lockdown periods. This case study is based on interviews conducted with company employees in the context of the 'Digital Theatre Transformation' project in 2020, followed by a second set of interviews carried out in September 2022 that shed light on the longer term consequences of the values-led adaptations and innovations that have made Creation Theatre emerge as a leading digital production company and an example of how ethical employment practices within the industry might enhance a company's resilience. As Aebischer shows, for the creative team involved in producing a digital *Tempest* at break-neck speed in April 2020, digital work offered hope, structure, income and significantly better mental health outcomes than those in Price, Pitts and Timmers' sample of freelancers struggling through the pandemic. The chapter explores the rapid adaptations this group of theatre workers made to pivot to digital formats as they upskilled within their chosen professions. Live digital performance, the interviews show, is technical and physical and draws on hybrid skills sets derived from theatre, television and radio. While requiring adaptation to demanding physical regimes, it also has significant wellbeing and accessibility benefits for the creative team, along with sustainability benefits for the company. The agility with which the company used its technological innovations to pursue new partnerships in turn unlocked new funding opportunities that made it possible to offer fairer contracts, more inclusive working practices and increased financial stability for the workforce and a model for values-led resilience for the industry.

The final chapter in this section transports us into the future and shifts its focus from freelancers to young arts practitioners, as it looks back to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on young people engaged in online creative projects from the vantage point of 2063. From there, Paul Heritage, Poppy Spowage and Mariana Willmersdorf Steffen reflect on the rapid-response project Heritage led with People's Palace Projects and a team of artists and academic partners in both Latin America (2020) and the UK (2021).

The multidisciplinary research underpinning this essay arises from the digitally enabled cross-cultural collaborations set up by the 'Far Apart but Close at Heart' project, which aimed to build self-confidence in young people engaged in participatory online creative projects at a time when pandemic mitigation measures were aggravating an ongoing global mental health crisis in young people. The fictional future vantage point, supported by an approach that challenges the Eurocentrism of knowledge production that dominates current discourses regarding the impacts of COVID-19, creatively catalyses an incisive critique of the different approaches to the arts in the (by 2063 no longer united) United Kingdom and Latin America, arguing for a much more comprehensive integration of participatory arts activities in public health provision in order to support young people's mental health resilience and recovery. The chapter revisits the evidence gathered through analysis of artworks, surveys, interviews and workshops that involved young artists from ten cultural organisations in Latin America and the UK as research partners, shedding light on how arts organisations working in under-resourced, lower-income communities were able to offer vital support for the young. In doing so, this chapter not only gives voice to marginalised narratives, but it offers important insights into the sometimes radically divergent experiences of the pandemic, support systems and digital arts provision of young participants in the UK and Latin America that point to the need for large-scale policy interventions.

Part III of this book considers how live events were reimagined through analogue solutions to the challenges of venue closures and restrictions on social gatherings. 'Going digital' was not the only way that creative organisations and performers responded to the inability to gather in indoor performance spaces. The final two chapters in the volume are accordingly united in their focus on performers who took their work outside during the pandemic, where they could safely conduct performances with a live, if socially distanced, audience in attendance. In 'Reconfiguring dramaturgies of place: Local authority event management during the COVID-19 pandemic', Giselle Garcia explores how the pandemic accelerated a shift in thinking about the value of outdoor performances at the level of local government. Based on surveys and interviews conducted

with events managers in UK local authorities (LAs) as part of the 'Outside the Box: Open Air Performance as Pandemic Response' project, Garcia documents how, in having to create events tailored to local communities, LAs began to recognise that outdoor events and performances hold value that reaches beyond the economic impact of attracting tourists and external footfall to the local area. Garcia describes how, in forcing them to think carefully about how to maximise their local assets and about how best to serve their local communities, the pandemic led events managers to reflect on the specific histories, geographies and community structures of their towns and cities. This resulted in events that were both more inclusive, aiming to open up public space to marginalised groups, and more sensitive and responsive to local contexts and ecologies. Turning to the future, the chapter concludes by suggesting that the pandemic will have a lasting impact on how events managers and teams perceive their roles, and therefore the types of public events and performances that they facilitate, with more LAs collaborating with creative producers and local creative talent to create events that are community-driven.

Our final chapter complements Garcia's essay by providing case studies that demonstrate the value of small-scale arts and performance initiatives that are created with and for the local community. In 'Reinventing live events, reinventing communities', Sarah Pogoda and Lindsey Colbourne detail two examples of arts projects that ran during the pandemic in rural north-west Wales: *Metamorffosis*, a week-long combined arts festival with indoor, outdoor and online elements, and *Utopias Bach*, an experimental and inclusive arts initiative open to all with a focus on the benefits of small-scale working. As Pogoda and Colbourne explain, both projects were created for a local rather than a tourist audience and were formed outside of formal arts establishments, with a particular emphasis on experimental formats that foreground co-creation with the artistic community and audiences. Through this, both projects challenge ideas about 'where and how we gather, and with whom' for shared artistic experiences, returning us to the fundamental issue, explored earlier in the volume by Dixon and Sermon as well as Strutt, of how to negotiate co-presence and touch when physical proximity is both potentially

dangerous and legally restricted. The case studies detailed by Pogoda and Colbourne, however, offer approaches for tackling and interrogating the problem of presence which do not dispense with the live, in-person experience. The authors argue that the innovation required to negotiate restrictions on presence resulted in novel experiences which helped audiences to feel connected despite social distancing measures. This chapter underscores the importance of small-scale work and community co-creation to building resilience for both artists and audiences; the authors conclude by suggesting that recovery in the creative industries might start by considering the value of small-scale and long-term work, and by prioritising deep engagement with communities over a focus on large audience numbers.

Together, the chapters in this volume thus contribute to the growing understanding of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on live performance and provide insight not only into what went wrong, but also, importantly, into what went well: the practices, innovations and serendipitous discoveries that pave the way towards making live performance more sustainable, equitable, values-led and able to withstand future shocks. Resilience, these essays show, stems not principally from the individuals' financial, physical and mental ability to cope with disruptions to the industry and from their willingness to 'go the extra mile', but rather from a set of practices that centre the needs of the individual artist and/or audience member and that work collaboratively to embed inclusion, security, adaptability and care within creative communities and company structures. It is when creative practitioners were supported by strong networks and a values-led company ethos, and when accessibility and sustainability were part of the thinking behind technological innovation, that artistic communities grew stronger and much of the most exciting new work was able to develop despite the challenges of working through a pandemic. With the right leadership and structures of support, practitioners found ways of connecting with one another, with technology and with audiences to create the live shows that were a lifeline for so many culture-starved people during the pandemic, contributing in measurable ways to the wellbeing and resilience of performers and audiences alike.

Notes

1 In the UK, Theatre Tax Relief explicitly cannot be claimed for productions where 'the main object, or one of the main objects, is to make a relevant recording'. Made-for-digital shows that are performed online only and productions that are hybrid, with equal weight given to digital audiences, are therefore ineligible and disincentivised from creating a quality digital component as 'one of the main objects'; see www.gov.uk/guidance/claiming-theatre-tax-relief-for-corporation-tax, accessed 5 March 2023.

2 The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) splits the creative industries into nine subsectors, of which 'music, performing and visual arts' are one (House of Lords, 2023: 6), and this is the subsector which suffered the greatest job losses in 2020–21 (Siepel *et al.,* 2021: 8). It is noteworthy that none of the *Pandemic and Beyond* projects were concerned with supporting the music industry, although many arts and health projects represented in volume 2 of this series did investigate the relationship between visual arts and wellbeing.

3 In its written evidence to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in 2020, the Theatres Trust estimated 'that approximately 35% of theatre charities have less than one month's reserves and 59% have less than 3 months reserves' (DCMS Committee, 2020: 22).

4 For a full list of projects in this cluster, see https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk/projects/bridging-distance-in-the-creative-industries/ (accessed 5 April 2023; available at least until February 2028). The impacts of this cluster are documented in Aebischer *et al.* 2022: 12.

5 For the initiatives and projects collecting survey data on the impact of COVID-19 on the Creative Industries, which was updated throughout the pandemic, see the list collated by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (led by NESTA) at https://pec.ac.uk/news/how-can-the-creative-industries-come-together-to-share-how-covid-19-is-impacting-the-sector (accessed 15 April 2023).

6 For more information about the ' "Impacts of Covid-19 on the Cultural Sector and Implications for Policy' project, see https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk/projects/bridging-distance-in-the-creative-industries/impacts-of-covid-19-on-the-cultural-sector-and-implications-for-policy/ (accessed 5 April 2023; available until February 2028).

References

Aebischer, Pascale and Rachael Nicholas (2020), *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit: Final Report*, October. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10871/123464 (accessed 28 March 2023).

Aebischer, Pascale, *et al.* (2022), *The Pandemic and Beyond: The Arts and Humanities Contribution to Covid Research and Recovery*. Final Project Report. Available at http://hdl.handle.net/10871/132640 (accessed 30 March 2023).

Aebischer, Pascale (2022), *Viral Shakespeare: Performance in the Time of Pandemic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Allred, Gemma Kate, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (eds) (2022), *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*. London: Bloomsbury.

Allred, Gemma Kate (2022), Notions of liveness in lockdown performance. In Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (eds), *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation* London: Bloomsbury, pp. 65–86.

Allred, Gemma Kate and Benjamin Broadribb (2022), Introduction: Cultural cartography of the digital lockdown landscape. In Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (eds), *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1–19.

Bissell, Laura and Lucy Weir (2022), Introducing performance in a pandemic. In Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir (eds), *Performance in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–6.

Brader, Clare (2022), Arts Council England: Funding and regional distribution. House of Lords Library: In Focus. 8 December. Available at: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/arts-council-england-funding-and-regional-distribution/ (accessed 4 April 2023).

Busby, Selina, Kelly Freebody and Charlene Rajendran (2023), Introduction. In Selina Busby, Kelly Freebody and Charlene Rajendran (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–15.

Chatzichristodoulou, Maria, *et al.* (2022), Covid-19: Theatre goes digital – provocations. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18:1, 1–6. DOI: 10.1080/14794713.2022.2040095

Comunian, Roberta and Lauren England (2020), Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy. *Cultural Trends* 29.2, 112–128.

DCMS [Digital, Culture, Media and Sport] Committee (23 July 2020), Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors. House of Lords Library: HC 291. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/work/250/impact-of-covid19-on-dcms-sectors/publications/ (accessed 6 April 2023).

ENO (English National Opera) (17 January 2023), ENO funding statement. *ENO: News*. Available at: www.eno.org/news/eno-funding-statement/ (accessed 4 April 2023).

Feder, Tal, *et al.* (2023). Cultural consumption and Covid-19: Evidence from the *Taking Part* and *COVID-19 Cultural Participation Monitor* surveys. *Leisure Studies* 42.1, 38–52.

Feder, Tal, *et al.* (2024). The impact of the pandemic on jobs and working hours. In Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Freelancers Make Theatre Work (2021), *The Big Freelancer Report*. Available at: https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/bigfreelancerreport/ (accessed 4 April 2023).

Fuchs, Barbara (2022), *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic*. London: Methuen Drama (Bloomsbury).

Gammel, Irene and Jason Wang (2022), Introduction. In Irene Gammel and Jason Wang (eds), *Creative Resilience and COVID-19: Figuring the Everyday in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–13.

Gayle, Damien (2021), Kneehigh theatre to close after 'changes in artistic leadership'. *The Guardian*, 3 June. Available at: www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jun/03/kneehigh-theatre-close-changes-artistic-leadership (accessed 4 April 2023).

Gilmore, Abigail, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds) (2024a), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gilmore, Abigail, *et al.* (2024b), Policy review. In Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien, and Ben Walmsley (eds), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gray, Karen and Ben Walmsley (2024), Pandemic theatre: How England's theatre organisations responded to Covid-19. In Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Halliday, Josh (2023), Dismay as Oldham Coliseum confirms final closure at end of March. *The Guardian*, 16 March. www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/mar/16/dismay-oldham-coliseum-theatre-to-close-government-grant-lost (accessed 5 April 2023).

Hayes, Emily (2023), Supporting the performing arts. House of Lords Library, 27 March 2023. Available at: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/supporting-the-performing-arts/ (accessed 4 April 2023).

House of Lords (17 January 2023). At risk: Our creative future. House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 2nd Report of Session 2022–23, HL Paper 125. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldcomm/125/125.pdf (accessed 11 April 2023).

Kenyon, Nicholas (2022), Opera was on top form in 2022 – but the Arts Council might kill it off. *Daily Telegraph*, 14 December. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/opera/what-to-see/best-worst-opera-2022-eno-royal-opera-house-glyndebourne-welsh/ (accessed 4 April 2023).

Kolb, Alexandra and Nicole Haitzinger (2023), 'Brexit put us in the fridge, Covid in the freezer': The impact of Covid-19 and Brexit on UK freelance dance artists. *Dance Research* 41.1.

Liedke, Heidi Lucja (2023), Covidian theatre: The move to small screens and into homes. In Heidi Lucja Liedke, *Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre: NT Live and the Aesthetics of Spectacle, Materiality and Engagement*. London: Methuen Drama (Bloomsbury), pp. 145–197.

Maples, Holly, *et al.* (2022), *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of Covid-19 on UK Theatre Workers Final Report*. Available at: http://repository.essex.ac.uk/32639/ (accessed 4 September 2022).

Pietrzak-Franger, Monika, Heidi Lucja Liedke and Tamara Radak (2023), Editorial: Presence and precarity in (post-)pandemic theatre and performance. *Theatre Research International* 48.1, 2–8. DOI: 10.1017/S0307883322000360

Ruminski, Emma (2023), News report for BBC Spotlight South West, 31 January.

Shaughnessy, Caitlin, *et al.* (2022), The future of the cultural workforce: Perspectives from early career arts professionals on the challenges and future of the cultural industries in the context of COVID-19. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 6, 1–12. DOI: 10.1016/j.ssaho.2022.100296

Slawson, Nicola (2021), National Theatre to halt Europe tours over Brexit rules. *The Guardian*, 17 February. Available at: www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/feb/17/national-theatre-to-halt-europe-tours-over-brexit-rules (accessed 4 April 2023).

Siepel, Josh, *et al.* (2021), *Creative Radar 2021: The Impact of COVID-19 on the UK's Creative Industries*. London: Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre and Sussex University. Available at: www.pec.ac.uk/research-reports/creative-radar-2021-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-uks-creative-industries (accessed 12 January 2023).

Svich, Caridad (2022), Introduction. In Caridad Svich (ed.), *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations during a Pandemic*. London: Methuen Drama, pp. 1–8. DOI: 10.5040/9781350241091–003

Tsitsou, Lito (2022), The impact of COVID-19 on freelance contemporary dance work: Precarity and the vulnerabilities of the dancing body. In Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir (eds), *Performance in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 19–30.

Underwood, Josie, *et al.* (2022), *Big Freelancer Report 2022: Open to All, But Not Open All Hours: Hope and Fears for the Future of the UK's Entertainment Industries*. Available at: https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/bigfreelancersurvey_2022/ (accessed 5 April 2023).

Walmsley, Ben, *et al.* (2022), *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK Cultural Sector and Where we Go from Here*. Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value. Available at: www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/culture-in-crisis-impacts-of-covid-19/ (accessed 3 February 2022).

Wiegand, Chris (2023), London's Riverside Studios to enter administration. *The Guardian*, 30 March. Available at: www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/mar/30/londons-riverside-studios-to-enter-administration (accessed 30 March 2023).

Part I

Digital adaptation

1

The present and future of digital theatre

Richard Misek

The first two years of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic saw two seismic shifts in how the performing arts were delivered in the UK. The first was the shift online that followed the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. This led to a range of accessibility benefits, as well as providing an impetus for many in the arts sector to look at accessibility in a new light – as something that extends far beyond physical access to venues. Yet within 18 months another shift, this time back towards venue-based performance, was all but complete. For all the discussions about accessibility and new perspectives on social value that the pandemic prompted, at first glance it appears as though the UK's performing arts have now mostly reset back to how they were at the start of 2020.

Is this so? If not, what has changed? In this chapter, I summarise some of the findings of the 'Digital Access to Arts and Culture' research project and use these as the basis of a critical reflection on both the short-term and longer term results of the intensified digital experimentation that took place during the peak of the pandemic. I also look at the implications of this work on the future of accessibility within the sector. I do so by focusing mainly on the performing arts, and theatre in particular. Though many of our project's findings are relevant to other fields of arts and culture, our research skewed towards theatre in part because it was in this field that some of the greatest ambivalence towards online activity was evident and the most work needed to be done to highlight its potential (Childs *et al.*, 2021). This remains the case at the time of writing in late 2022.

By contrast, though not without its own challenges, the museum sector's 'digital turn' during the pandemic fitted more easily within a longer term process of engagement both with its social role and with emergent technologies (NEMO, 2021). For example, in addition to renewed interest in serving communities beyond their walls (something that the internet can play an important role in), there is ongoing enthusiasm across much of the sector for providing public access to digital collections through 'OpenGLAM' (Open Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) policies. It is notable that, though the AHRC COVID-19 project 'Museums, Crisis and Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities' noted various ongoing challenges to be faced if the museum sector is to capitalise fully on its pandemic-driven digital activities, the overall tone of its 'Museums and Digital Media: Innovation, Engagement, and Practice' report is largely positive about UK museums' digital innovation, and optimistic about how this may develop.[1]

Within the performing arts, however, there seems to be a greater baseline of suspicion towards digital activities; the creation of works for online consumption in particular has often been regarded as somehow inimical to performance, or at least an awkward fit with it, not least because it problematises traditional notions of physical co-presence. Of course, this could also be seen as a creative opportunity, and many practitioners, as detailed in Chapters 2–4 in this volume, embraced the potential of Zoom and other platforms of telepresence during coronavirus lockdowns. Yet across the performing arts as a whole, digital performance remains viewed with ambivalence. On the one hand, there is a widespread acknowledgement that work and leisure are hybrid and will only become further hybridised in the future. For example, many of the sector workers that we interviewed as a part of our project expressed wholehearted enthusiasm for digital innovation across all areas of their organisations. On the other hand, for a mix of cultural and economic reasons, this in-principle enthusiasm has not always translated into consistent practice. In light of this seemingly contradictory situation, in this chapter I also ask: what next for digital theatre? In addressing this question, I focus on theatre's use of streaming and immersive technologies.

Digital access: quantitative and qualitative research

Accessibility and diversity have become priority issues within the cultural sector over recent years, a move that has been reinforced by the requirement by Creative Scotland and the three Arts Councils that grant recipients gather equality, diversity and inclusion data, and by the incorporation of equality, diversity and inclusion into their fundamental investment criteria (e.g. 'inclusivity and relevance' is now one of Arts Council England's four investment principles). Yet many publicly funded cultural institutions remain limited in their social reach. Extensive research on cultural consumption has suggested that higher levels of public engagement with the arts over recent decades have not necessarily gone hand in hand with greater diversity (e.g. Miles and Sullivan, 2012). Well-known differentials in access based on economic and cultural factors (Brook *et al.*, 2020; Leguina *et al.*, 2022) are amplified by complex regional divides (Leguina and Miles, 2017), and intersect with ethnicity, disability, and age effects (Widdop and Cutts, 2012; Brook, 2016). Pre-pandemic studies focusing specifically on online cultural consumption suggest a similar pattern. For example, while online participants in arts and culture have generally been younger than in-person attendees, their socioeconomic profiles have tended to be quite similar (Leguina and Miles, 2017; Panarese and Azzarita, 2020; Weingartner, 2020; Mihelj *et al.*, 2019). Drawing on extant research, one could argue that the socially advantageous position of arts consumers who attend in person has historically made them more likely to engage online as well.

Research carried out by our own and other AHRC COVID-19 projects suggests that online provision continued to have limited success in diversifying arts consumption during the pandemic. For example, the longitudinal Cultural Participation Monitor surveys carried out by the 'Impacts of Covid-19 on the Cultural Sector' project in partnership with the Audience Agency suggested that the demographics of participants who engaged with arts and culture online at the height of the pandemic were overall fairly similar to those who had previously attended in person (Walmsley *et al.*, 2022; Feder *et al.*, 2022). Our own sector-wide research comprised an equality-focused analysis of the full dataset of the largest

COVID-19 arts and culture survey, Indigo's 'Culture Tracker', which featured 58,880 responses gathered from attendees of several hundred UK cultural venues between October 2020 and July 2021. This too found that online provision did not significantly diversify arts consumption during the pandemic, though our analysis suggested there were some small positive effects in attracting new participants from younger and minority ethnic demographics.

However, digital provision did lead to significant accessibility benefits for many existing cultural participants. Over the last two years, widespread evidence has emerged of the extent to which many d/Deaf and disabled people in particular have benefited from online arts and culture. The numbers here are unambiguous: the Audience Agency research cited above suggested that 57% of disabled people in the UK engaged with culture online during the pandemic, compared to a figure of 35% across the entire UK population (Torregiani, 2021). Our own project's quantitative research also provided clear evidence of the benefits for d/Deaf and disabled participants. For example, our demographic analysis of Indigo's Digital Experience survey found that 64% of d/Deaf and disabled arts participants remained interested in future digital offerings in autumn 2021, compared to 53% of non-disabled participants.

To gain multi-faceted insight into cultural production and consumption, top-level quantitative research needs to be complemented by focused qualitative research. For this reason, our project aimed to complement the statistical work already being carried out by the Audience Agency, the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC), our own project partner Indigo Ltd. and other organisations, with insights gathered from individual arts institutions via interviews and surveys about who their online activities were benefiting. Working at organisation level also allowed us to explore in detail how effectively cultural providers were shifting their programmes online, and learn about the opportunities that were opening to them as well as the challenges that they were facing.

As already mentioned, large-scale surveys of online arts provision suggest mixed results, finding significant accessibility and inclusion benefits among some demographic groups but limited benefits among others. This top-level finding raises an important question: were the accessibility effects of digital provision similar across organisations, or do the above sector-wide surveys conceal

a diversity of accessibility outcomes from organisation to organisation? If the answer to the above question is that all theatres witnessed a similar pattern of accessibility improvements in some areas (e.g. for d/Deaf and disabled participants) and lack of improvement in other areas (e.g. for older or minority ethnic participants), then this suggests that there may be an innate limit to the ability of digital provision to improve accessibility across multiple demographics. However, if the answer to the above question is that there was a significant disparity in the ability of different organisations to engage particular demographics through their online programmes, then the lack of sector-wide increases in engagement among certain demographics (e.g. older participants) cannot be assumed to be a consequence of digital provision in itself, but must result from more specific and nuanced causes.

Though limited in scope, our qualitative research suggested that there was indeed a significant disparity between the ability of different organisations to engage audiences online. A key element of our research comprised interviews and follow-up surveys with 40 organisations, most of whom operate in the performing arts. Organisations were chosen to reflect a wide cross-section of scales and types of activity, and of geographic location; our interviewees were typically artistic directors, digital managers and marketing managers. Across this sample, digital outcomes were drastically divergent: some organisations reported significant accessibility improvements across a wide range of demographics, while others struggled even to achieve double-digit views on YouTube. This disparity foregrounds the possibility that many of the perceived 'failures' of online provision to improve access and to diversify participation may have resulted from many organisations finding themselves unable to maximise the opportunities afforded by digital production and/or distribution – for example, because of lack of funding, lack of expertise, lack of technical infrastructure or lack of interest.

However, gaining detailed data about specific organisations' activities proved highly challenging for our project. Many organisations did not gather detailed data about their digital activities: in 2020 and 2021, arts funding agencies including Arts Council England eased their reporting requirements in order to take the pressure off struggling arts organisations; the result was a dearth of data

at precisely the moment when we most needed it. Nonetheless, a small number of the more digitally mature organisations that we interviewed had extensive data on their digital activities (notably Opera North, Darkfield Radio, Tank Museum and Pitlochry Festival Theatre), and we also initiated audience surveys with four further organisations (Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO), Imitating the Dog, the Lowry and the Barbican). Our findings from this data pool highlighted diverse accessibility benefits emerging from digital activity, though these benefits were unevenly distributed among organisations. For some (often smaller, less well-resourced) organisations, accessibility benefits remained latent; for others, the benefits were immediately apparent. For example, our survey of over 500 live and online ticket holders for BSO's 2020/21 season found that twice as many online viewers declared themselves disabled as compared to in-person audience members.

One key finding of both our quantitative and qualitative research was that one of the most important (and often overlooked) variables in digital success is quality. Our quantitative research into Indigo's sector-wide Culture Restart surveys revealed a direct correlation across many thousands of respondents between the quality of their digital experience and their willingness to continue engaging with digital content post-pandemic. Strong engagement was directly related to quality of experience, which was itself closely connected to the effort that arts providers made to remain connected with their communities. Our qualitative research into BSO's in-person and digital activities in turn shed light onto the work required to achieve a high quality of experience. For example, as well as their success in serving d/Deaf and disabled participants, BSO also achieved startling success in migrating over-65s online in 2020; our survey revealed that 87% of BSO's online audience were over 65; 67% of this online audience were new to digital arts and culture, of which 85% found BSO's concerts 'easy' or 'very easy' to access. BSO achieved this unusually high engagement among older participants by going far beyond the minimum required to mount a live stream. Aware of the age of their core audience, they ensured that the entire user journey involved in experiencing their live streams was as intuitive as possible across the various platforms involved in digital delivery – from providing a simple and easily navigable website, via simplifying the journey through the Spektrix

ticketing interface, through to providing videos to view. In a context in which accessing digital performances can often involve progressing through over a dozen web pages, BSO's membership packages allowed for two-click viewing. Quality of experience also of course depends on the content of the streams themselves. To provide the best possible experience, BSO invested in a high-quality remote-controlled multi-camera system that allowed them to live edit their concert videos (e.g. moving between close-ups of individual musicians at relevant moments in a performance), adapting for their orchestra the techniques and conventions of multi-camera television broadcasts.

Qualitative research can also complement quantitative research by revealing the personal experiences of digital participants. In order to gain some sense of the human impact of this change, I worked as a co-creator between January and March 2022 on *Mystery Trip,* a Lowry Digital Now! commission by Nigel Barret and Louise Mari, made in collaboration with a self-selected group of d/Deaf and disabled, and clinically vulnerable creators. The project used an adapted version of Zoom as a performance platform to provide a series of 'mystery trips' for online participants unable to travel. Week by week, I witnessed co-creators articulating the joy, the creative satisfaction and the sense of connection that this remote collaboration was giving them. Disability activist Kerry Underhill, for example, noted: 'This is the first time in 10 years that I've been able to collaborate on a performance. Before this, I'd given up on ever having the chance again' (Misek *et al.*, 2022).

Indeed, a key learning outcome of our project was that many participants with accessibility needs now see streaming arts and culture not only as a conduit for accessibility features (including closed captions, BSL interpretation and audio description) but also as an essential accessibility feature *in itself*. Online productions lower the physical, economic and social barriers faced by d/Deaf and disabled creators and audiences alike when visiting physical venues. Understanding online distribution as an accessibility feature opens the door to a more inclusive approach to accessibility that also addresses previously invisible barriers to engagement with arts and culture. For example, one of the biggest barriers is travel: the effort, the time and the cost (Brook, 2013). For many who are d/Deaf and disabled, older, vulnerable, low income, overworked,

geographically remote, chronically ill, dependent on local transport, time-poor or carers, this can form such a hard barrier to participation that no on-site accessibility features can make the trip to a physical venue feasible. In our post-interview survey, 100% of organisations that responded noted ‘widened geographic reach’ as a benefit of online arts and culture. Widened geographic reach in turn provides a strong foundation for organisations to reach new and more diverse audiences. For example, a 2020 live-streamed production of *Fidelio* by Opera North reached new bookers in widely spread UK cities including London, Bristol, Edinburgh, Stockport and Rochdale, and in 16 countries across four continents. The reduction of geographic barriers to engagement is not in itself sufficient to diversify audiences, but the experience of the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that – though previously overlooked – it can play a crucial role in facilitating diversification.

Unfortunately, despite the willingness of many (especially d/Deaf and disabled) participants to continue engaging with digital content beyond lockdown, as well as the widespread enthusiasm of many of our interviewees towards future digital projects, the intense digital activity of 2020 and early to mid-2021 did not last. By late 2021, theatres across the country were downscaling or abandoning their digital programmes.

The present and future of digital theatre

The balance of factors relating to why many organisations have now returned to exclusively in-person performances remains open to interpretation, but the extent of this ‘snap back’ is clear. In the first 18 months of the pandemic, of the 219 publicly funded theatres and theatre companies in the UK, 123 (56%) streamed live performances, offered digitally native performances or offered online workshops. For the autumn 2021 season, this figure went down to 60 (28%), and in the winter/spring 2022 season, this figure declined further to 35 (16%).

The above statistics also demonstrate that many theatres never went online in the first place, lending support to the argument that historically apprehensive attitudes towards technological innovation rooted in a traditional live/digital binary are still deeply

ensconced within the performing arts (Manninen *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, as previously mentioned, many of our interviewees expressed great enthusiasm for digital content. Many progressive artistic directors in particular looked forward to a hybrid future in which different forms of arts activity could coexist, and the traditional hierarchisation of venue-based performances could, at last, be challenged. For example, in our project interviews, Kris Bryce, Executive Director of Pitlochry Festival Theatre, highlighted the importance of being 'platform blind' and open to the possibility that streaming and social media platforms could sometimes be even more effective tools for delivering content than physical theatres. Jess Thorpe, Artistic Director (Engagement) at Dundee Rep, similarly highlighted the importance of combining in-venue, public and online activities in whatever combination worked best for achieving her organisation's main goal of community engagement. Meanwhile, Sanjit Chudha, Marketing and Communications Manager at Talawa Theatre, saw his organisation's digital pivot as an opportunity 'to unthink the transactional relationship' of conventional venue-based theatre altogether.

However, the widespread enthusiasm for digital theatre during successive lockdowns seems not to have had a lasting impact on how performing arts organisations have allocated their budgets since. How to explain the paradox of widespread enthusiasm for digital accompanied by widespread retrenchment in online activity?

A key answer is cost. The high levels of digital activity seen during successive lockdowns were made possible by the UK government's £1.57 billion Culture Recovery Fund and by budgets diverted from live activities (Bradbury *et al.*, 2021). As most of our interviewees noted, production costs for digital content are typically high – often in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of pounds – and digital projects rarely break even. The only way to generate a profit from streaming content is by reaching a mass viewership, something that only the very largest organisations with international brands can realistically hope to achieve. Unsurprisingly, as venues reopened, and emergency funding for digital projects dropped away, the high costs and low revenue potential of typical digital projects militated against continued online activity (Holcombe-James, 2021). In the face of an economic landscape that is now generally inimical to digitally created and/or distributed performances, many organisations'

enthusiasm for digital provision no longer translates into specific projects.

Another possible explanation for the paradox that many organisations' enthusiasm for digital seems to be generating limited online work is that this enthusiasm has not abated but is instead following a new trajectory. Though live-streaming of venue-based performances is significantly down, and online native performances utilising Zoom and similar platforms have all but disappeared (with notable exceptions, see Chapter 5 in this volume), much digital exploration continues – especially in the field of immersive technology.

Attention within and beyond the tech sector has increasingly focused over recent years on extended reality (XR) technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), and their role within the emerging metaverse. Major UK funders of Arts and Humanities research, UKRI and the AHRC, have been quick to direct funding at this potential growth area – not least because, with the combined pressures of pandemic recovery, a war in Ukraine, a domestic cost-of-living crisis and government debt, framing the arts as a form of R&D for the creative industries is more likely to lead to funding than is arguing for their social value. Notable developments include the establishment of the UKRI-funded StoryFutures Creative Cluster, a national centre for immersive storytelling based at Royal Holloway, University of London, whose partners include the National Gallery, immersive theatre company Punchdrunk and virtual reality system Vive, which forms part of a £120 million UKRI creative clusters programme. Another development is Innovate UK and the UKRI's £39.3 million 'Audience of the Future' project, with beneficiaries including the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and Aardman Animation. Most recently, UKRI has announced funding for a £75.6 million CoSTAR (a hub focused on the gaming, screen and performance sectors). Tellingly, accessibility, inclusion, diversity, social value and community engagement are not referenced at all in CoSTAR's application guidelines.

The paradox of widespread enthusiasm for digital accompanied by widespread retrenchment in online activity can thus perhaps be resolved by suggesting that organisations' short-term focus is on survival, which means a return to venue-based core activities, while at least some of the last three years of this enthusiasm is being

channelled towards immersive experiments. Due to their intensive use of emergent technology, these experiments may not always be suitable for widespread online distribution, and so are unlikely ever to achieve the kind of visibility of high-profile streaming arts programmes like the National Theatre's NT at Home initiative. They also typically require workarounds to accommodate the fact that VR headsets are still 'early adopter' technologies and far less widespread than phones and laptops. For example, StoryFutures' StoryTrails project, made as a part of the UK government's controversial £120 million Unboxed festival in 2022 (see Weaver, 2022), featured seven AR and VR experiences that were based in local libraries and depended on loanable iPads and VR headsets.

In short, while in 2020 and much of 2021 the prevailing wind was directed towards online experiences, at the time of writing in late 2022, it has shifted towards the use of 'cutting-edge' immersive technology in venue-based experiences. Interestingly, many organisations (including big players like the RSC and the Royal Opera) who showed ambivalence towards streaming seem to be more open to immersive technology. This is perhaps not entirely surprising. The pivot to streaming video was an externally imposed necessity that often did not fit easily with existing processes and some saw it as an instance of the tail wagging the dog. By contrast, XR is a creative tool that can be embedded within the stage-based rehearsal process. Crucially, it also leans into performers' embodiment, the performing arts' basic constituent. For example, the use of social VR technology in Dan Strutt's 'Dancing into the metaverse' (see Chapter 2 in this volume) offers a way for dancers simultaneously to engage with their own bodies and those of the remote dancers with whom they collaborate, as well as their technological mediation.

Immersive performance in English Touring Theatre's *Museum of Austerity*: a new frontier for digital access?

The increased use of XR technology within the performing arts brings many new accessibility features within relatively easy reach. For example, one of our case studies, *Museum of Austerity*, a mixed-reality installation by Sacha Wares and John Pring produced by

English Touring Theatre, featured a jaw-dropping array of accessibility features. *Museum of Austerity* recounted the personal stories of disabled benefit claimants who died between 2010 and 2020 and invited participants to reflect on the human cost of austerity. Wearing HoloLens 2 mixed-reality 'smart glasses', participants could walk around a room, encounter volumetrically captured life-size images of individual victims of austerity, and hear their stories as told by surviving friends and relatives. Accessibility options included in-headset captions (the result of an extensive process of experimentation into how to position text in virtual space); multiple options for controlling sound and integrating the installation with hearing aids, including the option of experiencing the work without background audio; and the option to bypass narrative elements that featured specific trigger content. The astonishing level of innovation involved in some of the work's accessibility solutions is exemplified by the audio description for blind and partially sighted participants. The installation featured verbal testimony that was triggered when participants approached each holographic figure. The audio description therefore needed to be cued by the user's position and to trigger a delay in the narration of each story until the audio description itself was complete; the audio description also needed not to repeat if a user returned to a figure that they had already visited. All of these accessibility solutions were so innovative that no model for their implementation yet existed, and each had to be developed by the creative team themselves, as a part of the production process.

Particularly impressive is the fact that none of the digital accessibility options offered by *Museum of Austerity* were mutually exclusive: users could choose any combination from a wide menu of choices. Many of the technologies incorporated into this work are still emergent, and not yet ready for sector-wide implementation; the diverse accessibility features embedded within *Museum of Austerity* only came about because the director pushed for their inclusion and applied for additional Arts Council England funding to implement them. Nonetheless, it is exciting to imagine a near future in which all venue-based arts are routinely accompanied by a menu of digital accessibility options similar to that of *Museum of Austerity*. For example, instead of having to wait three weeks for an audio described performance and another three weeks for

a captioned performance, the time is near when *every* performance will have these options available. It is possible that one of the most lasting effects of the digital experiments of recent years may yet end up being the normalisation of accessibility features previously reserved for streamed performances across all areas of the performing arts.

At the same time, although the potential for XR to facilitate the integration of accessibility technologies into the next generation of digital arts and culture is immense, this future promise is counterbalanced by the present reality that XR is currently among the least accessible consumer technologies available. If the accessibility benefits of digital arts and culture during the pandemic often failed to extend to people on the wrong side of the digital divide, then with XR this challenge returns with a vengeance. Immersive XR experiences typically require high-end headsets and base stations, as well as expensive gaming computers to experience. They also require technical proficiency to set up and troubleshoot. Additionally, the many challenges around how d/Deaf and sight-impaired users can engage with VR remain unresolved, and in contrast to *Museum of Austerity*, most VR experiences still lack even basic accessibility features such as captions.

In partial mitigation of these various exclusions, many performing arts organisations that create work using immersive technologies also exhibit such work on-site, where they can provide users with hardware and support. This was the case, for example, with *Current, Rising*, a collaboration between StoryFutures and the Royal Opera House (ROH) that was exhibited at the ROH's Covent Garden venue in 2021. But rather than overcoming VR's accessibility problems, creating work for a sited exhibition just pushes them onto curators and programmers. Every user needs their own computer and headset, as well as someone watching over them. As a result, VR installations are resource-hungry, yet can only be experienced by tiny numbers of people. Unsurprisingly, the costs of these elaborate exhibition logistics are typically passed on to the user. For example, *Current, Rising* cost £20 for a 15-minute experience. Per minute, that is just slightly less than the cost of a top-priced Grand Tier seat for a performance on the Royal Opera House's main stage. In this way, the pre-existing barriers to engagement associated with live performances at (often metropolitan)

arts venues are compounded by the default inaccessibility of VR experiences themselves.

Even *Museum of Austerity*, though a best practice in accessible XR storytelling, found itself enfolded within various external barriers to access associated with its exhibition conditions. To experience it, participants needed to be in London during the 2021 London Film Festival; buy a ticket for one of the (over-subscribed) 90-minute limited-entry slots to the festival's immersive exhibition; travel to the South Bank; queue up outside the exhibition venue beforehand; and then – having gained access to the venue – be fortunate or ruthless enough to secure a slot for *Museum of Austerity* itself, whose capacity was about three users per half hour. I wonder how many wheelchair users would have been able to race to the back of the exhibition venue as I did, as soon as the doors opened, in order to get their names down on the booking sheet. The multiple barriers associated with physical installations remind us that, to fulfil its potential, accessible technology needs to be folded into a much larger, holistic approach to accessibility that looks at the entirety of arts participants' journeys – for example, from social media ads, through exploring organisations' websites, to navigating ticketing systems and accessibility schemes, through to experiencing the work itself.

The second factor that should prevent anyone from feeling sanguine about the recent shift of resources from streaming to immersive performance is that the latter is not only inaccessible to most users, but also inaccessible to many organisations. The fact that VR installations are resource-hungry but can only be experienced in small numbers makes them particularly difficult for small and mid-sized organisations to utilise. Already before the pandemic, commentators were beginning to notice digital inequalities between cultural organisations, typically based on organisations' size and prestige (ACE and Nesta, 2019; Mihelj *et al.*, 2019). Our own research and that of others suggests that the disparity between many organisations' ability or willingness to embrace digital activity while COVID-19 mitigation measures were in place has confirmed, and further exacerbated, these inequalities (Leguina *et al.*, 2021; Holcombe-James, 2021). Without intervention, inequalities increase, as those with resources are able to pull ever further ahead of those without.

Judging by the beneficiaries of AHRC digital innovation funding so far, this seems to be exactly what is happening. Sector leaders including the National Theatre, the RSC and the Royal Opera have been most able to dedicate significant resources to immersive technology, so they have also become *de facto* centres of expertise in immersive performance and now have an advantage when it comes to gaining additional digital innovation funding. This compounds previous advantages that come from partnerships with Nesta and other innovation funders, the Arts Councils, industrial partnerships and so on (Aebischer, 2020: 85–87). It is perhaps no coincidence that the AHRC has recently awarded the RSC Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status, opening the door for it to collaborate in more funding bids and to apply directly for research funding. Top of the RSC press release's list of activities that this change in status will enable is 'immersive technologies in performance' (RSC, 2021). It is hard to imagine the RSC not playing a key role in the forthcoming CoSTAR super-project (UKRI, 2022).

In short, the gradual shift of focus away from streaming performance towards immersive tech risks exacerbating existing barriers to engaging with arts and culture, with digital innovation increasingly becoming the preserve of elite institutions making works that are shown at their own metropolitan venues, in exhibitions that require familiarity with these institutions to access. As a result, digital theatre currently finds itself in a double-bind. 'Lo-fi' lockdown-inspired digital solutions with relatively low barriers to engagement (e.g. Zoom performances) have largely disappeared. However, the radical accessibility promised by emergent technologies remains in the future. The result, for now at least, is a further dilution of the promise of digital access.

Conclusion

The example of *Museum of Austerity* suggests that there is no 'either/or' in digital access, just 'both/and'. Overall advances in access emerge from an incremental addition of accessibilities – from reserved parking and step-free access to phone-based caption apps and streaming performances. Why choose between these, if all are possible?

For much of 2020 and 2021, digital programming was mostly necessity-driven, and the focus of discourse within the performing arts was on how to use digital as an alternative to venue-based performance. This led to extensive discussion about the relative effectiveness and value of venue-based versus online activities, resulting in an artificial binary in which liveness and digitality were somehow seen as existing in competition with each other. This binary is no longer useful. To maximise accessibility, the future of the performing arts needs to be neither venue-based nor online exclusively, but both, in tandem: it needs to be hybrid. True hybridity entails overcoming historical preconceptions that equate 'theatre' as an artform with physical theatre venues.

Effective hybridity also necessitates being open to multiple digital production tools and distribution platforms. For example, many of our interviewees often expressed views about the relative merits of live streams (good at creating a sense of occasion) and on-demand video (good for convenience), as if the two options were mutually exclusive. However, they are not. Our research suggested that the most accessible option for an organisation is to have both. Live streams are more popular with older viewers used to live television broadcasts, while on-demand videos are more popular with younger viewers used to playlists.

So how to ensure that the performing arts' emergent hybridity also maximises accessibility? The answer is very different for creators and organisations. Creators need to be free to create work using whatever technologies they choose and present it in whatever way works best for their project. For a creator, hybridity could be seen as the opportunity to choose freely between the diverse forms, platforms and technologies currently available. Of course, all artists have a responsibility to consider accessibility. Certain forms of accessibility are a legal requirement, others are a moral imperative. However, if a work really needs to be experienced by a few users at a time, so be it. For example, the power of *Museum of Austerity* stems from users standing next to its life-sized holograms of people who died as a result of austerity and listening to their stories; it could not work without the unsettling combination of presence and absence that the Microsoft HoloLens 2 creates.

However, on an organisational level, hybridity should perhaps be seen not as the option to choose between forms and technologies,

but as the practice of working across as many forms and technologies as possible, in tandem. For organisations, the answer to the question of whether to provide live performance or online performance, live streams or on-demand videos, online-native performance or digitally augmented venue-based performance, is to do both, all six, and more besides. The best way for performing arts organisations to maximise access to their work is to include as many combinations of liveness, asynchronicity, 'sitedness' and remoteness as possible across their programmes. Diversity requires not only diverse content created by diverse artists but also the presentation of this diverse content through diverse means. Artistic programmes that include a diverse mix of hybrid activities allow organisations to meet their communities wherever they are, rather than expecting people to come to them. Now as ever, the more routes that exist for engaging with arts and culture, the easier it is to engage with and the more inclusive it can become.

Note

1 See Elizabeth Crooke and David Farrell-Banks, 'Crisis and Engagement: The Emotional Toll of Museum Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic' in *Knowing COVID-19* in this series.

References

ACE and Nesta (2019), *Digital Culture 2019*. Available at www.artscouncil.org/digital-culture-2019 (accessed 17 October 2022).

Aebischer, Pascale (2020), *Shakespeare, Spectatorship and the Technologies of Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bradbury, Alexandra, Katey Warran, Hei Wan Mak and Daisy Fancourt (2021), *The Role of the Arts during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. London: Arts Council England. Available at: www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/UCL_Role_of_the_Arts_during_COVID_13012022_0.pdf (accessed 17 October 2022).

Brook, Orian (2013), Reframing models of arts attendance: Understanding the role of access to a venue. The case of opera in London. *Cultural Trends* 22.2, 97–197. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2013.783175

Brook, Orian (2016), Spatial equity and cultural participation: How access influences attendance at museums and galleries in London. *Cultural Trends* 25.1, 21–34. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2015.1134098

Brook, Orian, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor (2020), *Culture is Bad for you: Inequality and the Cultural and Creative Industries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Childs, Danielle, Karen Gray, Harry Weeks and John Wright (2021), Why digital isn't enough. *Arts Professional* (May). Available at: www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/why-digital-isnt-enough (accessed 20 October 2022).

Crooke, Elizabeth and David Farrell-Banks (forthcoming), Crisis and engagement: The emotional toll of museum work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In Fred Cooper and Des Fitzgerald (eds), *Knowing COVID-19: The pandemic and beyond*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Feder, Tal, Siobhan McAndrew, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor (2022), Cultural consumption and Covid-19: Evidence from the Taking Part and COVID-19 Cultural Participation Monitor surveys. *Leisure Studies* 1–18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2088831 (accessed 20 January 2023)

Holcombe-James, Indigo (2021), Digital access, skills, and dollars: Applying a framework to digital exclusion in cultural institutions. *Cultural Trends* 31.3, 240–256. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2021.1972282

Leguina, Adrian and Andrew Miles (2017), Fields of participation and lifestyle in England: Revealing the regional dimension from a reanalysis of the Taking Part Survey using multiple factor analysis. *Cultural Trends* 26.1, 4–17. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2017.1274356

Leguina, Adrián, Irmak Karademir-Hazir and Francisco Azpitarte (2022), Exploring patterns of children's cultural participation: Parental cultural capitals and their transmission, *Consumption and Society* 1.1, 170–196, DOI: 10.1332/IOJW2616.

Manninen, Kadja, *et al.* (2021), Digital business models for performing arts. British Academy of Management Conference. Available at: www.cdt-students.wp.horizon.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DigitalBusinessModelsForPerformingArts.pdf (accessed 6 April 2023).

Miles, Andrew and Alice Sullivan (2012), Understanding participation in culture and sport: Mixing methods, reordering knowledges. *Cultural Trends* 21.4, 311–324. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2012.726795

Mihelj, Sabina, Adrian Leguina and John Downey (2019), Culture is digital: Cultural participation, diversity and the digital divide. *New Media & Society* 21.7, 1465–1485. DOI: 10.1177/1461444818822816 (accessed 20 January 2023)

Misek, Richard, Adrian Leguina and Kadja Manninen (2022), Digital access to arts and culture. Available at: www.digiaccessarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/DigitalAccessFINALREPORT-1.pdf (accessed 17 October 2022).

Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) (January 2021), *Follow-up Survey on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Museums in Europe: Final Report*. Available at: www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_FollowUpReport_11.1.2021.pdf (accessed 24 October 2022).

Panarese, Paola and Vittoria Azzarita (2020), Online cultural participation in Italy. The role of digital media across generations. In Quin Gao and Jia Zhou (eds), *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population: Healthy and Active Aging*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 643–660. DOI: 10.1007/978–3-030–50249–2_46

RSC (13 October 2021), First performing arts company to get independent research status. Press release. Available at: www.rsc.org.uk/news/first-performing-arts-company-to-get-independent-research-status (accessed 6 April 2023).

Torregiani, Anne (2021), Win-win for disabled arts-lovers and the sector. *Arts Professional* (September). Available at: www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/win-win-disabled-arts-lovers-and-sector (accessed 20 October 2022).

UKRI (11 October 2022), National capability for R&D in screen and performance. Available at: www.ukri.org/opportunity/national-capability-for-rd-in-screen-and-performance/ (accessed 20 January 2023).

Walmsley, Ben, Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien and Anne Torreggiani (2022), Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here. Centre for Cultural Value. Available at: www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/culture-in-crisisimpacts-of-covid-19/ (accessed 17 October 2022).

Weaver, Mathew (2022), 'Festival of Brexit' label puts visitors off Unboxed project, says organiser. *The Guardian*. Available at: www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/31/unboxed-project-festival-of-brexit-label-visitors-target (accessed 20 November 2022).

Weingartner, Sebastian (2020), Digital omnivores? How digital media reinforce social inequalities in cultural consumption. *New Media & Society* 23.11, 3370–3390. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820957635 (accessed 20 January 2023).

Widdop, Paul and David Cutts (2012), Impact of place on museum participation. *Cultural Trends* 21.1, 47–66. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2012.641775 (accessed 20 January 2023).

2

Dancing into the metaverse: Creating a framework for ethical and ecological telematic dance practice and performance

Daniel Strutt

In the last 12 years, several developments and convergences in motion capture (mocap) and immersive media technology have seen the synthesis of new and hybrid systems for embodied, extended and augmented digital performance.[1] In the same way in which 'camcorder' home video recording and playback became affordable in the 1970s and 1980s and subsequently revolutionised many arts and performance practices to become 'multimedia', the recent waves of hardware and software tools have quickly come down in price, such that they have become accessible to small companies and even enthusiastic individuals.[2] More recently, the conditions surrounding the various coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic lockdowns – with artists frustrated by both the impossibility of sharing analogue/physical spaces, and the two-dimensional limitations of videoconferencing for sharing work and practising – generated a clear and decisive turning-point in immersive tech production practices, both in their take-up within the performing arts and in wider cultural engagement with a discourse about the kinds of artistic expression that 'Metaverse'-type virtual performance systems can afford.[3]

Around the same time as the onset of the pandemic in 2020, a network of academics, dancers and creative technologists based at Goldsmiths, University of London, began to think about the kinds of existing technologies that could be drawn together to build a system for meaningful *remote* dance interaction. We offered a concept of a system for the streaming of motion capture data, asking *could we bring three-dimensional dance movement from remote performers around the world into a connected virtual space, live and in real time, as a legitimate form of dance practice?* We developed a simple-to-use, open-source software tool named 'Goldsmiths

Figure 2.1 Screenshot from the second Goldsmiths Mocap Streamer showcase performance 'Dancing in the Metaverse', November 2021. Two performers in the UK (Jack Thomson, Hannah Burfield) were able to dance in real-time with another dancer in Brooklyn, New York (Kristia Morabito) (image author's own).

Mocap Streamer', which could grab motion capture data locally and send it to any other computer in the world to be rendered within a real-time graphics engine (Figure 2.1), or indeed within a cloud-based Metaverse provider. Our team then used this framework to address experimentally a set of critical aesthetic and technical questions. What kinds of meaningful movement and dance interaction and communication can be generated remotely through the use of immersive tech? What kinds of alternative or augmented aesthetics of dance interaction could be explored in shared virtual spaces, where the dancer's avatar body does not even need to be fully 'corporeal'? What are the limitations of, and obstacles to, this kind of remote collaborative dance practice in terms of connection, interaction and sense of presence?

These original research questions are now complemented by an awareness of the need, in the current state of climate emergency, to clearly connect innovation ideals with actual societal needs. At the end of 2020, the meeting of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) set an agenda for 'greening the performing arts' that was positioned both within the ongoing climate emergency, and within the pandemic itself. Their report, *Climate Action and the Performing Arts*, evoked the landscape in which it was written:

> Skies cleared over the most polluted cities on Earth, while people sought cover from a deadly virus whose origin we now know to be directly related to damages humans inflicted on ecosystems. Climate

> change became more visible and tangible than ever. And so did the urgency to tackle it within the performing arts scene. (Skolczylas, 2020: 3)

This vivid picture of a cessation of normal polluting activity invites a reconsideration of the current Zeitgeist moment in performance tech (and Metaverse hype) through a more socially pragmatic lens, framing it through the possibility of mitigating the need for environmentally damaging touring practices. In addition, could this moment also instigate the lowering of barriers to access into collaborative digital spaces, so that people, regardless of geography, disability or social status, can come together over great distances to move and create with a convincing sense of embodied presence, interaction and communication? We now move to ask: could 'dancing in the metaverse' come to be seen, not only as legitimate, but even as the *ethical* form of future dance performance?

As we have discovered in our research, technical, aesthetic and environmental innovation goals are not necessarily in opposition to each other. In contemplating the historical lineage of remote, networked, distributed or telematic performance practice, developing as a form since the 1960s through the work of artists such as Roy Ascott, Paul Sermon (see Chapter 3 in this volume), Laurie Anderson, Joan Jonas and ORLAN, we can see that practical concerns around embodied presence and liveness, collaboration and interaction have often coexisted with more philosophical questions of conscious evolution, empathy and ethics. This has usually involved speculative and utopian ideas around altered states of extended embodiment, what it means to be 'together' or virtually present, and of harmony and care for the other. However, this philosophical approach to immersive networked technology may also frame solutions to ecological and other societal concerns. Such ethical practice might generate an understanding about the role of the performing arts in future visions of digital society, and of a social and cultural metaverse.

In this chapter I work towards a genealogically supported vision of telematic dance and performance work as driving the sort of innovation that might address some of these ecological and other societal concerns. To do this I draw together some historical and then institutional discourses before turning to a model of analysis of 'user' experience, to frame the research of Goldsmiths Mocap

Streamer through the words of the dancers themselves. In doing this, I approach the speculative 'promise of the digital' through not only short-term technical and aesthetic innovation concerns, but also through affective, ethical and 'technoetic' philosophical frameworks.[4]

From telematic to metaverse futurity

In 1966, cybernetic visionary and artist Roy Ascott

> articulated a cybernetic vision for the arts that began with the premise that interactive art must free itself from the modernist ideal of the perfect object. He proposed that artwork be responsive to the viewer rather than fixed and static, suggesting that *l'esprit cybernétique* offered the most effective means for overcoming the separation between artwork and spectator. Ascott's vision of networking as a shared activity that is 'both dance and an embrace' resonated with performance artists who … brought together remote participants to produce multi-site, real-time, interactive dance, music and theater experiments. (Giges and Warburton, 2010: 25)

In what is effectively an alternative origin for the type of shared virtual space now dubbed the 'metaverse', Ascott imagined a non-linear, processual interaction between participant and artwork that 'is not primarily a thing, an object, but a set of behaviours, system, actually a system of systems' (1990: 243). He emphasised the emotional and embodied nature of this vision, in a relationship of mutual *becoming* – where the artwork 'embraces the viewer in the creation of meaning' (1990: 242) in a 'spiritual interchange' imbued with a sense of intimacy and affection (1990: 247).

First framed by cybernetic theory, Ascott's artworks and writings later became primarily positioned through the idea of the 'telematic', a term introduced in 1978 by Simon Nora and Alain Minc (Shanken, 2000). As a concept, 'telematic' simply refers to remote subjects brought together through computer-mediated communication. But even early on, it gained, particularly for Ascott, a decidedly utopian nuance, regarding the evolution of human consciousness:

> With the computer, and brought together in the telematic embrace, we can hope to glimpse the unseeable, to grasp the ineffable chaos of

> becoming, the secret order of disorder. … More than a technological expedient for the interchange of information, networking provides the very infrastructure for spiritual interchange that could lead to the harmonization and creative development of the whole planet. (Ascott, 1990: 247)

While aspects of this utopianism seem somewhat anachronistic today, much of Ascott's telematic vision does still remain relevant at a time when tangible interfaces are disappearing and we are becoming increasingly immersed in virtual worlds. Ascott offered a cyborg vision of conscious fusion with the computer that clearly suggests itself to new immersive technologies: 'As we come to see more, we shall see the computer less and less. It will become invisible in its immanence, but its presence will be palpable to the artist engaged telematically in the world process of autopoiesis, planetary self-creation' (Ascott, 1990: 247).

Current metaverse visions can be seen as simply the next iteration of this same idealistic imperative, now framed by the convergence of new VR and XR interfaces, real-time generative graphics and motion capture systems. However, it should be noted that when we arrive at current simulation technologies, a decisively new dynamic relationship between felt presence and embodiment emerges. Performance theorist and practitioner Johannes Birringer describes this as a 'historical shift … between video dance (choreography for the camera) and interactions systems', described as 'sensing systems worn on the body which generate data in real time or produce data that can be digitally processed and transcoded' (2008: 25). We now see simulation computation rendering complex models in real time and on immersive interfaces, with open-ended, generative images forming in response to participants' actions. This, for Birringer, yields a significant disruption of previous practices, even a new ontological landscape:

> For example, [post-human performance artist] Stelarc's strategic exploration of the non-conscious agent, of telematic scaling and the engineering of external, extended, and virtual nervous systems for the body undermines the humanist and rationalist conceptions of the body and subjectivity, of mind, instrumental reason, and consciousness. (Birringer, 2008: 25)

However, while this technology is no doubt disruptive to the structures of representation that have developed through media

technology over the last 150 years, and while it may indeed shift our understanding of humanity, in a more pragmatic sense can we truly say that it addresses our contemporary and urgent *real-world* needs?

Contemporary concerns and realities

What twenty-first-century developments in virtual and immersive media mean in relation to 'physical' reality, consciousness and experience is hotly debated.[5] The quasi-spiritual futurist vision of a 'technoetic' evolution of consciousness that Roy Ascott still pursues to this day can seem naïve when tech corporations manipulate global democracy through the harvesting of sensor data, and when fresh hardware with built-in obsolescence is released daily while a climate disaster looms (Chua, 2006: notes 12–14). What seems called for is a more context-specific and pragmatic approach to assessing the value of metaverse technologies, including our own Mocap Streamer tool, within our present-day eco-political context. This might mean exploring whether the new immersive technologies for remote collaboration and performance offer a viable alternative to touring that might help address the climate impact of the performing arts. While lockdowns rather forced the issue of maintaining arts and culture in online forms, can we now consider the more long-term ecological benefits and potentialities of this shift to virtualised media arts?

The environmental sustainability of arts, culture and the performing arts was an issue that was being institutionally foregrounded prior to the pandemic. The 2019 Arts Council England *Sustaining Great Art and Culture Report* acknowledged that 'culture has a carbon footprint, and data matters … There should be no opposition between what art is and how art does: reducing emissions prompts creativity and activism, and vice versa' (ACE, 2019). This report offered figures on the most common impacts that can be meaningfully tracked – of energy, water, waste, business travel and touring – across 747 arts and culture organisations in England. Travel and touring were found to equate to 114,547 tonnes of CO_2, with dance and theatre together generating about 20% of this. While this damaging activity pretty much ceased

during the lockdowns, at the time of writing, and in our haste and desperation to get back to 'normal' regardless of how damaging that 'normal' might have been, we seem to have backslid in terms of progressive environmental policy without learning any lessons from the pandemic.

The 2020 IETM report gathered many ideas, suggestions, tools and experiences that considered the role of performing arts in addressing climate change.[6] The report includes a section on 'the promise of the digital' which asks a set of technical and aesthetic questions to frame the potential of digitally streamed performance, motion capture and gaming tech, for sustainability and reduced environmental impact:

> Producing digital works opens up the question of the live quality of such recordings, of whether it can be replicated, and if not, is it necessary? What is the value of these new experiences? How do we direct the gaze of the public in such a setting? What audiences does this include (people with disabilities or unable to afford the ticket in the opera), and which does it exclude (those with poor internet access or insufficient digital skills)? How to create performances that can work as hybrids, and can be rehearsed online? Can video games provide interesting solutions designing engaging, first-person experiences for the audiences? Finally, can performing arts participate in shaping new technologies, rather than passively adopting them? (Skolczylas, 2020: 11)

It is worth noting that even these digital modes of access to performance through streaming and cloud computing are not carbon neutral of course, and in fact got progressively *more* polluting during the pandemic. Media philosopher and activist Laura Marks, creator of the *Small File Media Festival* (which challenges the need for high-definition media images), speaks to the real impact of our media streaming culture:

> We can now corroborate the [French think tank] The Shift Project's analysis that streaming video is responsible for over 1% of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. Exacerbated by new habits established during the Covid-19 pandemic, that figure is currently estimated at 1.2% to 1.4% and rising fast. (Marks, 2021: paragraph 2)

The main impact of this activity is from the power consumption of media streaming giants such as YouTube and Netflix, where the

pursuit of ever higher quality images directly compounds carbon output. Videoconferencing, due to the standard lower resolutions, pollutes considerably less than streaming video. Furthermore, the streaming of motion capture data rather than of whole images, with tiny packages of lightweight data, is less energy consuming than this again.[7] This does not mean, however, that our own Goldsmiths Mocap Streamer tool, and this mode of virtual production more broadly, is without impact. We still extensively use video conferencing platforms adjunct to the streamer itself, to meet, plan, share the image back to remote dancers and provide a simulcast video feed of the physical dancer(s) for audiences (to allow them to understand the performance's liveness). We must acknowledge that technological innovation in the performing arts is not simply a quick solution to climate realities. The promise of the digital, as much as it *is* about technical and aesthetic innovation, must also be guided by an ethical approach of moderation and sensitivity towards ecology, embedded in day-to-day practices, that weighs audience experience and artistic aspiration against environmental impact. We can, however, think about how this sensitivity can catalyse innovation, creativity and activism in ways that might allow the arts to *shape* new technologies for social good, rather than merely adopting them.

Goldsmiths Mocap Streamer: User experience

It is perhaps easy to accept *in principle* that the new metaverse-type iterations of telematic performance work are a good thing, in terms of their potential not only to connect performers and audiences remotely but also to diminish the climate impact of the performing arts. However, in the same vein as the stated goal of the *Small File Media Festival* – 'Movies don't have to be big to be bingeworthy!' (Marks 2021, section 'Call for work, Second Annual Small File Media Festival') – can we yet say that good live performance doesn't require the physical presence of either audience or performers? Or confidently state that we can deliver experiences which are aesthetically satisfying, and no longer merely a substitute for live theatrical performing arts?

Much recent research has turned to audience research to address these questions. A recent UK government policy POSTnote

(May 2022) acknowledged that, while there is a relative abundance of quantitative research ‘mostly focusing on audiences or organisations’, … ‘there is limited evidence on how performers and artists are affected by digital technology’ (Cîrstea and Mutebi, 2022: 4). Acknowledging this dearth of research on how performers actually feel about digital technologies within their disciplinary practice, it is perhaps also key to note, as performance theorist Johannes Birringer does (2008: 35), that in interactive performance systems, the distinction between audience and performer, or between ‘viewer’, ‘participant’, and ‘user’ can become complexified, or even break down. Understanding the new kinds of interactions, actors and interfaces within non-linear, interactive performative events can mean that it becomes difficult to ascertain what ‘audience’ even means, as all participants effectively become co-creators.

In what follows, I seek to explore this convergence of experience by bringing a structured model of *audience* research to my own qualitative and often informal research into *performer* experience. I focus on the experience of our project’s collaborating practitioners, who have led or participated in the workshops and showcases in which we have connected dancers from Singapore, New York and Hong Kong to those in the UK. In these sessions, the dancers wore Noitom ‘Perception Neuron’ inertial motion sensor (IMU) capture kits, allowing them to move and interact in a virtual landscape in real time. The virtual performance spaces were generated by real-time games engines Unity and Unreal Engine, with live interaction design through sets of digital tools such as shaders, colliders, and GPU particle effect. These tools permit reactions between avatars and objects, and give dancers the feeling of virtual touch, proximity and gravity, that allows a sense of kinesthetic embodiment within the virtual scene. More than this, it allows a kind of *augmentation* of both kinetic force and proprioception which can both extend and distort normative modes of dance embodiment (Figure 2.2). Throughout the research we asked dancers about how this mode of practice feels, the kinds of obstacles that they face both cognitively and physically, and if they can see themselves productively and creatively engaging with these systems in the future.

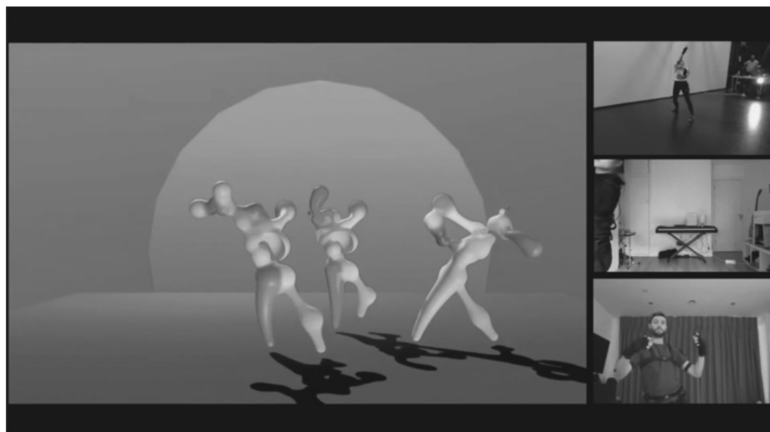


Figure 2.2 Dancers Alexander Whitley, Tia May Hockey and Nicola Henshall dance together in May 2021 in a scene called 'Bubblegum' – designed to explore altered feelings of embodiment and proximity in the virtual environment (image author's own).

The IMPACT audience research model

In 2018, Nesta and i2 Media Research group released a report on *Evaluating Immersive User Experience and Audience Impact,* which drew attention to the 'challenges of understanding the value of creative content while … traditional quantitative measures of measuring impact are not always available or reliable' (Nesta and i2, 2018: 1). They proposed to 'develop a research methodology for testing and evaluating the experimental immersive content that is being made now, in a way that will help us predict the potential audience appetite, cultural impact, and commercial opportunity in the future'. This report identified some key predictors of experience in immersive experiences through concepts of positive affect, engagement, and sense of presence, drawn from psychological models which render these states quantifiable. i2 Research then honed their own model as a toolkit for both the creation and evaluation of immersive experiences, offering what they call quantifiable 'high level categories' as 'helpful thinking aids to stimulate conversation and deliberation during design sprints' (Kurta and Freeman,

2022: 209).[8] These categories of experience, or 'states', are offered with the acronym IMPACT (Kurta and Freeman, 2022: 200):

- Interesting: Capturing initial interest through automatic and personalised attentional cues.
- Meaningful: Connecting to user values and cultural or universal goals. Meaning goes beyond initial interest.
- Personalised: Personalising design features. Personalisation focuses on individual relevance, e.g. achieves personal 'to be goals'. [sic]
- Affective: Emotionally arousing. The affective dimension acknowledges how changes in arousal level are important for maintaining interest and engagement.
- Collective: Enabling social experience or ability to connect and share with others. Features may connect individually or demonstrate collective action or community.
- Transportive: Feeling presence, sustained attentional engagement. The transportive dimension guides design which resolves user friction and minimises disengagement via distraction.

While these categories are deduced as insights into the key domains of *audience* experience, they suggest themselves as useful modes of thinking about the relative quality or success also from the *performer*'s point of view. Below, I adopt the IMPACT model as a thinking aid to reflect in a structured way on the experience of our own project's dancers and choreographers in their collaborative practice with our 3D interaction designers and creative technologist. This interview material was gathered through question-and-answer sessions and personal interviews with some of the dancers, choreographers and project partners that we worked with in the course of the project. The dancers quoted here are Mavin Khoo, Creative Associate of Akram Khan Company, and Alexander Whitley and Tia May Hockey of Alexander Whitley Dance Company.

The performer's experience

Interesting/meaningful

The first two IMPACT states of 'interesting' and 'meaningful' are intimately connected. The first 'captures initial interest' through a measure of novelty. The second is concerned with sustaining

interest and attention through embedding technological innovations within a meaningful structure (Kurta and Freeman, 2022). The i2 researchers note that the 'psychological impact of content can be "broken" or diminished by poor technology implementation' (Nesta and i2, 2018: 10), referring to the possibility of tech failure or a glitch that would draw the participant out of the experience. They also note how perceived gimmickry may cause the same 'break', as the initial point of interest proves to be depthless. Mavin Khoo spoke eloquently on this point in relation to his company's storytelling ethos:

> One of the things that I have been questioning is: how are we able to embrace this element of motion capture creatively into our work without it becoming an impressive tool that is there to impress? How does it sit within the poetic nature of the kind of work that our company does? Is there a possibility for it to become a poetic collaborator in the kind of dramaturgical frameworks of the kind of work that the company makes? And so I think that has been a consistent framework that is always there to push me, to ensure that it doesn't just become an impressive tool. (Khoo, 2022)

In conversation with the author, Khoo expanded on this point of striving to avoid gimmickry. Having just extensively used a form of motion capture animation (rotoscoped) in Akram Khan Company's production of *The Jungle Book* (2022), he mused:

> One of the things I've discussed many times in the process is, for me, it's such a dangerous point when an audience gets taken into an emotional experience journey, and suddenly for one second they go: 'wow that's really clever!', and that really clever part means we've lost them from the story, and we've lost the ability for the work to speak. (Khoo, 2022)

In many ways, Khoo's issue of the technology being a 'poetic collaborator' became the guiding mantra throughout our research. We are acutely aware that the technology must serve the intention of the dancer if it is to become embedded meaningfully within practice. On this point, Khoo had some critical thoughts about some of our 3D avatar and interaction design (see Figure 2.3).

> There'd be something so beautiful that Neal [Coghlan, 3D designer] would have constructed and designed so beautifully, and it's amazing, and then my question is, okay, after two minutes we've got it, and

Figure 2.3 Dancers Jack Thomson and Hannah Burfield in a performance designed as a dance battle called 'Bird of Prey'. With complex gravity, inertial and elaborate costume effects built into the scene, Mavin Khoo felt that this design did not adequately serve the dance (image author's own).

> then what? One rule I would always have is that, however much it's integral in that process for those elements to come together, the rule that I have on myself is also independent of all those elements, i.e. how strong is the dancing? (Khoo, 2022)

Khoo's comment highlights how important it is that the whole team, from software developer to animator, to dancer, and then, ultimately, to the audience, focuses on the poetics of the performance, which needs to lead (if not limit) the technological marvel. There is, then, a magical moment when this human/technology collaboration clicks. As dancer Tia May Hockey observed:

> What was interesting for me was that when we all had the same ideas, and timings of when those ideas were happening, even though the movement wasn't necessarily choreographed, we were connected by the same ideas … It was very interesting to experience [the difference between] days where we were just playing around with no idea set and we're all just exploring in our own worlds, to then suddenly as soon as we all have the same intention it does feel like there's meaning. (Hockey, 2021)

Khoo and Hockey's comments give insight into the way that, from the perspective of both dancer and audience, the technical and aesthetic innovation of the work must be in the service of artistic expression and poetry. To be interesting and meaningful it must mesh with both the intention of the performer and the broader discipline in which they work – to generate meaning (embedded within a dramaturgical framework or 'journey'), to exhibit a disciplined artistry and to 'allow the work to speak'.

Personalised

For dancers within the mocap streaming framework, the question of personalisation as 'individual relevance' seems, to a large extent, to come down to the feeling of embodiment within the avatar figure. Our dance partner Alexander Whitley spoke about the *negotiation* involved in achieving this sense of personal investment with the virtual body, particularly when the expression of the body is not exactly figurative:

> I mean there's a few things going on; there's the avatar figure itself which obviously has kind of added appendages and things that aren't naturally part of your body. So there's some interesting kind of working out of how it relates to you, which naturally changes how you're thinking through your body. The different qualities and rigidities or softness of the figures you embody quite naturally, … so when you recognize enough of yourself in those figures you automatically start to take on their characteristics or qualities. (Whitley, 2021)

It is this process of 'taking on' and internalising the traits of these avatars that seems to enhance the personalisation of the experience, where one starts to identify, and to feel and act differently. In a second interview, Whitley explained:

> The thing that really just stood out to me immediately is that the process of visual feedback about action perception and negotiation of space is really different and just really interesting in terms of how it provokes responses in you as a mover. These real-time live setups are so exciting in terms of how you can embed ideas or concepts into a system, in a process that will have a really significant effect on the kind of movement that you then generate. (Whitley, 2022)

This real-time feedback, and the practice of *feeling-out* the kinaesthetic possibilities of the avatar, are a process through which we come to 'recognise' it as an extension of self. Moreover, this is a modified self, structured by a set of intentions and concepts made 'flesh' and with which the dancer can explore alternative or augmented subjective and personal experiences of embodiment.

Affective

The affective dimension of experience seems to follow from and extend this sense of personalised embodied investment in the avatar and its potentialities into a deeper emotional sense of 'presence', such that the dancer can feel that they are expressing something of their interiority through it: to 'reveal ideas of choreographic intention or performance intention through the kind of visuals that are generated' (Whitley, 2022). For Whitley, this kind of 'deep' connection is really the purpose of continuing to engage and experiment in this realm. He states, 'I guess facilitating those more deeply embodied experiences through this kind of technology is what really excites me. And it obviously presents some great solutions to the challenges we've been experiencing over the last year [of the pandemic]' (Whitley, 2021).

For Khoo, however, there were always reservations. He confessed, early in our research process in 2019: 'I was genuinely concerned that the presence of motion capture in my process would be problematic in generating a kind of emotive human ownership to the work' (Khoo, 2022, in Strutt, 2022). Later, he again noted the aesthetic and design element as a major factor in being able to achieve this sense of investment: 'whatever the creation of that avatar is, if you like the nature of that, plays a huge importance in terms of how far one is able to invest in it from an emotional perspective' (Khoo, 2022). He describes:

> The dancer has to go to a space where they understand the potential of what the avatar is and what the potential of their physical body is in relation to those other elements of the form. They start off just negotiating and navigating that, and then they become engaged and aware of these supporting avatars around them, and then eventually merge into one. (Khoo, 2022)

Our research attests that it is certainly possible to experience a kind of affective immersion or 'merging' with the system through an iterative process of exploration and experimentation. While Khoo and Whitley's remarks show how this 'merger' is initiated through a dancer's exploration of their own avatar form, one of the most significant findings of our research is how emotional ownership is dramatically heightened when the participant starts to move and 'merge' with other avatar performers within the remote streaming 'metaverse' framework. Ironically perhaps, it is in the displacement of the attention on self, through focusing on moving with the other avatar figures, that the potent, transcendent affect of 'deep embodiment' seems to occur. This collective sharing of experience, with real-time sensory feedback from a partner, enhances the sensation of deep kinaesthetic embodiment within the avatar form.

Collective

Fitting neatly into the IMPACT model's categorisation of collective experience, the primary purpose for the development of our own mocap streamer tool from the outset has been to 'enabl[e] social experience or the ability to connect and share with others' (Kurta and Freeman, 2022: 200). The dancers' reflections then show how the collective aspect of the work takes on an even more affective and almost ethical nuance of 'taking responsibility' for the remotely connected other. Khoo described: 'There's a sense for the dancers of having to first take responsibility in terms of what their own potential is, and then of course the minute there is the engagement with the second or third avatars, to take responsibility for the others as well' (Khoo, 2021).

Of course, this is something that would happen in the physical studio quite normally. However, as Whitley observes, the remoteness of the streaming tool is not too much of an obstacle to this, though there is a need to develop a set of task-based, semi-improvisational techniques to lean into this sensitivity, honing attunement with the rhythm, intention and nuanced expressivity of the other, remote, dancers through their avatars.[9]

> Choreographing something would defeat a lot of the purpose of this and what makes it really special as a tool is its liveness, and

> the fact that we can be interacting and responsive to each other in the moment. I think the fact that we could be as responsive to each other, and work around the kinds of tasks that we would normally work with in a studio setting, shows the success of this tool – that it … really enables us to interact in three-dimensional space with other people in a way that feels quite natural and intuitive to us as dance practitioners. (Whitley, 2021)

Tia May Hockey adds nuance to this idea of responsivity, and responsibility, in an interesting analogy between the avatar and an animal (Figure 2.4):

> When I had a shared intention to play with in improvisation with another performer, I felt moments of connection with our virtual characters and through to my being. It's kind of like the connection you make with an animal and you both know that you're watching each other, there's a level of sensitivity required by both parties to listen, anticipate, predict, and respond. It was hard to maintain this sensitivity, but I did experience flashes of it. It's easy for this experience to be cold and alienating, and so far it has mostly felt this way. However, with shared intentions, heightened awareness, conscious effort and sensitivity I believe a connection can be formed and enhanced. (Hockey, 2021)

There is a complexity to this work that a dancer, perhaps intuitively, understands more than most, due to their already disciplined practice of sensing, anticipating, predicting and responding to the

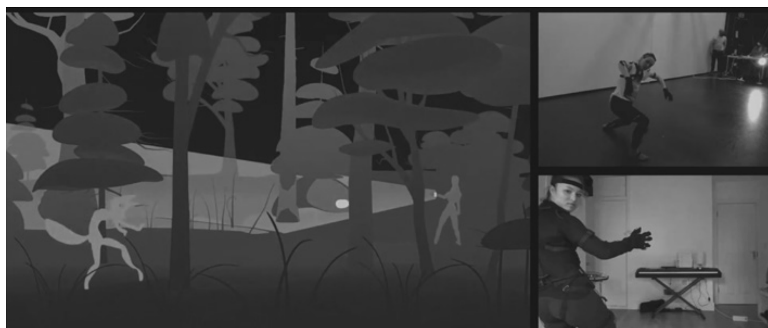


Figure 2.4 Nicola Henshall and Tia May Hockey explored a hide and seek dynamic in a fantasy woodland scene in May 2021 (image author's own).

movement of another. However, what we have noted is that there is implicit ethical inflection to these practices when the 'other' is remote and not even within their own body. We could perhaps call this an 'alien phenomenology' which can yield transformative experiences of connection and interaction through exploration of alternative forms and 'augmented' embodiments.[10]

Transportive

With her expression of the experience of 'connection through to her being', Tia May Hockey nicely leads into the IMPACT model's notion of the transportive as a sense of flow or deep unbroken attentiveness. In the same interview, she explained:

> There were definitely some out-of-body experiences and moments where I felt the potential of the virtual connection with the other performers. It required me to fully engage with my imagination and to let the reality around me disappear in order to let my attention be fully present in the virtual space. (Hockey, 2021)

Similarly, Khoo noted that there is a kind of altered state that needs to be reached, where 'psychologically the dancer has to come to a space where they are able to let go of what their habitual pattern would be'. This led him to reflect that '[y]ou get quite easily in this state like "I'm in another realm and so much new is happening". … It's so interesting and there is something in that psychology, I think, that is actually bigger than we consider' (Khoo, 2022). It seems that here, in the collective moment that is facilitated by the motion capture streamer as much as by the elements of avatar and interaction design, there can be an intense and transportive sense of almost 'out-of-body' engagement that fixes our attention on our attunement and sensitivity to the other figures. This, as Khoo notes in terms that seem close to Roy Ascott's utopian dreams of global harmonisation, is perhaps 'actually bigger than we consider'.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to question whether, within our current moment, we are truly at a point of sufficient technological advancement in

which remote connection can become a legitimate, mainstream and carbon-conscious *alternative* medium for dance practice and performance. It is clear, however, that there are no quick or direct fixes in terms of technological or aesthetic innovation. We need to look a bit deeper, and more speculatively, at the 'promise of the digital' (here, specifically, of metaverse-adjacent tech) as a performance medium that can meaningfully connect people toward shared experience. Indeed, this is not a new critical approach, but one that is broadly in line with a longer genealogy of telematic connection in the arts.

Though in one way these questions about consciousness and rationality might still seem a little disconnected from the clear and present climate emergency, there is a burgeoning literature on how this more philosophical approach does in fact speak to these concerns. While there is a fair amount of good critical work on VR and immersive media as an ethical 'empathy machine',[11] it is particularly interesting to think about Laura Marks' recent work,[12] where she speaks of a 'talismanic image' that cultivates an active form of sensory engagement with images, and which makes us palpably feel the 'interconnectedness' of things. She says:

> Some films carry out operations on the universe: performative films, and fabulative documentaries, movies that make things happen. Many movies, including some environmentalist films, activate sympathy among entities at different levels of the cosmos. A very few works make an affective fold that reaches all the way from the cosmos to your body, through delicate and risky processes of contact, correspondence, sympathy, and passion. (Marks, 2020: 253)

She asserts that this kind of image can not only alert us to our responsibility to other entities, but also stimulate activism and action: 'When images make contact with us, we recognise that we are strung in webs of causality. By cultivating affective response and indexical awareness, we can draw the universe close, even rearrange it' (Marks, 2020: 255).

Ending on this point, I suggest, drawing Roy Ascott close to Laura Marks, that the promise of 'dance in the metaverse' is not only that it might just mitigate the carbon footprint of the performing arts, but moreover that telematic performance has the potential to cultivate structures of empathy and awareness in ways

that are not just abstract messages. Rather they are embodied and connected practices and processes which might lead into action (the modification of existing damaging behaviours) and even activism (spreading the word and creating new kinds of content). Returning to Tia May Hockey's words, 'with shared intentions, heightened awareness, conscious effort and sensitivity', we might get there yet.

Notes

1 Developments such as inertial motion sensors (IMU mocap systems emerging in around 2016 onto the consumer market), machine learning tools (ML), Virtual Reality 2.0 (VR, with this phase generally acknowledged to have commenced with the arrival of the Oculus Rift in 2014), and increasingly sophisticated real-time graphics engines such as Unity and Unreal Engine.

2 To illustrate, the most recent version of the Perception Neuron kit (v.3) is priced at $3,400, the Rokoko Smartsuit pro at €2,800. Virtual Reality headsets have become more accessible at £400, with Sony PlayStation VR at only around £200. Games engines for real-time graphics rendering such as Unreal Engine and Unity are now largely free to use.

3 See the foreword to the European Dance Network's 2021 report *Virtualised Dance? Digital Shifts in Artistic Practices* for a neat summary of this: 'Since March 2020, we have observed that artists and dance professionals have altered their practices and that the creation, production, and distribution of artistic work have increasingly explored digital spaces and tools. Pre-existing trends have become predominant' (Floch, 2021).

4 Ascott describes technoetics as the evolution of consciousness through technology (2008: 204)

5 For instance, in David Chalmers, Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy (2022).

6 Similarly, during lockdown, the 'Theatre Green Book' was produced through in-depth studies, workshops and consultations with the UK theatre community, offering guidelines around sustainable production, venues and operations. See https://theatregreenbook.com/.

7 A common streaming service requires 7GB per hour of streaming in high video quality (Ultra HD or 4K). A standard videoconferencing service uses about 2.5GB per hour (Obringer *et al.*, 2021). Streaming

motion capture in two directions (a duet) within our own project, based on our own cloud server usage, peaks at 1.8GB per hour.

8 This was achieved through extensive surveying of the audience for the RSC's 2021 *Dream* online production eliciting some 6,500 audience responses.

9 Attunement is a psychological term that has moved through affect theory. A definition of attunement 'is a kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others, knowing their rhythm, affect, and experience by metaphorically being in their skin, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feeling connectedness by providing a reciprocal affect and/or resonating response' (Erskine, 1998: 236).

10 Alien Phenomenology is a term coined by Ian Bogost within an Object-Oriented ethical and speculative philosophy, a project that displaces humans as the sole-makers of meaning and explores alternate subject positions: 'A bold new metaphysics that explores how all things – from atoms to green chillies, cotton to computers – interact with, perceive, and experience one another' (Bogost, 2012).

11 See for instance Rueda and Lara (2020) 'Virtual Reality and Empathy Enhancement: Ethical Aspects' as an example of good work that speaks about 'fostering empathy-related abilities through virtual embodiment in avatars'.

12 I have reflected on the connection of VR and environmental awareness in greater length before in the article 'Mystical-Type Experience at The Virtual Reality Interface: Technics, Aesthetics, and Theology in the Search for Cosmic Connection' (Strutt, 2021).

References

Arts Council England (2019), *Sustaining Great Art and Culture, Environmental Report*. Available at: www.artscouncil.org.uk/sustaining-great-art-and-culture-environmental-report-201819 (accessed 9 January 2023).

Ascott, Roy (1990), Is there love in the telematic embrace? *Art Journal* 49.3, 241–247. DOI: 10.2307/777114

Ascott, Roy (2008), Cybernetic, technoetic, syncretic: The prospect for art' *Leonardo* 41.3, 1–2. DOI: 10.1162/leon.2008.41.3.204

Birringer, Johannes (2008), *Performance, Technology, and Science*. New York: PAJ.

Bogost, Ian (2012), *Alien Phenomenology, or, What it's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chalmers, David (2022), *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. London: Allen Lane.

Chua, Eu Jin (2006), Laurie Anderson's Telepresence, *Postmodern Culture* 16.2. Available at: pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.106/16.2chua.html (accessed 7 December 2023).

Cîrstea, Ana-Maria and Natasha Mutebi (2022), UK Parliament POSTnote 669. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0669/POST-PN-0669.pdf (accessed 5 January 2023).

Erskine, R. G. (1998), Attunement and involvement: Therapeutic responses to relational needs. *International Journal of Psychotherapy* 3.3, 235–244.

Floch, Johan (2021), Foreword. In M. Fol, Virtualised dance? Digital shifts in artistic practices. EDN. Available at: www.ednetwork.eu/news/edn-publication-virtualised-dance (accessed 9 January 2023).

Giges, Bob and Edward C. Warburton (2010) From router to front row: Lubricious transfer and the aesthetics of telematic performance. *Leonardo* 43.1, 24–32. Available at: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372222 (accessed 7 April 2023).

Hockey, Tia May (2021), Personal interview.

Khoo, Mavin (2021, 2022), Personal interviews and Q&A conversation in showcase 'Virtual Touch, Virtually Dancing'. Available at: www.mocapstreamer.live (accessed 9 January 2023).

Kurta, Leah and Jonathan Freeman (2022), Targeting IMPACT: a new psychological model of user experience. *International Conference on Human–Computer Interaction*. Cham: Springer, pp. 196–212. DOI: 10.1007/978–3-031–05637–6_12

Marks, Laura U. (2020), Talisman-images: From the cosmos to your body. In Radek Przedpełski and Steven Elliot Wilmer (eds), *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Art of Multiplicity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 231–260.

Marks, Laura U. (2021), Tackling the carbon footprint of streaming media. Available at project site www.sfu.ca/sca/projects---activities/streaming-carbon-footprint.html; 'Streaming Carbon Footprint' and 'Call for work, Second Annual Small File Media Festival' blog entries at www.sfu.ca/~lmarks/blog/ (accessed 9 January 2023).

Nesta & i2 Media Research (2018), *Evaluating Immersive User Experience and Audience Impact*. A report produced for Digital Catapult. Available at: www.immerseuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Evaluating_Immersive_User_Experience_and_Audience_Impact.pdf (accessed 9 January 2023).

Obringer, Renee, *et al.* (2021), The overlooked environmental footprint of increasing Internet use. *Resources, Conservation & Recycling* 167. DOI: 10.1016/j.resconrec.2020.105389

Rueda, Jon and Francisco Lara (2020), Virtual reality and empathy enhancement: Ethical aspects. *Frontiers in Robotics and AI* 7. DOI: 10.3389/frobt.2020.506984

Shanken, Edward A. (2000), Tele-agency: Telematics, telerobotics, and the art of meaning. *Art Journal* 59.2, 64–77. DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2000.10791997
Skolczylas, Natalia (2020), Climate Action and the Performing Arts. Report from the IETM Galway Satellite Meeting. Available at: www.ietm.org/system/files/publications/ietm_report_galway_satellite.pdf (accessed 9 January 2023).
Strutt, Daniel (2022), Motion capture and the digital dance aesthetic: Using inertial sensor motion tracking for devising and producing contemporary dance performance. In Carla Fernandes, Vito Evola and Cláudia Ribeiro (eds), *Dance Data, Cognition, and Multimodal Communication*. London: Routledge.
Whitley, Alexander (2021, 2022), Personal interview and Q&A conversation in showcase 'Virtual Touch, Virtually Dancing'. Available at: www.mocapstreamer.live (accessed 9 January 2023)

3

Breaking the fifth wall: Creating theatre on a telepresence stage

Steve Dixon and Paul Sermon

Introduction: Breaking out of the box(es)

Traumatic times have heralded new directions and forms of art, such as the development of the twentieth-century avant-garde movements of Constructivism, Bauhaus, Dada and Surrealism in the years immediately following World War I. Whether the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic will bring about comparable artistic paradigm shifts remains to be seen. But at moments of historical crisis, artists look to transform the harsh realities of the day into representations of a quite different and more visionary future. As the pandemic of the early 2020s divided people physically, artists sought new ways to bring them back together, strengthen their bonds and establish new creative modalities for their interactions.

One such initiative was *Collaborative Solutions for the Performing Arts: A Telepresence Stage*, led by telematic artists and researchers Paul Sermon (Principal Investigator, University of Brighton, UK) and Steve Dixon (Co-Investigator, LASALLE College of the Arts, University of the Arts Singapore), together with research consultants Sita Popat Taylor, Satinder Gill and Randall Packer. It responded to the crisis in the live performing arts following the closure of theatres and the inability of performers to devise, create and rehearse together in person during lockdowns. The Telepresence Stage project countered both by providing a new and highly 'theatrical' stage platform for live performances online, and by designing visually immersive stage settings where remote individual performers could meet, rehearse and perform together in a digital 'third space' using videoconferencing tools.

Such systems were found by performers to be far more powerful than and preferable to the predominant platform used by groups to rehearse and perform during lockdowns: Zoom. The pandemic saw a plethora of Zoom performances online and the format was adopted for notable television productions such as the BBC's *Staged* (2020) starring Michael Sheen and David Tennant. Its first series follows two (comically) temperamental actors who become increasingly frustrated and finally disinterested as they attempt to rehearse a theatre play via Zoom during lockdown. Videoconferencing platforms strategically adapted televisual aesthetics, and the lines between TV and computer screens were ever more blurred during the pandemic, as screens became ubiquitous and used indiscriminately for leisure, work and art.

But a significant drawback remains Zoom's fixed visual format, with each participant appearing quite separately in their own window. Most users also position their computer cameras to frame themselves in head and shoulders close-ups, resulting in Zoom 'theatre' productions resembling television far more than live stage shows. This separation of the performers in rows of boxes remains a source of disappointment to stage actors, including those in Improbable, one of the research residency theatre companies, who had done previous shows via Zoom. They described working on the Telepresence Stage platform as a blessed relief, since the boxes were gone and the *full bodies* of their live performers could be composited simultaneously within a shared virtual stage space. They named their residency production *Outside the Frame* and literalised the metaphor of breaking out of Zoom boxes with an opening sequence where three characters in a simulated Zoom meeting (created using a visual overlay) discuss separation through the pandemic, but then discover they can actually reach into each other's windows. They reach out to each other and then 'break out of their boxes' to climb into one another's windows, appearing at different angles or upside down (Figure 3.1).

The research involved the participation of professional theatre and dance companies in ten separate projects experimenting with different technological systems and configurations, as well as diverse approaches to scenography and visual design. The core equipment was provided by the research team: cameras, monitors, green screen 'walls' and floors that could be set up in performers' homes.[1]

Figure 3.1 After sharing some 'magic mushrooms' the three Improbable actors (from top left to right, Angela Clerkin, Adedamola Bajomo and Cassie Hercules) laugh hysterically as they appear strangely doubled in each other's Zoom boxes, turned upside down and on their sides (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

Our team aimed to provide practitioners with a range of scalable solutions to bring remote performers and audiences together, from straightforward systems able to be utilised by student or amateur performance groups at little or no cost, to those suited to large professional troupes. Each company's residency culminated in a live performance. The Telepresence Stage team then presented case studies sharing the research findings online, and provided 'how to' help guides, tutorial support and open-source resources for the performing arts sector, to encourage use of the available technologies and techniques.

The chapter draws on these case studies as well as interviews with the performers to analyse the projects, explore their highlights, differences and commonalities, and to present key research findings. These interconnect in interesting ways with Richard Misek's discussion of video-streaming as a means of improving the accessibility of live performances and Dan Strutt's on telematic performance, motion capture and virtual dance. Some of Strutt's themes entwine and harmonise with ours, around presence, liveness and the uncanny power of virtual touch.[2] In common with other chapters,

too, our research emphasises the importance of exploring real-world solutions by working in partnership with professional companies who beta-test a range of technological systems, following which, findings are shared with the creative sector in ways that can be practically applied, including technical help guides.

Aims and objectives of resident companies

The theatre and dance companies involved in the Telepresence Stage project varied from the young, recently established and 'tech-savvy' to some of the longest established UK touring groups. These include Red Ladder, founded in 1968 and renowned for its distinctive approach to radical 'agit prop' theatre, and Phoenix Dance Theatre, founded in 1981 by three black British men, and the longest-standing UK-based professional contemporary dance company outside London.

Some came with prepared or pre-scripted ideas, others adapted or expanded previous stage productions, some worked purely through improvisation and others began with a blank sheet but built up their ideas progressively to develop well-crafted shows. Some companies adopted more traditional theatre and dance styles, others used comedy and cabaret formats, while still others focused on more abstract and experimental visual aesthetics.

Their aims and objectives in undertaking their research residencies also varied:

Telematic Quarantine was the first performance, an R&D pilot by the research team to test out some telematic systems, virtual scenographies and effects. For the livestreamed two-and-a-half-hour event, international participants were scheduled at different times to join Paul Sermon via Skype and were composited in painterly rendered 3D simulations of rooms in his actual house (Figure 3.2). Together, they played, improvised and shared their stories of self-isolation while exploring genres from kitchen sink drama to political satire, and from hospital drama to magic realism and the theatre of the absurd.

Improbable's desire to break out of boxes aimed to create a more spacious open 'stage' to express what they described at the beginning of their residency as 'the fun, the creativity, the outrageous,

Figure 3.2 Visitors from Singapore, Alex Kong (left), Indumathi Tamilselvan (centre right) and Nurulhuda Hassan (right), dance and sing gospel songs to bring Paul Sermon in the UK (centre left) out of his dark mood, in *Telematic Quarantine* (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

the intimate, the beautiful, the human, the theatrical, the unexpected and unlikely'. *Outside the Frame* combines live action, puppetry, animation and psychedelia in a vivid presentation of autobiographical stories by the ensemble of women and non-binary performers.

Creation Theatre used their residency to experiment with the paradoxes and potentials of how the physical can interact with the virtual in telematic theatre. The remote performers revel in the challenge of achieving the impossible by passing drinks and throwing balls to one another and stabbing a person's hand as they bring to life the characters in Paul Cézanne's 1895 painting *The Card Players* (Figure 3.3). They use a mix of ingenuity, sleight of hand and comic slapstick, but like absurd Samuel Beckett characters, they seem destined to try and fail, and try and fail again, but better.

DAP-Lab (Design and Performance Lab)'s intention was to create a telepresence performance based on environmental issues and the climate crisis through an exploration of *hydrocommons*, a shared ecological water and plant culture. In *The River of No one*, they were interested in seeing how they could incorporate scenes of

Figure 3.3 Creation Theatre actors (left to right) Graeme Rose and Giles Stoakley fill the empty seats in Cézanne's 'The Card Players' and attempt to impress their audience member visitor (centre) with a simple, yet impossible game of catch the ball (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

devastation from recent flooding, scientific measuring data and underwater environments to create a compelling narrative about a botanist's global journey.

Female collective **Guttersnipe Theatre** had received Arts Council funding to create a new show but their tour was cancelled due to coronavirus. They approached the research team to utilise the Telepresence Stage platform to transpose it into an online performance. *SHUGA FIXX vs The Illuminati* is a black comedy parodying X Factor-style talent shows, and satirising conspiracy theories and the media's manipulation of young people.

Phoenix Dance Theatre wanted to investigate the choreographic possibilities of working with telepresence and virtual scenographies, and to conceive new types of creative space. Using unusual camera positions, they explored dramatic viewpoints and perspectives, including seemingly defying gravity and pulling one another out of holes in the ground and into the sky (Figure 3.4).

Pigeon Theatre's central research concern focuses on the formal structures of space, environment and architecture, and the project gave the company an opportunity to extend their experiments using virtual scenography. Their performance follows two

Figure 3.4 Phoenix Dance Theatre performer Reynaldo Santos pulls Mirabel Hung-Smith out of a mossy hole in a woodland in 'Experiments in Wonderland' (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

mother characters as they lose and find one another and traverse a dizzying array of 'real' and fantastical locations, grow from small to tall, tidy away toys, drink, dance and repeatedly wonder *Where are the Children?*

Red Ladder approached their residency with the aim of creating what they called 'a world in which strange and surreal events could happen in a believable way around the physical actors, and to blend reality and fantasy to make the audience question their perceptions of reality'. In *TAXI*, a conversation between a male driver and his female passenger begins to unravel issues around mental health and the fragility of society.

Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company's collaboration with The Third Space Network brought together a black tenor singer (Charles Lane) and a white choreographer/dancer (Daniel Charon) to create a response to racial polarisation in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the crisis of personal isolation following the coronavirus lockdown. *Black|White* explores notions of intimacy, conflict, harmony and humanity as the bodies of the two performers, who have never met in person, are doubled, silhouetted and composited amidst various video backgrounds.

Sharp Teeth Theatre wanted to build on their experience and success with acclaimed murder mystery audience participation shows they had previously presented both to physical audiences and via Zoom. *Sherlock in Homes* is set in a 1920s Antarctic expedition base camp following a blizzard and a murder, with audience members given clues through flashback sequences and guided to interrogate the eccentric character suspects to uncover 'who done it'.

Technologies and techniques

Throughout all the residencies the central compositing was completed using various video production and VJing applications (which allow real-time manipulations of digital imagery, normally in synchronisation with music) to mix and switch the audio and video layers, together with live video calls from the remote actors. Whilst the initial pilot residency with *Telematic Quarantine* and the first sessions with Phoenix Dance Theatre used the VJing application 'Resolume Avenue 6' (first release 2017) in combination with 'Skype' (first release 2003) for the video communications, all subsequent residencies made full use of 'WebRTC' (Web Real-Time Communications, first release 2011) in order to visually overlay and composite together all the remote actors participating in the production. WebRTC is a free and open-source protocol allowing audio and video communication to work inside web pages, providing direct high-quality, low latency peer-to-peer audio and video communication, eliminating the need for native applications such as Skype.

For the residency with Guttersnipe Theatre, guest researcher Boyd Branch incorporated the WebRTC platform OBS-Ninja (first release 2020) with his self-built, open-source video production software 'Virtual Director', specifically designed for remote improvisatory theatre. It resulted in a performance with kaleidoscopic and kinetic set designs including a grandiose, multi-screen TV talent show (Figure 3.5), with shattering mirrors which announced the winners' descent into a purgatory underworld lair. For the DAP-Lab residency, project partners the Third Space Network used LiveToAir (first released 2020) to manage the WebRTC video calls in combination with the 'VDMX' VJing/video processing application

Figure 3.5 Guttersnipe Theatre's girl-band SHUGA FIX (left to right, dancing, Grace Church, Molly McGeachin and Polly Pedder) take to the stage live for their Triple Threat Teen Award performance, complete with triangular pre-recorded video versions of themselves (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

(first release 1998) for the compositing. In both these cases, and with the earlier solution using Resolume Avenue 6 and Skype, the remote audio and video communications were brought directly into the video production via the newly developed NDI (Network Device Interface) protocol for seamless sharing of audio and video between applications and local area networks.

The other residencies used 'vMix' (first release 2009), a complete video production platform, incorporating WebRTC communications with video mixing and chromakeying effects (where, as in film and TV production, software recognises the (non-green) figure of a person/people or object and separates them from the background), all in one application. Two key aspects – stability and functionality – made this the software platform of choice. Using a Google Chrome browser and the vMix Call website, the remote actors simply called into the Telepresence Stage vMix platform operated by a member of the research team, who could apply a full range of video switching functions and effects. The incoming video calls were chromakeyed and composited together within the virtual sets with the output

relayed back to the actors and simultaneously streamed online for audiences on YouTube, Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

During the latter stages of the project, Sharp Teeth Theatre explored ways to bring Zoom audience members directly into their production using ‘ZoomISO’ (first release 2021), which allows the video outputs of Zoom participants using virtual green screen backgrounds to be incorporated as live video assets in their production. Their live head and shoulder images appeared in a variety of positions within the stage sets in the Sharp Teeth production, including in mirrors and ship portholes, and framed upside down under tables. In addition, live chat from the audience’s Zoom meeting was placed within scenes as titles and text overlays using ‘vMix Social’, which also integrated Twitter, Facebook, Twitch, YouTube and IRC social media content directly into the live production.

A telepresence stage of possibilities

Sophisticated and accurately perspectival 3D digital scenographies were perhaps the most critical element in providing a sense of theatricality to the productions, and a vast array of designs and visual effects were created and explored. Two companies chose a single setting (Cézanne’s room with a card table for Creation Theatre; the interior of a taxi for Red Ladder) to stage their final performance, providing a highly concentrated focus and increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere (Figure 3.6). But while apparently simple scenographies, these had many separate digital layers to provide a sense of scale, depth and three-dimensional reality, with the former including walls, two chairs, a table, and a bottle of wine, as well as the two actors (Figure 3.3). Invisible cross-fades were applied in real time to place the different layers to the foreground or background. This allowed the remote actors to move and be positioned in different perspective configurations, such as in front of or behind one another, and to walk around the virtual table and in between the chairs convincingly. In preparation, the performers set up a table of the same dimensions and a chair (both covered with green cloth) in their homes and aligned them precisely with the positions of the virtual ones they could see on their screens. Their positions

Figure 3.6 The taxi driver (Matthew Lewney) reads an address on a piece of paper handed to him by his passenger (Stefania Pinato) in Red Ladder Theatre's 'TAXI' (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton)

when sitting down, or when leaning on the table and placing real objects onto it (cards, drinks, etc.) matched the digital picture perfectly to create a believable three-dimensional *mise-en-scène* of one single space.

Designing and layering of foreground and background elements, objects and planes was key in developing virtual scenographies with sufficient visual depth and perspective to truly resemble a theatre stage set. In the research team's introductory briefings to the companies, the concept was explained using the analogy of a 'Victorian paper theatre' – a traditional model theatre constructed from cardboard, complete with changeable backgrounds and wings. Different full and partial scene settings can be placed progressively at different points and planes (usually between three and five) on the stage from downstage to upstage, while cardboard miniature characters, inserted through the wings from stage left and right, can be introduced and moved about on sticks.

This layering of 2D paper scenography and actors to produce a 3D effect is an apt metaphor to explain how scenic and video layers were composited for the Telepresence Stage, with actors positioned in front of and behind elements of scenic locales such as pillars, and objects such as furniture. Just like the Victorian paper theatre, the central

node operator has all the digital assets at their disposal to composite the scene. This includes the remote actors, who are live video assets calling in from their individual homes and who are cut out from their green screen backdrops using chromakey techniques. These live cut-out figures can be quickly and easily placed by the operator into any position within the scenography, scaled as tiny or huge in comparison to the set and other performers, rotated to be upside down, and so on.

The ease with which the system's software can instantly render *Gulliver's Travels*-style size transformations of characters was utilised by a number of groups, most strikingly with DAP-Lab's image of a giant biologist with a VR helmet examining and touching the miniscule female figure of Ariel, who appears like a tiny bee on a petal of a huge flower (Figure 3.7). Other visual body effects that were applied at the touch of a button included inverting bodies to negative and rendering them as silhouettes. Turning the actors into silhouettes provides them with the opportunity to interact as a complete composition, without the concern of who is in front or behind the other, and worked particularly well in physically oriented scenes, such as fights. Its use included disguising the identity of the murderer in Sharp Teeth's *Sherlock*

Figure 3.7 The tiny figure of Ariel (Dee Kathleen Egan) appears like a bee on a huge red flower ten times her size, while the VR-helmet wearing botanist (Zhi Xu) observes and pokes at her with his finger, in DAP-Lab's 'The river of no one' (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

Figure 3.8 Sharp Teeth Theatre performers Alice Lamb (left) and Tom Fletcher (centre left) re-enact different murder scenarios, silhouetted to disguise their identity (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

in Homes (Figure 3.8). In a sequence in Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company's *Black|White*, the silhouette of the black character was rendered white, and the white character's silhouette rendered black. The performance thus celebrated the Black Lives Matter movement (Figure 3.9), while also pointing to the tensions leading to the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and the activism it prompted across the Western world.

The visual styles and renderings of digitally created scenographies varied from gritty realism to graphic novel genres and from the painterly and impressionistic to sci-fi futuristic and fantastical. Deep spaces were explored, including Pigeon Theatre's extended corridor with a long vanishing perspective that became filled with toys and children, and for the denouement entirely submerged in water (Figure 3.10). Many virtual settings and effects such as these, and others including vertiginous ones with characters placed in the sky or upside down, were created by the companies specifically because they would be impossible (or at least prohibitively expensive) for them to stage in a physical theatre. Such benefits are important when evaluating the broader significance of the project and its usefulness beyond the pandemic. This is *theatre+*: it is precisely not theatre but is enabling ways of being 'theatrical' within a digital medium combining both analogue and digital affordances

Figure 3.9 In 'Black|White', the silhouetted performers Daniel Charon (left) and Charles Lane (right) meet in the middle with their two neighbourhoods superimposed behind them (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

Figure 3.10 As rain falls outside, Anna Fenemore leans in through a window with a toy watering can to fill up the corridor with water as Gillian Knox looks on, in Pigeon Theatre's 'Where are the children?' (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

in order to create something that is *neither* theatre *nor* television, but an exciting hybrid that has its own aesthetic and ontology.

Improbable's team included an experienced video designer and animator, which enabled their scenographies to juxtapose digital

settings with physical backgrounds. In addition, they framed full-body live action sequences with close-up shots of hands that crafted and manipulated the scenes in real time by moving physical objects and layers. The giant hands moved the performers inside books whose pages turned to reveal them within another picture setting, and within scenes that were hand-drawn and painted in real-time around them. Settings were assembled from paper cut-outs to fit with the performers' dialogue. For example, as one performer read the words 'scrub, scrub, scrub' aloud from the book, the artist's hands rubbed white chalk onto a (green screen) piece of paper, chromakeyed over another setting, thus changing the entire scene to the one described in the story (Figure 3.11). In a dark, child-like silhouette of a street filled with washing lines, one of the live actors appeared with flapping, animated black wings, and the manipulator's giant hands suddenly obscured her face and head by placing a cut-out paper crow's head on it.

Such experiments demonstrate the potential of the Telepresence Stage system to stir the imaginations of performance artists and to foster unexpected juxtapositions and haunting effects. The extensive palette of forms – from theatrical and televisual to craftwork and animations – and the ability to reveal, activate and combine them at the touch of a button catalysed the company's creativity, their

Figure 3.11 Hands rub away chalk to reveal a forest scene, as Cassie Hercules sits by a campfire in the foreground, reading out a story from a book in Improbable's 'Outside the Frame' (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

appetite to experiment and ambitions to create unique images and *coup de théâtre* moments. The performance ended with an equally arresting and unexpected sequence, where all the performers suddenly pulled back their green screen cloths to disrupt the spectacle and reveal the mundane domestic rooms that lay behind the virtual illusions.

Virtually touching: Phenomenological aspects of telepresence

Telepresence is akin to a lucid dream where distance is forgotten and a bridge is forged through time and space, making a collective dream of our existing together somewhere else, come true. Telepresence is arguably the most significant cultural development of our age. Whereas not long ago, videophones existed only in the realms of science-fiction fantasy, Star Trek-style telepresence, too, has now become a reality and, just as Walter Benjamin noted with the coming of photographic and reproductive media, it has entirely changed our 'sense perception' (Benjamin, 1999 [1936]: 211–245). Technological changes materially alter people and their psychologies, and telepresence systems – and specifically in our research, stages – are witness to profound moments, evidencing not only significant changes to human sense perception, but proprioception: our body's self-perception and instincts in sensing our own and others' movements and spatial positioning.

One of the first concerns, and delights, of almost every performer we worked with when they first encountered other bodies in the 'third space' of the Telepresence Stage, was to reach out and try to touch them (my location is the first space, yours is the second and the screen compositing us together is the third space). They virtually shook hands, high-fived, embraced, stroked one another's hair, kissed, pushed, pulled, punched, kicked and fought with one another. Telematic touching was the recurring and defining feature of every single first practical session we had with the companies. Grasping only at the air, the participants nonetheless shared a palpable intimacy and extraordinary energy in their telematic touching. Their proprioception was not only highly attuned when working within the virtual sets, it was

actually heightened by the need to adjust their positions and actions in relation to these new and unfamiliar parameters, in the same way that proprioception is intensified during moments of physical uncertainty or danger.

One performer described the effects of virtual hugging as giving 'a level of solace and a sense of closeness I wasn't expecting' (Grace Church, Guttersnipe Theatre) and explained how she suddenly felt very alone on her green screen after shutting down her laptop at the end of a session. Virtual touching is sensorily highly affective even though it remains non-tactile, since the body can experience tactile feelings through visual stimuli, what Laura Marks calls 'haptic visuality' (2014: 269–274). As Hao (2022) notes:

> Virtual touch can create a synaesthetic experience – a neurological condition that causes a blending of the senses … where the proprioception of the body is re-engineered through telematic technology … a heterotopic virtual interface to situate an uncanny fusion of real and fictional experience.

The Telepresence Stage experience is uncanny not only because it blends reality and fantasy, but also because it offers a new perspective that goes beyond a physical encounter, since each participant *sees themselves* as well as the others in the 'third space' of the screen. With the exception of looking in a mirror, we never observe ourselves interacting with others, but doing so on the Telepresence Stage reinforces our sense of self and responsibility for our actions. We directly witness ourselves interacting with others, making choices and acting upon them, while simultaneously seeing ourselves as others see us. Being doubled and witnessing ourselves outside ourselves provides both an uncanny and an existential experience.

For existentialist philosophers, the encounter with the Other is a revelatory one that is a key to understanding the essence of *Dasein* (Being): from Emmanuel Lévinas' (1991 [1961]) philosophy of ethical responsibility for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, to Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *being-for-others* (2003 [1943]) and Gabriel Marcel's reflections on 'separation with communion' (1995: 39). Responsibility for others has also emerged as an important theme within performance theory, from Helena Grehan's ideas on ethical spectatorship and responsible theatre

(2009) to Hans-Thies Lehmann's observations on responsibility/response-ability in performance (2006). Seeing ourselves in the third-person position while watching our own encounters with Others on the Telepresence Stage is a poignant and sometimes tragi-comic experience, since we recognise ourselves as our own puppet-masters.

The strong sense of intimacy and empathy possible through telematic encounters has been well documented and discussed over decades. In an article, telematic arts pioneer Roy Ascott answered his titular question 'Is there Love in the Telematic Embrace?' very affirmatively (Ascott, 1990); in 2002 Stephen Wilson called telepresence the 'major goal of telecommunications in both research and art' (Wilson, 2002: 526). Meanwhile, Oliver Grau concluded that in Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (1991) installation, where remote participants encounter one another via projections on beds in different spaces,

> a feeling of astounding nearness arises … many visitors seize the opportunity for uninhibited mischief and make virtual seductive advances, indulge in intimacies or even come to blows … the restraints that reality imposes on us are lifted and the actual consequences of our actions removed. (Grau, 2003: 275)

The residency actors and dancers were initially surprised that working from separate spaces they could so quickly and easily relate to each other in human, physical and visceral ways. They reported their sensations of connection, intimacy and empathy as being highly pronounced. Even more surprising was that the more they interacted and performed together within the third space, the more they forgot – often entirely for long periods – that they were still in their own homes and felt physically transported into the virtual setting. A number of the residency companies were fascinated by the potential of how this sense of total transference, as well as the proprioceptive intensities of their performers' telematic encounters, could embellish, amplify or complicate the audience's perceptions of 'liveness' to enable their productions to still be located within a live theatre context rather than simply being perceived by audiences as streaming video.

Ontological issues: Can theatre ever truly exist on a screen?

For decades, artists and critics have argued that theatre remains impossible on a screen, since theatre and screen media are not only ontologically different, but incompatible enemies alien to one another (e.g. Grotowski, 1968; Phelan, 1993; Sontag, 1966; Pavis, 2003). During the pandemic, that argument was renewed and intensified as the screens presenting live online theatre became doubly shrouded by the chastening knowledge of what had positioned it there – the state of fear of contagion and death – together with the reminder of the internet's central and sometimes insidious role in guiding our understandings and responses to the virus:

> One of the reasons why theatre performances using Zoom and the like have failed … [is] that the digital pandemic theatres are not only mounted on the effects of biological fright, but also encircled by the 'digital feelings' of hypertrophied cosmic fear. … As of now, all the world's a stage haunted by the effective virus and affective #virus. The virus is spatially within and among us. (Kyoko, 2020)

The research team acknowledge that live theatre presented on a screen will never replicate its physical experience, but we argue that what the residency companies created was not simply online media or live television, but *another form of theatre*. For decades, performance companies have been experimenting with and creating innovative new forms of theatre using digital technologies (see Dixon, 2007), and while the pandemic further accelerated those activities, it was not *responsible* for it. Thus, the sort of *Angst* that Kyoko stresses in the quotation above is not intrinsic to all digital experimentation, but rather layered onto those developments in the years immediately following 2020. It was a central concern of several residency troupes to try to transcend the televisual/filmic and two-dimensional aspects of online streaming video and 'make it feel like theatre' by highlighting aspects such as liveness, ephemerality and materiality: to retain the particular language and qualities of a theatrical experience. Whilst they fully engaged with the digital scenography and technical possibilities, they wanted to

expand and celebrate the Telepresence Stage's material aspects, physical capabilities and analogue aesthetics in order to render it a theatrical performance space 'fit for purpose':

> I really wanted it to still feel like theatre, and to me it did! … This really opened up a world for us, that we could use different techniques that felt real … you could feel the set wobble, you know, that's what I really liked about it. … It felt really right with the type of work that we were developing. (Angela Clerkin, Improbable)

Performers spoke of the nerves and adrenaline they experienced before their live performances, just as they would waiting in the wings prior to their physical stage entrances. Interestingly, they also reflected on the imperfections and mistakes during performances in a positive light, since these reaffirmed the unpredictability of live experiences they were aiming for: 'it did feel like theatre when things went wrong' (Cassie Hercules, Improbable). Some groups played with ideas of screens within screens, and in doing so highlighted the medium in a meta-theatrical way, emphasising its hybrid form combining live theatre with pre-recorded televisual aesthetics. Sharp Teeth's 'captain' introduced the 1920s murder mystery characters

Figure 3.12 Finding themselves miniaturised on the television console, Pigeon Theatre's Anna Fenemore (left) and Gillian Knox (right) decide to attempt to get inside the TV – and succeed (© Telepresence Stage, University of Brighton).

while scratchy black-and-white film footage played on an old-fashioned screen in a ship's cabin. Two characters in *Telematic Quarantine* mysteriously disappeared from a living room then reappeared on the TV set in the room, looking very confused, while miniature versions of Pigeon Theatre's mother characters physically pulled one another into a vintage TV set (Figure 3.12).

Thinking beyond the pandemic

Although the research was initially concerned with enabling theatre productions to effectively migrate online to provide solutions to counter lockdowns, closed theatres and safe distancing protocols, its findings are of lasting value and impact for the creative industries. The project had a profound effect on the resident companies, with the use of immersive virtual scenographies proving a significant spur to creativity, taking troupes into whole new realms of imagination and ideas. Some spoke of it entirely changing their styles and taking them in much more experimental and 'otherworldly' directions.

In debrief sessions concluding the residencies, many reflected on the platform's transformative potential, including creating sequences and illusions that would be impossible in live theatre, and of experiencing a particular sense of freedom or playfulness that provided impetus to change artistic directions. Creation Theatre's Giles Stoakley spoke of 'discovering an entirely new medium, and experimenting with it exuberantly to discover its magical possibilities in much the same way that Georges Méliès and the early cinema pioneers did over a century ago'.

The platform's intuitive interface and user-friendliness (following the initial setting up process) was praised, with many noting both its simplicity – one company unused to employing technology reflected 'if we can do it, anyone can' (Gillian Knox, Pigeon Theatre) – and cost-effectiveness. Huge and spectacular virtual sets can be built quickly with opensource software at a fraction of the financial cost of building a physical set. Groups spoke about the future possibilities of the platform, from its ease and convenience for script read-throughs, casting, preparing sets and reducing production costs to its potential to inspire ambitious new hybrid theatre forms,

slipping between stage and screen. Other companies speculated on the emergence of a future role, somewhere between a director, stage manager, controller and QLab operator, as increasingly essential to elevate and expand digital productions; and these possibilities may prompt the performing arts sector to consider upskilling initiatives to embrace and accelerate such developments.

Some participants enthused about the flexibility the system provides for people who have limitations on travel, such as those with mobility issues and caring responsibilities. Pigeon Theatre's two performers are mothers with young children who discussed the tremendous benefits of devising and rehearsing from home with their children there with them (they also incorporated them as performers in the *Where are the Children?* production) without the need for childcare arrangements which rehearsals normally involve. They also reflected on the inherently playful and childlike qualities of the Telepresence Stage, which 'created a world that you just did want to spend time with and mess around with … a space that's naturally making you want to experiment, to be in and enjoy. The kind of theatricality that it's able to create is incredibly exciting for us' (Gillian Knox).

The pandemic has changed working patterns across all industry sectors and many of these will last, including more working from home, since the experience has shown the benefits – not only is it convenient for people and saves costs (from travel to office space), but it also *works*. The project's experiments demonstrate the same for the theatre and dance industries – these platforms and techniques *work* and are highly effective, enabling intimate and immersive experiences across distances. Performers within the same city can devise, rehearse and perform together from their homes, but perhaps more significantly, the techniques enable ambitious cross-border collaborations.

Telematic Quarantine conjoined individuals and groups from the UK, Singapore, Australia and Brazil in a spontaneously improvised yet vividly memorable performance, with participants needing no more than a laptop, a Skype connection and a large green cloth. Phoenix Dance Theatre described the system's 'potential to reinvent collaborative workshopping', while Improbable advocated scheduling regular open events using the Telepresence Stage, making it a space for global improvisations where artists

from around the world meet frequently to collaborate, invent and perform together.

The project provides a scalable Telepresence Stage for global connectivity without the need to physically travel, and in the push for a green world, it can thus reduce carbon footprints. It catalyses originality and innovation and opens up bold new vistas and international collaborative opportunities for the performance industries.

Conclusion

In the light of lockdowns and social distancing, the Telepresence Stage project developed effective, affordable approaches to connect theatre and dance performers from their separate homes and place them together within virtual sets online. Freed from Zoom-style walled boxes and able to physically and verbally interact, the theatrical tradition of 'breaking the fourth wall' to address the audience reaches another level, with the actors seemingly breaking a *fifth* wall of space and time.

The ten residencies developed new online approaches and forms of performance, developed and tested a range of proprietary systems and bespoke online video encoder/decoder laboratory platforms, and undertook technical and creative experiments towards proof-of-concept testing and prototyping. Ambitious, visually immersive 3D scenography environments were designed to the companies' requirements and employed in ten original productions performed live for online audiences.

The projects were highly diverse in their aims, styles and narratives, but had in common a trinity of key elements: dramaturgy, telematics and scenography. The platform's use of multilayered and multi-perspectival digital sets aimed to replicate conditions on a physical theatre stage and resulted in a strong sense of performance intimacy, empathy and telepresence between the performers. A range of arresting visual effects and illusions, many of which would be impossible to achieve without significant budgets in a theatre building, were achieved at minimal cost.

The experiments undertaken transpose theatre into another context while retaining the sense of communion and 'liveness' that lie at the heart of theatrical performance. They herald new

creative modalities, ways of collaborating, staging and delivering performances that will long outlive the pandemic.

Notes

1 After gathering information on the participants' own available computer resources, such as laptop or desktop computer and internet router and speed, as well as room dimensions and its distance to the router, the research team could supply the bespoke green screen resources required. The actors were each supplied with: one 3×5 metre green screen backdrop and stand, for the floor and wall (three metres being the maximum width of most domestic rooms); two LED video lights on stands, providing bright saturated lighting; one webcam and stand to position the camera at eye level; and various cables and adapters including HDMI cables, USB extension cables and most importantly an Ethernet cable to connect their computer to the router to maximise on available internet bandwidth. They were also supplied with one, and in some cases (preferably) two 24″ video monitors, positioned to one or both sides of the green screen, providing them with the ability to monitor the performance on both sides of the green screen, left and right, as well as straight ahead using their computer screen, giving them complete observation and control of their telepresence performance from all three available angles. The equipment was dispatched and set up in their homes according to the green screen studio instructions provided before each residency session, which they all perfected with increased speed over time.

2 For a discussion of digital access, telepresence and the future potential of live online performance between Misek, Strutt, Sermon and Aebischer, see Aebischer (2021).

References

Aebischer, Pascale (2 December 2021), Digital performance beyond the pandemic. *Pandemic and Beyond* podcast, episode 12. Available at: https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/pandemicandbeyond/episodes/Pandemic-and-Beyond-Episode-12-Digital-Performance-Beyond-the-Pandemic-e1b4nf8/a-a70v8oh (accessed 8 April 2023).

Ascott, Roy (1990), Is there love in the telematic embrace? *Art Journal* 49.3, 241–247.

Benjamin, Walter (1999 [1936]), The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, pp. 211–245.

Dixon, Steve (2007), *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art and Installation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Grau, Oliver (2003), *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Grehan, Helena (2009), *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grotowski, Jerzy (1968), *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eugenio Barba. London: Methuen.

Hao, Ada Xiaoyu (2022), ConTagion, ConTactic, ConFronted, ConTinuance: A Performance of the disquiet. Abstract submitted to DRHA 2022: Digital Research in the Humanities and Arts conference.

Kyoko, Iwaki (2020), A spatial bubble of digital pandemic theatres. *Global Performance Studies* 3.2. https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv3n2a10

Lehmann, Hans-Thies (2006), *Postdramatic Theatre*. London: Routledge.

Lévinas, Emmanuel (1991 [1961]), *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* trans. A. Lingis Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Marcel, Gabriel (1995), *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari. New York: Carol Publishing Group.

Marks, Laura U. (2014), Haptic aesthetics. In Michael Kelly (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 269–274.

Pavis, Patrice (2003), Afterword: Contemporary dramatic writings and the new technologies. In Caridad Svich (ed.), *Trans-global Readings: Crossing Theatrical Boundaries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 187–202.

Phelan, Peggy (1993), *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (2003 [1943]), *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes, Abingdon: Routledge Classics.

Sontag, Susan (1966), Film and Theatre. *TDR: Tulane Drama Review* 11.1, 24–37.

Wilson, Stephen (2002), *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Part II

Crisis and the creative workforce

4

Weariness, adaptability and challenging 'viability': Creative freelancers and pandemic resilience in South Yorkshire

Sarah M. Price, Stephanie E. Pitts and Renee Timmers

From the early days of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, freelancers in the UK were particularly vulnerable to the financial impact of coronavirus restrictions (Hutchison and Yordanova, 2020). As financial rescue packages were announced to support workers, it quickly became apparent that many freelancers would fall through the cracks and not receive any financial assistance as their work ground to a halt (House of Commons Treasury Committee, 2020). People working in the arts, culture and heritage sector were badly affected, owing to the high proportion of freelancers (70% of the workforce in music, performing, and visual arts; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2020), lengthy coronavirus restrictions on arts activities and the fact that many arts workers were ineligible for support as a result of moving between employment and self-employment (Woronkowicz and Noonan, 2019: 660).

Studies on the effects of coronavirus restrictions, including our own interim report (Price, 2021), have shown the extent to which freelancers lost work during lockdowns, faced financial instability and experienced a worsening sense of wellbeing (May *et al.*, 2021; Spiro *et al.,* 2021). These have demonstrated how coronavirus restrictions exacerbated *existing* problems, such as freelancers' 'forced dependency' on arts organisations, the precarity and financial risk of freelance work and the systemic inequalities in the sector (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2021: 15–16; see also Pratt, 2017: 136; Comunian and England, 2020). It is therefore hardly surprising that the number of freelancers in creative occupations declined by around 38,000 from the start of 2020 to the end of

2020, with music, performing and visual arts found to be the 'epicentre' of the crisis (Florisson *et al.*, 2021).

This chapter contributes to the critique of the UK government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic by exploring the mental health and wellbeing impact of UK coronavirus restrictions on freelance arts, culture and heritage workers in South Yorkshire, a region in the North of England. We argue that one of the most destructive elements of the lockdown period for this population was the 'viability' rhetoric that surrounded debates about governmental financial assistance (discussed below), leaving freelancers feeling as though they were not valued and not deemed worthy of support.

Coronavirus restrictions in England in relation to arts and culture

Prior to the pandemic, the creative industries in the UK were growing faster than the wider economy (DCMS, 2022). According to a report by the non-profit Creative UK Group (2021), the Creative Industries contributed £116 billion per year to the UK economy in 2019, in addition to the immeasurable cultural, social, health and wellbeing value that they bring to their local areas and populations (e.g. see Mowlah *et al.*, 2014; Perkins *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the Creative Industries play an important role in the UK's global exports and soft power (Arthurs, 2019). Much of this growth has been produced by freelancers, who comprise one-third of workers in the creative industries, accounting for one-seventh of all self-employed workers in the UK (Creative UK Group, 2021: 15). These workers are often freelance by necessity (Easton and Caldwell-French, 2017: 10) and have been found to move frequently between different forms of employment, taking on commissioned projects, sourcing funding for their own ideas, as well as carrying out work on temporary contracts (p. 15). Because creative organisations regularly rely on freelancers for specialist skills or to increase their capacity to deliver specific projects (p. 28), the sector is structured on a large proportion of its workforce having precarious employment. While many arts workers had successfully sustained careers in freelance employment prior to the pandemic, the feast-and-famine nature of freelance employment has led to inequalities in

who is able to access paid opportunities and often made it so that only those with financial safety nets are able to pursue this type of work (Brook *et al.*, 2020). Freelancers disproportionately shoulder the risk of staging arts events, and the precarious nature of freelance employment left them exposed when the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

Lockdowns put a stop to many activities in the cultural and creative sectors. The gathering of audiences indoors for large-scale events such as gigs and theatre performances was prohibited in England during national lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Activities were also often not permitted or practicable outside of these dates owing to further social distancing measures and additional local lockdowns and restrictions. The government financial assistance schemes designed to alleviate the burden of the pandemic on affected industries were welcomed but were not enough to prevent insolvencies. The Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) was designed to help freelancers survive this period, but large numbers of freelancers were ineligible for the support. New freelancers, those who were earning over £50,000 a year and those who were directors of limited companies were excluded from support across numerous business sectors. The scheme was particularly detrimental for arts freelancers as they had often moved between fixed term employed and self-employment: many did not meet the threshold of 50% self-employment to be eligible for SEISS (House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2020: 27–28). Studies into the experiences of freelancers across the UK have found that this disproportionately impacted those with protected characteristics and caring responsibilities (Donnelly and Komorowski, 2022: 24–25), as well as those who experience racism, disabled individuals and those without higher education qualifications (Walmsley *et al.*, 2022: 41). Despite high-profile campaigns calling on the government to address these deficiencies, the government was described as showing 'no inclination to expand or provide alternatives to SEISS' (House of Commons Treasury Committee, 2021: 23). The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme paid the wages of furloughed employees who were not able to continue with their usual work in order to avoid redundancies. This alone was not sufficient to address the financial difficulties of arts and cultural organisations, leading to the announcement of a

£1.57 billion Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) on 5 July 2020. While these schemes have saved many organisations from going under, criticism has been rife (see Hill, 2020; Musicians' Union, 2020). This is especially the case around the government's desire to save institutions over individuals (see House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2021: 12–13).

In the autumn of 2020, a series of government announcements led to the emergence of the 'viability rhetoric', in which the legitimacy of a career in arts, culture and heritage was challenged on a public stage. This began with the launch of the Winter Economy Plan on 24 September 2020 (HM Treasury, 2020),[1] where furlough was replaced with the new Job Support Scheme, narrowing the remit of support to only 'viable jobs' (Gov.uk, 2020). Jobs were deemed 'viable' if employees had returned to at least a third of their normal working hours, thereby excluding most of the cultural sector where activities were still subject to many coronavirus restrictions. Immediately, the cultural sector rejected this definition of their work as 'unviable' (Roberts, 2020; Wiegand, 2020). This was compounded by a controversial interview with then Chancellor Rishi Sunak (ITV, 2020) in which he was interpreted as saying that arts and cultural workers would need to move sectors following the coronavirus pandemic (Allen-Kinross, 2020).

Anger amongst arts freelancers was further fuelled on 12 October 2020 by the emergence on social media of the now-infamous 'Fatima' advert (Parkinson, 2020; see also Chapter 5 in this volume). The advert consisted of a photo of a ballet dancer lacing up her pointe shoes, with the tagline 'Fatima's next job could be in cyber (she just doesn't know it yet). Rethink. Reskill. Reboot.' with logos for CyberFirst and the UK government. The outcry from the creative community was swift and damning. While the government was at pains to distance itself from this campaign (Jordan, 2020), stating that it predated the coronavirus pandemic and was one image in a series of posters showing people in a range of occupations, the damage was done: the government was seen by many to have entirely dismissed arts careers as lacking substance and being inconsequential and unworthy of support. This is despite their well-documented contribution to the UK economy, society, health and wellbeing (see *Creative approaches to wellbeing* in this series).

The research conducted with freelancers in this project was carried out from autumn 2020 onwards, after the emergence of the viability rhetoric and amongst ongoing debates about the support for arts and culture through the coronavirus pandemic. Following an overview of our data collection methods below, we share how these debates around viability and legitimacy of arts careers impacted the health and wellbeing of our participants. We end by suggesting ways in which the government could rebuild trust amongst the cultural sector through more informed policymaking and ongoing funding of arts workers.

Methods

The data explored in this chapter were collected as part of a larger project, 'Responding to and Modelling the Impact of COVID-19 for Sheffield's Cultural Ecology – a Case Study of Impact and Recovery'.[2] Taking place from July 2020 to November 2021, this project investigated how the coronavirus pandemic affected various stakeholders in the arts, culture and heritage sectors in the Sheffield City Region (synonymous with the 'South Yorkshire' region) comprising Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. We collected information from: (1) cultural organisations and businesses, (2) audiences and arts participants, (3) freelance arts workers, (4) key decision-makers in the city, as well as (5) commissioning an analysis of national economic data (Chamberlain and Morris, 2021). Ongoing discussions with stakeholders from the region ensured that their experiences of the pandemic fed into our research design, and findings were communicated back to local decision-makers throughout the project.

This chapter reports on our longitudinal study of arts, culture and heritage freelancers in South Yorkshire. This strand saw 98 freelancers complete three online surveys during the period October 2020 to August 2021, with nine participants taking part in follow-up semi-structured interviews between 18 February 2021 and 17 March 2021.[3]

Reports from each strand of the project and a breakdown of socio-demographics of respondents are available via the project website, containing detailed analysis of survey and interview

data. Here, we focus on data pertaining to the themes of wellbeing amongst freelancers, deriving from quantitative and qualitative data from all three surveys and from the semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data has been analysed using thematic analysis to identify key topics, which were often then investigated further in later phases of the study; particularly relevant to this chapter is the identification of an interview theme around feeling unvalued as an artist.

Findings and discussion

Deterioration of wellbeing

For the vast majority of freelancers in our study, coronavirus restrictions had led to them losing most of their work and experiencing a deterioration of their mental health and wellbeing. The availability of work had decreased 'dramatically' for 72% of respondents, consistent with findings from freelancers in Wales who experienced an average 76% reduction in income in 2020 and with little improvement in 2021 (Donnelly and Komorowski, 2022: 2). Almost half (47%) of the respondents to Survey 1 reported feeling stressed about personal finances to the point where financial pressures were constantly on their mind or keeping them awake at night (question adapted from the COVID-19 Social Study: Bu *et al*., 2020). Respondents who self-identified as being from a disadvantaged background experienced major stress about their personal finances at greater levels. Those who described their work as 'event crew, lighting or sound engineer' were particularly badly affected, with larger reductions in income (Price, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, given these high levels of stress, 77% of the freelancers reported in Survey 1 that their mental wellbeing was worse since the start of lockdown in March 2020. This worsening of mental health was reported at greater levels from male freelancers, those with diagnosed mental health conditions, those who were under 30, and event crew, lighting and sound engineers. We used the standardised ONS4 questions (Office of National Statistics, 2018) to provide comparable data on wellbeing between our respondents and the UK population. Freelancers in our study rated lower levels of life satisfaction than the UK population, felt life was less

worthwhile and reported lower levels of happiness, when compared with the UK population statistics recorded through weekly surveys by the Office of National Statistics during the same period. These findings are consistent with the decline in mental health reported by freelancers in other areas of the UK (May *et al.*, 2021; Spiro *et al.*, 2021; Donnelly and Komorowski, 2022).

The uncertainty around the future meant that many respondents were calculating how long they could withstand the financial insecurity of working in the arts during the coronavirus pandemic, while being at pains to say that working in arts, culture and heritage was an intrinsic part of who they were, that they were loath to give up. When asked whether they were likely to leave the sector, 22 respondents to Survey 2 (29%) indicated it was unlikely that they would ever change careers because their work in arts and culture was their passion, part of their identity and fulfilled them in a way that other jobs did not: 'I am by definition a Musician and will not be happy in any other role' (Survey Respondent 51). This survey question was designed in consultation with our advisory board in order to investigate arts freelancers' intention to leave the sector, insight that was not possible to ascertain through official statistics like the Labour Force Survey (Walmsley and Feder, 2022). Our study suggests that participants had every intention of staying in the sector if they were able to. However, there was a sense of inner conflict running through many of the responses, as respondents reflected on the possibility of having to leave the sector in order to stay financially afloat:

> The main issues that I've had to deal with have been … a loss of self. … You've found the one career that you think you're going to be particularly really good at and you've worked really hard to build that up and then it's taken away … and then you have to find something else but then you're not really trained in anything else, you have a loss of self, you have like, 'Have I wasted years of my life?' (Interview 04)

> Probably too old to retrain to do anything else – and all my skills lie in music. However, if work dries up completely I'll be forced to look elsewhere. To an extent it has always been a precarious way of making a living, but COVID has completely rocked the arts scene, and made life far more precarious than before. (Survey Respondent 15)

Interview Participant 04 described the sense of 'loss' that came with not only having to stop working at their chosen career, but also having to look for work in a field where they are not skilled, feeling a loss of identity as a result. This was echoed by the theatre freelancers study in which people felt a 'loss of personal identity and a place within society' as a result of not being able to work (Maples *et al.*, 2022: 10). Survey Respondent 15 also acknowledged the likelihood of having to look for work elsewhere, again recognising that they lacked the skills to work in other sectors, but with a wry comment that they were 'too old' to make retraining in a new career a real possibility. The two responses show varying levels of determination to remain in the industry or resignation to the thought of having to leave, as well as a concern from some that they may not have the skills or confidence to get back to their pre-coronavirus work. Some worried that the long break in their work forced by the coronavirus pandemic would make it hard to return to it, having to rebuild their client base, regain confidence in performing to audiences and potentially start again from scratch. Three respondents gave themselves timelines of one-to-two years to see if they could regain lost ground, otherwise they were planning to find a new career. This shows that the full impact of coronavirus on freelancer careers will take some time to be fully evident, as some decisions are postponed until the recovery – or otherwise – of the sector has stabilised.

What is striking about these and other responses is the sense that building a career in the arts has always been difficult and precarious, a perception that is very much confirmed by existing literature (Comunian and England, 2020). Indeed, 18 respondents (23%) reflected on the pros and cons of forging a career in the arts, namely the sense of fulfilment versus precarity, a dilemma that many had been experiencing since long before the pandemic: 'I'm always thinking of leaving the sector. It's hard. There's less money. But it's also fulfilling' (Survey Respondent 13). The balance between doing a career you love and finding enough work to be able to pay the bills was nothing new to the freelancers in our survey: 'the desire for stability and a salary has certainly been playing on my mind, but ultimately, I love what I do and so I'll threaten to leave all I want, but I just won't!' (Survey Respondent 26). Indeed, the sector is reliant on there being an oversupply of people who are desperate to work in this sector and hence will tolerate poor working conditions

and a lack of job security. The poor mental health reported above points to a workforce that was already vulnerable to fluctuating work availability, and who were fully aware that forging a career in the arts has always needed a sense of determination, tenacity or even obstinance to be successful. Nonetheless, as we discuss below, the public undermining of the validity of arts careers threatened the emotional resilience that had driven these freelancers in their careers to date, leaving more of them with doubts about their capacity to return to 'normal'.

The viability question

The first indication that the viability rhetoric was compounding the doubts and fears of freelancers in our study came in an interview following Survey 1. When asked to reflect on whether there had been any gaps in support, one respondent commented:

> There has been a bit of a focus around, 'Is this … are you viable?' … The discussions that have been had around whether or not being an artist is an actual career or an actual job, that's been devastating to hear. … it's just like the worst thing that you ever think in your head is, 'Am I a job's worth, am I just doing absolutely nothing, am I a louse and a sponge or whatever?' and then to hear people say that they think you are, that's been probably the toughest thing. (Interview 04)

This interviewee vividly described the way in which the viability rhetoric had a direct negative impact on their emotional well-being. Significantly, for this participant, hearing people question the validity of their work was particularly devastating because it compounded their own long-standing insecurities about not having enough work. This is not a new sentiment, with, for example, Cooper and Wills finding that a key stressor for popular musicians was 'ignorance' from the public and the 'low esteem' in which society held popular music as work, with musicians regularly being told to 'get a real job' (1989: 26–27). While not every freelancer had these doubts about their own work, the power of the viability rhetoric resulted from ongoing misgivings amongst the British public about the legitimacy of careers in the arts. Furthermore, this participant questions whether, in choosing to pursue a career in the arts, they are being a parasite on society, describing themselves

as potentially being a 'louse' and a 'sponge', but then justifying the value of what they do both in terms of the economic contribution, as well as providing 'people, everyday people with a release in their life'. As described above, the creative industries are built on a largely freelance workforce and are a big contributor to the UK economy and to people's wellbeing, so their conclusion that their work is valuable is rooted in strong evidence. However, the emergence of the viability rhetoric meant that many artists, researchers and public figures felt the need to proclaim the value of the arts publicly in a way that had not really been seen before the pandemic (see Roberts, 2020; Savage, 2020).

Having noticed the impact of the viability rhetoric in freelancer interviews, we interrogated this idea further in the second survey by asking respondents to reflect on the extent to which they felt valued as artists. When asked 'do you feel more or less valued as an arts worker than before the pandemic?', 49% of respondents felt less valued, with only seven (9%) feeling more valued than before the coronavirus pandemic. Similarly, a study with theatre freelancers from around the UK found that the overwhelming majority of respondents were dissatisfied and angry at the way in which they had been 'unvalued', 'ignored' or rendered 'invisible' by the government (Maples *et al.*, 2022: 93). We asked participants to describe in their own words how this had affected them. The treatment of the arts by the UK government was felt by many to not recognise the economic, social and cultural value that the arts bring to the UK, 'massively punch[ing] above our weight on the global market' (Survey Respondent 61). Instead, the arts were felt to be treated as a luxury, with little consequence if they were to fail:

> Being told by the government to retrain made me feel my career wasn't worthwhile. (Survey Respondent 49)

> I often feel as though what I do for a living isn't considered 'real'. A few people have said 'what business?' when I mention how difficult it's been to keep my business afloat. As though business and the arts don't go together?! (Survey Respondent 26)

Survey Respondent 49 explicitly linked the viability rhetoric to negative feelings about their own work, stating that the publicity which suggested that artists retrain into new careers made them feel like their career was not 'worthwhile'. In a nationwide study of

freelancers during the same period, the 'Fatima' advert and government advice to 'retrain' were also cited as making participants feel demoralised in their career (Maples *et al.*, 2022: 94–95). For Survey Respondent 26, it was not government campaigns but public opinion that they were having to contend with, having had to explain to people that they were running businesses as a freelance arts worker. Their comment ('as though business and the arts don't go together') points to a perceived conflict between the two amongst people outside the sector. The impact of this discursive devaluation of their career choices on respondents' emotional wellbeing was strongly evident, summarised by one as being 'demoralising to see our sector not only ignored but dismissed and devalued' (Survey Respondent 21). Participants reported that it had been hard to maintain any resilience when they were not able to do what they have trained to do, were isolated from other artists and were regularly being told that their artistic practice and business was unimportant.

Over this period, the question of whether or not arts workers were worthy of support became inextricably linked to whether or not working in the arts was a 'real job', which in turn connects to, we would argue, long-standing distrust amongst the public towards people who pursue artistic careers (see Cooper and Wills, 1989; this sentiment is under-explored in academic literature, but testimonies abound in the media, e.g. Benson, 2020). Furthermore, it shows the way in which public opinion is both filtered through and shaped by media and government policy, having a tangible impact on freelancers' livelihoods and wellbeing. The financial difficulties faced by creative workers as a direct result of the coronavirus restrictions were depicted as essentially an inevitable consequence of choosing an arts career, which here is presented as synonymous with precarity as a result of the widespread use of freelancers to sustain the sector. The responsibility is put on the individual worker to be able to withstand a global pandemic, rather than critiquing the insecure employment structures in which they operate. Furthermore, any financial successes prior to coronavirus were not recognised as evidence of a viable business. The responses above showed that freelancers, in addition to coping with the disruption of lockdown and the stress of not having work, were also having to withstand a kind of crisis of legitimacy within the media and public opinion. While many people were outspokenly supportive of arts

and culture, this rhetoric brought to the surface a sense that those in power did not understand or value the contribution that freelance arts workers make to the cultural life and economy of the UK.

Looking to the future

Despite the many difficulties facing freelancers through the coronavirus pandemic, participants in our study showed enormous aptitude for adaptation and innovation. Twenty-six respondents (34%) spoke of *managing* through the coronavirus pandemic, as a result of successful funding applications or through the support of long-term collaborating organisations, 14 respondents (18%) had *adapted* their work and business in creative ways to cope, 9 respondents (12%) saw this period as a time for *reflection* and a chance to evaluate their existing work, and 21 respondents (27%) described their experience of the coronavirus pandemic as a *struggle* to stay financially stable and to generate any work. Despite the resilience shown by freelancers, there is a real risk that the pandemic will continue to impact their careers for years to come. In the first survey, we asked people to report on what barriers they faced in returning to work, and they highlighted a loss of momentum (48%) and loss of visibility (37%) as concerns, with under-30s and respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds feeling these even more keenly. Some respondents worried that the long break in their work forced by the pandemic would make it hard to begin again, having to rebuild their client base, regain confidence in performing to audiences and potentially start again from scratch. Amongst our participants, these challenges were experienced differently according to career stage, being hardest for those who had just begun to build networks and would have to start again. As one interviewee succinctly stated: 'the idea of [work] just being on pause is not realistic. It's not that we could pick this up this May … the recording fees, the contracts, it's gone' (Interview 03). The focus on momentum is indicative of how the freelance world works, which is that one gig often leads to the next booking in a way that gradually accumulates over time. The prospect of having an 'empty diary' was therefore alarming for respondents not just in terms of a lack of income, but also their diminished visibility and the chances of getting work in the future.

Conclusion

The effects of coronavirus on the careers of our participants will be long-lasting. Our study showed a burgeoning crisis in mental health amongst arts and cultural freelancers, not only as a result of lockdown restriction and lack of work, but also the damaging viability rhetoric which made freelancers feel unvalued by the government, media, and in public opinion. As noted above, our respondents demonstrated the way in which poor public opinion of arts careers both influenced and was influenced by media reporting and government policy. This also demonstrates the way in which precarity is assumed to be an inevitability in pursuing a career in the arts and cultural sector, with freelancers shouldering the risk – but rarely seeing the benefit – of booming creative industries in the UK.

In order to create a better environment for freelancers, change is needed across arts policy, cultural organisations and public opinion of arts workers. This begins in childhood, by ensuring that the arts are taken seriously as legitimate and worthwhile school subjects that are properly resourced, reversing the trend towards the arts being seen as disposable school subjects in England (Welch, 2012). Public opinion could also be shifted through publicity campaigns by bodies such as Arts Council England and Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) which emphasise the economic and social contribution of arts and culture, with a strong focus on the entrepreneurial nature of arts careers and the business acumen of cultural freelancers. Cultural organisations must do more to support the freelancers they hire, through efforts to create longer term employment opportunities, commitments to following through on paid work even if events are cancelled and offering wellbeing support and guidance for staff on all forms of employment. Finally, the apparent lack of understanding amongst policymakers about the nature of freelance arts work demonstrates the desperate need both for more accurate data collection on freelancers (also noted by Walmsley *et al*., 2022: 65) and for people with arts backgrounds to be in the room when policy decisions are taking place. Given that before the pandemic, the creative industries contributed £166 billion to the UK economy with 2.1 million workers, representatives from this sector should be properly consulted on policy matters relating to employment.

Coronavirus restrictions are likely to have put freelancers' careers back by many years, plunging many into debt and neutralising the momentum and visibility that they had worked hard to attain. Freelancers are therefore in need of ongoing support from DCMS and Arts Council England to provide work opportunities to get their names back into the sector. More recent analyses from the Centre for Cultural Value has shown that the performing arts sector is experiencing a particularly slow recovery (Walmsley and Feder, 2022). Funding to enable freelancers to make new work, have periods of research and development, and improve their skills or make new contacts would help to mitigate some of the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic; our research provided the basis for such funding within the Sheffield City Region (University of Sheffield, 2021). Funding opportunities like this should be aimed at those who are most severely affected by the pandemic restrictions, namely: under-30s who did not have an established reputation and extensive contacts to rely on; those from disadvantaged backgrounds and low economic status who had to quickly find alternative employment and were not able to continue with their career development during the pandemic; and event crew, lighting and sound engineers who often reported being the hardest hit in our study. Systemic inequalities in the arts sector have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, so funding should be targeted towards under-represented groups within the arts sector, especially disabled workers, people from low-income backgrounds and freelancers from global majority communities.

Whereas the UK government's and hence the English approach to supporting the arts and cultural workers through the coronavirus pandemic focused on the survival of institutions (as noted by Wright, 2020: 16), the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each structured their policies around helping individual arts workers. Indeed, the Scottish government quickly recognised that many freelancers would fall through the cracks of the UK-wide support schemes and devised their own fund to help (Wright, 2020: 15), in contrast to central government who, as noted in House of Commons Treasury Committee (2021), were unwilling to alter their existing schemes despite the flaws repeatedly being pointed out. Many European countries offered far more in the way of tailored financial aid for creative freelancers. Denmark, notably,

designed a fund for artists who move between paid employment and self-employment and thereby fell through the gaps of their other schemes (Eurofound, 2020).

The fact that many freelancers immediately felt the impact of lockdown is indicative of the difficulties of working freelance where income is generated week-to-week. Arguably, coronavirus restrictions only exacerbated this existing precarity, noted in previous research as having class and accessibility biases that are likely to have become worse as people struggle to return to the sector (Brook *et al.*, 2020; Perry *et al.*, 2015). While many of our participants were committed to staying in the sector, local cultural organisations who participated in the research have reported that it is harder to find freelancers to fill roles such as sound and lighting technicians since reopening. It may be that those workers have found better job security, work-life balance and working conditions in other sectors, in which case improvements would need to be made in how the cultural sector looks after freelancers in order for this type of work to be attractive and competitive. Models for how the UK government could reduce precarity amongst arts freelancers in the long term can be found across Europe, with Austria, France and Germany having artist social insurance schemes, and Ireland trialling regular payments for artists beyond the coronavirus pandemic by embarking on a Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme (citizensinformation.ie, 2022). As the country enters another turbulent period of post-Brexit changes, cost of living crisis and an unsettled political landscape, support for arts sector jobs will be essential to maintain strong creative and cultural industries and avoid a future skills gap as potential new entrants seek out more secure and institutionally supported work.

More optimistically, many respondents demonstrated how they had established sustainable creative businesses prior to coronavirus that would have continued to succeed had it not been for the pandemic. We should be mindful as to how emphasising the vulnerabilities in this sector might reinforce the viability rhetoric and leave the arts sector open to future criticism. As researchers, we have a responsibility to highlight the strength of the freelance arts sector workforce and its contribution to the economic and cultural fabric of society, while also identifying the ways in which its inequities limit the pool of people who are able to work, and its precarious

conditions negatively impact those who elect to work in this sector. Change is needed to both arts policy and working practices to ensure that risk is not shouldered by 'resilient' freelance workers, but instead absorbed by the industry as a whole through better job security and financial support for freelancers.

Notes

1 While the introduction of a second lockdown in November led to this policy being withdrawn, the term 'viable jobs' which peppered the Winter Economy Plan had entered circulation and did not disappear with the policy.
2 www.sheffield.ac.uk/city-region/enhancing-cultural-vibrancy/covid-research-0
3 The topics included in each phase of the longitudinal study as well as the full questionnaires can be found on the project website. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

References

Allen-Kinross, Pippa (7 October 2020), What did Rishi Sunak actually say about people in the arts? *Full Fact*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220507082849/https://fullfact.org/economy/rishi-sunak-arts-opportunities/ (accessed 19 August 2022).

Arthurs, Kate (2019), Soft power of the creative industries. British Council. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20210916181451/https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/soft-power-creative (accessed 31 August 2022).

Benson, Louise (15 October 2020), I'm tired of being told to get a 'real job'. *Elephant*. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20210611155315/https://elephant.art/im-tired-of-being-told-to-get-a-real-job-15102020/ (accessed 4 September 2022).

Brook, Orian, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor (2020), *Culture is Bad for You*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bu, Feifei, Andrew Steptoe and Daisy Fancourt (2020), Loneliness during a strict lockdown: Trajectories and predictors during the COVID-19 pandemic in 38,217 United Kingdom adults. *Social Science & Medicine* 265. DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113521

Chamberlain, Paul and David Morris (2021), *The Economic Impact of Covid-19 on the Culture, Arts and Heritage (CAH) Sector in South*

Yorkshire and Comparator Regions. Sheffield: Chamberlain Walker and University of Sheffield. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220801150357/https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/media/28397/download?attachment (accessed 19 August 2022).

citizensinformation.ie (2022), Basic Income for the Arts (BIA). Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220621154520/https://www. citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment_and_redundancy/employment_support_schemes/basic_income_arts.html (accessed 31 August 2022).

Comunian, Roberta and Lauren England (2020), Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy. *Cultural Trends* 29.2, 112–128. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2020.1770577

Cooper, Cary L. and Geoffrey I. Wills (1989), Popular musicians under pressure. *Psychology of Music* 17.1, 22–36. DOI: 10.1177/0305735689171003

Creative UK Group (2021), The UK creative industries: Unleashing the power and potential of creativity. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20221102024518/https://www.wearecreative.uk/champion/publications/ (accessed 31 August 2022).

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2020), DCMS Sectors Economic Estimates 2019: Employment, 30 April 2020. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220407163234/https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dcms-sectors-economic-estimates-2019-employment/dcms-sectors-economic-estimates-2019-employment (accessed 19 August 2022).

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2022), Official statistics: DCMS sector national economic estimates: 2011–2020. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220405181703/https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dcms-sector-national-economic-estimates-2011-to-2020/dcms-sector-national-economic-estimates-2011-2020 (accessed 31 August 2022).

Donnelly, Steffan and Marlen Komorowski (2022), *Road to Recovery? Cultural Freelancers Wales Report 2022*. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220329153108/https://cfw.wales/recovery (accessed 31 August 2022).

Easton, Eliza and Evy Caldwell-French (2017), *Creative Freelancers*. Creative Industries Federation. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220901060305/https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/sites/default/files/2017–07/Creative%20Freelancers%201.0.pdf (accessed 31 August 2022).

Eurofound (2020), Support scheme for artists with different types of income, measure DK-2020–11/707 (measures in Denmark). EU PolicyWatch, Dublin. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220728222451/https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/DK-2020–11_707.html (accessed 31 August 2022).

Florisson, Rebecca, *et al.* (2021), The impact of Covid-19 on jobs in the cultural sector – part 3. Centre for Cultural Value in Partnership with Culture Hive. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220605092144/https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-jobs-in-the-cultural-sector-part-3/ (accessed 19 August 2022).

Freelancers Make Theatre Work (2021), The Big Freelancer Report. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20221022120041/https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Big-Freelancer-Report.pdf (accessed 19 August 2022).

Gov.uk (24 September 2020), Chancellor outlines winter economy plan. Press release. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220710191446/www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-outlines-winter-economy-plan (accessed 19 August 2022).

Hill, Liz (16 October 2020), Unease grows over Recovery Fund grant allocations. *Arts Professional*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210921050523/www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/unease-grows-over-recovery-fund-grant-allocations (accessed 19 August 2022).

HM Treasury (2020), *Winter Economy Plan*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220724215115/www.gov.uk/government/publications/winter-economy-plan/winter-economy-plan (accessed 19 August 2022).

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2021), COVID 19: Culture Recovery Fund. Eighth Report of Session 2021–22. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210703015038/https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6383/documents/70055/default/ (accessed 19 August 2022).

House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2020), *Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS Sectors: First Report*. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20211028023202/https://committees.parliament.uk/work/250/impact-of-covid19-on-dcms-sectors/publications/ (accessed 4 September 2022).

House of Commons Treasury Committee (2020), *Economic Impact of Coronavirus: Gaps in Support*. Second Report of Session 2019–21. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210923054515/https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1446/documents/13238/default/ (accessed 19 August 2022).

House of Commons Treasury Committee (2021), *Economic Impact of Coronavirus: Gaps in Support*. Eleventh Report of Session 2019–21. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210923055928/https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4703/documents/47210/default/ (accessed 19 August 2022).

Hutchison, Alasdair and Inna Yordanova (2020), Impact of the coronavirus outbreak on freelancers' income and their self-employed businesses. Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220715235131/www.ipse.co.uk/coronavirus-hub/coronavirus-report.html (accessed 19 August 2022).

ITV (6 October 2020), Covid: Rishi Sunak says people in 'all walks of life' are having to adapt for employment. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220221003256/www.itv.com/news/2020–10–06/rishi-sunak-suggests-musicians-and-others-in-arts-should-retrain-and-find-other-jobs (accessed 19 August 2022).

Jordan, Dearbail (12 October 2020), Downing Street joins criticism of 'crass' job ad. BBC News. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220815064434/www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-54505841 (accessed 19 August 2022).

Maples, Holly, *et al.* (2022), *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of Covid-19 on UK Theatre Workers. Final Report*. Colchester: University of Essex. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220904160819/https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/329928888/Freelancers_in_the_Dark_Final_Report_2022.pdf (accessed 31 August 2022).

May, Tom, *et al.* (2021), Socioeconomic and psychosocial adversities experienced by freelancers working in the UK cultural sector during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.672694

Mowlah, Andrew (2014), The value of arts and culture to people and society: An evidence review. Arts Council England. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20211103120354/https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Value_arts_culture_evidence_review.pdf (accessed 4 September 2022).

Musicians' Union (29 July 2020), Further details on the Cultural Recovery Fund announced. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210802023707/https://musiciansunion.org.uk/news/further-details-on-the-cultural-recovery-fund-announced (accessed 19 August 2022).

Office of National Statistics (2018), Personal well-being user guidance. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220530010339/www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingsurveyuserguide (accessed 19 August 2022).

Parkinson, Hannah Jane [@ladyhaja] (12 October 2020), 'this has made me so angry' [Tweet]. Twitter. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210526141212/https://twitter.com/ladyhaja/status/1315570650195648513 (accessed 19 August 2022).

Perkins, Rosie, *et al.* (2021), Arts engagement supports social connectedness in adulthood: Findings from the HEartS Survey. *BMC Public Health* 21.1, 1–15. DOI: 10.1186/s12889–021–11233–6

Perry, Beth, Kerry Smith and Saskia Warren (2015), Revealing and re-valuing cultural intermediaries in the 'real' creative city: Insights from a diary-keeping exercise. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18.6, 724–740. DOI: 10.1177/1367549415572324

Pratt, Andy C. (2017), Beyond resilience: Learning from the cultural economy. *European Planning Studies* 25.1, 127–139. DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2016.1272549

Price, Sarah (2021), *The Impact of Covid-19 on Freelance Arts Workers in the Sheffield City Region*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20211008222128/www.sheffield.ac.uk/city-region/enhancing-cultural-vibrancy/covid-research/freelancers (accessed 19 August 2022).

Roberts, Maddy Shaw (28 September 2020), Musicians express fury as arts jobs not 'viable' in COVID-19 economy. Classic FM. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220517004229/www.classicfm.com/music-news/coronavirus/anger-music-arts-jobs-not-viable-rishi-sunak-scheme/ (accessed 19 August 2022).

Savage, Mark (6 October 2020), Hundreds of musicians protest outside Parliament. BBC News. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220815222137/https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-54437872 (accessed 31 August 2022).

Spiro, Neta, *et al.* (2021), The effects of COVID-19 lockdown 1.0 on working patterns, income, and wellbeing among performing arts professionals in the United Kingdom (April–June 2020). *Frontiers in Psychology* 11. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.594086

University of Sheffield (8 April 2021), 83 freelance arts and culture workers benefit from Sheffield-based small grants. Press release. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20210726091541/https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/city-region/news/83-freelance-arts-culture-workers-benefit-sheffield-based-small-grants (accessed 31 August 2022).

Walmsley, Ben, *et al.* (2022), *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*. Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value. http://web.archive.org/web/20220207123112/https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Culture_in_Crisis.pdf (accessed 31 August 2022).

Walmsley, Ben and Tal Feder (2022), Workforce: A slow recovery from Covid for performing arts. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20221110132550/https://www.culturehive.co.uk/web/20221110132550/https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/workforce-a-slow-recovery-from-covid-for-performing-arts/ (accessed 31 August 2022).

Welch, Graham F. (2012), The arts and humanities, technology and the 'English Baccalaureate': STEAM not STEM. *Journal of Music, Technology & Education* 4.2–3, 245–250. DOI: 10.1386/jmte.4.2–3.245_1

Wiegand, Chris (30 September 2020), Carrie Hope Fletcher: 'The arts aren't viable? See how you feel without them!' *The Guardian*. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20211009053632/www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/sep/30/carrie-hope-fletcher-the-arts-arent-viable-see-how-you-feel-without-them (accessed 19 August 2022).

Woronkowicz, Joanna and Douglas S. Noonan (2019), Who goes freelance? The determinants of self-employment for artists. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 43.4, 651–672. DOI: 10.1177/104225871772806

Wright, John (2020), *Policy Review: Cultural Policy Responses to Covid-19 in the UK*. Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20220131075743/https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Policy-Review-Cultural-Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19-in-the-UK.pdf (accessed 31 August 2022).

5

Reboot. Upskill. Rethink: A case study of digital adaptation in the creative workforce

Pascale Aebischer

In October 2020, an advertising campaign by the UK government showed a young black dancer, hair pulled back into a tight bun, sitting on the hard bench of a scruffy studio, her right leg elegantly lifted mid-air to allow her to tighten the straps of her pointe shoe. Branded with the logos of CyberFirst and HM Government, the slogan on the ad read: 'Fatima's next job could be in cyber. (she just doesn't know it yet). Rethink. Reskill. Reboot.'. Although apparently commissioned by the National Cyber Security Centre before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Dawson, 2020), the ad appeared against the backdrop of the Winter Economy Plan that was focusing the financial support of the Job Support Scheme on 'viable jobs' (Gov.uk, 24 September 2020), and so seemed not so much to 'encourag[e] people from all walks of life to think about a career in cyber security', as the then Secretary of State of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Oliver Dowden hastened to explain (Dowden, 2020), but to specifically target artists and compel them to rethink their life choices. More than that, as Marianka Swain was quick to point out, choosing a woman of colour to be the ad's 'Fatima' seemed to specifically take aim at those members of the artistic community who, because of their race, gender and socio-economic background, were already facing multiple structural barriers, suggesting that they 'must not entertain aspirations above [their] station' (Swain, 2020). Within hours of its publication, and overshadowing the announcement of the allocation of '£257 million to save 1385 theatres, arts venues, museums and cultural organisations across England' (Gov.uk, 12 October 2020), the ad thus became a lightning rod for the ' "viability" rhetoric' concerning financial support for freelance artists during the

pandemic which Sarah Price, Stephanie Pitts and Renee Timmers have shown to have been profoundly damaging to the mental health and morale of the artistic community (see Chapter 4).

Crucially, the campaign ignored evidence that many creative practitioners had flipped the slogan on its head and had indeed rebooted, reskilled and rethought, and had done so *within* their professions to work towards building a more inclusive, secure and resilient industry. During the lockdowns of 2020, many freelance theatre artists and smaller production companies stepped up to produce new work, often repurposing digital social media and videoconferencing platforms. This chapter focuses on the agile digital transformation undertaken by the creative and cultural workers associated with the OnComm Award-winner for online platform-based shows: Oxford-based Creation Theatre.

This mid-size theatre production company collaborated closely with Big Telly in Northern Ireland in 2020 to produce several shows performed live on the Zoom videoconferencing platform. Their *Tempest*, which opened a mere three weeks into the first UK-wide lockdown, offered its permanent staff and its freelancers – director, designer, stage manager, performers – financial independence, dignity and the chance of a future in their chosen profession. In the summer of 2020, Creation Theatre and Big Telly worked together again to produce *Alice: A Digital Theme Park*, a show for which they collaborated with charisma.ai to involve an artificial intelligence-operated Cheshire cat that chatted with the audience and to move beyond the Zoom platform as viewers were invited to download an app on their smartphone (designed by Foxdog Studios) that allowed them to design a hedgehog with which they could race through croquet hoops. By the end of the year, Creation Theatre had secured an Innovate UK grant that allowed it to hire a company of five performers for a six-month season of digital shows (January–June 2021) and to collaborate with a tech company to design a new digital performance platform, Auditorium. It is with members of this company that, in 2021, Creation Theatre enjoyed a virtual residency with the Telepresence Stage project (see Chapter 3).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the impact that the company's rapid adaptation to digital modes of working had on the working conditions of the performers and production company

staff, both in terms of physical regimes and in terms of the mental health and wellbeing of the creative workforce. The evidence for this chapter is drawn from a survey of 13 Creation Theatre and Big Telly (NI) workers carried out in June and July 2020 as well as two sets of interviews with the workforce involved in producing and performing in the 2020 *Tempest* and subsequent digital shows. The survey and first set of interviews carried out at the start of July 2020 were part of the AHRC-funded 'Digital Theatre Transformation' project (July to October 2020). Follow-on interviews with the company's Chief Executive and four performers who worked for Creation Theatre and their occasional partner Big Telly in the Digital Repertory Company of 2021 were carried out in September 2022, to gather evidence of the longer term impacts of the pandemic on the theatre workers who were in Creation Theatre's employment in 2021.[1]

The sample sizes on which this essay is based are correspondingly small and the study participants' comments impossible to anonymise, but they complement the larger datasets collected by Price, Pitts and Timmers (Chapter 4) and by the team led by Ben Walmsley at the Centre for Cultural Value in Leeds (Gilmore *et al.*, 2024) in providing an in-depth insight into how an early digital adopter in the theatre industry shaped the experience of its workforce, and how a group of creative practitioners have found their feet in a hybrid performance environment. In doing so, this case study, alongside Dan Strutt's work (Chapter 2), adds to the still limited evidence base regarding 'how performers and artists are affected by digital technology' (Cîrstea and Mutebi, 2022: 4). It also provides a vivid example of how the pandemic triggered, for this corner of the industry, a far-reaching and visionary rethinking of how to do theatre more resiliently, fairly, inclusively, and sustainably.

Reboot

Creation Theatre is Oxford's largest professional theatre production company. From 2012 to 2023, the company was headed by Chief Executive and Creative Producer Lucy Askew. At the time of the coronavirus pandemic it had nine permanent members of leadership, administrative and front of house staff and did not

benefit from being part an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. Without such a financial safety-net in place, when the lockdowns were announced, Askew drew on her prior experience of a season when poor weather and poor sales had brought the company close to closure and, as she recalled,

> moved very quickly knowing that we had to reduce everything that we could from our overheads. So we gave notice on our office, we cut subscriptions to … all kinds of things that are relatively small costs but they all add up. We put two members of the team [the marketing and social media managers] straight on furlough, and in addition to that we've had two members of the team [the general manager and education manager] go on maternity leave. (Askew, July 2020)

To match the financial impact furloughed staff were experiencing, all remaining permanent full-time staff members reduced their working week to four days, with Askew (who had taken the same salary cut herself) filling all the jobs and gaps that could not be covered by her staff. Despite the substantial impact on her own work-life balance, she '[c]onsciously … made the choice that there were too many people's jobs at stake to worry too much about my own work-life balance. It's very difficult for anything else to feel important when the stakes are so high for so many people' (Askew, July 2020). While 'survival mode' during the pandemic for many theatre companies involved 'quietly' losing casual staff and freelancers (Gray and Walmsley, 2024), for Askew looking after her staff was what survival was about.

To achieve some financial stability for her staff and their families and to honour the contracts of freelance performers hired for scheduled analogue shows, the company had to produce a new show fast. With Zoë Seaton of Big Telly (NI), who had directed Creation Theatre's 2019 site-specific, immersive promenade production of *The Tempest*, Askew rebooted that production online, on a 'stripped-back survival budget' (Askew, July 2020). Director and designer agreed to a reduction to their usual fee, the freelance actors were paid the Equity rate and the core backstage team was shrunk to the roles of director, designer, stage manager and the production manager, who also doubled as a cast member. Over a rehearsal period of just two weeks (one week's rehearsal time spread over two weeks to ease 'Zoom fatigue'), roles were

Figure 5.1 Caliban (P. K. Taylor) and the dinosaur. *The Tempest*, dir. Zoë Seaton for Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020.

cut, the script was adapted and the company went from no prior acquaintance with the Zoom platform to producing a professional show. The digital *Tempest* included a mixture of rudimentary and highly sophisticated green-screen backgrounds – including, in a memorably outrageous scene, Caliban in the maw of a rampaging dinosaur (Figure 5.1). The company approached the medium and its proneness to glitches with a sense of irreverence and fun that helped defuse some of the audience's medium-related anxieties and fatigue.

No doubt helped by the dearth of new material for theatre reviewers to write about so early in the first lockdown, the show was picked up by reviewers in the UK and USA and found audiences in 27 different countries. Our project report documents how a sizeable proportion of its audience joined in from the USA, Ireland and Canada and how within the UK, too, the digital production had a significantly wider reach than its analogue predecessor, enabling the show to make a modest profit (Aebischer and Nicholas, 2020: 33; see also 88). As a result, the company was able to reboot fully as a producer of made-for-digital theatre, but its survival hinged on the ability to rapidly keep producing new shows. This, in turn, depended on taking full advantage of the affordances of online working, which allows theatre makers to move much more quickly through the previously time-consuming processes of casting, design, rehearsal and performance, but without the expense caused by travel and accommodation, physical set design, lighting, front of house presence and accommodations for physical access.

Upskill

Creation Theatre's extraordinary capacity to reboot at record speed comes down to the agility of the entire team. For Al Barclay, who played Alonso in *The Tempest*, there is a clear connection between Creation Theatre's specialism in site-specific theatre and the ease with which the company pivoted to digital modes of performance: 'Creation don't have a building … so they immediately shifted because of course they make [theatre] wherever, so they made it online, that's their new building … It is "adapt or die," we're at that stage, unfortunately' (July 2020). Creation Theatre's workers were willing not to *re*skill by formal training in a new profession, but to *up*skill in a creative, *ad hoc* and solutions-focused manner within the framework of their prior professional identities – as actors, production manager, stage manager, designer, director. They were not unusual in this: a survey of 397 freelancers carried out between November 2020 and March 2021 revealed 'a widespread move' among this UK-wide group of respondents, 'not to "retrain", but to upskill and diversify their ability to work in creative fields' (Maples *et al.*, 2022: 63; see also Feder *et al*. 2024).

Unlike this survey, however, which found that the highest rate of reported 'upskilling' was amongst directors, of whom 92% 'claimed to have developed new skills during the lockdowns', followed by 76% of actors and a mere 53% of stage managers (Maples *et al.*, 2022: 63), our analysis of Creation Theatre's digital transformation revealed that, while all staff had acquired new skills, by far the most marked and rapid upskilling was undertaken by stage manager Sinéad Owens, who was appropriately credited in shows as 'Zoom Wizard'. That upskilling was recognised more widely within the industry and the press, with Owens marvelling about how she 'started being mentioned in reviews for the first time ever' (July 2020).

In our interviews, cast members and production team alike stressed that Owens had not only played a central role in the company's initial adaptation to digital practices, but continued to be the technological and human backbone of several early Zoom productions: in effect, she transferred the stage manager's traditional technological and technical facilitation role and duty of care

for the cast to the digital working environment. As she recalled, at the start of lockdown she'd 'never even heard of Zoom'. Although she maintained that she 'really just learned through rehearsals', further probing revealed that much of the learning happened independently, through googling or, as she put it, 'playing': 'it was really just learning as we go. If [the show's director] Zoë [Seaton] said "it would be really cool if this could happen", then I would just go on google or Zoom and play even more to see whether it could happen' (July 2020). By the time we talked to her, Owens was simultaneously using multiple technologies during live shows, combining video feeds and changing virtual backgrounds remotely by using ManyCam and vMix software while mixing the sound via QLab. She had also designed a step-by-step guide on using Zoom for performers and was involved in training others – a concrete example of the kind of informal peer support networks that sprang up in the pandemic (Maples *et al.,* 2022: 166–176; Gray and Walmsley, 2024).

Not far behind in terms of upskilling were the rest of Creation Theatre's team: Askew, as Chief Executive and Creative Producer, suddenly found herself learning to use Zoom and ManyCam and attempting basic coding, while also running the company and keeping an eye on rehearsals. Giles Stoakley's production manager role, too, expanded and shifted significantly. For the 2019 *Tempest*, he had overseen the budgets and, taking over some of the traditional roles of the stage manager, had helped with the building and striking of the physical set, carrying out major repairs and checking its safety. For the digital production, his production management work on the Zoom production involved 'just monitoring things' and being there in rehearsals to ensure the financial and technical feasibility of ideas. Other aspects of the job, however, became

> much more difficult, just because you can't access people, because it's incredibly difficult to teach an actor who isn't technological and has no basis of knowledge of this, to use a relatively complicated software programme and to not only teach it to them, but to teach it to them remotely. (July 2020)

The production manager's remit now also extended to organising the logistics of shipping costumes, props and elements of set design to performers' homes, finding solutions to unreliable broadband

and devising new strategies for remote risk assessments. Additional new challenges arose to square the production's budget with performers' needs for loans of technical equipment.

It was also the production manager's role to think through the unforeseen impact of rehearsals and performances on performers' lives and the people with whom they shared their homes. These impacts could be significant: both our survey and the interviews revealed that, for some cast members, being able to access a space suitable for rehearsal and performance within their shared quarters, to monopolise broadband width in the household and have the surrounding silence requisite for performance required the cooperation and rigorous discipline of several turn-taking adults (and, for one performer, avoiding a nightly clash with the evening bath time of the neighbour's children). All the freelance cast members had to transform a space in their own homes into an impromptu performance studio, rigging up green screens, laying cables and finding ingenious solutions to technical problems as varied as lighting themselves so that they would not create shadows that might interfere with the chromakey technology, positioning webcams, getting the sound right and being able to reach their keyboard to hit the correct commands to change backgrounds, or switch between different cameras while continuing to perform in a scene. For many, this complex technological setup had to be disassembled after each rehearsal and performance, to make room for everyday lockdown life, and reassembled meticulously day after day.

In this, as in the approach to costume design, the performers relied on the kind of 'bricolage' technique of crafting and assembling impromptu solutions with the resources available to them which Heidi Lu Liedke, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, argues characterised the approach of audiences, who similarly became 'bricoleurs as they tinker[ed] with the new and yet everyday situation' of watching theatre on their home devices (2023: 169). Bricolage is probably the best term to describe the approach performers took to solving technical performance challenges. P. K. Taylor, who played Caliban, recalled:

> During *The Tempest,* there were points at which I had to change the lighting positions and the mike positions in my off time for the setup for the next scene. There was a point when I came out of a

Figure 5.2 Caliban (P. K. Taylor) peering through the 'trapdoor'. *The Tempest*, dir. Zoë Seaton for Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020.

> cellar in Prospero's cell. [What looked on the screen like a trapdoor (Figure 5.2)] was a stupid piece of wood. So while I was in my off time, this required changing camera height, changing camera angle, so I could get just the top of the wood, not lose the bottom of the background, keeping it far enough away that you get full length or half-length of your body, but not losing the edge of the green screen. (July 2020)

Similar bricolage solutions made it possible for Annabelle May Terry's Miranda to 'reach through' the edge of her Zoom screen to grasp Ferdinand's hand in a spine-tingling moment of physical connection in the depth of the first lockdown (Figure 5.3), or for Ferdinand, amid the tempest, to be pelted by flying objects. As Terry pithily pointed out: 'a good performer will use what they've got even if it's nothing' (July 2020).

Figure 5.3 Ferdinand (Ryan Duncan) and Miranda (Annabelle May Terry) 'touching'. *The Tempest*, dir. Zoë Seaton for Creation Theatre and Big Telly, 2020.

The upskilling, however, was also more seriously technological. Like the stage manager and Creation's leadership team, the performers, too, spent hours searching and watching online video tutorials to acquire the skill sets that would allow them to perform effectively in this new medium. Ryan Duncan, whose steep learning curve resulted in his producing new Zoom shows of his own, explained how, when performing Ferdinand, he also had to 'be a director of photography, basically, because you've got to set up everything to make sure the lighting is correct, and the framing is right' (June 2020). Help with these elements came from within the Creation Theatre team but also from friends and colleagues in the industry. Ultimately, however, the performers were on their own, literally and figuratively: unable, unless they had a separate computer set up for that purpose, to see the other performers or the audience, and having to perform their role alone in an often cramped space full of cables, green screens and lights. Although all the performers spoke of the comfort (often mixed with survivor's guilt) they derived from working in theatre during the pandemic, and of the joy of virtually being with others, a note that ran through many of the interviews had to do with how working in this way was 'quite solitary' (Terry, September 2022), especially for elements of the job that had previously been communal.

For performers, therefore, the biggest upskilling involved technical acting skills and the ability to multitask to integrate their body with the technology. 'Digital performance', in the end, came down to the actors' ability to combine purely technical actions, such as hitting a mark or a keyboard command, or matching a sightline by looking at exactly the right spot on their wall with the correct focus, without loss of physical embodiment and commitment to their part. This is what Dani Snyder-Young *et al.* describe as 'the *entanglement* of technology and live performance practices' in digital theatre (2023: 172). It is clear from the interviews that juggling multiple information streams and levels of activity while staying in character was cognitively demanding. Rhodri Lewis, who evocatively described the multitasking required as 'like playing tennis but you've got a dog with you on a lead', also explained how his prior experience of radio work had prepared him for the intimacy of directly speaking to an audience, while television had taught him to perform for camera and be aware of sightlines

and continuity across different shots. Madeleine McMahon, too, found that acting for television had to an extent prepared her for performing on Zoom, especially in relation to the 'volume' of the performance, which required 'paring down the way that you perform the character while at the same time being aware that the interactive nature that the director wanted was for a theatre crowd' (June 2020). Stoakley concurred: 'Just wrestling with Zoom is a skill in itself but we have all learned a completely new style of acting that is a curious combination of screen and stage acting' (June 2020). Performing on Zoom thus required the development of a hybrid performance method that combined theatricality and an awareness of the live audience with the ability to perform for a small screen.

The follow-up interviews held in September 2022 showed that performers who had spent a lot of time performing on Zoom found that handling these technical demands had become easier because the technology itself had evolved in such a way as to require ever less technical work from the actors. This is a point Annabelle Terry, who became a member of the Digital Repertory Company in 2021 that was set up specifically 'to be a learning experience' (Stoakley September 2022), stressed: for her, the biggest leap came with the advent of vMix, which enabled performers to share the screen space (Figure 5.4). No longer being in 'separate boxes' was exhilarating for the performers, with the virtual proximity on a shared screen

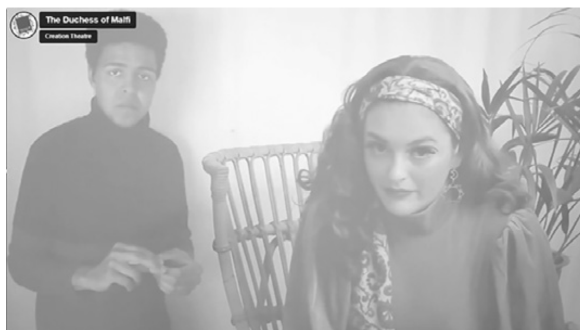


Figure 5.4 Antonio (Kofi Dennis) and the Duchess (Annabelle May Terry) in *The Duchess of Malfi,* dir. Laura Jayne Wright and Natasha Rickman for Creation Theatre, 2021.

affording Terry the comforting sense of 'getting back to some sense of ensemble' (September 2022; see also Chapters 2 and 3).

Most of the performers I interviewed have now returned to working primarily in face-to-face settings and relish the ability to connect physically with fellow actors and audiences. That does not mean, however, that the upskilling has not left a trace in their working lives: with casting now often taking place online and actors expected to produce self-tapes, the equipment and performance craft digital theatre requires is still regularly in use. Beyond this, as Terry explains, having had to perform Juliet in her own home to a camera standing in for Romeo, she does 'see a difference in my performances now, because in my head I'm going: "I've got no excuse not to commit to this scene because I have an actor stood in front of me. … it's so easy … compared to what I was doing digitally" ' (September 2022). Even when working on physical stages, the performers who have been part of the company's journey through the pandemic continue to benefit from their new skill sets.

While for the freelancers employed by Creation Theatre during the lockdown, the buzz and sheer relief of making theatre and the relative financial security this gave them clearly outweighed the strains of their accelerated upskilling, their responses also reveal that Comunian and England were right, in 2020, to suspect that such resilience and upskilling came at a personal cost (p. 121). Even with Creation Theatre's generous approach to training, loaning equipment, paying for data and organising repayment plans for performers' kit purchases (Askew and Taylor, July 2020), some of the burden of upskilling and equipment purchase was inevitably borne by the freelancers themselves. Of the 13 respondents to our June 2020 survey, 11 rated working from home as 'a mostly positive experience, with some challenges but also positive changes': they enjoyed not having to travel to work and not having to stay in 'digs'. Only one respondent, who found it hard to manage their own time, rated the experience as 'difficult, mostly negative'.

Working from home, however, also had clear downsides, including a financial impact as energy bills went up (an element which Creation Theatre compensated for through a one-off payment). Furthermore, with no clear end to the working day and international collaborations creating unprecedented pressures as teams started to

work across time zones, a healthy work-life balance could be hard to maintain. Stage manager Sinéad Owens, for example, was 'able and willing to work all day every day if needed' and reported being 'always on hand to work' (July 2020). Performers also reported that having to provide elements of props and costume design made them feel somewhat under pressure. One cast member also simply could not work with the Zoom technology. Ingeniously, the director and designer helped her build an analogue set in her own home, turning the problem into a creative feature of the show that contributed to its critical success (Aebischer and Nicholas, 2022: 96–99). In our interviews, all the performers furthermore alluded to the strains on their mental health of having to work in isolation. Simon Spencer-Hyde's comment is representative: while digital performance 'has opened up a world of creative possibilities it has taken away the greatest joy of my work, which is face to face social interactions with audience and colleagues. … I wonder if [lack of direct interaction] is felt more acutely by us theatre lot whose work is centred around social interaction' (June 2020 survey response). Al Barclay spoke of the sadness of 'going back to my living room' at the end of a show. Through Taylor's remark that performing in *The Tempest* was a profoundly 'emotional event' because it made him feel that he was '*with* people' shines a sense of the emotional fragility of some members of the cast in lockdown who threw themselves into this new way of working because the alternative, of total isolation without work, was too awful:

> Being able to have contact with those people that you work with and talk to … to have that back, even though it's not physical, was gorgeous. And then seeing the pain, the hurt at times, and desperation on the fellow actors' faces that do live on their own, that haven't seen another person for three months … (June 2020)

Unsurprisingly, by September 2022, Taylor had turned his back on digital performance and was looking forward to the premiere of a show which had been in the works for two years but had suffered repeated coronavirus-related setbacks. The follow-on interviews revealed that the effects of the pandemic are far from over: not only do digital modes of working continue to be a prominent if sporadic feature of casting and rehearsals that remains invisible to the outside eye, but even years later shows were still regularly delayed

or cancelled and rehearsal periods interrupted because of ongoing COVID-19 infections and the increased incidence of other physical illnesses within the workforce (Askew, September 2022). Together, these factors greatly exacerbate the mental health and financial pressures on this group of cultural workers.

Rethink

What started as a relatively straightforward exercise to 'reboot' the company on a digital platform soon became something more fundamental and wide-ranging for Creation Theatre. On the one hand, the medium itself was put front and centre. The types of experimentation which had, over the preceding 20-odd years, been on the fringes of artistic and academic research and development in telepresence (see Dixon, 2007, for precursors) became much more widespread as 'the cultural sector quickly realised that lockdown presented an extraordinary new laboratory situation in which to carry out a giant, arguably long-overdue experiment in designing digital and hybrid experiences' (Mantell *et al*., 2024; see also Part I of this volume). On the other hand, there has been a 'heightened awareness of structural inequalities and of economic precarity resulting from the combination of national and global pandemic impacts and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements following the murder of George Floyd' (Gray and Walmsley, 2024). Additionally, there have been long-standing calls for increasing access to live performing arts for people with disabilities and for a reduction in the carbon footprint of theatre. All this has prompted a 'rethink' not just of the medium of theatre, but its structural, technological and financial underpinning, too.

The question, then, was no longer simply about how to 'pivot to digital', but about how doing so might provide opportunities for a shake-up of the industry that would put the wellbeing and financial stability of diverse creative and cultural workers at its heart and that would, in doing so, have additional accessibility and environmental benefits. After all, as Katherine Nolan points out, 'In the COVID moment, … issues of care, interdependence, labour and mortality became heightened concepts, bringing them into sharp focus' in a way that was felt by many to be a call to action (Nolan, 2022: 9).

Financial stability and survival may have been the principal drivers of the company's digital transformation at the start of the pandemic, as Barclay recognised when he summed up the changes as: 'That's what Creation did so beautifully. They said: "how are we going to make work for freelancers, and how are we going to make work for ourselves and continue to connect and to make and create this environment?" ' (June 2022). By the time we carried out our research, however, this simple goal had grown into something more akin to what Kathleen Gallagher has described, in relation to applied theatre, as 'a hopeful practice in precarious times': 'theatre … is *not* a question of whether we will live or die, but rather *how* we will live and die. And until we do die, we should make a work of living well. And equitably. And joyously, playfully, and simply' (2023: 36).

For Creation Theatre, such a 'hopeful practice in precarious times' involved seeing digital technology not just as a temporary tactic adopted for immediate survival, to be dropped as soon as infection rates receded (Gammel and Wang, 2022: 6), but to recognise digital performance as a potential means of solving some longstanding problems in the industry. One of these was accessibility for audiences (see also Misek in Chapter 1). Creative producer Crissy O'Donovan explained how their 2019 in-person site-specific promenade version of *The Tempest* posed serious accessibility issues as it spread across woodland, a coffee shop, a bus and a large hall. Despite the provision of ramps and a mobility scooter there were serious physical challenges for disabled people. Digital theatre, she explained, 'takes *that* pressure off, when something is so available to everybody' (July 2020).

In July 2020, the company was thinking hard about how to integrate not just captioning but also possibly a BSL interpreter for some shows. Additionally, their work on *Alice*, which attracted niche audiences, made the company realise that the accessibility gains extended to neurodiverse audience members, who were now more able to participate in live shows. On the digital stage, neurodiverse viewers could interact with the performers in ways impossible in a shared space, where, as Kirsty Sedgman (2018) has shown, theatre etiquette is still often rigorously enforced by neurotypical audiences. While acutely aware of the 'digital divide' that was continuing to prevent audience members without a digital

device or stable internet from participating, the company was also mindful of the real gains of digital performance for young viewers from diverse backgrounds. It therefore made complimentary tickets available for such audiences (Dharmesh Patel, September 2022).

For performers and backstage staff, too, digital modes of working opened new possibilities. One of the barriers to inclusion in the industry has long been the working culture of long hours and needing to be physically present in a shared space. Holly Maples reports that research participants for ‘ Freelancers in the Dark’

> emphasised the need for schedule adjustments to provide access for freelance theatre workers with chronic health issues, caring responsibilities, and other work/home obligations. Such concerns had far greater impact on marginalised and disabled theatre workers. … the rigidity of the schedule for work that occurs in the theatre industry needs to become more flexible to be more inclusive. (Maples 2022: 32)

This was also clear from our conversations with Creation Theatre staff: Askew was excited that shifting to an online platform for meetings meant that they were able to work with a far more diverse set of colleagues, both in programming roles and as performers. She saw bringing in new talent as key to tapping into the needs of more diverse audiences. Terry, meanwhile, described how casting on Zoom could contribute to ‘virtual equality’:

> This way of working is more accessible and inclusive as it’s available to anyone and everyone at any time. I had the privilege of sitting in on Creation’s *Alice* auditions in which they were actively seeking to diversify their casting and broaden their pool of actors of colour. (July 2020)

Creation Theatre’s online shows have featured markedly diverse casts, with many performers of colour cast in leading roles. Dharmesh Patel, who joined Creation Theatre’s Digital Rep Company at the start of 2021, considers the ability of digital theatre to ‘level the playing field’ for diverse audiences and performers to be the most important gain of this mode of working (September 2022).

One of our research questions, regarding the environmental impact of digital transformation and working from home for theatre workers, additionally sparked a deeper reflection and separate piece of research on the carbon footprint of digital performance.

Our research had shown not only that remote working benefited freelancers' family lives and wellbeing, in countering the London-centricity of the industry, but that there were obvious carbon benefits from the reduction in performer travel for rehearsals and shows. For audiences, too, not needing to leave their homes to watch a show had a positive impact on carbon emissions. In her foreword to the report in which the findings of Creation Theatre's analysis of the sustainability gains achieved by the Digital Rep Company of January–June 2021 were shared, Askew writes:

> Across all industries we need to think bigger, we need to be more selfless and we need to make drastic changes to the way we live our lives, to preserve the planet for future generations. I've pondered how we could reduce our environmental impact at Creation for years. … Our digital work over the past 15 months has shown us a route to making far more meaningful carbon reductions in our industry. (Creation Theatre, 2021: 5)

While this report does not calculate the carbon costs of data centres, which is one of the great challenges in assessing environmental impacts of digital media and data and represents an urgent research gap, it does measure individual performers' and audience members' energy usage, transportation needs and changes to set design and lighting requirements. The conclusion is striking: the company's digital work resulted in 'an overall 98% reduction in the emissions associated with a performance' (Creation Theatre, 2021: 32).

Creation Theatre's 'hopeful practice in precarious times' also involved countering the discourses of resilience in the creative and cultural industries that had in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 put the onus of resilience on freelancers in the industry (Comunian and England, 2020: 116–117). The company is explicit about how job security, decent working conditions and workers' rights should be the foundation for creating a more resilient future. Against the backdrop of 'the collapse of different forms of the resident repertory theatre system particularly in England [which] had made it more difficult to enter the theatre workforce outside London, creating an uneven and unsustainable landscape', which was known to be 'particularly damaging for local communities, working-class theatre workers, and especially, for the design and technical theatre work force' (Maples *et al.*, 2022: 33), Askew decided to swim against the tide. As she explained: 'We have to really start changing

the business model, and we have to really start saying we're not going to do this anymore, and we have to change the way we contract actors' (September 2022). Building on the positive experience of working with a Digital Rep Company in 2021, Creation Theatre announced on 8 November 2022 that they would hire a repertory company of six actors for an initial period of two years.

The aim is in part to create financial stability for company members and model how basic employment rights might be structurally embedded in the operations of a theatre company. As Creation Theatre's press release states, the evidence base for the move came from the reflective work they had engaged with through working with our Digital Theatre Transformation project and other researchers studying the wellbeing, pay and conditions of freelancers:

> With no other UK theatre company offering such a radical solution to the financial insecurity of freelancing, Creation hopes to provide significantly increased stability for performers. Along with the mental health benefits of secure work, the company will gain increased employment rights, support returning to work after maternity leave or sickness, greater flexibility for holidays and compassionate leave, and the ability to live locally and not travel for work. (Creation Theatre, 2022: 1)

Beyond those motives and hopes, the aim was also to build a diverse team of performers and technicians who would have the skill sets to adapt flexibly to analogue, digital and hybrid stages and who would be able to be deployed between scheduled shows to work with academic researchers on funded projects that require a team of performers to workshop scenes, do play readings or perform entire plays.

Creation Theatre's pre-pandemic business model, which used to be dependent on live in-person shows with freelance performers, supplemented by an education provision focused on holiday club activities, has thus been overhauled. At the time of writing, the company provides stable employment to a group of actors who perform in-person for site-specific and often outdoor shows in summer and indoors for the Christmas show. Between those seasons, the cast perform digital shows that reach an international audience. This ticket-sale-based income is supplemented with both an education provision that can be either in-person or online and with grant-based income from collaborative work with academics and tech

companies. This may, as Askew admitted, be 'a mad gamble', but she is confident that 'we'll make it work because it's the right thing to do' (September 2022). Therefore, amid the all the evidence of the industry returning to a 'new normal' that looks disappointingly like the 'old normal', Creation Theatre stands out as a model of what might be possible if the lessons of the pandemic regarding care for the workforce, equity, inclusivity and sustainability are learned. If the pandemic acted as a rocket booster for digital theatre and for its potential to rethink the industry, then Creation Theatre's work since 2021 has been dedicated to ensuring that the rocket would not fall back into the sea along with the booster but continue to travel into a better future for the creative workforce.

Note

1 Ethics approval for this research was granted by the University of Exeter's Ethics Committee in 2020 and 2022.

References

Aebischer, Pascale and Rachael Nicholas (2022), Creation Theatre and Big Telly's *The Tempest:* Digital Theatre and the Performing Audience. In Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (eds), *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation.* London: Bloomsbury, pp. 87–106.

Aebischer, Pascale and Rachael Nicholas (2020), *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit.* Final Report, October. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10871/123464 (accessed 28 March 2023).

Cîrstea, Ana-Maria and Natasha Mutebi (2022), *The Impact of Digital Technology on Arts and Culture in the UK.* UK Parliament POSTnote no. 669. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0669/POST-PN-0669.pdf (accessed 10 May 2022).

Comunian, Roberta and Lauren England (2020), Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy. *Cultural Trends* 29.2, 112–128.

Dawson, Brit (12 October 2020), A brief explainer on the government's dystopian Fatima cyber ad. *Dazed Digital.* Available at: www.dazeddigital.com/politics/article/50747/1/a-brief-explainer-on-the-government-dystopian-fatima-cyber-ad (accessed 9 February 2023).

Creation Theatre (2021), *Digital Theatre: A Route to Sustainability*. Available at: https://creationtheatre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Digital-Theatre-a-route-to-sustainability.pdf (accessed 9 February 2023).

Creation Theatre (8 November 2022), Creation Theatre announces the UK's first full-time repertory company. Available at: https://creationtheatre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Creation-Theatre-launches-the-UKs-first-full-time-Repertory-Company-press-release-CNC-FL.pdf (accessed 11 April 2023).

Dixon, Steve, with contributions by Barry Smith (2007), *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dowden, Oliver (12 October 2020), To those tweeting re #Fatima. Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/OliverDowden/status/1315586209415073793?s=20 (accessed 9 February 2023).

Feder, Tal, *et al.* (2024), The impact of the pandemic on jobs and working hours. In Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds) *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gallagher, Kathleen (2023), On the importance of big umbrellas: Applied theatre as a hopeful practice in precarious times. In Selina Busby, Kelly Freebody and Charlene Rajendran (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 36–30.

Gammel, Irene and Jason Wang (2022), Introduction. In Irene Gammel and Jason Wang (eds), *Creative Resilience and COVID-19: Figuring the Everyday in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–13.

Gilmore, Abigail, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds) (2024), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gov.uk (24 September 2020), Chancellor outlines Winter Economy Plan. Press release. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20220710191446/www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-outlines-winter-economy-plan (accessed 19 August 2022).

Gov.uk (12 October 2020), £257 million to save 1385 theatres, arts venues, museums and cultural organisations across England. Press release. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/257-million-to-save-1385-theatres-arts-venues-museums-and-cultural-organisations-across-england (accessed 9 February 2023).

Gray, Karen and Ben Walmsley (2024), Pandemic theatre: How England's theatre organisations responded to Covid-19. In Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Liedke, Heidi Lucja (2023), Covidian theatre: The move to small screens and into homes. In Heidi Lucja Liedke, *Livecasting in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre: NT Live and the Aesthetics of Spectacle, Materiality and Engagement*. London: Methuen Drama (Bloomsbury), pp. 145–197.

Maples, H., *et al.* (2022), *Freelancers in the Dark: The Economic, Cultural, and Social Impact of Covid-19 on UK Theatre Workers: Final Report*. Available at: http://repository.essex.ac.uk/32639/ (accessed 4 September 2022).

Mantell, Oliver, *et al.* (2024), Audiences' engagement with culture during the pandemic. In Abigail Gilmore, Dave O'Brien and Ben Walmsley (eds), *Pandemic Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Nolan, Katherine (2022), Life on pause: Entanglements of the maternal and the mortal in a global pandemic. In Laura Bissell and Lucy Weir (eds), *Performance in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 9–18.

Sedgman, Kirsty (2018), *The Reasonable Audience: Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing, and the Live Performance Experience*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Snyder-Young, Dani, *et al.* (2023), Rethinking 'theatre' during social distancing: How Cosmic Kids Yoga got us through a pandemic.' In Selina Busby, Kelly Freebody and Charlene Rajendran (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 170–180.

Swain, Marianka (12 October 2020), The government's attitude to Fatima and the arts will put them on the wrong side of history – they just don't know it yet. *The Independent*. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/voices/cyberfirst-advert-rethink-reskill-reboot-fatimas-next-job-coronavirus-arts-b992467.html (accessed 24 January 2023).

6

Once upon a pandemic: Tales from the 2020s

Paul Heritage, Poppy Spowage and Mariana Willmersdorf Steffen (2063)

Looking back at the 2020s: Pandemic, youth mental health and the arts

Every pandemic requires a social reset.[1] Catastrophic health crises not only reveal the asymmetry of the global order and expose the fissures of systematic inequalities: they also bring an imminent sense of mortality and a heightened perception of the precariousness of life. In times of economic, political and social vulnerability, an uncharted space emerges for artists to call for a recalibration of values. The cultural response to AIDS/HIV in the late twentieth century was such a moment when artists were critical not only in reinforcing public health messages, but also in opening new discursive spaces, resisting silence, and advocating for permanent changes to the way in which sex, sexuality, contagion, disease and well-being were imagined and lived. Forty years ago, the coronavirus global pandemic (COVID-19) similarly revealed social fractures that forced a radical rethink about how people would live together in the future. Opening the archive of the Far Apart But Close at Heart research projects in 2063 we can discover how young artists from ten cultural organisations in the UK and Latin America faced the challenge of a global pandemic.

Over the last four decades we have often heard how the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic laid bare a crisis in the systems of care of the 2020s.[2] The Far Apart research sought to understand how arts organisations that worked in under-resourced, lower income communities functioned as part of the system of care supporting the mental health of young people during the pandemic. Using quantitative surveys, interviews and digital arts workshops, the research

asked what could be learned from the creative online experiences of young people in Latin America and in what was then known as the United Kingdom, during a global pandemic. People's Palace Projects – who produced the original research projects 40 years ago – is a research organisation that in 2063 is still developing arts-based collaborative projects to address social justice and development challenges. The Far Apart archive from the 2020s brings insights into how artists and arts organisations in Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Cardiff, Lima, London, Manchester, and Rio de Janeiro reimagined their creative work with young people when live participatory arts work was shut down and moved online in response to the pandemic.[3] It registers how the shift to digital impacted arts organisations' capacity to support young people's mental wellbeing and offers fascinating pointers towards the need for the sort of integrated approach to arts and medicine that is now incorporated into all progressive public health systems, most notably in Latin America.

Looking back from 2063, a time in which the epistemologies of a Global South and North (O'Brien, 2017) have been radically revised, the Far Apart archive transports us to a historical period still dominated by the Eurocentrism of knowledge production, where young people were trying to create an imaginary space from which it might be possible to look beyond these binaries. The way in which the research was conceived sought to shift four Latin American countries from their peripheral position within pandemic preoccupations and resist what a Canadian public health academic, citing Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), described as 'centuries-long Western dismissal of knowledge, practices, experiences, and existential meaning generated in the Global South' (Birn, 2020: 355). Far Apart reconstituted young people as researchers rather than as the source of data or anecdotal evidence; the research suggested how hidden, ignored or marginalised narratives can shape more nuanced understandings of pandemics.

Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Peru are no strangers to contagious diseases that wipe out populations. They have a shared but heterogeneous experience of the lethal and lingering pandemic of colonialism which decimated peoples and left a legacy of structural inequalities, systemic violence and ongoing resource deficits. But as the young Latin Americans engaged in the Far Apart research

demonstrated in the 2020s, it is also possible to create alternative narratives that draw strength from the resistance that is characteristic of the continent's historic and contemporary response to invasion, occupation and annihilation. The methodologies and thematic analysis were co-created and designed by British and Latin American researchers with support from young people to be implemented in these four Latin American countries in 2020. The same research framework was then used again for a second phase of the research in England and Wales in 2021. Far Apart was built across South-South and North-South axes of cooperation and exchange, but with research methods constituted initially in Latin America.

Before the pandemic there were already clear signs that young people were in the midst of a global mental health crisis. The Far Apart archive includes a World Health Organisation report (2018) which identified reducing adolescent depression and anxiety as a key priority. The pandemic exacerbated mental distress in general, but the effect was particularly acute in the young adult age group. Furthermore, the impact was intensified for young people who were made more vulnerable by intersecting challenges such as poor mental health, low educational achievement and social exclusion, including structural racism (Shim and Starks, 2021). Creative research produced by young people and arts organisations during the Far Apart study corroborated evidence that measures taken to control the spread of coronavirus were triggers for young people (Kowal *et al.*, 2020; Varma *et al.*, 2021). The consequences of restrictive public health regulations introduced during the pandemic which especially affected young people included lack of social contact, overload of information from social media platforms, lack of personal space, reduced autonomy and concern about the impact on the economy and their academic studies.

Participatory arts programmes with social as well as creative outcomes were referenced as a potential ingredient in mental health recovery and resilience amongst young people (Easwaran *et al.*, 2021; Syed Sheriff *et al.*, 2022; see Figure 6.1). As public health measures to control the spread of the pandemic locked down normal social intercourse, research began to show an increase in mental distress (including depression and anxiety), with an acute impact on the young adult age group. Arts organisations working

Figure 6.1 Young person participating in an in-person session as part of the Far Apart UK workshops delivered by National Theatre of Wales (Wrexham, Wales), 2021.

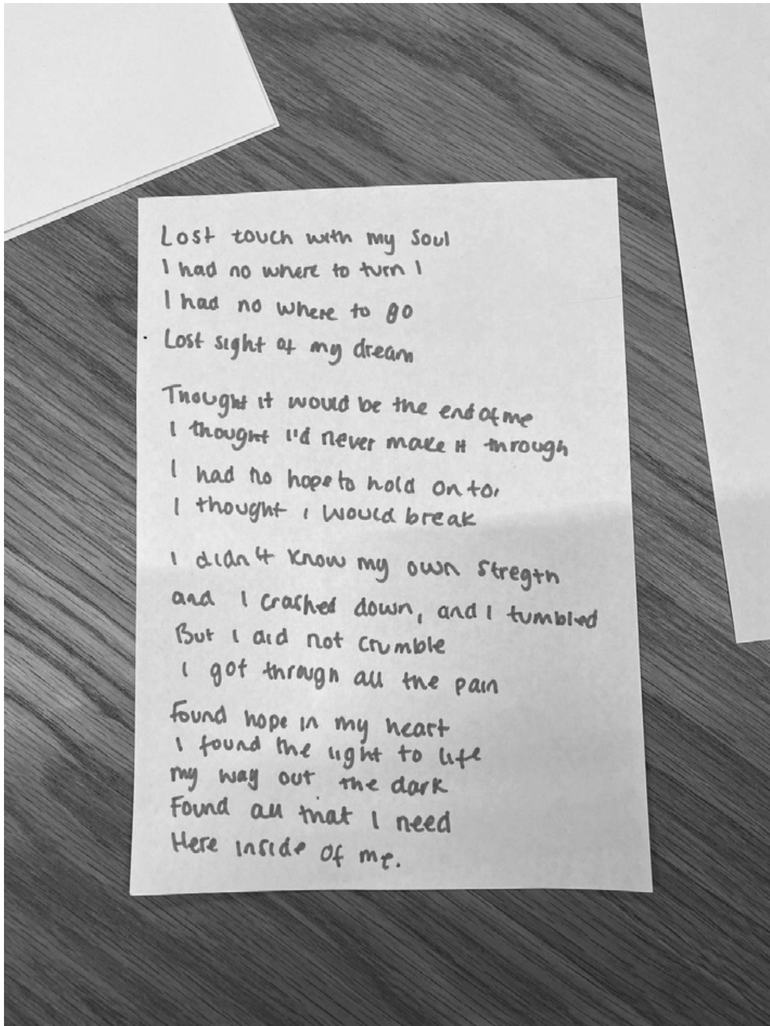
with young people made profound changes to their practices and methods to cater for the increased needs of the young people they worked with, from a distance none of them had ever experienced. It was the learning from these drastic and often abrupt shifts in the 2020s that established the ways in which arts organisations have subsequently worked with young people. The pandemic established new relations with the health sector and contributed to reframing the relationship between cultural and medical institutions in the Latin American region, which now leads the world in radical approaches to public health.

The archive created during the Far Apart project also contains artwork produced by young people across 18 months of research in two continents, registering the different layers of emotions young people expressed during the pandemic. For example, it records the time-space compression experienced at the beginning of the pandemic, when everyday objects such as bags and shoes failed to move for days, for weeks, for months. As the pandemic progressed, a subtle transition to hope can be seen in the artwork, with new opportunities for young people arising as services, arts organisations and the young people themselves began to adapt. The archive also captures the young artists' fears of the future. Far Apart shows young people in a state of shock: frozen in an uncertain expanse of time, confined in the four walls of their bedrooms for many hours a day. Cut off from friends, from school and from activities that previously helped them build resilience to depression and anxiety, young people were forced to press an indefinite pause button. The artwork in Far Apart records a shared struggle between young people in diverse cities, countries and continents as they became lost in the uncertainty of the future (see Appendix 1: Shock).[4]

In the 2020s – particularly in Latin America where there was little or no access to traditional mental health interventions such as talking therapies – arts organisations and creative practices were already playing an important role in supporting young people's mental health. Before the pandemic, arts organisations were already beginning to conceptualise how the participatory activities they provided might support recovery and build resilience of young people's mental wellbeing, providing a space for them 'to make sense of their fears, communicate with others, and feel a sense of social solidarity' (Kukkonen, 2021: 4). Through their artwork the young

people revealed the importance of committing, playing around, creating, crafting, talking to people with the same goal and producing something collectively (Figure 6.2). Pandemic-related postponement of live performances and events inadvertently increased opportunities for experimentation in digital arenas, and young people reported being given more time to explore creative activities without the pressure of committing to challenging deadlines. Even though the participants discovered that a digital space could never replace the power of a face-to-face connection, many of the young people who participated in the Far Apart research reported finding a platform for sparking or strengthening relationships, as well as establishing a common ground that was often more familiar to them than to the arts organisations themselves. The works show a transition from the shock of uncertainty at the beginning of the pandemic to the testing of hope as a creative practice (Appendix 2: Hope).

The archive also gives an insight into what young people feared about a future beyond the coronavirus pandemic: the risk of losing what they had gained from the pain of the lockdowns and the sense of engagement they felt as they participated in collective responses to a global crisis (Appendix 3: Fear). Each of the countries where the Far Apart research took place emerged differently in the years following the pandemic, with the governments of Fernández (elected President of Argentina in October 2019), Castillo (elected President of Peru in June 2021), Petro (elected President of Colombia in June 2022) and Lula (elected President of Brazil in October 2022) leading a Latin American resurgence of progressive reforms. Despite the occasional reverses, the subsequent four decades have gradually seen a reconceptualization of Latin America's arts and cultural heritage, which has responded to what the young people involved in the Far Apart research hoped to see beyond the pandemic. This has included extensive investment in arts and creative activities, both in and out of formal education, as part of an integrated cultural-medical strategy to alleviate anxiety and depression amongst young people. The benefits of a creative and compassionate approach to health and wellbeing that many countries in Latin America enjoy in 2063 contrasts with the abandonment of public and universal healthcare that has taken place in England over the last 40 years. Amongst the newly independent nations of the former UK, Wales



Lost touch with my soul
I had no where to turn I
I had no where to go
Lost sight of my dream

Thought it would be the end of me
I thought I'd never make it through
I had no hope to hold on to,
I thought I would break

I didn't know my own stregth
and I crashed down, and I tumbled
But I did not crumble
I got through all the pain

found hope in my heart
I found the light to life
my way out the dark
Found all that I need
Here inside of me.

Figure 6.2 Spoken word draft by a young participant of the in-person session part of Far Apart UK workshops delivered by Battersea Arts Centre (London, England), 2021.

has shown itself to be most open to the ‘Latin Americanisation of healthcare’, as the integration of arts and public health has become universally known. The visionary concept enshrined in the Welsh Assembly’s Well-being of Future Generations Act in 2015 meant Wales was better prepared to enact the necessary reforms beyond the pandemic. With a focus on the long-term impact of government decisions, the Well-being of Future Generations Act insisted that public agencies work more closely with people, communities and each other in order to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. The ground-breaking Welsh legislation of 2015 has meant that nearly 50 years later, Wales has a public health system that recognises the long-term benefits of the arts and the preventative role they play in mental health resilience and recovery.

It is the testimonies of the young people from the Far Apart research that compel us to ask what has been learnt from this global crisis. Looking back, can we identify which countries used the experience of the pandemic to create a radical rethink about the value of the arts and creativity? Has learning from 2022 informed policies which ensure that young people are more resilient to the mental health challenges we continue to face in 2063?

Far Apart: Findings from the archive

Far Apart developed a multidisciplinary methodological framework, using research instruments from across the fields of arts, economics and psychiatry. Developed in consultation with the ten collaborating arts organisations in Latin America and the UK, Far Apart used mixed methods – qualitative interviews, an online survey and creative workshops[5] – to explore the impact of shifting to the online delivery of creative activities on young people and arts facilitators. The data collection was the same across all ten sites in Latin America and the UK, and the quantitative analysis used the same method of descriptive statistical analysis for both regions. The qualitative thematic analysis was constructed around concise, well-defined themes identified in Latin America, which were then used to guide the development of the interviews in the UK, where a thematic content analysis was used.

The Far Apart archive provides a detailed account of the data collection and analysis undertaken in 2020–22.[6] The survey was open between April and June 2021 in Latin America and between July and August 2021 in the UK. Its design was based on responses obtained from semi-structured interviews with young people who took part in creative activities with ten arts organisations from six countries before and during the coronavirus pandemic. The survey mainly explored young people's participation in online activities during the coronavirus pandemic and was applied to participants from each of the five arts organisations using a convenience sample. A total of 239 young people were interviewed in Latin America and 141 young people in the UK.

Participants self-reported their mental health during the pandemic and at the time of the survey, which found that over 40% of the participants experienced low moods and anxiety during the pandemic.[7] There was also consistency in their responses about how online activity diminished young people's experiences of engaging with arts organisations: they missed physical contact with their peers, found it more difficult to express themselves and had less focus and confidence in their participation online than in-person. However, there was an overwhelming enthusiasm from the Latin American respondents for online arts activities, with 91% indicating their desire to rejoin in the future, while only 27% of young people interviewed in the UK expressed a similar intention. This divergence is even more remarkable given the challenges of accessing arts workshops online in contexts with greater digital inequality. The Latin American respondents consistently gave more positive feedback on the success of online workshops than those in the UK. This may reflect how most of the respondents identified the internet as being an essential tool for social organisations and movements based in the lower-income communities in Latin America. Research undertaken in Latin America during the pandemic suggested that stay-in-place and other mobility restrictions 'generated a renewed and innovative social mobilization in the digital space, notwithstanding the deep digital divide in the region' (Duque Franco *et al.*, 2020: 541).

More differences emerged in the reasons why the young people interviewed took part in arts activities online. In Latin America, most respondents reported that they wanted to feel happy, less

bored and to do something outside of their routine, with a strong emphasis on relaxation, distraction and enjoyment. Feeling better about yourself was also often cited by the UK respondents, but that sentiment sat alongside a desire to develop skills and pursue a career (not mentioned in the Latin American interviews that guided the survey design). The sample is small, but the researchers at the time noted that the responses in the UK and Latin America indicated a different purpose for young people's engagement in the arts, which is reflected in the divergent ways arts policy, funding and practices have developed in subsequent years at the sites in which the original research took place (Figure 6.3).

Further analysis was produced from the qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 young people and 45 staff members over a five-month period between August–December 2020 in Latin America, and with 46 young people, 28 staff members and 16 stakeholders over a four-month period between March–June 2021 in the UK. Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity across participants. It is these interviews that provide a reflective account of young people's perceptions of impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

All interviews were conducted online via 'Zoom', a long-forgotten videoconferencing platform. The researchers report that the most important resource for the participants was a stable internet connection, combined with a device that was suitable for such communication at the time: a computer, smartphone or tablet. It is clear from the field notes included in the archive that video-recorded interviews created challenges for the research team, as the connection quality was patchy and, since interviews were conducted in people's homes, there were frequent interruptions.

Thematic content analysis was chosen as a methodology to guide the analysis of the data in 2022. A coding framework was constructed using NVivo (a software programme used for qualitative data analysis) to identify trends and themes in the data, and later to classify those codes into overarching themes. It is this methodology which produced a comparison and contrast of testimonies through different themes or subtopics, using the verbatim data from the interviews to guide the generation of the codes, as well as the questions from the topic guide.

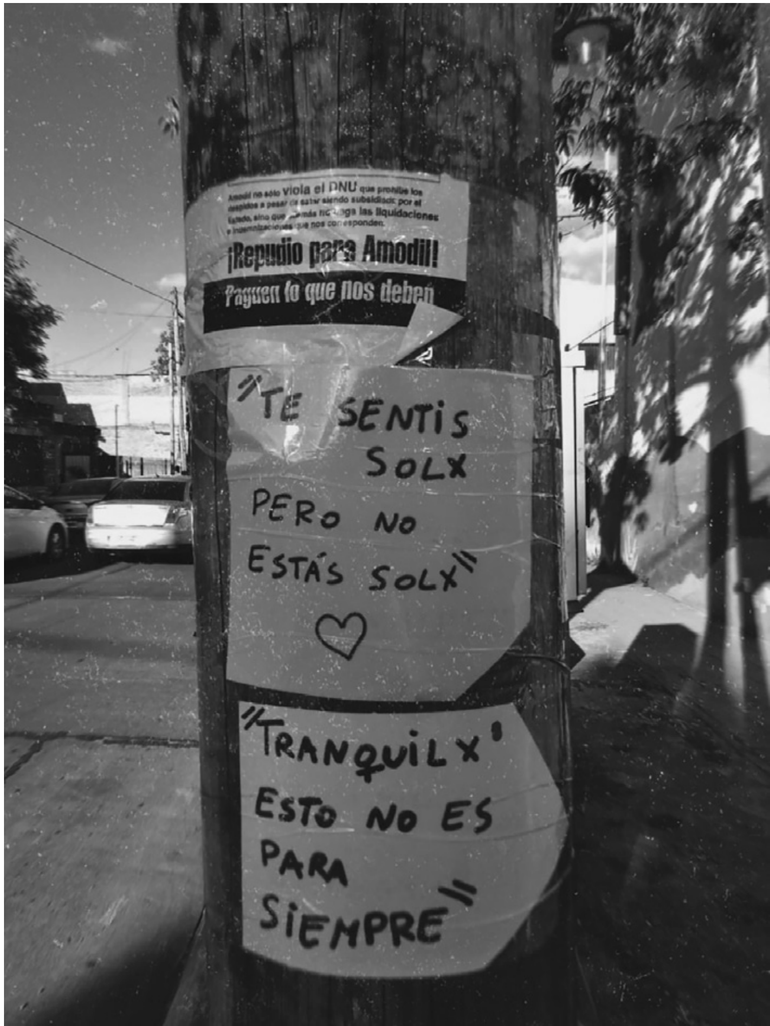


Figure 6.3 Urban art intervention by a young participant of the Far Apart Latin America workshops delivered by Crear Vale la Pena (Buenos Aires, Argentina), 2020.

The Far Apart archive groups the findings from the research in the UK into four topic areas: the impact of lockdown and social distancing; strategies for coping and engagement; key learning and challenges; general recommendations. Themes that emerged in Latin America were consistently present in the UK data and would later contribute to shaping the policy recommendations and practice guidelines: practical problems need to be overcome; ongoing staff support is essential; online arts activities are helpful in a stressful context (coronavirus pandemic); online arts activities compete with other online activities but bring different benefits and opportunities; connecting online is not the same as face-to-face.

The practical problems of internet connectivity and limited data now seem archaic, but the inequalities of access to arts activities remain resonant. Most striking in the research is the way in which online experiences revealed new aspects of the young people's home lives, how those impacted on the arts activities and how the arts organisations gained insight into the interface between their programmes and young people's domestic lives. The Latin American respondents consistently drew attention to the way in which online activities opened a complex space between public/private life. Multiple-occupancy rooms in poor domestic infrastructures reduced or removed privacy, compelling several young people to leave their homes and find spaces where they could freely express themselves, without surveillance by family members. However, young people also reported that parents were understanding and played an important role in trying to solve such issues by allowing them to use larger house spaces for the digital performances created during the project.

> My house doesn't have Wi-Fi anymore. I use my aunt's. … the internet there sometimes got bad. I did everything I could to stay in the classes. I used to do it on the rooftop but … My aunt complained and asked me to stop jumping because it was making a lot of noise in her house.' (Young person from Latin America)

> I used to say: I'm going to do it [watch online activities] in my room so as not to disturb my family with all the noise I'm going to make. And then I told my parents: 'Parents listen … How can I do it? Because if I do it in my room, it is very small, the space won't … I won't be as comfortable moving and so on'. And they said: 'no, X.,

> use the living room. … move the furniture back, push the table, do whatever you want.' (Young person from Latin America)

A common difficulty that was faced by those lacking dedicated spaces were the multiple distractions found in their homes. This prevented them from fully concentrating on the activities as they would if they were participating in-person.

> Sometimes I was in classes at home, and sometimes they passed behind, or there were times when they didn't have keys, I had to open it, go through the trouble and say 'teacher, I'm sorry, but I have to open the door' or things arrived that I had to receive. (Young person from Latin America)

Whereas in Latin America, despite such disruptive set-ups, young people experienced arts activities as a form of escape, in the UK, young people who had difficult home lives spoke of the negative impact of being forced to engage with arts activities online at home. This was challenging for many as they did not have the same emotional, physical or creative outlet. There was an additional sense from some that they were self-conscious of their living situations or the home environment. This led to many young people not turning on their cameras, which limited engagement, or not participating with online activities at all. But referring to what they called 'the spectrum of impact' (Heritage *et al.*, 2022: 28), the UK researchers noted that some young people (especially those who are shy and reluctant to connect) talked of feeling safer when they were engaging in online spaces than in-person. They were able to stay in the comfort of their own homes and were in control of their level of engagement.

> It's interesting because some people's personalities come out a little bit more online. They actually feel safer online, and that's been really lovely.' (Staff member from the UK)

Additionally, the digital space was one that young people in the 2020s were already more familiar with than were the adult artists leading the workshops. For some young people, the combined notion of being online and working from within their own personal space was empowering.

> I think in terms of all this time, and I know for some of the other people that I've spoken to, that the sessions are one place that you can still be creative because right now it's very hard and especially when you're in your own house. I don't work well at home either, and especially not to be in a room with people, I can't really focus. So, actually joining an online session with other people doing some kind of artistic, creative thing, has been really important. (Young person from the UK)

A significant difference between the findings from Latin America and the UK was that young people in Cardiff, London and Manchester consistently talked about losing their connection with their local arts organisations. While they were grateful to be able to continue their engagement online, for most of the UK respondents the level of connection with other people and with their artform decreased over time. The Latin American respondents registered a similar reduction, but also pointed to the positive impacts of the digital delivery:

> I feel like we are more connected, because now they call us more, they [teachers or arts facilitators] ask us if we understood things, then if I didn't understand, I can tell them and they explain again, it feels like they have more patience. (Young person from Latin America)

> I know the coordinator of the library, L., and she sent me a message on my mother's WhatsApp saying that there would be an activity, and then I went there to find out, to participate. (Young person from Latin America)

The young people across all the sites highlighted how the arts workers at each organisation were essential during the transition from in-person to online activities, not least in translating the safe and supportive in-person environments to online platforms. One of the most common strategies to keep the participants engaged in the online activities, despite all the technical issues brought by digital platforms, was the arts workers constantly reaching out and motivating them through social media and instant messaging applications.

Forty years have passed since the coronavirus pandemic, but the research offers testimony to the efforts of youth arts workers who kept in close contact with the young people. In the interviews, young people identify how the staff were key to keeping them interested

in the arts activities and strengthening emotional ties. In all cities, interviewed participants found comfort and emotional support during the pandemic while they were actively engaged in arts activities, which expanded their bonds with the facilitators and teachers.

> I also really liked the attitude of each one of them, the commitment they have had with each one of us, sincerely supporting us from below, believing in us and in our strength, in our talent. It is what has motivated me the most and it has called my attention to continue [joining activities from the arts organisation]. (Young person from Latin America)

> Even if I feel like I'm being carried away by thoughts of 'oh no, this is not the same, I am deceiving myself', they were telling me to calm down, saying that we are here to enjoy, have fun, do what we are passionate about and let's say that this is like a ray of light that hits you in the middle of a pandemic, telling you everything is going to work out, everything is going to be fine. (Young person from Latin America)

> I think it helps me, not only with finding new ways to explore or gather ideas, but also hone structure in my writing as well as inspiration and ideas from people that I've met there and forming closer bonds with people I've never met before. (Young person from the UK)

Meanwhile the youth arts workers themselves registered a variety of negative mental health symptoms. In the UK, they experienced a diminished sense of morale as organisations were forced to make staff cuts that disproportionately affected people in the organisation who were more locally based, culturally diverse, and on lower incomes. It was those most in need who were most significantly affected by the cuts. The research clearly shows that UK organisations that decided to furlough staff or make redundancies experienced a significant shift in staff morale, which then had an impact on how they could support young people.

> Not everyone can afford the equipment that they need for a good wi-fi connection, good camera, or good sound. I know there were some laptops organised for the people, which was fab, and we've had people pop back in that now can come. There is a barrier to it which is tricky. (Staff member from the UK)

In Latin America, the interviews reveal that working from home secluded youth arts workers from regular in-person contact with

young people and peers, causing stress and worry. Not being able to properly support young people discouraged them, while having to deal with technological issues without the support they needed for their duties made them feel more distressed and mentally debilitated.

> Then, it is more difficult to be alone. I've been through very, very, very bad situations. And that happens, just like in-person, you swallow and keep going, but at the end of the [in-person] arts activities you have a friend that you can hug, that you can cry, that you can later share a mate[8] with and relax a bit. Now there is no physical space and there are no people. (Staff member from Latin America)

In addition, youth arts workers' own experiences of unreliable internet access negatively affected their daily work life. They had to learn how to cope with no longer being able to control the success of their classes. Significant increases to workload, with several professionals losing track of how much time they were committing to work, also affected their personal lives and home management. Such challenges were reflected in the increase of youth arts workers' feelings of anxiety, stress, loneliness and exhaustion.

> Because precisely what I wanted was to try to feel less anguish, right? Because I said: I'm getting anguished. It's horrible, it's exhausting, it's frustrating, the internet goes out, there's no signal. Now I have a new computer, the computer that I had before would cut me off, it was a disaster. So it is very frustrating that the failure or success of your session is not in your hands, right? (Staff member from Latin America)

> I had to learn a new function, too, and learn it by myself. With that, it was a lot more time working. … And that thing: you don't have time to come in, you don't have time to leave, you work all the time. And: didn't you waste time on public transport? You use this time to keep working instead. Didn't you use to waste so much time for lunch? You work instead. It is very tiring, and until you realise it, you are already burnt out. (Staff member from Latin America)

The Far Apart archive registers diverse and often destabilising challenges brought by the pandemic across all ten cities, but also identifies what young people recognised as the positive results of the support offered by arts organisations. The research shows that while social isolation and other restrictive measures deeply

affected young people's lives, online creative activities generated an important space for participants to manage feelings of stress. Their daily routine and social life were abruptly interrupted, at a time when such interactions play a crucial part in their development as individuals, so the arts organisations offered a structured means of maintaining contact with other young people.

> At the beginning of the year I felt very stressed, for not knowing how to organize my routine … In Batuta they sent some tips at the beginning, that when you were stressed you should take a deep breath, organise your time, stories and everything that had to do with emotions … Well, it has helped me a lot … sometimes when I am very stressed with the tasks, I listen to music or watch the activities that are offered by the foundation. (Young person from Latin America)

> It made it possible for me to stay active at a time when everyone else had to stay locked up. So I could, even though I was afraid of the risks, I could keep active, I can be dancing, I can be learning other things, I'm in touch with other people. (Young person from Latin America)

> At times with online you get to meet more people because sometimes in youth theatres you only have a certain amount of people in one session, but if you do online, they could have up to thirty people in the same Zoom. (Young person from the UK)

The young interviewees also recognised that the arts organisations were supporting them to find suitable ways to express their emotions. While engaging in these activities, participants could temporarily disconnect themselves from the news reports, avoiding the perpetuation of feelings such as fear and anxiety.

> It was important because it was good, it distracted me. I didn't think about anything. I was calm, it distracts me a lot from all the things that are happening with the coronavirus etc. … They helped me with personal issues and made me feel calmer. (Young person from Latin America)

> It helped me in the sense that being locked up, … was a hassle and doing all these activities helped me to disconnect, disconnect. These activities came to me like ten times, because you have your head all day with this, about the pandemic, the cases, that there is no money … that there are a lot of problems and doing the activities feels like it frees you. (Young person from Latin America)

The research identified transformational processes by which youth arts organisations were constantly reviewing what was working within the structure of their organisation and using the experience of the pandemic to rethink their engagement with young people. Although it could be a difficult, distressing process, youth arts workers reported that going online created new opportunities for adapting different tools, which improved their creative and teaching skills.

In the UK, the research revealed that there were more barriers to innovation for larger, venue-based organisations. Smaller organisations, particularly those without a venue, were able to transition to an online space more quickly than larger organisations. Organisations with smaller teams and fewer overheads were able to make swifter decisions and did not have to spend as much time figuring out how to keep the organisation afloat. In general, staff from smaller organisations felt a higher level of satisfaction with their work during the pandemic, as they were still able to make an impact. In larger organisations, on the other hand, staff reported feelings of frustration and depleted motivation due to pandemic-related uncertainties as well as a lack of leadership focus. In general, larger organisations were busy maintaining themselves while smaller organisations were able to concentrate on innovating.

This difference did not emerge in the Latin American research. As the pandemic imposed an abrupt shift to the virtual, not all of the participating arts organisations in Latin America could create appropriate mechanisms to support their staff and ease their transition to new ways of working. Some workers received direct or indirect financial assistance, training and materials to help to guide their online work, but in general, youth arts workers in Latin America reported having to learn things on their own during the transition process.

> [the arts organisation] … has given us workshops on managing emotions, it's something like support for the ones who support. … so we have had workshops, training on this issue, on the emotional containment of us who are working with children and parents. (Staff member from Latin America)

All the arts workers talked of missing their face-to-face work routine, but the Latin Americans highlighted the benefits that emerged

from virtual interdisciplinary teamwork. They felt that their teams had been strengthened during the pandemic, allowing them to feel closer as an organic institution and develop an increased understanding of the arts organisation itself.

> My colleagues have been very supportive of each other, eh? And we had no alternative but to find spaces to share among us, to be able to vent, because we knew that we needed it. And luckily I think we found that dynamic in the group and we were able to support each other. We were able to hold on a lot. (Young person from Latin America)

Lessons learned

The Far Apart archive provides a framework for how we can measure the achievements and limitations of cultural policies and arts practices that have been variously implemented and rejected in the 40 years since this research was undertaken. The researchers – artists and academics – made a series of recommendations based on the findings of their research, which were presented at a series of public events with stakeholders across the research sites. One important question remains: what can we learn from the research in 2063?

Far Apart reflected on whether the coronavirus pandemic was an opportunity to reset the social agenda of arts organisations across several cities in Latin America and in the former UK. During the social transformations of 2020–22, the research registered a need for the repositioning of the arts and their role in society. The shift towards recognising the importance of art as a tool for resilience and recovery brought each of the arts organisations closer to an activist aesthetic as the pandemic opened a space in which a diversity of arts and cultural activities were repurposed and publicly acknowledged as part of society's system of care.

Given the way in which Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Peru have pioneered the integration of creative and cultural engagement into their public care systems over the last four decades, it seems reasonable to describe the recommendations arising from the Far Apart research as the Latin Americanisation of the arts. The final report recommended that policymakers should 'lean into art's

social purpose'. Building on the notion of creativity as a process, it argued that arts organisations were well-placed to address a range of social issues. The research showed how arts organisations created a new repertoire of collective actions by opening their venues as food banks or vaccination centres and registered a shift in thinking towards public acknowledgement of how creativity is a common tool for connection with wider societal care, welfare and security issues. At the same time, it urged caution and the need to recognise that what arts organisations offer may not work for everyone and that arts activities need to be integrated into other support systems. The study demonstrated that the arts were just one tool in a large box. Far Apart's conclusions looked to future government policy that would incentivise arts and other social and community organisations to connect in ways that are more fruitful, strategic and long-term. While the pandemic strengthened the social role of arts organisations, the research recognised the urgent need for attention to policy changes, alongside the training and support that would be needed to enable staff and venues to make the necessary transitions for them to be integrated into systems of care.

It was impossible for anyone who participated in this research in the 2020s to imagine that brutal political and societal changes would create such different directions of travel for arts policy and practice in Latin America and the former UK. At the time this research was undertaken, the participants were still in a state of intense insecurity and shared a common struggle. The research was produced by and promoted inter-regional cooperation whilst strengthening regional collaborations, which at the time was seen as an essential characteristic of coordinated responses to the pandemic. The research was not confident that what was being observed in the two years between 2020 and 2022 would herald the necessary revolution in which the arts would come to play a pivotal role in supporting the mental health of young participants.

As the recently crowned Nobel Laureate Ocean Vuong reminds us, 'Time is a Mother'.[9] The 40 years that separate us from the stories told by the data produced in Far Apart allow us to see the deeper currents and visceral social cracks that the crises provoked by the pandemic exposed. Those stories are ones that we can learn from in 2063, as we continue to explore how the collective practices

of the arts can be part of the new formation of collective action that we still need to confront our own emerging catastrophe.

Notes

1 Based on research undertaken with young people in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, England, and Wales. In association with Fundación Crear Vale la Pena, Redes da Maré, Fundación Nacional Batuta, Teatro La Plaza, Battersea Arts Centre, Contact Theatre Manchester, Dirty Protest and National Theatre Wales. Original research team (2020–22) in alphabetical order: Victoria Bird, Catherine Fung, Francisco García Pósleman, Paul Heritage, Matheus Lock Santos, Mathias Muñoz Hernández, Aline Navegantes, Renata Peppl, Meghan Peterson, Stefan Priebe, Karina Ruiz, Poppy Spowage, Mariana W. Steffen. The authors developed the ideas for this essay from reflections with the People's Palace Projects team. Special thanks to Pascale Aebischer for her editorial provocations and support.

2 See e.g. 'Mapping Repertoires of Collective Action Facing the COVID-19 Pandemic in Informal Settlements in Latin American Cities' (Duque Franco et al., 2020).

3 In Colombia and Argentina, most of the research participants were based in the capitals Bogotá and Buenos Aires (respectively). However, as the arts organisations from these countries had a national reach, young people from other parts of the country were consulted.

4 All appendices are available alongside the rest of the Far Apart archive at https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/far-apart-but-close-at-heart-latin-america/ and https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/far-apart-uk/.

5 The studies in Latin America and in the UK were approved by the Queen Mary University of London Research Ethics Committee (approval references are respectively QMERC2020/44 and QMERC20/144).

6 All reports and public data part of the Far Apart archive can be found at https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/far-apart-but-close-at-heart-latin-america/ and https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/far-apart-uk/.

7 In Latin America 40% experienced low mood during the pandemic and 46% in the UK; 45% experienced anxiety during the pandemic in Latin America and 42% in the UK.

8 *Mate* is a traditional South American drink, made of soaking dried leaves of a herb (*Yerba Mate*) in hot water. It is usually served in a calabash gourd crafted specifically for this type of drink.
9 The Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2060.

References

Birn, Anne-Emanuelle (2020), How to have narrative-flipping history in a pandemic: Views of/from Latin America. *Centaurus* 62.2, 354–369.

Duque Franco, Isabel, Ortiz, Catalina, Samper, Jota, and Millan, Gynna (2020), Mapping repertoires of collective action facing the COVID-19 pandemic in informal settlements in Latin American cities. *Environment and Urbanization* 32.2, 523–546. DOI: 0.1177/0956247820944823

Easwaran, Kamala, *et al.* (9 September 2021), *Why Art Matters for Youth Mental Health: A Youth Led Participatory Insight Analysis*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/ap476

Heritage, P., et al. (2022), *Looking Beyond Lockdown: How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue to Support Young People's Wellbeing during and beyond COVID-19*. Research report. Available at: https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/fach-final-report-report.pdf (accessed 3 July 2022).

Kowal, Marta, *et al.* (2020), Who is the most stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic? Data from 26 countries and areas. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* 12.4, 946–966. DOI: 10.1111/aphw.12234

Kukkonen, Tiina (2021), *Supporting Youth Mental Health in and through the Arts*. *Technical Report*. Quebec: English Language Arts Network. Available at: https://artistsinspire.ca/youth-mental-health-screen-2.pdf (accessed 3 July 2022).

O'Brien, Eugene (ed.) (2017), *Oxford Bibliographies: Literary and Critical Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Santos, Boaventura d. S. (2014), *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Shim, Ruth S. and Steven M. Starks (2021), COVID-19, structural racism, and mental health inequities: Policy implications for an emerging syndemic. *Psychiatric Services* 72.10, 1193–1198. DOI: 10.1176/appi.ps.202000725

Syed Sheriff, Rebecca J., *et al.* (2022), A co-produced online cultural experience compared to a typical museum website for mental health in people aged 16–24: A proof-of-principle randomised controlled trial. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00048674221115648 (accessed November 2022).

Varma, Prerna, Moira Junge, Hailey Meaklim and Melinda L. Jackson (2021), Younger people are more vulnerable to stress, anxiety and depression during COVID-19 pandemic: A global cross-sectional survey. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry* 109. DOI: 10.1016/j.pnpbp. 2020.110236

Vuong, Ocean (2020), *Not Even This*. Poetry Foundation. Available at: www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/152940/not-even-this (accessed 3 July 2022).

World Health Organisation (2018), *Mental Health ATLAS 2017*. Geneva: WHO. Available at www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241514019 (accessed 3 July 2022).

Part III

Reimagining the live event

7

Reconfiguring dramaturgies of place: Local authority event management during the COVID-19 pandemic

Giselle Garcia

When restrictions eased in the UK for outdoor gatherings and performances in the summer of 2020, and the UK government announced that it would act against the impacts of the unfolding coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to protect arts and culture, which the then Prime Minister described as 'the beating heart of the country' (Brown, 2020), many town centres and tourism destinations began to explore how to safely organise post-lockdown activities. For UK events managers working with or within local authorities to deliver events and programmes within their council areas, this posed unprecedented challenges. When taking decisions regarding the use of public space for arts activities and having to deliver events and programmes in public spaces safely, local authority officers had to contend with the limits of their experience in programming work that involved dispersed audiences. As part of their effort to enable the local population to reconnect with their environment, some also had to deal with the challenge of reimagining sites and routes that had no prior history of use as performance spaces. These difficulties were compounded by the devolved geographies of governance across the UK for public health and for arts and culture. Drawing on the results of a survey and interviews with local authority event managers across the UK, this chapter sheds light on the difficulties faced by events managers at the time of the easing of pandemic mitigation measures and explores the range of practices and sites that were used, their relative success and the detailed practicability of taking the arts outdoors, especially into public spaces.

The various problems faced by UK events managers may in part stem from the origins of the event manager role: local authority events teams and manager roles were initially created simply to

support civic events within their specific geographical areas. As one event manager we interviewed explained:

> The events team was primarily made to manage a travelling fun fair as well as the more civic angles of our events like the Lord Mayor's Gala, Christmas lights and things like that. Over time, it's developed very much into [a] tourism and economic drive function. (Interview 4)

Another interviewee adds detail about what such an 'economic drive function' boils down to:

> Traditionally, council funding is based on a certain volume of people that will come to the city centre to measure a certain amount of spend that will happen in the city centre. It's economically driven more than artistically driven from their perspective. It's about animating the city centre to bring footfall. (Interview 3)

An animated city contributes to the cultural capital that makes it a sought-after venue for events such as weddings, which in turn brings yet greater footfall and spend for businesses and the local authority: 'Our team focuses on outdoor events and weddings, anything that takes place on council land, or a highway, including heritage parks. Primarily, we are responsible for generating an income for the local authority through hiring council land for events' (Interview 5). As these comments show, local authority events teams were, before 2020, mostly in charge of the logistical implementation of events in their local area, a 'one-stop shop' for licensing and managing the event as well as ensuring the economic function of a town or city (Interview 4).

Recognising the original purpose of the event manager is key to understanding the changes to their roles and functions during the pandemic, as they had to adapt to support safer and, ultimately, better curated arts and culture programmes that included community art initiatives in outdoor spaces, such as those explored in the final chapter of this volume. Our research for 'Outside the Box: Open-Air Performance as a Pandemic Response' (April to August 2021) reveals that local authorities' approach to managing events before the pandemic shaped their response during the crisis and is also affecting how they plan their future events. An in-depth look at management styles and structures enables us to better understand how local authorities govern their local areas, how they

think about place-making/geography, history and community, and how they might best serve communities through artistic and performance event programming as we emerge from the pandemic and face new environmental and social challenges.

Our project set out to map variations in approaches and examples of good and best practice across the UK. Informed by drama and management studies, we took an interdisciplinary approach and sought to harness changes brought about by the lockdown such as the revivified community engagement with green spaces and renewed desire for sustainable leisure. For the strand of our research project aimed at understanding how local authorities managed outdoor events before and during the coronavirus pandemic, we collected qualitative data at the cusp of the UK reopening from lockdown on 8 March 2021. We thus explored the views of events managers at the point when new practices and outdoor venues emerged, and as local authority event managers approached the possibility of a physically distanced autumn/winter season, potentially with shorter lead-in times, less economically viable audience capacities and the hazards associated with indoor working.

This chapter focuses on what we learned from the survey of event managers we created using Qualtrics, which contained 19 questions. These questions were divided into four categories:

1 Location, population and the nature of services;
2 Events prior to the pandemic, including frequency, locations and types of events;
3 Events since the pandemic was first declared in the UK in March 2020, including changes to programming and the main challenges that event managers encountered;
4 Views on the pandemic and the future of outdoors events.

The full survey was completed by 19 local authority event managers and an additional 24 answered it partially. Of the total of 43 responses, 18 were involved with commissioning work from artists. Just over half (22) of councils were involved in programming events. These 22 respondents said that their councils put on events in urban areas, with 19 utilising parks as venues predominantly for concerts and street theatre or other performance events. Such ‘performance events’, including rituals, music, live art, installations, interactive games, parades and guided/walking experiences, made up a fifth of

the activities organised by local authorities during this period and these are the focus of this chapter.[1]

Our survey findings were fleshed out by the detailed responses we obtained through 30-minute interviews conducted through video calls on Zoom. Fourteen of those interviews with local authority event managers and producers across the UK took place in June–August 2021, the summer during which England began a phased exit from lockdown. In the following section, I draw on data from the interviews to discuss how councils managed performance events before the pandemic, how this changed in response to the pandemic and what has been learned from these experiences. I argue that the pandemic has led to a reflective period wherein events managers needed to update their working structures to accommodate not only the immediate responses to COVID-19 guidelines, but a sustainable and inclusive practice for the future.

Performance events before the pandemic

The festival circuit is one of largest events local authorities host, with some larger cities hosting several major festivals every year. For these, most of the content comes from external event organisers, with the council event team playing a facilitating role. One interviewee explained that the council only acted as organiser for winter holiday events, with the rest of the calendar of events managed by 'external organisations or through individual event producers': 'It's their responsibility and it's their events. We just make the land available to them if they need land from us or if they need permission from us, and then we facilitate that to allow their events go ahead. We don't programme as such' (Interview 8).

In most towns and cities, markets are also one of the biggest outdoor events local authorities manage and produce. In one city, the events manager saw markets as a potential area to grow arts audiences:

> the markets were a really big draw for a lot of people who maybe didn't see themselves as art attenders, but they come down for street food and they come down to the craft market and then see this amazing piece of contemporary dance even if they would never consider themselves to be a dance audience. That combination is

> something we pushed very hard. We collide these worlds and see what happens. It fits with our broader objective to try and increase people's exposure to culture and give them an experience that they may not have. They wouldn't go into a building that is a cultural venue, but they will come to the street and see something in the street because they like [a] particular churros stand. (Interview 3)

This chimes with the responses of several interviewees, who described similar pre-pandemic initiatives to use open-air spaces where people naturally enjoy gathering to develop new audiences for their arts and culture programming. However, they explained that a particular challenge to this approach was that some potential audience members, especially within lower income demographics, did not feel as though those open-air spaces were 'their' places.

One council made it their aim to remove barriers to participation that may stem from the spaces created by history, the cityscape, communities and from the architecture of the town or city. It has become a part of this council's remit to bridge gaps between areas to engage communities that would otherwise feel separated from local authority-run city centre events:

> This part of the city is an old part and was a nineteenth century trading warehouse area. It was gentrified through the 80s and 90s so now it's got a beautiful streetscape. But for a lot of people from poorer areas, that part of town is intimidating so we've started engagement work and outreach with communities that border this part of town. We're trying to find ways to create connections because there's almost like an invisible barrier, and people don't think that part of town is for them. Even if it's a free street festival and anyone can come in, for some people psychologically, they're not sure if that part of town is going to be [welcoming]. They might stand out or something. (Interview 3)

Evidently, psychological and cultural barriers need to be tackled to encourage communities to cross geographical boundaries and enter the city centre. This is a good case study for understanding how built environments are experienced and perceived, and how event managers can participate actively in place-making. By understanding the effects of gentrification within a community, they created programmes that forged connections in cities that are perceived as culturally and economically divided. By paying attention to local audience behaviour, footfall and demographics, they developed

strategies not only to drive the economy and tourism, but also to encourage residents to take ownership of their city. In this case, event managers have shown how cultural programming can impact community cohesion.

As this example suggests, the default open space for most events run by the council is the city centre, as well as any historic attractions around it. This is also often the case in most other towns and cities. This is how our first interviewee put it:

> The central point is the City Hall, a huge, beautiful building built in 1906. It's historic. That's where our Christmas market will be, and our Christmas tree … It's a key place for us since the city streets link all around it for parades etc. We've also got the harbour as it's become a hub for a lot of tourists, so we tend to concentrate on the quaysides. (Interview 1)

City centres and plazas have always been the heart of a municipality's public life. They are the hub for culture and commerce, if not also the seat of political and geographical power, and often the nucleus of a settlement's history. It is no surprise, then, that events programming would take place here. However, this is not without pitfalls, as exemplified by the earlier example of exclusionary experiences brought about by gentrification. For this event manager, too, the challenge lay in expanding arts and culture across the city by deliberately spreading cultural activity across the city's different geographical areas and social groups, through targeted outreach engagements:

> One of our main priorities is [to] reclaim public space and re-use public space to bring culture out of theatres and … cultural exhibition spaces and make it more public. It's a massive problem of access that people don't necessarily want to walk into a gallery. So, a big ambition in our cultural strategy is to ask artists to think about public space, and how they can be ambitious around what they can do. We need to geographically spread ourselves across the entire city, so we always divide it into city centre, north, south, east and west. What we're doing is that we're involving a community in each section or we're involving a venue in each section or involving an artist from each part of the city, focusing on inclusivity as well for disabled artists, LGBTQ+ artists, and migrant artists. We're looking at capacity building programmes for minority groups. (Interview 1)

This initiative points to a contemporary turn in civic events and cultural programming, one that is attuned and committed to accessibility and inclusivity. As these interviewees articulate, outdoor spaces have their own particular histories, and these mark the present in different ways for different communities. What the councils have discovered through an understanding of cultural geography is how to manage those associations to support the communities they serve. Sometimes they must work to break down 'invisible barriers', and sometimes they celebrate spaces that are historically important to the community. A council's awareness of their specific contexts and their roles within those contexts is key to beginning to revise their cultural strategies when thinking about public space in contemporary performance programming.

Public space often includes green spaces, which pose an additional challenge in that there are limitations in place to protect parks and gardens from overuse. Sometimes, too much footfall can damage the built or natural ecosystems that thrive in them: 'We've encouraged use of outdoor spaces but not green spaces because they are sensitive and can be overused. We've said no to any new events going on in green spaces and we've protected them' (Interview 8). This is not to say that such green zones are unusable, but that the way performance events are conceived needs to be attuned to these spaces, as was clear from the following comment:

> We've got limited spaces where people can put on events. We've got two reasonably large green spaces and those are usable but there are restrictions around the Abbey, which is currently limited to twenty-eight days a year for activity. So, we're going to look to see how we can adjust planning permissions on that moving forward. (Interview 7)

While there are regulations in place, such as specific numbers of days a green space can be used, arts programmers can consider the possibilities of how they are used and how planning permissions may be adapted.

As became apparent in our second interview, specific historical and cultural factors have also influenced how events have positioned themselves within the city's economic recovery. The wealth of some cities, as in the case of Interviewee 2, has historical roots in slavery and the cotton trade, but this wealth has not necessarily been

maintained. Councils in poorer cities, like theirs, felt they needed to use events programming to capitalise on their cultural reputation and drive tourism towards economic revival (Interview 2). It was important to the interviewees that they understand, reflect on and maximise how the histories of their towns and cities shape cultural capital, as illustrated by Interview 6:

> Our city was very badly bombed. It was a medieval city but most of the urban fabric has been rebuilt since the Second World War, so it's quite an unusual geography. But we need to maximise that. We had a tightrope walk [between two structures that] couldn't really have been done anywhere else. (Interview 6)

A performance event can thus be a means of connecting a traumatic past with the present in a manner that tells a compelling story of bravery and resilience.

A story very different to such urban devastation and resilience can be told about the countryside communities that began to boom during the industrial revolution with the advent of steel and iron plants. The growth of this industry prompted migration as jobs were made and communities were built:

> We have a population of about a hundred and sixty thousand. We are a very new town. Almost everybody's family that lives here is probably less than four or five generations. We've always been a receiver of communities coming here, settling, and developing their own communities. We are very diverse and it's well-received. (Interview 10)

Performance events in such an environment will be angled very differently. This town had a purpose-built theatre erected after the Second World War. Having a specific place to host performances meant that alternative sites were not explored as much until the coronavirus pandemic. Necessity is the mother of invention, or in this case, innovation, as this community moved theatre outdoors with performances that were 'raved about by the public' (Interview 10). Utilising the farmlands surrounding their town, the community were able to produce theatre performances that were in line with the government guidelines, while also giving them the opportunity to contemplate the land that had welcomed and sustained them.

By thus reflecting on their respective locations' contexts and histories, events managers and artists discovered how the dramaturgy

of space can affect the style and aesthetics of arts, theatre and performance in their local outdoor spaces. In sum, before 2020 events teams were concerned with a sense of place to:

1 Celebrate or rebrand the city's architecture and maximise cultural capital;
2 Understand the origins and heritages of their community and civic life;
3 Use the arts to reclaim public space for inclusivity and accessibility;
4 Respect the environment as ecosystems that support more than human life forms.

These four primary drivers for programming in turn changed the way performance events were structured. Events managers considered new relationships that occur in public space where the divide between audience and performer is blurred. As becomes apparent in a comment by our third interviewee, when this divide is blurred, the site becomes a part of the performance: 'Responding to the fluidness and democracy of outdoor space when you close a road and just let people wander through a closed road, there's a different set of relationships between the artist, between the performer, and audience' (Interview 3).

Such potential for site-specificity, in turn, influenced how this event manager conceived of theatre and performance in outdoor public space: 'A lot of outdoor work tends not to be very text-based or verbal. It's much more about the visual. If it's too wordy, it just doesn't work in the outdoor context. Sometimes, it's basically indoor work that they've just kind of got a bit of a roof over' (Interview 3). Text-based work, this event manager suggests, is not best served outdoors, where the words and sounds risk being lost in the city centre's hustle and bustle; whereas visual-arts-led events which intersect with interdisciplinary modes of creation fare better. Further, the attention to site-specificity within local authority event management puts place-making at the centre of their work, which recognises the limitations of replicating events in various venues: 'I think it's important for [the] events team to consider place-making when thinking about locations because some events can happen in the same format anywhere, but others can't' (Interview 6). Outdoor programming thus ended up being about much more than

just matching up an artist or event with a specific site: it became a means of connecting communities, opening up access to arts and culture, increasing footfall in city centres, connecting the present with the location's past and about place-making in a manner that went far beyond economic imperatives.

The pandemic situation

When the pandemic happened, it brewed the perfect storm to set these ideas in motion. The pandemic, as Mary Breunig reminds us, uncloaked a 'further bifurcation of haves and have nots in a capitalist-driven and culturally divided society. Post-pandemic, the opportunity for individuals to put their lives back together will be culture, race, gender, age and geography-dependent' (Breunig, 2022: 644). During the pandemic, one way of beginning to counter this bifurcation was therefore to make public space accessible for marginalised populations. Considerations of contexts, histories, site-specificity and place-making within performance events and other civic events began to flourish amidst the need to stimulate local economies.

While in several towns and cities the pandemic put a stop to all planned events, other councils shifted their focus towards 'supporting local businesses and trying to help them and push them towards the government funding opportunities available to all the people that were suddenly out of work' (Interview 9). Suddenly, events were no longer a priority. It was all about keeping people safe and supporting them through the economic downturn caused by lockdowns and closing borders all over the world, and events teams were drastically reduced in size because of staff being reassigned to other duties or furloughed.

The entire supply chain for events was impacted by the pandemic mitigation measures:

> I've seen the hardship that some people have and are on the brink of collapse. Even a two-week delay could cost around half a billion pounds to the event sector. And I don't think that's an exaggeration because it's just wiped out a lot of the summer. It's not just the big players in that business, it's the whole supply chain – all the people who supply events and all the artists who rely on those festivals happening as well. (Interview 2)

Events teams needed to act quickly and respond to changes in government guidelines as they came: ‘an awful lot of planning needs to be done but every time it would just about come to fruition, we’d get a new stage in the lockdown’ (Interview 4). As most events teams agreed, the top two challenges with event programming at that time were the changing government advice and interpreting government guidance, which meant that a lot of logistical recalibrations needed to be put in place.

Despite these challenges, some interviewees explained that they had attempted and managed to organise events during stages of lockdown with varying degrees of success. Previous templates for producing events could no longer be applied, so councils which may previously have functioned on ‘autopilot’ had to work harder to marry form with content and deeply think through the dramaturgy of the work they managed and commissioned. As a result, their team structures and roles changed, as they became more active producers themselves and/or hired producers to become a part of their team to ensure that events were not only safe but functioned for the communities they served.

Our interviewees described employing the following distinctive tactics in organising events during the pandemic.

Test and trace

Contact tracing was a system implemented during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, using a smartphone-based app that informed people if they had been in close contact with someone who had subsequently reported a positive test result. Events managers used this system for ticketed events in fenced-in outdoor spaces:

> We knew exactly who was coming and we could track and trace them. They were there for a specific length of time and then they left the site, which was completely different to how we used to do it. (Interview 3)

Pop-up

The element of surprise in pop-up events plays with the idea that shared space and time with an audience need not be planned, ticketed or fenced-in and that attendance numbers in a space would

be minimal without putting a stop to the performance event. The pop-up format radically alters the way performance events are marketed and advertised, as is evident from these comments:

> We're just trying to keep it open and fresh, pocket entertainment, pop-up and move on. That's the plan. When I say pop-up events, what I mean by that is we will host an event, but it won't be the singing and dancing quayside entertainment. It will be moving and roving and pop-up. You might see something for five to seven minutes and it'll disappear, whereas previously you may have had a twenty-minute showpiece performance or someone performing in a marquee for two and half hours on a guitar. (Interview 1)

> We really wanted to encourage people to come back to the city and go for a drink, go for lunch, go for dinner or whatever in these places so we did have some walkabout performances in closed roads that [were] not ticketed. Performers just appeared and we didn't tell anyone. We said they're paid between 12 noon and 5pm, but we didn't give specific times because we didn't want the audience to gather in the street. If you book into a restaurant or a café or a bar, you might see something passing. It was a weird thing to explain and sell and I'm not entirely sure it worked, but we thought it was a kind of compromise. (Interview 3)

> All [these events] were unannounced. In general, those that were not connected with the event didn't have any insider information … Nobody was told any of the locations in advance of where things were happening just because it was seen as such a risk that an audience might gather. If a crowd is gathering of more than 30 people and it's not socially distant then that show has to stop happening in order that people aren't put at risk by gathering to watch. It was really an event that was designed to work within restrictions that still works on a big scale with lots of different forms of performers. (Interview 6)

Window installations

Window dressing was a common visually-led idea used in several town and cities to animate the high street as it was suffering from economic loss:

> We did a … programme of window dressing based on fairy tales all the way down the high street. It was lovely and helped the situation of vacant units where shops closed down. (Interview 1)

Window dressing was also envisioned as a festive winter event that people could enjoy. Despite some of these events having to be cancelled amidst recurring lockdowns, the idea was so good that, after the height of the lockdown, at least one local authority carried on its window-dressing project later in the year:

> In the lead up to Christmas, as most cities, we've had an issue with vacant retail units. So, we worked with arts organisations to bring some beautiful animations for those shop windows. We did have plans to have an arts trail in vacant units. This was going to be indoor not outdoor but it's something that made use of our event planning abilities in this particular situation. We were going to do an arts trail through the city centre with various stakeholders but unfortunately, we went into the third lockdown, and it just became impossible. But we fostered a good relationship with the University and eventually worked on a project located in a very big retail unit after the lockdown and it was a successful project. (Interview 5)

This experience reveals how pandemic solutions can be applied to post-pandemic event planning as well.

Installations and parades

Strategising events in terms of scale also helped to animate a city without drawing a large crowd needing to be in a certain place or a certain time. One event manager recalled how they 'brought in big inflatable monsters that sit on top of buildings. It was something people could engage with' (Interview 6). This could enable engagement from afar and allowed people to share an experience without needing to be within proximity.

Socially distant, minimal parades were also reconstructed to be less crowded. This also shows how large numbers are not always necessary to draw attention and create a festive environment:

> It was incredible how just a group of six people who were all at least two metres apart, [could be] full of colours, light, animation, and sound. There was no singing, so we had drumming. We had one [parade] each weekend over that period where the Christmas market would have been taking place. (Interview 5)

Stretching space

Events managers also utilised spaces within their areas or jurisdiction in new and creative ways. They expanded arts and culture to the whole city, using traditional indoor spatial behaviour as a point of departure. By curating parts of the city as they would galleries and museums, they invited the local population to see their town or city in a new light. Gardens and parks were transformed into gallery or museum-like spaces where people could wander freely within their allocated ticket time (Interview 3). In one city, they had a specific time frame to limit the numbers of people within the space at any one time (Interview 1). Stretching space also allowed for green spaces to be used while also regulating traffic flow so that the environment was not harmed or disturbed.

Expanding even more, some events occurred in local neighbourhoods and scenic pedestrian-friendly trails. As one events manager recalls, '[walkabouts] were a great way to get a sense of place and connect with audiences but in a new and different way. We didn't need to be in a massive space' (Interview 11). Another local authority created a sense of adventure by exploring a mile-long road where several pop-up performances and interactive experiences occurred in a family-friendly manner (Interview 1).

Stretching time

Because most people were working from home and longer commutes were no longer a large part of people's lives, time seemed to stretch and events were no longer limited to the daytime. Part of making space for various demographics meant that they could extend events to evenings that were now a space of leisure: 'If people can come in the evenings, we can have a bit of a programme in the evening.' (Interview 1).

Identifying alternative outdoor spaces

Finally, the pandemic prompted events teams to look for alternative venues that would allow participants to observe social distancing rules. They had to consider how to spread people out, not just in the performance venue, but also in their use of facilities

as well: 'Toilets are going to have to be set and spread out further. They're going to have to be cleaned more regularly than we would have before' (Interview 9). As demand grew for outdoor performances that would allow for air circulation and larger groups congregating, many of the solutions involved the discovery of new suitable sites such a farms and courtyards (as in Interview 10), and even car parks:

> Our producers know the city and what's permissible. Some of them have come up with additional sites by themselves that they've identified so we had one taking place in a car park that we've never used before. They're using it as an outdoor venue whereas normally they would have been in lots of small rooms around the city. (Interview 8)

In his article 'COVID, Resilience, and the Built Environment', sustainability scholar Jesse Keenan reflects on how the 'intimacy of social isolation afforded us the luxury of seeing and experiencing out built environment in a very different way' (2021: 159). In these cases, identifying alternative venues was a collaborative endeavour between artists and producers, offering a new perspective to a previously indoor-oriented events circuit.

All these tactical responses to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the UK government's mitigation measures were informed by the way these councils had previously approached the planning of events and the development of new strategies. The tactics they adopted directly align with their prior desire to develop a sense of place and acted to accelerate pre-existing strategic priorities:

1. They started using the city's landscape and architecture beyond city centres and town halls, thus maximising their cultural capital.
2. They reclaimed public space and jumpstarted their plans for inclusivity and accessibility.
3. They were prompted to better understand the needs of the community and the event manager's role in civic life.
4. They considered the environmental impact of their events.

Whereas, before 2020, the focus of events teams had been on the numbers of visitors generated by tourism and city-centre consumer footfall, the pandemic gave events organisers leeway to focus more explicitly on the needs of their local communities and a way to test new ideas and formats quickly, which has, in

turn, instigated reflection on how events function within their respective jurisdictions.

Lessons learned and the future

The interviews we carried out allowed producers and event managers the space to reflect on what they had learned from adapting their work to the changing circumstances of lockdowns and the easing of restrictions. One aspect they reflected on, which is explored in greater detail in the final chapter of this volume, concerns an adjustment in how to measure success. Instead of thinking about success in terms of size, scale or footfall, events managers recognised the value of small-scale interventions and thinking about 'bite-sized multiples' when it comes to safe event programming in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment (Interview 4).

Another crucial lesson involved rethinking the way their departments are structured, so as to transform the local authority into a more collaborative system:

> [The structure is such that] the arm does not know what the leg is doing, what the head is doing … we've now understood the disconnect between the funder and the council authority on the creative sectors, so we've spent the last three years trying to bridge those gaps and working with the events team. Now we can see how we can work together. (Interview 1)

> In general, the council are not that interested in the content. They're not bothered. They want to know that it's going to be safe. They want to see risk assessments. In terms of actual content, there's very little conversation about that. I'm a producer within [one department]. There's a separate department that is the event management department. I team up with them and they do all the logistics, street plans, licensing, liaising with the council for closing roads, giving people parking etc. (Interview 3)

This also aligns with what a few local authorities have discovered, namely the value of an in-house creative producer who is experienced in the arts and culture sector of the town or city:

> I've worked in theatre and visual arts and event management in the cultural sector, and I work in the council so I'm kind of filling that

> [producer] gap. I work closely with the events team and they're very much about the practical side of delivery. I come up with creative solutions and they come up with practical solutions. (Interview 1)

Having a conduit between artists and the council allows artists to stay local and the council to 'make use of the creative talent in the city' (Interview 1). On top of being able to programme the creative content, producers are also better able to support new or emerging artists: 'If I'm bringing in artists that are quite new, they do struggle a bit with the paperwork. We will try to help them a little bit, so we have a bit of a nurturing role in that' (Interview 3). This new way of working thus benefits both established and emerging artists as well as the local community.

Additionally, if there was anything positive that came out of the pandemic, some event managers noticed that it became a way for politicians to believe in what they do: 'The arts and culture sector is not just a nice thing to do but it's all linked into our hospitality cultural sector and how it's important to the local economy' (Interview 2). Seeing the success of pandemic events also signalled changes in values and the use of urban retail space: 'We're hoping we'll have a unit in the city centre that we can turn into a cultural space and show the city that culture can be the new retail' (Interview 1). The sizeable shift from a retail-oriented city centre to one that champions the city's arts and culture aligns with the well-documented decline of the department store across UK town and cities in the years leading up to 2020 (Simpson, 2021). Thus, the coronavirus pandemic has galvanised events managers to consider alternative ways in which such spaces can be reimagined.

Events teams furthermore realised that green spaces could be explored more fully than had hitherto been the case. Although local authorities often focused on city centre events due to the imperative to boost rapid economic recovery, there is room for expansion when looking to the future:

> One of [the artists we core funded] is specifically looking at green space in the city and how you … democratise and decentralise that and allow people to take it over again because people are being quite nervous about what they can and can't do. We'd love to see him experiment with that over a year and hopefully by 2023 we can work with him on a large-scale park project that is looking at what we can do for culture and parks. (Interview 1)

Such work, in turn, connects communities with the natural environment in ways that align with the ecological turn that is a consequence of the accelerating climate emergency. Environmental anthropologist Keith Tidball argues that when humans are faced with disaster, they seek engagement with nature, hence the drive to spend time outdoors in public green space (2012). One positive result of the lockdown was that limiting movement across the country also limited CO_2 emissions, aligning with Dutheil *et al.*'s finding that that the decrease in air pollution as an effect of quarantine improved the air quality in China (2020). This makes a case for considering how events teams can help shape a social system and built environment that is attuned to the wellbeing of its local dwellers.

Much of what has been learned since the pandemic involved restructuring how events function within society. They became much more community-driven instead of relying on the external footfall that had previously come from tourism. The pandemic then urged local events teams into taking ownership of the creative life and spirit of their respective areas. Arguably, this period has also shed light on the value of the creative producer as someone intimately acquainted with a town or city's creative spirit and therefore able to be a key force in delivering creative solutions tailor-made for that locality.

By taking ownership of their town and cities, councils and event managers who worked together with creative producers have reviewed their unique geographies, histories and strengths, and moved from the previously primarily economically driven approach towards thinking more carefully about the needs of the communities they serve. This, in turn, made them reflect on their role and on what is at the heart of the activities they set up, distinguishing them from the digital arts events explored in the first part of this volume: 'To me, an event is all about people coming together and sharing experience, talking, laughing, joking with friends, with new people' (Interview 2).

Events managers thus increasingly function to support such community-focused in-person gatherings instead of just putting on more anonymous large-scale events that can be replicated in every town and city:

> People used to expect to be entertained, but now more street groups are starting to do their own street parties and things like that. Instead

> of thinking we deserve to be entertained, we're looking at what we can do for ourselves and certainly the community groups that came together to do things like the food banks. … There'll always be a place for Glastonbury-scale events, but I think it's nice that people have a little bit more ownership back as well. (Interview 4)

When a town or city's identity is created collaboratively with their residents, their resilience and capacity to solve pandemic-related issues can take them beyond the imperatives of survival and economic prosperity. This is what Troy Glover describes as a kind of 'tactical urbanism' that lets inhabitants not only live within a space, but 'produce it to meet their needs and those of their neighbours' too (2022). What the coronavirus pandemic has done is to reconnect local event managers to their communities, fast-tracking strategies and testing plans for a more inclusive, community driven and ecologically sensitive arts and culture programme:

> If one good thing came from this pandemic, it's that people, groups and organisations have very much started to work with each other. Maybe we have gotten complacent. Maybe we need a gentle reminder. (Interview 4)

Note

1 Performance events foster interaction, are unique and unrepeatable, are not completely controlled by one individual and create a very specific experience that draws a spectator into what might be described as a 'liminal space' (Fischer-Lichte, 2014: 41–42), a transitional gap that transports the audience into the world of the performance.

References

Breunig, Mary (2022), Slow nature-focused leisure in the days of COVID-19: Repressive myths, social (in)justice, and hope. *Annals of Leisure Research* 25.5, 637–650. DOI: 10.1080/11745398.2020.1859390

Brown, Mark (5 July 2020), Boris Johnson pledges £1.5bn lifeline to keep UK's arts sector afloat. *The Guardian*. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/05/boris-johnson-uk-lifeline-arts-heritage-sector-afloat (accessed 17 October 2022).

Dutheil, Frédéric, Julien S. Baker and Valentin Navel (2020), COVID-19 as a factor influencing air pollution? *Environmental Pollution*. DOI: 10.1016/j.envpol.2020.114466

Fischer-Lichte, Erika (2014), *Theatre and Performance Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

Glover, Troy D. (2022), Playing with the City: Leisure, public health, and placemaking during COVID-19 and beyond. In Irene Gammel and Jason Wang (eds), *Creative Resilience and Covid-19: Figuring the Everyday in a Pandemic*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 157–165.

Keenan, Jesse (2020), COVID, resilience, and the built environment. *Environment Systems and Decisions* 40. 216–221. DOI: 10.1007/s10669–020–09773–0

Simpson, Emma (27 August 2021), UK loses 83% of department stores since BHS collapsed. BBC News. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58331168 (accessed 1 February 2023).

Tidball, Keith G. (2012), Urgent biophilia: Human–nature interactions and biological attractions in disaster resilience. *Ecology and Society* 17.2, 5. DOI: 10.5751/ES-04596–170205

8

Reinventing live events, reinventing communities

Sarah Pogoda and Lindsey Colbourne

This chapter presents a take on resilience, sustainability and recovery in the arts sector and creative industries that is distinct from the digital projects presented in Part I of this book: we present two case studies of small-scale, local, socially and environmentally engaged arts projects in a predominantly rural area. Our case studies offer alternative narratives to those of the urban and metropolitan creative industries and the macro-solutions that often do not suit the social and economic realities of artists and audiences in remote geographical locations. This chapter therefore complements the thinking about outdoor arts facilitation by local authorities in Chapter 7 in this volume and aims to enable governments, funders and the creative sector to take decisions which improve the well-being, prosperity and cultural vivacity of the creative sector and communities, based on research carried out in rural North Wales.

Metamorffosis and *Utopias Bach* are both initiatives that started outside formal arts establishments. *Metamorffosis*, a week-long, small-scale festival of combined arts which ran in June 2021, offered 25 events ranging from performance, movement, music, poetry, film, artistic walks to site-specific interventions and puppetry. Though part of the AHRC-funded research project on *Re-Inventing the Live Arts Event with Local Communities* (Bangor University), *Metamorffosis* emerged from within the arts community of north-west Wales. *Utopias Bach,* meanwhile, is a diverse, creative arts initiative created by those taking part, and open to all. It is a low-tech, virtual and in-person initiative tackling the uncertainties of our post-lockdown world, exploring how we can face the overwhelming gravity of our current situation, including climate change, inequalities and the collapse of our ecosystem.

Both *Metamorffosis* and *Utopias Bach* are grassroots initiatives that tackle the issues of where and how we gather, and with whom we gather for shared artistic experience. They offer models of low-tech, outdoor and small-scale arts practices that are particularly adaptive to the challenges rural areas were, and are, still facing in the context of coronavirus (COVID-19). By doing so, both put into practice the Wales Arts Council's call to 'take a fresh look at how we can achieve a strong and resilient arts sector that properly reflects culture and society in modern-day Wales', based on a 'profound questioning and re-shaping of values across all aspects of public life' (Arts Council of Wales, 2020).

Case Study I – *Metamorffosis* festival

Sarah Pogoda

For live events, the bodily co-presence of actors and audiences is constitutive for the events' distinctive aesthetic experience (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Since the existence of theatre studies and performance studies, bodily co-presence has been understood as an integral part of artistic live events. Whereas Peter Brook's idea of theatre as a physical space of watching and being watched is open to technologically mediated forms of bodies and gazes (Brook, 1996), Peggy Phelan insisted on performance art as a physical live experience that would change its ontological status if it is 'saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate[s] in the circulation of representations of representations' (Phelan, 2005: 146). Different to his predecessors, Cormac Power investigates how the changing concepts of presence mutually constitute (with) various modern and postmodern understandings of theatre and performance art (Power, 2008). Power also explores non-physical modes of presence, for instance aura, media, text. Common to all these approaches is the understanding of the fundamental reliance of live arts on physical co-presence.

It was the pandemic that made even governments acknowledge that 'The arts sector, like the hospitality industry, relies on audiences gathering together to enjoy a shared experience' (Welsh Parliament, 2020: 2). As a core prerequisite for creative industries, bodily co-presence matters for GDP. The creative industries contributed £150.6 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA) to the

UK economy in 2019 (DCMS, 2021).[1] With an annual turnover of more than £2.2 billion (Elis-Thomas, 2020), it is one of the fastest growing sectors in Wales. At the same time, compared with the large anchor nature of UK-wide creative industries, within the Welsh creative ecosystem 98% of companies are small businesses, backed by a large population of freelancers. This makes traditional forms of industrial strategy unsuitable for Wales (Komorowski and Lewis, 2020: 14).

This unique Welsh situation calls for even more attentiveness considering all acknowledged intrinsic benefits of the arts: enrichment of people's lives, enabling social interaction among community members and experiencing a sense of community (Close *et al*., 2005).

Keen to enable a return to audience gatherings for the arts as soon as possible, on 15 September 2020 the Welsh government published their 'Guidance on Coronavirus and Working Safely in Performing Arts Industries'. However, the pandemic mitigation measures undermined the aesthetic and communal traditions of arts events markedly; the Welsh government acknowledged that strict regulations for social distancing 'could have implications for the choice of repertoire or type of activity, especially where close physical contact is an integral part of the artform' (Welsh Government, 2020: 17).

The findings of this case study, which is based on the *Re-Inventing the Live Event with Local Communities* research project carried out in Bangor, Wales, must be understood in this context as a contribution to understanding the relevance of small-scale events for diverse communities in north-west Wales during the pandemic and beyond. The project examined how practitioners creatively reinvented live formats to align with government regulations, and how audiences experienced potentially unusual event formats resulting from artistic innovation. The research reveals how local grassroots initiatives mitigated the impact of arts communities put on hold by the pandemic restrictions and how small-scale arts events can sustain communities during crisis and generate the loyal audiences essential for recovery.

The focus of the project was an investigation of the artists, art formats and audiences attending the week-long combined arts festival *Metamorffosis* (21–27 June 2021). This festival was the result

of a long co-creational process involving Sarah Pogoda and community member Anna Powell, who suggested the idea only weeks into the first national lockdown in 2020. What started with *Surrealist Saffaru* (August 2020) – the first in-person festival in the area since March 2020 – grew into the community behind the *Metamorffosis* festival of June 2021, which took place over one year before pandemic restrictions were finally lifted in Wales on 6 August 2022. *Metamorffosis* events, accordingly, aligned with the government protocols, most prominently through a mask mandate, social distancing, sanitising, ventilation, one-way systems and limiting audience sizes to 30 people.

The *Metamorffosis* festival consisted of 25 different events, some of which ran multiple times;[2] 12 were indoor events, 12 took place outdoors and three used mixed venues, with one online event. Encouraging artists and audiences to rediscover sites on their doorstep, the outdoor events used public spaces not previously associated with arts events, whereas half of the indoor venues were artist-run spaces outside established institutions (Awen 33, Togyg, Bangor Arts Initiative). Most events were site-specific (*Hag Haf Ha Ha; Metamorffosis, Revolution and Botanical Time; Metamorffosis movement!*; *Bacchanates y Farclodiad*). Though diverse in genre, formats and theme, the most cutting-edge contributions experimented with including the more than human world.[3] These events enabled a radical shift from imagining a community of human beings, towards a community of human and more-than-human beings.

The research demonstrates the relevance of small-scale events for diverse communities in north-west Wales during the pandemic and beyond. The evidence is drawn from qualitative and quantitative data collected through seven artist interviews, which includes one interview with an art group of seven artists,[4] and three questionnaires. Two questionnaires were circulated immediately after the festival, one designed for artists, one for audiences. A third questionnaire – designed for audiences – followed a series of six so-called post-festival arts events we organised across a period of six months after *Metamorffosis*. The questionnaires were designed for descriptive research using open questions, multiple choice, multiple response, rating and likert-grids. These data are complemented by field notes in the form of writing, film, photography and sound,

alongside film documentation of the festival by Culture Colony (Machynlleth).

Artists reinvent the live event

The artist questionnaire was circulated after *Metamorffosis* (June 2021) to 34 participating artistic participants (professional and non-professional artists), yielding a total of 12 responses. For nine respondents, *Metamorffosis* was the first time they had been able to present their work since the first national lockdown, with six not being able to continue arts projects they had started before the pandemic. Artist Freya Beath explained that the artistic 'tumbleweed' during lockdown was 'very bad for your mental health' and described the festival as providing a 'platform to inspire people … a reason to do something'. For many artists and communities, local initiatives like *Metamorffosis* were thus key opportunities for restarting engagement with live in-person arts and for engaging with their communities, both of which had a positive impact on their mental health. These events also provided opportunities to develop their artistic practice.

Local initiatives like *Metamorffosis* are thus key to enabling the artist community to engage with their communities and develop their practice. *Metamorffosis* was welcomed as a platform for experimentation, allowing artists to bring their practice to new levels at a time when the sector was put on hold. Ten artists felt the event they created was more experimental than usual, and 11 stated that, for their participation in *Metamorffosis*, they had expanded their practice into new artforms. Four engaged with new materials, and seven collaborated with new people.

One predominant aspect of experimentation and development arose from *Metamorffosis'* small scale, with ten artists reporting that small-scale events allow them to take more risks and experiment with artforms when compared with big productions. The main focus of experimentation was the audience–artist relationship. Free-text responses particularly highlighted the possibility for generating a community and enabling intimate experiences for both artists and audiences as well as meaningful interaction among all. Some suggested that the small scale blurred artist–audience divides: 'It made everything feel somehow collaborative,

breaking down the "performance-audience" dichotomy.' The fact that 11 out of the 12 respondents felt that the pandemic-related health and safety protocols had not made them feel disconnected from their audience suggests that the more experimental art forms they created also bridged pandemic-related physical distancing.

Audiences reinvent the live audience

The results from the audience questionnaire corroborate the artists' perceptions. As the audience questionnaire aimed to understand the overall festival experience as well as that of individual events, audience members could submit a questionnaire for each event. When submitting second and subsequent times, the questionnaire followed a different pathway. In total, 24 individuals offered 46 responses, of which nine were in Welsh and 37 in English.

Audiences confirmed in free-text answers that they felt 'engaged', 'connected', 'comfortable' or 'relaxed'. This is further supported when 91% strongly agreed (with 9% agreeing) that they 'felt engaged in the experience', or 78% strongly agreed (with 18% agreeing) that they 'felt part of a group'. Like the artists themselves, audiences noticed the shift to more experimental art formats. One representative response states: 'Extremely different in content. I don't tend to choose to see movement work (i.e., dance) so this was unusual for me.' Another remarked on the risk-taking: 'Felt much less institutional! People hanging off trees/cliffs maybe wouldn't happen in a pre-covid cultural event?' Yet another statement referred to the *Metamorffosis Movement!* event and suggested the transformative power of experimental art enabled by small-scale formats: 'this was different due to its external setting, amount of people present, transformative subject. The experience of the "transfformation" itself was unlike anything I have ever experienced.'

When asked whether they would still attend small-scale events of the kind offered by *Metamorffosis* once other venues reopen, all responses confirmed 'yes'. The questionnaire then offered an open-text box to add comments, which were used by most respondents to highlight their preferences for community-organised small-scale events outside of established institutions and making visible the

tangible and intangible benefits small-scale grassroots art events bring to communities (Duxbury and Campbell, 2009):

> The sense of a local community working together in a creative and supportive way is very special

> I much, much prefer these kinds of things outside the gallery. I think we need to re-imagine the gallery, and the way art can be part of life rather than in isolated/removed/elite institutions. COVID and this event has shown us how we can do that

Metamorffosis was born from a global crisis and normal life being put on hold, but it used the unprecedented circumstances creatively to reinvent live events not only for building and sustaining communities, but also for enabling them to flourish. Audience responses provide evidence that there is a general openness and willingness from audiences to diversify the range of formats of cultural events they attend, not only during the pandemic, but beyond it into the future.

Beyond the pandemic

Looking beyond lockdowns and restrictions, the picture is mixed. Data from the Cultural Participation Monitor (CPM) collected by The Audience Agency between October and November 2020 showed differences between results for Wales and the rest of the UK, making Wales-specific plans for recovery more urgent. According to their survey, 'fewer Welsh are ready to start attending in person than the UK average'. The same survey sees 9% fewer people in Wales planning to return to established venues or sites when compared to the rest of the UK. The CPM also suggests that the support of safety measures makes a return to pre-pandemic 'normal' in Wales only likely long-term (The Audience Agency, 2021).

The *Metamorffosis* research suggests that small-scale and outdoor events are essential drivers for creative industries and should not be considered only as interim replacements in times of lockdowns and restrictions. Small-scale events can help facilitate a transitional phase or make engagements with arts accessible to those who continue to be affected by anxieties in large crowds, as some responses to the audience survey suggest.[5]

This is what also emerges from the additional research, carried out with artists involved in the original *Metamorffosis* festival,

which consisted of a series of small-scale events across a period of six months after the festival that we evaluated via a second audience survey (AuQ2). The events were free of charge and located at various sites and venues in the area, including the local large-scale arts centre, Pontio. Pontio encompasses a flexible mid-scale theatre (up to 450 people), a studio theatre (up to 120 people), digital cinema (up to 200 people), Bar Ffynnon and Cegin café. Pontio closed on 20 March 2020 and reopened its doors to the public only more than a year later on 12 July 2021 (thus weeks after *Metamorffosis*). Pontio has since been struggling to bring back its audience.

The rate of 13 English and five Welsh responses to the second audience questionnaire mirrors the average attendance number for the events in question. The results support our hypothesis that small-scale events generate a loyal audience: 89% strongly agreed (with 11% agreeing) they came to the follow-up event(s) because they had enjoyed *Metamorffosis* and it made them want to experience more events of its kind. Free-text answers supported this further: 'We are like a community now and I don't want to miss anything that goes on, because each thing builds on the rest and deepens the experience'.

The findings further suggest that this loyal audience is willing to follow artists to new and/or larger scale venues. This becomes evident in the 15 responses we received after the events we ran in Pontio. Eleven stated that they will now visit Pontio more often for arts events, and for two it was their first visit to Pontio ever, while one response expressed that they usually avoid Pontio for arts events.

Reinventing the rural live event

Metamorffosis was a unique festival in many senses: it was small-scale and in a rural area, but it was aesthetically experimental with some cutting-edge artistic innovations and therefore not comparable with rural festivals which often relate to mainly traditional cultural heritage. *Metamorffosis* also did not attract tourism (Crompton and McKay, 1997; Egresi and Kara, 2014), as pandemic restrictions prohibited travel. Therefore, it is difficult to discuss it as an economic case study (Janeczko, 2002; Kwiatkowski *et al.*, 2018).

As Qu and Cheer point out, 'in evaluating the success and/or failure of art festivals in rural contexts, assessments that transcend economic development are essential because non-economic outcomes can often contribute greatly to sustainable revitalisation efforts' (Qu and Cheer, 2021).

Small-scale initiatives co-created from within the community can step in where macro-solutions do not take effect, or where established institutions and local councils are slow to respond. The *Metamorffosis* research demonstrates how such initiatives can boost community morale and enable members of the audience to experience a sense of community and intimacy. At the same time, they offer platforms for developing artistic skill sets, showcasing experimental formats, networking and exchange for artists that are a viable alternative to virtual forms of artistic engagement and offer mental health benefits. Communities require ongoing care, care which virtual networking events or digital access to creative content alone may not be able to provide with the same level of success. Communities emerging from in-person small-scale local events that focus on intimate relationships can be sustainable, committed (Mahon and Hyyryläinen, 2019) and thus contribute to more resilient and empowered communities who can sustain the material and immaterial infrastructures that keep a creative community alive and resilient in times of crisis (Mackay *et al*., 2018).

Case study II – *Utopias Bach,* a revolution in miniature

Lindsey Colbourne

Utopias Bach is a co-created socially engaged arts initiative that emerged amidst the coronavirus pandemic. It was part-funded by Arts Council Wales, Gwynedd Council and Rural Futures from November 2020 to July 2022. It started with two conversations in August 2020, in a gap between pandemic restrictions. One was with 14-year-old Gruff Ellis and the other with movement psychotherapist Samina Ali. These conversations highlighted the possibilities of working at a small scale for physical and mental health, in ways that can effect change and collectively activate and explore a new way of being in the world.

Stimulated by these conversations, a group that started with four members has, within two years, grown into a constellation of around one hundred creatives, academics, people working in the community and interested individuals. We are focused on north-west Wales, but reach as far as Spain, Argentina and Malawi, and share ideas about how we might use socially engaged art to create space for meeting, creating and being the change at small scale.

As a case study, *Utopias Bach* illustrates how less prescriptive public sector funding and interventions can support long-lasting grassroots initiatives responsive to local challenges within a global crisis. We will share *Utopias Bach* learning and principles, not as draconian macro-solutions or techno-fixes, but as quite the opposite: *Utopias Bach's* practice emerges from those taking part and from where it is taking place. The pandemic made evident our entanglement with the global world, while lockdowns and shielding threw us back to attaching ourselves to the soil. *Utopias Bach* addresses this uncanny/confusing simultaneity of personal, local and global, and explores the bigger picture, empowering communities to find responsive small-scale solutions together (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1 *Utopias Bach* Penrhyndeudraeth, November 2020 (https://utopiasbach.org/penrhyndeudraeth-ar-cylch).

The importance of language and metaphors

The Welsh word *bach* means hook, hinge, nook, corner, bend, dear, small and minor, suggesting a range of possibilities or creative starting points. In *Utopias Bach*, *bach* stands in creative tension with the universal no-place of *Utopia* because there is particular resonance with the small in Welsh language and culture. The dying words of Wales' patron saint, St David were: 'Gwnewch y pethau bychain' – 'do the little things'. Small also connects us to a set of Welsh words and phrases relating to intimate connections with your small patch of place, that do not translate into English, such as Milltir Sgwar, Bro fy Mebyd, Cynefin (Davies, 2021). In this way, our concept of Utopias Bach relates closely to what Bruno Latour calls 'the Terrestrial' (Latour, 2018). The Terrestrial is a way of being that avoids a return to identity and the defence of borders in the face of the current existential threats stemming from climate change, ecosystem collapse and inequalities. It brings together two complementary movements that modernisation made contradictory: attaching oneself to the soil and becoming attached to the world.

Bilingual communities such as those of north-west Wales are particularly aware of the power of language to shape the world we inhabit. Attentiveness to how we use language became a core tool for transition in *Utopias Bach*. We use metaphors deliberately to question (and undermine) existing 'norms' which uphold the status quo or generate anxiety instead of agency or limit our imagination for change. One key metaphor, which Lisa Hudson introduced to describe the form, structure and growth of *Utopias Bach*, is that of a strawberry plant. To propagate themselves, strawberry plants send out runners looking for soil. If a runner finds soil, it starts to root and a new plant will develop. This metaphor enables us to think of growth as other than 'big', as it shifts attention towards feeding and supporting small groupings to take root wherever they find fertile ground, be it Spain, Malawi or Gaerwen on Anglesey.

The strawberry plant, which our website (at www.utopiasbach.org) structurally replicates, enables us to entangle and be open to unexpected forms and outcomes, making it possible for us to act beyond the formal entity of a network and to acknowledge *the more than human* as part of our community and way of working.

It allows us to think of our roles, practices and discourses in expanded language and open them to transgress beyond managerial processes, as follows:

The Partners (the gardeners): meeting monthly, with particular areas of responsibility: Lindsey Colbourne – project overview, collaboration and documentation including website; Samina Ali – conscious participation, inclusion and health and wellbeing, plain language; Dr Wanda Zyborska – artistic quality, reflexive practice and conceptual frameworks; Lisa Hudson – methodologies, reflective learning and budget; Julie Upmeyer – host organisation, methodology toolkit and social media.

The Collaboratory (the mother strawberry plant): an action learning community where we come together monthly, alternating between online and face-to-face, to share ideas, learning and activities.

Arbrofion – Community experiments (the strawberry plantlets): discrete interventions reaching out into different communities, often involving an artist and a 'community connector'. Community connectors are a human or more-than-human (an event, a space, a piece of land, a plant, an idea, a shop) that functions as a way of reaching out and creating ongoing connections.

Documenting and evaluating (the compost heap): creatively responding in writing, film, sound, images, movement to track: thread, flow, intent; material for a purpose (e.g. to share learning on something); individual moments of insight/significance.

In the course of the project, our use of language has begun to intersect with the development of a new culture. We have started to think of *Utopias Bach* as a Utopia Bach itself*:* one in which we work with awareness, care and respect for each other and the environment, paying attention to our process and methods. Not only did this way of working fit with the increased time available to some during coronavirus restrictions, but it also offered a calm space for those on the frontline. The funding we received for the project, with its emphasis on process, community and relationship-building for long-term outcomes, was instrumental in supporting this way of working.

A critical characteristic of this unique culture was allowing slow-paced activity and the organic evolution of conversation. We were

encouraged to bring 'our whole selves' to the conversation and to find common ground with others experiencing similar psychological, emotional and physical challenges. At our Collaboratory meetings, we co-created a set of principles for *Utopias Bach:*

- **Diversity:** Seeking and celebrating diversity and difference and appreciating what we each bring to the collective experience.
- **Change:** Challenging prevailing orthodoxies, polarities and ways of working to create space for radical change. Sometimes a tiny change is as important as a big one.
- **Spread:** Like a strawberry plant, spreading and nurturing through sharing skills, ideas, events and resources.
- **Open and reflective:** Generous with space and time for ongoing reflection and dialogue and open to challenge. Flexible on time, outcomes, methods.
- **Co-creation:** All those involved co-determine what happens through self-facilitation, accountability and conscious participation.
- **Responsive to needs:** Aware of and responsive to the needs of participants; encouraging honesty, kindness, empathy and understanding.
- **Artistic quality:** A questioning approach to quality, as something to strive towards. Developing a culture of questioning and noticing where the art is taking place or becoming.

Pandemic resonance

From the start, *Utopias Bach* tapped into the shift in people's everyday routines and needs triggered by the space and effects of lockdown restrictions. For many of us, *Utopias Bach* became indispensable to our personal, community, creative and/or professional lives. Collaboratory participants at our six-month review meeting commented:[6]

> It takes me a long time to work with people because I am neurodivergent. But I've just been here a very short while and I really feel at home. And it's a lovely and bizarre feeling at the same time because this doesn't normally happen to me.

> I feel I've found my tribe. I just feel totally accepted and listened to and included, for me, as I am. And I have never felt that before, …. It's all about doing things differently in a beautiful way where

> everybody is very mindful of everybody else and the experiences we are all going through together.
>
> I wouldn't be here, doing this role [gallery curator], now, if it wasn't for *Utopias Bach*. It's just given me, personally, the confidence to think of myself as somebody who can be involved in art and it made me think 'art can be a really intimate and community-oriented thing … so my role is going to be all about participation and community engagement.
>
> *This* is the community I've been looking for for years. I've been so isolated after having kids and recovering from addiction. I'd lost all my creativity and confidence and didn't think I could go back to a creative life. But *Utopias Bach* is mind-blowing and beautiful, it's so great to be in this group. I am now full of ideas, confidence and enthusiasm.

During pandemic restrictions, we started meeting regularly on the Zoom platform. Despite the constraints of our rectangular boxes, our meetings started creating an open, supportive learning community which built capacity in terms of skills, creativity and contacts. Resisting the network metaphor that the Zoom algorithms suggest, we instead playfully experimented with virtual assemblages of 'being with'.[7] For instance, we physically performed 'Exquisite Corps' with our bodies on Zoom, enabling us to feel connected bodily as well as virtually (Figure 8.2). By using meditation and collective imagination exercises, Zoom became a small knot of entanglement within the telepresence of our virtual community. Our sense of community grew, countering the lack of physical interaction, contact and closeness with other people. As restrictions eased, we alternated between face-to-face and online meetings, to enable those further afield/with accessibility/social distancing needs to continue to take part.

Our first face-to-face meeting took place at *Metamorffosis* in June 2021. *Geocache Bach* was inspired by Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish's 'understanding [of] imagination as always embodied and relational, and recognizing that the radical imagination is a space of encounter, learning and disruption' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2010: 19).[8] *Geocache Bach* was an invitation to find and build *Utopias Bach* – a world of tiny possibilities and imaginings – in dystopian cracks and corners in and around The Old Goods Yard

Figure 8.2 *Utopias Bach* Collaboratory Zoom Exquisite Corps, February 2022.

Figure 8.3 *Geocache Bach*, June 2021.

(TOGY) in Bangor where some members of *Utopias Bach* had their art studios (Figure 8.3).

TOGY is a place in a state in transition, somewhat dilapidated and being taken over by weeds, while providing a space for new beginnings. Through the provision of mini-human figures and of basic found materials, around 60 people (aged 3 to 89) came to TOGY to seek out and add to a world of miniature installations. Tiny human figures were dwarfed and decentred by an enormous forest of moss and spiders and seagulls. Installations were inserted into cracks in the concrete and rusting sculptures exploring radical ideas in miniature. Examples include works made by participants that were about rethinking the role of monuments (The Wild Garden of the Outdated Monument), new relationships (Some of My Best Friends have Stems), cultural co-presence (My Family and Other Breadfruit) and equality (Quarry Ruins Housing the Homeless; a House for Moneyspiders).

In order to place humans within imagined futures to which they are not central, we also ran *Trawsffurfiad* at *Metamorffosis*.[9] This bilingual (Cymraeg: English) shape-shifting imaginative embodiment of becoming a more-than-human being was undertaken as a collective guided imagination exercise that involved

travelling to a future world, perfect for the more-than-human being that participants had become, and returning with messages for humans. These guided imagination exercises have become a key part of *Utopias Bach*'s methodology for imagining and exploring a new way of being in the world.[10]

Creating the change

What had started as 'experiments' supported by £500 of seed funding grew into work in villages and with particular interests (such as isolated older women, homeless people, land), which experimented with their own micro-utopias. Increasingly, we have received requests from public, private and voluntary sector organisations interested in learning about the kinds of processes we have been exploring. Importantly, these organisations, rather than seeking to fix the people and communities they serve, wish to change their *own* culture to enable closer collaboration with them. We now work with institutions to engage them long-term in building relationships, changing culture and offering 'invitations' to try things out in an open-ended way.

One example is our collaboration with Rural Futures, who were working in Gwalchmai on Anglesey, a small village particularly affected by low income and the effects of coronavirus. In spring 2021, they invited *Utopias Bach* to work with them to help the community reimagine the future. We connected the local school to one in Limbe, Malawi, and used our 'guided imagination' meditations with 120 young people to create a vision for the future which was taken as the starting point for the whole community to discuss the future (Figure 8.4).

Through the ongoing work of the Rural Futures development officer, Mark Gahan, the children-led *Utopias Bach* visioning has since resulted in a cross-generational group creating and maintaining an edible community garden and a renewed play area. Meanwhile, Samina Ali has led embodied psychotherapy sessions for the whole school. This work further helped to address the psychological trauma experienced through lockdown. The community visioning event was held in the Canolfan Henoed (Old People's Centre), and the cross-generational relationships and trust built meant that the

Figure 8.4 *Utopias Bach* Gwalchmai by Beca, Nia and Llyr, July 2021. Example of micro-utopia and edible garden/play area created by children at Ysgol y Ffridd, Gwalchmai, May 2022.

centre, traditionally only for use by older people, has opened up and become a hub for the whole community to continue to come together for a better future.

Co-creation and community-building

In the course of my 30 years of working as a professional facilitator, designing and running conflict resolution, co-creation and participatory decision-making processes for sustainable development in the UK and beyond, I have observed the need to develop shared practice and argued for the (cost)effectiveness of collaborative approaches in creating long-lasting change and innovative solutions (Colbourne and Straw, 2009). My work has shown that significant barriers to collaboration are not in communities but are inherent *within* public sector institutions themselves. For example, procedures and systems undermine the ability of staff to spend time on, or be rewarded for, collaborative efforts, compounded by gaps in staff collaborative skills, abilities and knowledge (Colbourne, 2009).

Utopias Bach became an opportunity to learn about collaborative decision-making, joint action and 'shared practice', bringing together diverse people, groups and perspectives. The results

illustrate the value of this kind of approach, going beyond 'arts/nature on prescription' (HARP, 2022) that supports people's individual health and wellbeing, to creating long-term communities with an ongoing relationship with each other and the more than human world.

Conclusion: Lessons learned for a better future as community

Metamorffosis and *Utopias Bach* tackled the issues of 'where and how we gather with whom to enjoy a shared experience', to speak in Welsh government papers' tongues. But they went beyond this, dealing with crises by creating transformational sustainable collaborations and communities with humans and more than humans in remote geographical locations. These collaborations and communities not only created resilience for surviving a pandemic crisis, but also for engaging with ecological emergency and issues of inclusivity in their locality.

These approaches are different to the more 'top down' or 'one-size-fits-all' model of interventions focused on the urban creative industry and urban audience. They involve long-term emergent processes, relationships and outcomes through community-building, the creation of networks of creatives, engaging communities in reimagining their relationship to the future and the more than human world, and low-tech, analogue solutions to problems thrown up by pandemic mitigation measures.

From grassroots experimentation, institutions within and beyond the cultural industries were able to pick up, learn from and use these approaches to influence their own post-pandemic futures. But this chapter has shown that, as well as building capacity and resilience of creative practitioners, small-scale arts events help to bring back – and attract new, more diverse – audiences to established venues and town centres.

The small-scale nature of the projects and events, designed to fit with pandemic restrictions, enabled new audiences to feel safe and confident to get involved, and be physically co-present. It also encouraged artists and participants/audiences to experiment with and experience unfamiliar event formats, aesthetics and ideas,

such as connecting to the more than human world. As restrictions eased, this new way of working continued to appeal, becoming an established way of working, like tributaries drawing people into contemporary arts, for both the local arts communities as well as for the audiences.

Small-scale grassroots initiatives also helped to build a sense of local ownership. The case studies illustrate how formal arts establishments can benefit from engaging with smaller grassroots initiatives to reimagine their relationships with the communities they serve. This type of community engagement, inclusion and co-creative approach, however, requires time and care in a world that is otherwise fast-paced, action-oriented and high-tech.

Time, attentiveness and intimacy are similar to care work, in that they are rewarded more symbolically or emotionally than monetarily. To allow artists to make a living doing this deeper, slower work, arts funding bodies might consider opening a conversation with creatives about the complexities of this kind of work and how to change funding (and other support) schemes to best support artists working in this way within their local communities.

Our case studies show that radical imagination and practice involve a reflective shift in our processes. Both case studies have allowed processes of openness and questioning, through experiencing a time of utmost uncertainty and precariousness (pandemic, social and climate emergency). But they were resilient in that they fostered mutual care and deep noticing, allowing participants to question how things could be done. This practice requires commitment, kindness and stamina; relational tools which can only be mobilised when feeling part of a community.

'Recovery' in the creative industries might therefore start by recognising the value of small-scale but long-term activities and the deeper effect they have on 'audience'/participants/creatives. Institutions might consider how they might prioritise this kind of engagement, over the pursuit of maximum audience numbers. This may require the adjustment of evaluation processes, paying more attention to enabling multi-perspective continual learning.[11] This would enable policymakers to be part the desired change and offer support for grassroots initiatives without being prescriptive, in line with John R. Ashton's call for institutions to shift to being 'on tap not on top' at this time of existential uncertainty (Ashton, 2003).

To do so, staff in policy/funding organisations at all levels – not just the 'front line' officers – need to engage in the projects and their processes as participants. Engaging within the processes themselves enables staff to develop skills for working collaboratively while gaining a sense of the far-reaching and interconnected effects of this kind of work, of how institutions can support the creative industries and, critically, what the institutions need to change *within their own processes and procedures* to do so.

Notes

1 'By comparison, the construction industry contributed £129.3bn, the automobile industry contributed £49.1bn, and agriculture £13.0bn' (DCMS, 2021).
2 For an overview of the programme, please see the bilingual website: https://metamorffosis.jimdosite.com/. There is also a playlist of videos introducing most of the participating artists and their events available via the following link: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeyZpVVVr6i_QOktoJ6zm5q1uarqIf-WW
3 The term *more than human* stems from eco-criticism and ecology studies but is more and more applied in other disciplines as well, particularly in the Arts & Humanities for thinking beyond the Anthropocene. 'More than human' is often used to describe what we used to call nature, but it does so from an ethical standpoint which emphasises that we exist in 'a communicative, reciprocal relationship with nature' (Cianchi, 2015: 32) and engage in inter-species relationships (Haraway, 2016). For this chapter, the term includes non-living beings, i.e. beings we would not identify as nature or species.
4 The semi-structured interviews focused on how artists changed their working practices to align with lockdown and restrictions, or to an art sector on hold and the resulting creative trajectories. All interviews lasted for an average of 45 minutes. Edited interviews are available on http://re-inventing-live-events.bangor.ac.uk/interview.php.en.
5 E.g. 'I don't feel safe in mass events and won't do so for a long time. Smaller events feel intimate, personal and are a greater opportunity to engage with fellow audiences'; 'I much prefer this type of small-scale event because I feel quite anxious in large crowds'.
6 Unpublished Zoom meeting recording 15 December 2022.

7 See this *Utopias Bach* collaboratory meeting for an example: https://vimeo.com/537410003.
8 For details see: https://utopiasbach.org/geocache-bach.
9 See page on our website: https://utopiasbach.org/trawsffurfiad.
10 See 'Revolution in Miniature' on our website: https://utopiasbach.org/dychmygu/imagine.
11 For details see this reflective blog on 'Mapping Moments': https://utopiasbach.org/blog-1/mapping-moments-how-do-we-connect-through-utopias-bach.

References

Arts Council of Wales (2020), *Re-setting the Dial Responding to Covid-19* (24 November 2020), Available at: www.arts.wales/sites/default/files/2020–11/Re-setting%20the%20dial.pdf (accessed 31 Mar 2023).

Ashton, John R. (2003), Professionals should be on tap, not on top. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 57.2. DOI: 10.1136/jech.57.2.82

Audience Agency (2021), Cultural participation monitor: Wave 3 – summer 2021 report. Available at: www.theaudienceagency.org/evidence/covid-19-cultural-participation-monitor/recent-key-findings-2 (accessed 4 September 2022).

Audience Agency (2021), Wales audiences summary from the COVID-19 cultural participation monitor. Available at: www.theaudienceagency.org/asset/2555 (accessed 13 November 2021).

Brook, Peter (1996), *The Empty Space: A Book about the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*. New York: Touchstone.

Cianchi, John (2015), *Radical Environmentalism: Nature, Identity and More-than-Human Agency*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Close, K., E. McCarthy, L. Ondaatje and A. Brooks Zakaras (2005), *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Value of the Arts*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Available at: www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG218.pdf (accessed 16 April 2023).

Colbourne, Lindsey (2009), *Mainstreaming Collaboration with Communities and Stakeholders for FCERM: Improving Institutional and Social Responses to Flooding* (Bristol: Environment Agency). Available at: www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/602e6d838fa8f5432d802fe6/mainstreaming_collaboration_with_communities_and_stakeholders_for_FCERM_WP4_technical_report.pdf (accessed 28 July 2022).

Colbourne, Lindsey and Ed Straw (2009), *Evaluation of the Use of Working with Others – Building Trust: For the Shaldon Flood Risk Project*.

Available at: www.interactnetworks.co.uk/storage/Colbourne%20Associates%20Report%20on% 20Shaldon%20Evaluation.pdf (accessed 4 September 2022).

Crompton, John L. and Stacey L. McKay (1997), Motives of visitors attending festival events. *Annals of Tourism Research* 24.2, 425–439. DOI: 10.1016/S0160–7383(97)80010–2.

Davies, Brian (14 April 2021), Wild moment. *John Muir Trust*. Available at: www.johnmuirtrust.org/resources/812-wild-moment-brian-davies (accessed 4 September 2022).

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (19 February 2021), DCMS economic estimates 2019 (provisional): Gross value added. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dcms-economic-estimates-2019-gross-value-added/dcms-economic-estimates-2019-provisional-gross-value-added (accessed 22 September 2022).

Duxbury, Nancy and Heather Campbell (2009), *Developing and Revitalising Rural Communities through Arts and Creativity: A Literature Review and Inventory of Resources*. Vancouver: Centre for Policy Research on Culture and Communities, Creative City Network of Canada. Available at: www.creativecity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/rural_communities_arts_2009.pdf (accessed 5 September 2022).

Egresi, Istvan and Fatih Kara (2014), Motives of tourists attending small-scale events: The case of three local festivals and events in Istanbul. *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites* 14.2, 93–110.

Elis-Thomas, Daffyd (June 2020), Written Cabinet statement: Creative industries. Available at: www.gov.wales/written-statement-creative-industries (accessed 22 September 2022).

Fischer-Lichte, Erika (2008), *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Haiven, Max and Alex Khasnabish (2010), What is radial imagination? A special issue. *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, 4.2, 1–37.

Haraway, Donna, J. (2016), *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

HARP (2022), Social prescribing and the arts in Wales: Learning from the 'HARP' programme. Available at: www.ylab.wales/sites/default/files/2022–03/All%20Documents.pdf (accessed 30 August 2022).

Janeczko, Ben, Trevor Mules and Brent Ritchie (2002), *Estimating the Economic Impacts of Festivals and Events: A Research Guide*. Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia: CRC for Sustainable Tourism: Gold Coast.

Komorowski, Marlen and Justin Lewis (2020), *Clwstwr Creative Industries Report no 1 – The Size and Composition of the Creative Industries in Wales*. Cardiff: Clwstwr publication series. Available at: www.clwstwr.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020–05/Creative%20Industries%20Report%20No%201_Final_compressed.pdf (accessed 22 September 2022).

Kwiatkowski, Grzegorz, Madlen Diedering and Ove Oklevik (2018), Profile, patterns of spending and economic impact of event visitors: Evidence

from Warnemünder Woche in Germany. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 18.1, 56–71.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Latour, Bruno (2018), *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mahon, Marie and Torsti Hyyryläinen (2019), Rural arts festivals as contributors to rural development and resilience. *Sociologia Ruralis* 59.4, 612–635.

Mackay, Michael, Joanna Fountain and Nicholas Cradock-Henry (2018), Festivals as devices for enhancing social connectivity and the resilience of rural communities. In Judith Mair (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Festivals*. London: Routledge, pp. 214–222.

Phelan, Peggy (2005), *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

Power, Cormac (2008), *Presence in Play. A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Qu, Meng and Joseph M. Cheer (2021), Community art festivals and sustainable rural revitalisation. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 29.11–12, 1756–1775.

Welsh Government (16 September 2020, updated: 16 November 2020), Rehearsing, performing and taking part in the performing arts: guidance for a phased return. Guidance on coronavirus and working safely in performing arts industries. Available at: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2021/1/3/1610565093/rehearsing-performing-and-taking-part-performing-arts-guidance-phased-return.pdf (accessed 21 July 2022).

Welsh Parliament. Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee (June 2020), *Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on the Arts Sector*. Available at: www.senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld13215/cr-ld13215%20-e.pdf (accessed 17 July 2022).

Websites

Metamorffosis festival website. Available at: metamorffosis.jimdosite.com (accessed 30 September 2022).

Reinventing Live Events AHRC research project website. Available at: http://re-inventing-live events.bangor.ac.uk/index.php.en (accessed 30 September 2022).

YouTube playlist with artist interviews. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeyZpVVVr6i_QOktoJ6zm5q1uarqIf-WW (accessed 30 September 2022).

Utopias Bach website. Available at: www.utopiasbach.org (accessed 30 September 2022).

Index

access 39, 167, 187
barriers to participation 8, 29, 37, 86, 129, 165
digital access 9, 23, 26, 28, 29, 34–36, 37, 44, 128
disability 2, 9, 26, 28, 29, 34, 127, 128, 129
geographic barriers 30
see also audiences; international audiences
neurodiversity 128, 194
aesthetics 10, 43
artificial intelligence 115
Arts Council England 2, 25, 34
Arts Council Wales 182
Ascott, Roy 45–46, 47, 82
Askew, Lucy 116, 130
attention 59, 147
Audience Agency (organisation) 25, 26, 187
audiences 7
audience experience 9, 28, 51, 82, 186
audience loyalty 188
audience performer relationship 45, 50, 169, 185
audience research 26, 51, 52, 186–187
diversity 25–26, 30, 39, 129, 165
international audiences 4, 118
older audiences 28
augmented reality *see* immersive technology

Barclay, Al 119, 126, 128
Beath, Freya 185
Big Telly (Northern Ireland) 12, 115, 117
Birringer, Johannes 46, 50
Black Lives Matter 77, 127
Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO) 28–29
Brexit xvi, 1, 107
bricolage 121–122
Brook, Peter 182
Bryce, Kris 31

Centre for Cultural Value 6, 106, 116
chromakeying 73, 76
see also green screen
Chudha, Sanjit 31
climate emergency *see* environmental impact
co-creation 14, 29, 136, 193
collaboration 29, 68, 153, 176, 179, 198, 201
international 86–87
technology as collaborator 53, 57

community 14, 153, 165, 166, 168, 178–179, 183, 185, 187, 189, 194, 199
connection 10, 58, 60, 81, 82, 148
co-presence 5, 7, 14, 43, 44, 182
  see also telepresence
COVID-19 pandemic
  economic recovery 168
  public health restrictions 15, 95, 137
  UK government policy 2, 4, 31, 94, 95, 96, 161, 170–171
Creation Theatre (Oxford) 12, 69, 85, 115–118, 131, 132
  Alice, A Digital Theme Park 115
  Tempest 115, 118, 122
creative industries 1, 94, 128
  economic contribution 1, 94, 162, 182–183
  impact of COVID-19 1–2, 117, 170–171
  inequality between organisations 3, 27, 36–37, 152
  recovery from COVID-19 1, 2, 15, 200
  social value 102, 153, 177
Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) 26
creative workers 4, 12, 116, 148–149
  adaptation and innovation 104, 115, 118
  financial impact of COVID-19 93, 95, 117
  identity 11, 99–100, 119
  mental health *see* mental health and wellbeing
  perceived value 96, 98, 102
  precarious employment *see* working conditions
  recovering from the pandemic 104, 106
  remote working 121, 123, 125–126, 150
  skills 12, 86, 100, 119–121, 123, 125, 131, 152
  working conditions 11, 93–94, 101, 130
cultural capital 162, 168
cultural geography 167
cybernetic theory 45

dance 42–61, 68, 70, 71
DAP-Lab (Design and Performance Lab) 69, 72, 76
Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) 1
digital divide 128, 143, 144, 149
digital programme
  abandonment 23, 30
  cost of digital 31–32
digital skepticism 23, 24, 31, 83
diversity and inclusion 14, 25, 26, 39, 129, 167, 193
Duncan, Ryan 123

embodiment 46, 50, 55–56, 57
  see also proprioception
English Touring Theatre
  Museum of Austerity 34, 35, 36
environmental impact 9, 43–44, 47, 69, 87, 178
  benefits of digital 48, 129–130
  impact of arts and culture 47–48
  impact of streaming 48–49
ethics 44, 59
  care 192
  empathy 10, 61, 82
  responsibility 57, 60, 81–82
Eurocentrism 136
extended reality *see* immersive technology

'Fatima' advert 12, 96, 103, 114–115
festivals 164
freelancers 4, 11, 93–95, 98–101, 105, 119

Freelancers in the Dark 129
Freelancers Make Theatre Work 3
funding 2, 4, 32, 37, 200

gentrification 165
gimmick 53
glitch 53, 84, 118
green screen xviii, 10, 66, 74, 76, 79, 80, 81, 118
Guttersnipe Theatre 70, 72

Hockey, Tia May 52, 54–55, 58, 59, 61
hybridity 31, 38, 78, 83, 84, 124

i2 Media Research 51
immersion 59
immersive technology 9, 32, 33–37
  cost 35, 36, 42
Improbable (theatre company) 66, 69, 78–79, 86
  Outside the Frame 66
Indigo Ltd 26, 28
inequality 95, 98, 104, 108, 127, 170
installations 173, 196
International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) 43

Khoo, Mavin 52, 53–54, 56, 59

language 191
Latin America 12, 135, 137, 139, 140, 143, 152
Lewis, Rhodri 123
liveness 5, 38, 82, 83
local government 13, 176
  arts and culture programmes 161–162, 164, 166, 175–176
  events managers and teams 14, 161–163, 169, 171
Lowry Digital Now! *Mystery Trip* 29

Marks, Laura 48, 60, 81
  Small File Media Festival 48, 49
McMahon, Madeleine 124
mental health and wellbeing
  arts supporting mental health 7, 136, 140, 142, 150–151
  impact on creative workers 94, 97, 98–99, 101, 116, 127, 149–150, 185
  young people 135, 137, 143
Metamorffosis (arts festival) 14, 181, 183–184, 185–186
metaverse 32
more than human (concept) 169, 191, 196
motion capture 9, 42, 53
museums 24

Nesta 51

opera 2
outdoor performance 13, 165, 168, 169–170, 175, 187
Owens, Sinéad 119

parades 173
participatory arts 13, 136, 139
  arts workers 149
People's Palace Projects 12, 136
performer experience 50, 52–59, 84, 185
Phelan, Peggy 182
Phoenix Dance Theatre 68, 70, 86
Pigeon Theatre 70, 77, 85
place-making 163, 165, 169–170
playfulness 86, 118
Pontio (venue) 188
pop-up events 171–172
Power, Cormac 182
proprioception 10, 50, 80, 82

Red Ladder 68, 71
resilience 15, 101, 130

Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company 71, 77
Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) 37
Ruminski, Emma 1

scenography 66, 74–80, 87
Sharp Teeth Theatre 72, 74, 76, 84
Sheffield City Region (South Yorkshire) 97
site-specific performance 169–170
small-scale 14, 176, 181, 183, 185, 187
space
  green space 167, 177
  public and private 146
  public space 161, 166, 169, 174, 177
  safety 147, 148
Spencer-Hyde, Simon 126
stage management 119–120
Stoakley, Giles 85, 120–121, 124
StoryFutures
  Current, Rising 35–36
streaming 33, 49

Taylor, P. K. 121–122, 126
telematic 45, 49
Telematic Quarantine (performance) 68, 85, 86
telepresence 2, 7, 9, 24, 80, 82, 127
televisual framing 66
Terry, Annabelle May 122, 124
test and trace 171
The Old Goods Yard (TOGY), Bangor 196
Theatre Royal Plymouth 1
theatricality 74
Thorpe, Jess 31
touch 5, 14, 80–81
tourism 161, 162, 166

Utopias Bach (arts initiative) 14, 181, 189–190, 192–193
  Geocache Bach 194

'viability' rhetoric 11, 94, 96, 101–104, 107, 114
videoconferencing 10, 29, 65, 66, 115, 194
virtual reality *see* immersive technology
vMix (software) 73, 120, 124

Wales 14, 142, 181, 183, 187
Walmsley, Ben 6
WebRTC 72
Whitley, Alexander 52, 55, 56
window installations 172–173

young people 12–13, 136, 139

Zoom *see* videoconferencing
ZoomISO (software) 74