

ARTICLE

Pandemics and the role of culture

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Pandemics creep up on us slowly, and without our suspecting, while we are distracted. Likewise, human experience shows that they recede gradually and without our noticing. For those in the eye of its storm—those that experience their devastating impact firsthand without the hope of an end in sight—they touch and shape their daily lives and their societies, in big and small ways. History shows, that across millennia, pandemics throw a harsh light on existing cleavages in societies and shortcomings in their organization; fuel deliberation, agitation, and the search for new ideas; and accelerate or bring about change. There is no reason to believe the effect of the pandemic that is presently affecting every continent will not follow a similar path.

Culture and its manifestations, which enable us to understand ourselves across time and space, have come to the fore during the current pandemic. During “normal” times, the arts and culture are usually a marginal concern for governments and policymakers. Yet the way in which the arts and culture, and those who create and care for it, are valued by our societies has been thrown into stark relief by this pandemic. In all countries, this sector and its workers have been especially and adversely affected by measures designed to curb the spread of the infection, including social and travel restrictions and lockdowns.¹ In the midst of the pandemic and these restrictions, people have turned to artistic expressions such as literature, art, music, film, and television, alongside cultural practices such as farming, food preparation, and weaving, to better understand, alleviate, or (momentarily) forget their current circumstances. And, as the end comes into view with the roll out of vaccines, international and national organizations and policymakers are increasingly recognizing and promoting the role of arts and culture in understanding and formulating our post-pandemic future.

In mid-2020, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, we extended an invitation to a number of scholars and policymakers to contribute to current debates about the fate of the culture sector and its institutions at this time by reflecting on the role of culture in times of crisis and change. We are grateful to Stanley Katz and Leah Reisman, Angela Martins, Salvatore Settis, Neil Silberman, and Megan Tracy, whose contributions capture these

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Culture Shock: COVID-19 and Culture and Creative Sectors,” 7 September 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135961-nenh9f2w7a&title=Culture-shock-COVID-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors (accessed 4 January 2020); United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Culture and COVID-19: Impact and Response Tracker Special Issue*, 3 July 2020, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/special_issue_en_culture_covid-19_tracker.pdf (accessed 4 January 2021).

diverse, current deliberations and independently coalesce around the likely and/or required changes needed to recalibrate the role of arts and culture in society now. We would like to draw out a few of those common themes in our brief introduction, including the role of arts and culture in society in response to the pandemic, the re-emphasis on local over the supranational, and the recalibration of how we value the arts and culture today.

Arts and culture in society: Resilience, recovery, and renewal

The role of arts and culture in enabling individuals and societies to respond to the effects of pandemics have been recorded through art, music and song, literature and oral tradition, and dance during the course of history. Art and culture have been used to allow people to understand their present as they experience the pandemic and its impact; facilitate personal and societal recovery post-pandemic; and enable renewal and reimagining over the long term to deeper concerns revealed during the pandemic.

During pandemics, the arts and culture foster individual and collective resilience by allowing people to acknowledge the disease and process its impact.² Since antiquity to the present day, literature has recorded pandemics and the human experience of them. Including Thucydides' account of the ravaging of the Athenian plague in approximately 430 BC,³ Giovanni Boccaccio's celebrated jaunt of Florentine aristocrats' escape from the Black Death in 1348,⁴ Daniel Defoe's retelling of the effects of the bubonic plague on London in 1655,⁵ Ahmed Ali's account of the 1918–19 influenza pandemic in India during British colonial occupation,⁶ and Philip Roth's examination of the Jewish community in Newark, New Jersey, in 1944 as the polio epidemic swept through.⁷ These works were written and published decades after the end of the epidemics or pandemics that they recorded. Yet they are revisited by readers in subsequent pandemics, especially during the lockdowns that were enforced during the first wave of the present-day pandemic.⁸

Theatre (particularly tragedies) and music have had a more immediate response to contemporaneous contagions. For example, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* were prepared in response to the plague in Athens;⁹ William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, among others, reflect his experience of successive waves of bubonic plague;¹⁰ Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* laid bare the scourge of the syphilis epidemic in eighteenth-century Europe;¹¹ and, more recently, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* dissected responses to the AIDS pandemic in the United States in the late twentieth century.¹² Pandemics from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries have been reflected in classical compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach (for example, Cantata no. 25, "There Is Nothing Healthy in My Body")

² Evans and Evans 2020.

³ Thucydides 2009.

⁴ Boccaccio 1353.

⁵ Defoe 1722.

⁶ Ali 1940.

⁷ Roth 2010.

⁸ E. Outka, "How Pandemics Seep into Literature," *Paris Review*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/04/08/how-pandemics-seep-into-literature/> (accessed 5 April 2021); O. Pamuk, "What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us," *New York Times*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html> (accessed 5 April 2021).

⁹ Mitchell-Boyask 2007.

¹⁰ J. Shapiro 2016; S. Greenblatt, "What Shakespeare Actually Wrote about the Plague," *The New Yorker*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-shakespeare-actually-wrote-about-the-plague> (accessed 6 January 2020).

¹¹ Ibsen 2008.

¹² Kushner 2014.

[1723]); Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* (1919) and Sergei Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* (1918), which were prepared during the 1918 influenza pandemic; and John Corigliano's *Symphony no. 1* ("AIDS Symphony") (1990). Music became a central and communal evening observance during the first-wave lockdown as COVID-19 ravaged in northern Italy and Spain in early 2020. This initiative extended around the world when musicians, orchestras, opera companies, and theatre companies, unable to perform to live audiences because of pandemic restrictions, streamed performances on the Internet to global audiences, usually free of charge.¹³

Museums and galleries, which have been similarly affected by the pandemic restrictions, have likewise had to use new technologies to enable the public to access their exhibitions and collections.¹⁴ Many institutions have provided free online educational resources to benefit students and teachers engaged in remote learning due to school closures.¹⁵ Ground-breaking exhibitions like the Smithsonian American Art Museum's "Heart of Our People: Native Women Artists" (2020), the National Gallery's London exhibit "Artemisia" (2020–21), and the National Gallery of Australia's "Know My Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now" (2020–21) either delayed their opening or enhanced their online presence. Accessibility and representation by museums and galleries were increasingly challenged as part of broader societal movements that emerged during the pandemic, as Stanley Katz and Leah Reisman elaborate in their case study on Philadelphia and its art institutions in this issue. By contrast, public and digital art and popular music, because of its immediacy and accessibility, has been deployed to inform and educate during the pandemic and engage broader societal concerns it has laid bare. Street art with various public health messages proliferated globally during the current pandemic, some spontaneous and some publicly funded.¹⁶ These forms of expression were also used by protesters and civil rights movements, particularly Black Lives Matter.¹⁷

The pandemic, as with most crises, precipitates the push for recovery, as its end comes into sight. The arts and culture sector can contribute to these efforts in multiple ways. Including most immediately the use of visual arts (particularly public and digital art) and music (especially popular music) in public health messages concerning initiatives like vaccines intended to hasten the end of the crisis.¹⁸ Much of the discussion concerning post-pandemic "recovery" has focused on economic recovery, with intergovernmental and

¹³ E. Prideaux, "Stayin' Alive! How Music Has Fought Pandemics for 2,700 years," *The Guardian*, 6 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/apr/06/stayin-alive-how-music-fought-pandemics-2700-years-coronavirus> (accessed 6 January 2021).

¹⁴ L. Feinstein, "Beginning of a New Era': How Culture Went Virtual in the Face of Crisis," *The Guardian*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/apr/08/art-virtual-reality-coronavirus-vr> (accessed 7 January 2021).

¹⁵ OECD, "Culture Shock," 22.

¹⁶ J. Billock, "How Street Artists around the World Are Reacting to Life with COVID-19," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/how-street-artists-around-world-are-reacting-to-life-with-covid-19-180974712/> (accessed 6 January 2021); E. Handley, "How South-East Asia Is Using Catchy Pop Songs to Combat Coronavirus," *ABC News Online*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-10/how-south-east-asia-is-using-pop-songs-to-combat-coronavirus/12038228> (accessed 7 January 2021); United Nations, "Senegalese Artists and the UN Fight Together against COVID-19," 12 May 2020, <https://www.unodc.org/westandcenter/trafrica/en/2020-05-12-un-street-art-covid.html> (accessed 6 January 2021).

¹⁷ D. A. Brooks, "How #BlackLivesMatter Started a Musical Revolution," *The Guardian*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/13/black-lives-matter-beyonce-kendrick-lamar-protest> (accessed 7 January 2021); A. Haider, "The Street Art That Expresses the World's Pain," *BBC News*, 14 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201209-the-street-art-that-expressed-the-worlds-pain> (accessed 6 January 2020).

¹⁸ A. Shapiro, "And Now for an Important Message: Convincing You to Get the Coronavirus Vaccine," *NPR Online*, 4 December 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/12/04/943151549/and-now-for-an-important-message-convincing-you-to-get-the-coronavirus-vaccine> (accessed 7 January 2021).

national economic bodies promoting the central role of the arts and cultural sector, including the African Union's response detailed by Angela Martins in this issue.¹⁹ However, they are embracing a more nuanced interpretation of this role by recognizing the sector's capacity to foster economic recovery.²⁰ This is because the arts and culture are increasingly recognized as an important factor in shoring up collective and individual resilience, post-pandemic, particularly our mental health and well-being.²¹ A University College London study of 70,000 adults during the pandemic found that almost a quarter engaged more with the arts during the lockdown, and it was "the single most protective activity for people's well-being" during the crisis. Its recommendations encouraged a whole person whole society approach to mental well-being and supporting the "cultural safety net."²² This language and thinking draws on decades-long work and advocacy by disability rights scholars and activists.²³ This important work also informs the conceptualization of an equitable and sustainable post-pandemic future and the role of culture within it.

The lockdowns and restrictions visited upon people around the world froze societies—their organization and disorganization, cohesion and tensions, strengths and weaknesses—in a moment in time. The curtailment of freedom of movement to thwart the contagion laid bare the existing inequalities of countries with the pandemic's disproportionate effect on particular people and groups (through loss of life, employment, homes, education, and increased violence).²⁴ And this dynamic fuelled the waves of protest movements throughout the world. For this reason, unsurprising, each one of our authors in their distinct way call for us to work for, and utilize, the arts and culture, not for the recovery of a pre-pandemic past but, rather, for the reimagining of a more equitable future. In so doing, there are two distinct themes that have arisen: (1) a shift from supranational to local and from exclusive to inclusive and (2) a recalibration of understanding the value of arts and culture.

Supranational to local and exclusive to inclusive

The pandemic and the efforts instigated to suppress contagion propelled forces that altered many people's relationship with the arts and culture. It accelerated and intensified its globalization. Broadcasts of concerts, theatre, opera, dance, public lectures, and exhibitions, untethered by digitalization and social media, were delivered (often freely) online to every corner of the globe. Audiences naturally increased in size and across countries. However, they remained exclusive, with just under 50 percent of the world's population having access

¹⁹ Rao and Walton 2004; OECD, "Culture Shock"; UNESCO, *Culture and COVID-19*.

²⁰ UNESCO and World Bank 2018.

²¹ Fancourt and Finn 2019; Evans and Evans 2020; Holmes et al. 2020.

²² Evans and Evans 2020, 36–43.

²³ United Nations, "International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD): Transformation towards Sustainable and Resilient Society for All," 3 December 2017, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/international-day-of-persons-with-disabilities-3-december/idpd2017.html#Background> (accessed 6 January 2021).

²⁴ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, "Statement on the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic and Its Implications under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination," Doc. Statement 3(2020); United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women," 9 April 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406> (accessed 7 April 2021); United Nations, "Policy Brief no.70: The Impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples," May 2020, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB_70.pdf (accessed 7 January 2021); United Nations, "Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19," May 2020, https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2020/05/sg_policy_brief_on_persons_with_disabilities_final.pdf (accessed 7 January 2021); United Nations Children's Fund, "COVID-19 and Children," *UNICEF Data Hub*, October 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/> (accessed 7 January 2021).

to the Internet and one in three being on social media in 2019.²⁵ New digital applications mean that globalization is also influencing not just the reception, but also the creation, of culture, with digital artworks created communally online by artists and musicians forming online ensembles.²⁶ By contrast, Neil Silberman explains in this issue how the dependency of existing cultural heritage protection on tourism has led to shuttered world heritage sites, museums and galleries, and national parks during lockdowns. He sees this as an opportunity to reconsider our valuing of culture by refocusing on the local.²⁷ Alternative approaches to measuring the value of heritage preservation—from measuring cultural (rather than strictly economic) value,²⁸ to its ability to help nurture local sustainable industries (for example, in the work of the Sustainable Preservation Initiative),²⁹ to thinking about heritage even more broadly as part of a community's well-being³⁰—offer ways of rationalizing heritage preservation beyond a narrow neoliberalist framework that is overly reliant on a single sector whose sustainability and ethics, even before the pandemic, was far from certain.³¹ Martins's contribution on the African Union's response shows how various regional and national initiatives have emphasized the need to ensure the viability of local arts and culture sectors to address challenges arising from the pandemic and other crises.³² Likewise, Salvatore Settis argues for the recognition of the fundamental role of culture in civil life, the economy, and the well-being of individuals and society. He maintains that societies cannot flourish after crises without fostering and increasing the opportunities for curiosity, creativity, and innovation by all.

Our understanding and recalibration of the relationship of the supranational, national, and local in the creation, care, and promotion of culture and its manifestations predates the pandemic. Silberman argues forcefully that the top-down, supranational approach is no longer sustainable. The International Criminal Court has acknowledged the disproportionate physical, economic, and emotional harm suffered by local inhabitants because of cultural destruction and found that they were best placed to protect and care for (in this instance) the historic city of Timbuktu in Mali in a way that benefits the national and international communities.³³ Likewise, the United Nations special rapporteur on cultural rights in a report on access to cultural heritage emphasized the need for the effective participation of "source" and local communities, particularly where there are competing claims over cultural property.³⁴ This refocus is tied to a shift from an emphasis on heritage and its maintenance in an "authentic" and exclusionary past, to cultures as living, inclusive, and ever-changing, as elaborated by Silberman.

One outcome of the pandemic has been a renewed recognition of the value of some communal practices, such as farming, food preparation, weaving, and other basic economic practices that are less universally known and practiced now, especially in the hyper-specialized

²⁵ E. Ortiz-Ospina, "The Rise of Social Media," *Our World in Data*, 18 September 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media> (accessed 8 January 2021); World Bank, "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)," 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS> (accessed 8 January 2021).

²⁶ J. Wakefield, "Coronavirus: What Is the Sound of Music during a Pandemic?" *BBC News Online*, 24 April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52295734> (accessed 8 January 2021).

²⁷ World Tourism Organization, "Cultural Tourism and COVID-19," 2020, <https://www.unwto.org/cultural-tourism-covid-19> (accessed 8 January 2021).

²⁸ See, for example, Throsby 2001.

²⁹ See Coben 2014.

³⁰ Sen 2004.

³¹ See Meskell 2004.

³² UNESCO, *Culture and COVID-19*.

³³ ICC, *Prosecutor v. Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi*, Case no. ICC-01/12-01/15, Reparations Order, 17 August 2017.

³⁴ United Nations, "Report of the Independent Expert in the Field of Cultural Rights: Access to Cultural Heritage," UN Doc, A/HRC/17/38, 21 March 2011, 14, 16, 19.

global economic system of the more affluent, urban sector. The interest in sourdough production, for example, is discussed in Megan Tracy's piece, and, in the first month or so of the pandemic in the United States, items for which demand quickly outstripped supply, after toilet paper, included yeast and live chickens, even in urban areas. At the same time, however, early concerns that the pandemic's origins in "wet markets" in China served to produce a contrary response against traditional culture or at least those forms that were potentially virogenic, highlighting the ways in which modern global discourses about heritage rely on certain (mainly Western, industrial) ideas of hygiene and "sanitization."³⁵

Reevaluating arts and culture

The pandemic, and the manifold challenges it exposes for societies, precipitated calls for a reassessment of the value of the arts and culture, expressed by all of our contributors in differing ways. This push is challenging the privileging of its economic value. The fragility of a funding model based on profit and private philanthropy, thoughtfully examined by Katz and Reisman within the US context, was laid bare by the restrictions instigated in response to the pandemic. For example, an International Council of Museums 2020 survey recorded that 95 percent of the world's approximately 95,000 museums were closed in May 2020 because of the pandemic, with 13 percent likely to never reopen.³⁶ The World Tourism Organization noted the closure of 80 percent of world heritage properties during this period.³⁷ *Variety* reported that the global cinema industry would lose US \$32 billion in 2020, a 71.5 percent drop in revenue from 2019.³⁸ These dollar figures do not and cannot capture the precariousness of the work of most of the people engaged in the arts and culture sector, and of creative industries more generally, and which interim government economic interventions alleviated only in the short term. Pandemic restrictions leading to the shuttering of arts, cultural, and educational spaces and resources likewise exposed the deficiencies of long-held funding models and their rationales, including the exclusivity of their audiences.

Earlier pandemics and periods of crises challenged how cultural expressions are valued by societies: who can create art, how practitioners are organized and their work valued, who are the intended audiences and how cultural institutions are organized and spaces are designed, and how societies and the law protects it. For example, the devastating impact on populations in medieval Europe had a disruptive effect on the feudalism and rise of crafts and artists' guilds due to successive waves of the bubonic plague. While contemporary records of later plagues highlight efforts to redesign theatres and public spaces to suppress contagion.³⁹ And, like today's pandemic, past pandemics have coincided with periods of significant economic and technological upheaval that accelerated changes already afoot—like the transformative influence of Albrecht Dürer and his adoption of printmaking to broaden the availability of his artworks and their market and the gradual elaboration of copyright on artistic works from the eighteenth century with the growing economic

³⁵ See Collins 2008; Meskell 2000.

³⁶ International Council of Museums, "Report: Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19," 2020, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-Museums-and-COVID-19.pdf> (accessed 8 January 2021).

³⁷ World Tourism Organization, "Cultural Tourism."

³⁸ N. Ramachandran, "Global Cinema Industry Set to Lose \$32 Billion in 2020, Says Omdia Report," *Variety*, 10 December 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/global-cinema-industry-lose-32-billion-2020-omdia-report-1234850235/> (accessed 8 January 2021).

³⁹ J. Nevins, "Looking to Past Pandemics to Determine the Future of Theatre," *New York Times*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/t-magazine/theater-coronavirus-covid-pandemic.html> (accessed 6 January 2021).

strength of artists and writers.⁴⁰ The current pandemic has strengthened demands to urgently address the effect of digitalization on the arts and culture sector, the precariousness of work, how the rights and interests of creators are protected by the law, and the relevance and design of existing organizations, spaces, and practices.

The fragility of existing arts and culture funding models that emphasize profitability has precipitated demands for public funding of the sector. Regions and countries that have long provided public funding to the arts and culture have reaffirmed and bolstered their commitments in the face of the challenges visited by the current crisis, which is explained by Martins in this issue with respect to the African context, and with many regions and countries providing financial support.⁴¹ Those who challenge current modes of valuing culture, which conceived of it purely in economic terms, advocate for its public funding and reconceptualization as a “cultural safety net.”⁴² Katz and Reisman’s case study of Philadelphia provides a timely example of public funding for local and participatory cultural initiatives that foster individual and collective resilience.

Looking ahead

Calls for change during our current pandemic remind us that recovery cannot mean a continuation of, or return to, the old ways of doing things and of the need to actively agitate for more equitable and sustainable future. Settis intimates that the heartbreak visited by these crises open a door to the possibility of a flourishing of civic community with culture at its centre. A commitment to sustainable public funding of arts and culture is recognition of their common good for society within this broader, manifold context. It moves away from an exclusionary model of creation and an exclusive notion of audience. Instead, it fosters an understanding of culture and creativity, and of related organizations and spaces that facilitate and promote it, as inclusive, diverse, and participatory. It recognizes the living, changing, competing, and challenging nature of arts and culture as responding to, and reflecting, the needs and desires of all society, ensuring resilience in individuals and communities during crises and the capacity for renewal.

As Amartya Sen has argued, there is a need to recognize the “dynamic and interactive” nature of culture and its integration into “a wider picture” of development.⁴³ He insists that we embrace and celebrate the diversity and complexity of cultural traditions. While we must acknowledge the homogenizing influence of globalization, he counsels us about the need to be exposed to other cultures to counter growing nationalism, tribalism, and isolationism. Humanity’s need to confront and reconcile their tension was an issue long before the current crisis, but there is no doubt that the pandemic has brought it into even sharper relief.

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⁴⁰ Metzger 2019.

⁴¹ OECD, “Culture Shock”; UNESCO, *Culture and COVID-19*.

⁴² Evans and Evans 2020.

⁴³ Sen 2004.

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Cite this article: Vrdoljak, Ana Filipa, and Alexander A. Bauer. 2020. "Pandemics and the role of culture." *International Journal of Cultural Property* 27, no. 4: 441–448. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0940739121000060>