

# How are Environmentally Engaged Arts and Cultural Organisations responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic?

CreaTures: Creative Practices for Transformational Futures  
Rapid Response Working Paper v1.0

Lara Houston, Ann Light and Kat Braybrooke

*Note that this paper describes the period April 8 - 30, 2020. It will be updated as we further collate organisations' responses.*

“Hope is a radical act in these times and we want to share all our hope for now and the future with you all.”

*Matt Bauman, Artistic Director, Cambridge Junction arts centre - [COVID-19 statement](#)<sup>1</sup>*

In lockdown, many people are turning to creative activities and gratefully finding new sources of online entertainment from the arts and cultural sector. Yet, it is a sector now struggling for survival. It has been hard hit by a lack of buffering and the vulnerabilities of a largely self-employed workforce, now extensively on furlough as all public activities are cancelled.

We are tracking the responses of a number of arts organisations whose mission has been to support and further ecological knowhow and the growth of neighbourhood resilience. Our [CreaTures project](#)<sup>2</sup> is a five-country study of the role of the arts to make societal transformations with a focus on these environmental issues. Unfortunately, the first challenge for arts organisations since we started the project in January 2020 has been to transform themselves into online engines of change. How are cultural organisations reacting to the new social distancing measures?

To find out, we explored the COVID-19 responses of over 300 arts and cultural organisations who have joined the [Culture Declares Emergency](#)<sup>3</sup> (CDE) movement. CDE launched last year to promote divestment from fossil fuels, climate change education and other ways that cultural organisations could make a difference in addressing the global climate crisis. It represents a good cross-section of activity, from visual art and theatre to local community arts. First, we collected any COVID-19 statements on organisations' websites. Then we reviewed other communication channels used by the organisations to reach their audiences as a way to identify new online activities. We used thematic analysis to come up with five notable ways that organisations are responding in the immediate aftermath of this crisis, and to discover interesting examples of creative connection and co-production in a newly-distanced world.

## 1. Grieving

“Temporarily closing the doors of the MAC has been very emotional for our tightly knit team. We're going to miss seeing the unbridled joy on children's faces when they visit our theatres and galleries for the first time...However, we know that our closure will help our community tackle the Coronavirus together, which is more important than anything else now.”

*Anne McReynolds from the MAC arts centre, Belfast - COVID-19 statement<sup>4</sup>*

From theatre shows to participatory arts, creative and cultural activities are often things that we do *together*. We find excitement and comfort from sharing spaces and experiences. In the time of COVID-19, the act of being co-present – once a source of joy – has become a risk. Processing this is difficult. It is a source of grief. Arts and cultural organisations have acted to safeguard their communities by halting all activities. They are now joining the shared effort to break COVID-19 transmission chains by encouraging people to stay at home.

The cancellation of programmes has an interlinked emotional and financial impact. Artists and producers are dismayed that unique events – brought together with creativity and care – will not be experienced. But, worryingly, lost income from ticket sales and/or project-specific funding means that many arts and cultural organisations are facing an uncertain future.

Age and status do not necessarily protect organisations from COVID-19 related financial shocks. Despite celebrating its 202nd birthday, the Old Vic theatre will launch a “critical and major fundraising campaign”<sup>5</sup> to recover from the closures. Many theatres, festivals, and event organisers are asking ticketholders to consider donating a portion of cancelled ticket prices to offset mounting losses – an act of shared solidarity.

## 2. Caring

“We will do everything we can to support those artists and freelancers least able to weather this crisis. We would welcome the support in turn of anyone who can help us through this unprecedentedly difficult time.”

*Camden People’s Theatre - Temporary closure announcement<sup>6</sup>*

In the immediate crisis, we have also seen organisations respond with deep care for the wider arts community. During this time of isolation and uncertainty, unprecedented levels of peer support have been offered. Many organisations have made specific financial commitments to pay the multitude of freelance staff that make creative events possible. Jerwood Arts<sup>7</sup> have announced that they will honour all contracted commitments to independent staff, and Yorkshire Dances<sup>8</sup> will continue to pay freelance workers for cancelled sessions. This support is crucial. The Creative Industries Federation<sup>9</sup> reports that an astonishing 42% of creative businesses and 62% freelancers have lost their entire incomes since the COVID-19 shutdown began. Freelance creative workers must subsist until June before receiving financial help from the Government; and, even then, unions argue<sup>10</sup>, a significant number will fall through the safety net, including new starters, parents and part-time workers.

Some organisations have responded by developing intensive practical and inspirational resources for arts workers, such as this comprehensive list from the Live Art Development Agency<sup>11</sup>. These mutual aid resources disseminate the details of funding support across arts communities, including relevant UK government schemes, support schemes from existing national funders and new “virus-proof” home-based commissions.

The UK's energetic theatre and live arts community are working together to help freelancers apply for these pots of funding. [Artsadmin](#)<sup>12</sup> staff are offering open, online Artist Advisory sessions and manning a new COVID-19 Artists Support Phonenumber. [Fuel Theatre](#)<sup>13</sup> and [Cambridge Junction](#)<sup>14</sup> producers are mentoring freelancers, giving a special leg up to those who haven't managed to secure national Arts Council funding before. Support for new writing provides an immediate lifeline for writers and keeps the pipeline for productions going. The High Tide theatre company has set up a comprehensive package of support called the [Lighthouse Programme](#)<sup>15</sup> which will enable the development of new work. Their [Cancellation Catalogue](#) will also record and try to re-home orphaned plays that were never shown due to COVID-19 disruption. In the same spirit, [Theatre Deli's](#)<sup>16</sup> directors are helping to scaffold emerging creative work by offering free, online consultancy sessions.

### 3. Sharing

"Take time to watch, stay well, stay at home and please continue to support the arts. We offer this to you free of charge. We put our heart and soul into this show."

*The Roughhouse Theatre, introducing their [Lockdown Performance](#)*<sup>17</sup>

A subset of the CDE organisations have begun to move their programming online. The modes of engagement that they have chosen differ widely. Larger institutions already have well-developed online resources that are now being extended; while other groups are experimenting with digital activities for the first time. The choice of activities and platforms also reflects the feasibility of transferring physical – and often highly local – artforms to the digital realm.

Organisations that have the resources can gather and retain their audiences, which is particularly important for those groups that rely on ticket sales as income. Theatre, dance and live art performances have been most amenable to digital translation. Existing recordings have been speedily uploaded to online streaming services. Most are employing donation models with free access, which keeps an audience for the future but does not compensate with a viable revenue stream. National institutions have become important centres for the sharing of performances. The Bristol Old Vic (a CDE member) shared their co-production of *Jane Eyre* on the National Theatre's [online streaming channel](#)<sup>18</sup>. Although the channel has enjoyed a remarkable 4 million views, National Theatre director Rufus Norris [cautions](#)<sup>19</sup> that this is not a financially sustainable model for the industry, which remains in limbo. Within the CDE sample, other venues have put high-profile performances online, including the Royal Court Theatre's co-production of [Cyprus Avenue](#)<sup>20</sup>, and Sadler's Wells' series of "Facebook Premieres". Their "[Digital Stage](#)"<sup>21</sup> features even more recordings of dance performances, plus new activities for people to do at home.

Theatre companies have also been contributing to the efforts to keep people entertained. Human rights campaigners the [Belarus Free Theatre](#)<sup>22</sup> have put their entire back catalogue of social justice-oriented works online, as part of their #LoveOverVirus campaign. The [Roughhouse Theatre](#)<sup>23</sup> company have shared a recording of their current production "When The Eye has Gone" as a special "Lockdown Performance". Social media has been an important dissemination point for these materials, creating a new and diverse media landscape for those who are connected. New listings sites [Cultural Digital](#)<sup>24</sup> and [The Shows Must Go Online](#)<sup>25</sup> have begun to catalogue these new resources.

Art galleries have dug into their back catalogues to put pre-recorded talks, interviews and tours online. Interactive exhibitions are taking on new relevance, as virtual galleries are newly promoted on websites and social media feeds. The Nottingham Contemporary has curated a page of “[Virtual Visits](#)”<sup>26</sup>, where visitors can navigate models of the past exhibitions and click through to interviews with the artists.

#### 4. Connecting

“The Watershed building is shut for now, but our arms are wide open”

*The Watershed, [COVID-19 statement](#)*<sup>27</sup>

Though much face-to-face participatory work has been paused, some organisations are using digital tools to maintain existing connections and foster new ones. Arts and cultural activities fulfil an important social role within communities, and there is widespread recognition that these are needed now more than ever to help those feeling isolated or overwhelmed. Many take the form of live online events hosted on videoconferencing platforms, which involve different registers of participation. The [Riverhouse Barn](#)<sup>28</sup> is hosting a virtual choir, and play-reading nights. [Rural Arts](#)<sup>29</sup> has launched the RADISH programme (Rural Arts Daily Inspiration while Staying Home) which features taster workshops for creative techniques, an art club for kids, and social media sharing prompts.

Creative new event formats are also beginning to emerge, as practitioners adapt to working from the confines of their homes. The [Deveron Projects](#)<sup>30</sup> team has developed the “Month of Sunsets” workshop series – part live cook-along and part writing workshop – to mark the observance of Ramadan. Interactive theatre producers [Coney](#)<sup>31</sup> have developed a series of online game events including a murder mystery called “You Hold the Crocodile’s Jaws”. Bringing a focus to the body, dancers with the [Akram Khan Company](#)<sup>32</sup> have developed a programme of live-streamed movement sessions entitled “Architects of Stillness” that people can follow at home.

Other events are explicitly using this moment of profound disruption as an opportunity to re-imagine more environmentally connected futures. [Furtherfield’s](#)<sup>33</sup> Marc Garrett has launched a new podcast called “News from where we are” that addresses how artists, techies and activists might work together to create more sustainable post-capitalist realities in the aftermath of COVID-19. Culture Declares Emergency’s weekly [series of seminars and events](#)<sup>34</sup> are open spaces to discuss what to do about our collective climate crisis.

Arts and cultural organisations are developing new resources to support communities, with a particular focus on wellbeing and education. [Manchester Art Gallery](#)<sup>35</sup> and [Derby Quad](#)<sup>36</sup> are hosting weekly art-focussed mindfulness recordings. Many cultural organisations have adapted their online learning programmes to support families and young people affected by school closures. The [Bristol Old Vic](#)’s<sup>37</sup> new learning-at-home activities are linked to the National Curriculum, and [Somerset House](#)<sup>38</sup> is hosting an integrated programme of new, rapid-response live art commissions, lectures, workshops, and peer exchange events for young creatives.

## 5. Co-creating

"We want to transform our state of fear into a living pulse of creation that breathes life into our community as together we head into uncharted territory. Turn your experiences into art and share them with us and your community...In times of adversity art will out."

*The Courtyard, Hereford - Call for [IsolationCreations](#)<sup>39</sup>*

Many arts and cultural experiences simply cannot be migrated to online media. Encouraging artists and audiences who both consume and create (e.g. "prosumers") to produce new creative works together is an important way of keeping relationships with audiences alive while events are cancelled and buildings are closed. The [Tate](#) has developed an engaging programme that shows kids (and playful grow-ups) how to create visual art at home using household materials to reproduce artists' techniques. Kids are then invited to share their creations to an [online gallery](#). The Bristol Old Vic is offering their audiences a creative outlet via its online [Open Stage](#)<sup>40</sup> which features performances, music compositions, drawings, texts, and photographs submitted by members of the public.

Other organisations are using co-creation to produce a shared record of life under lockdown. The Artists and Climate Change network is collecting 100-word [Tiny Coronavirus Stories](#)<sup>41</sup> that convey fleeting thoughts and feelings from isolation, assembling very different experiences of this shared global phenomenon. The Courtyard's [IsolationCreations](#)<sup>42</sup> project is gathering and sharing performances, photographs, drawings, and poetry produced by members of the community, forming a crowdsourced visual record of mundane happenings under the conditions of lockdown. Continuing their existing work with young people, the Gulbenkian Arts Centre curates a video-based "[Coronavirus Time Capsule](#)"<sup>43</sup> that documents teenage experiences of family life in isolation with humour and panache.

These shared activities bring us together in the moment, and at the same time record the legacy of COVID-19 as an event that is shaking up – and challenging – our global social, cultural and economic rules.

*"At the heart of theatre is a sense of ritual return... The company is committed to returning. Not returning to remain in the same place. But to return as an act of persistent enquiry; to bear witness to human experiences which demand. Which cry out. So that we can constantly reaffirm that what joins us is stronger than what divides us."*

*COVID-19 statement<sup>44</sup> by Simon McBurney, Artistic Director, Complicité theatre company*

How the COVID-19 pandemic will unfold is clearly uncertain. We have no idea how long arts and cultural venues will have to remain closed - but we do know that whatever happens, they will be severely affected. The organisations that are responding to COVID-19 are playing an immediate role in keeping communities entertained, nourished and inspired as they stay at home in the collective effort to slow the spread of the virus. As we continue to understand how the world has changed in the wake of the pandemic, cultural production gives us a way to think together about these transformations, and how we'd like to move forward.

Links to get involved:

A version of this report can be found on the [Sussex Sustainability Research Programme blog](#)<sup>45</sup>.

One of the authors, Kat Braybrooke, co-founded the [#CovidCreativesToolkit](#)<sup>46</sup>, a mutual aid resource to support artists and cultural organisations in going digital which has been compiled by 30+ creatives around the world.

Sign up to [Culture Declares Emergency](#)<sup>47</sup>.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Read the full COVID-19 statement from Cambridge Junction here: <https://www.junction.co.uk/news/covid-19-update>

<sup>2</sup> For more information visit our website at: <https://creatures-eu.org/>

<sup>3</sup> For more information visit the Culture Declares Emergency website: <https://www.culturedeclares.org/>

<sup>4</sup> To read the full statement visit the MAC website: <https://themaclive.com/about-us/news/a-statement-from-our-chief-executive>

<sup>5</sup> Read the Old Vic's full statement here: <https://www.oldvictheatre.com/news/2020/04/an-update-from-the-old-vics-artistic-director>

<sup>6</sup> Read the full Camden People's Theatre closure announcement here: <https://www.cptheatre.co.uk/blog/announcement-of-our-temporary-closure/>

<sup>7</sup> Read the Jerwood Arts COVID-19 statement here: <https://jerwoodarts.org/2020/03/27/update-in-response-to-covid-19/>

<sup>8</sup> Read the Yorkshire Dance COVID-19 statement here: <https://yorkshiredance.com/news/coronavirus-updates/>

<sup>9</sup> Read the full CIF report here: <https://www.screendaily.com/news/all-income-wiped-out-for-42-of-firms-says-uks-creative-industries-federation/5148824.article>

<sup>10</sup> The Artists' Union England has written a letter to the UK Chancellor outlining these difficulties. Read the full text here: <https://www.screendaily.com/news/all-income-wiped-out-for-42-of-firms-says-uks-creative-industries-federation/5148824.article>

<sup>11</sup> Read the LADA resource list here: <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/covid-19-support-resources/>

<sup>12</sup> For more information visit the Artsadmin website: <https://www.artsadmin.co.uk/artist-development/advice-info-training/advisory-service>

<sup>13</sup> For more information, see Fuel Theatre's Twitter feed here: <https://twitter.com/FuelTheatre>

<sup>14</sup> For more information, see Cambridge Junction's Twitter feed here: <https://twitter.com/CambJunction>

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the Lighthouse Programme (including the Cancellation Catalogue) see here: <https://hightide.org.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> See Theatre Deli's website for more information on consultancy support: <https://www.theatredeli.co.uk/blog/free-consultancy-support>

<sup>17</sup> Read more and view the lockdown Performance here: <https://www.roughhousetheatre.com/lockdown-performance>

<sup>18</sup> See the National Theatre's streaming channel here: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/nt-at-home>

<sup>19</sup> See: 'National Theatre Boss Rufus Norris: 'mu biggest worry is about survival' in The Guardian, 23 April 2020, by Arifa Akbar, available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/apr/23/national-theatre-boss-rufus-norris-covid-19>

<sup>20</sup> Watch Cyprus Avenue here: <https://royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/cyprus-avenue-film/>

<sup>21</sup> Watch the Sadlers Wells Digital Stage here: <https://www.sadlerswells.com/whats-on/2020/digital-stage/>

<sup>22</sup> Watch the Belarus Free Theatre back catalogue here: <https://www.youtube.com/c/BelarusFreeTheatre>

<sup>23</sup> Watch the Roughhouse Theatre's Lockdown Performance here: <https://www.roughhousetheatre.com/lockdown-performance>

<sup>24</sup> Cultural Digital list of online events is available here: <https://streams.culturaldigital.com/>

<sup>25</sup> The Shows Must Go Online listings are available here: <https://theshowsmustgo.online/>

- 
- <sup>26</sup> Virtually visit the Nottingham Contemporary's exhibitions here:  
<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/record/virtually-visit-us/>
- <sup>27</sup> Read The Watershed's COVID-19 statement here: <https://www.watershed.co.uk/news/watershed-building-shut-for-now-but-our-arms-are-wide-open>
- <sup>28</sup> View Riverhouse Barn events here: <https://riverhousebarn.co.uk/>
- <sup>29</sup> View the Rural Arts RADISH programme here: <https://www.ruralarts.org/radish>
- <sup>30</sup> View Deveron Projects' work here: <https://www.deveron-projects.com/home/>
- <sup>31</sup> View Coney's remote socials programme here: <https://coneyhq.org/2020/04/17/coming-soon-remote-socials/>
- <sup>32</sup> View Akram Khan's "Architects of Stillness" series here: <https://www.facebook.com/AkramKhanCompany/>
- <sup>33</sup> Listen to Furtherfield's podcast here: <https://soundcloud.com/furtherfield>
- <sup>34</sup> See CDE's new events here:  
[https://www.facebook.com/events/504052736958692/?event\\_time\\_id=504052770292022](https://www.facebook.com/events/504052736958692/?event_time_id=504052770292022)
- <sup>35</sup> View the Manchester Art Gallery's wellbeing series here: <https://manchesterartgallery.org/exhibitions-and-events/exhibition/stay-well/>
- <sup>36</sup> View the Derby Quad's Mindful Moments series here: <https://www.derbyquad.co.uk/about/news/mindful-moments-4-snow-storm-j-m-w-turner>
- <sup>37</sup> View Bristol Old Vic's education programme here: <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/at-home/family-arts-hub>
- <sup>38</sup> View rapid response commissions from Somerset House here: <https://www.somersetthouse.org.uk/>
- <sup>39</sup> See The Courtyard's "IsolationCreations" here: <https://www.courtyard.org.uk/isolationcreations/>
- <sup>40</sup> View the Bristol Old Vic's Open Stage Online: <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/at-home/open-stage-online>
- <sup>41</sup> Read the Tiny Coronavirus Stories here: <https://artistsandclimatechange.com/2020/03/17/tell-us-your-coronavirus-story/>
- <sup>42</sup> View The Courtyard's "IsolationCreations" here: <https://www.courtyard.org.uk/isolationcreations/>
- <sup>43</sup> View the "Coronavirus Time Capsule" here: <https://thegulbenkian.co.uk/what-we-do/the-coronavirus-time-capsule/>
- <sup>44</sup> Read the COVID-19 statement from Complicité theatre company here:  
<http://www.complicite.org/current.php?section=4>
- <sup>45</sup> See the SSRP blog post here: <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/ssrp/resources/forum/lara-ann-kat>
- <sup>46</sup> Find out more about the COVID Creatives Toolkit here:  
<https://blog.codekat.net/post/614021219451273216/covid-creatives-toolkit-mutual-aid-for-digital>
- <sup>47</sup> Visit the CDE website here: <https://www.culturedeclares.org/>