



The Pivotal—and Pivoting—Role of the Arts During Covid

Description

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Author's Memo

This autoethnographic essay describes my personal experiences of the arts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overnight, arts and culture organizations had to pivot from in-person performances and venues to mostly virtual offerings. Through the loneliest months of lockdown, artists and arts organizations sent their work out into the world, and in the process fostered new communities, made new friends, and pioneered new art forms. For me and many others, these virtual shared experiences brightened our pandemic days and nights and offered a lifeline through those long months of isolation.

Many of the experiences were interactive, and some were not just through the internet, but also through the mail. Some creative offerings also provided virtual escapes to other cities and countries—some familiar, others new to me. The essay draws both on notes/artifacts I kept from my virtual arts encounters and on my years of working in and writing about the nonprofit arts and culture sector. It celebrates the resilience of artists and audiences, while asking questions about how society values and sustains the arts.

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In March 2020, my world simultaneously shrank to the size of a modest house and began to expand across two continents. Over the next 18 months or so I spent time in Galway, Derry, and Dublin; Paris (on Bastille Day, with two fine friends) and Cordoba, Spain; New Mexico, New York, Michigan, Virginia, and California. Closer to home, I drifted slightly east into Philadelphia, slightly west into Chester County, and farther west into Lancaster County. Some places—like Philly and Santa Fe—I visited maybe a dozen times each during those months.

My travels were sometimes solitary, although other times I was in the company of as few as seven or as many as seven thousand fellow travelers, most of whose paths I will not cross again. Still, we shared something precious in our brief encounters—a performance, a reading, a hootenanny, a book launch, a concert, a meal, a wine tasting, a poem. One sweaty night in July 2020, I even made a brief trek from one end of the Oregon Trail to the other, along with 50 perfect strangers and two highly entertaining, history-minded guides.

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Sadly—or perhaps, wonderfully—all of these travels and cultural encounters were virtual. Arts experiences morphed in 2020 in ways we could not have imagined possible as recently as 2019. Who knew theater, dance, and opera companies had such rich troves of archival videos? Who could have predicted how cathartic it is to sit at home, alone, and sing along to familiar folk songs (loudly, imperfectly, but blessedly on mute) with a few hundred virtual friends (and one dear sister)—some around the corner, others in Israel, Poland, or China?

Or how delicious it feels to wear sparkly earrings and a skimpy nightgown (no video on my end) to watch five “what-should-have-been-opening-night” celebrations from the Santa Fe Opera? Or how amusing it was to take that imaginary covered wagon journey (hosted by Atlas Obscura) while anachronistically sitting in front of a window fan, Zooming, and eating cold noodles slathered in spicy peanut sauce.

Gratitude for “Escape Artists”

As they've done throughout my life, the artists and other creatives who offered up these virtual experiences allowed me to slip into new worlds, encounter new characters, see and hear and taste

other ways of being, present and past. But never have I felt such a debt to the arts as I did during those long months of lockdown, which were followed by many more months of only the most cautious forays into society. I've come to think of the creatives who entertained me during that period as "escape artists." I remain grateful for every minute they spirited me away from plague-ridden headlines, every reminder they offered about the resilience of the human spirit, and every time they made me laugh, or cry, about something not related to the raging pandemic or the sorry state of American civil society.

When the world turned upside-down in March 2020, my first thoughts were, of course, for the wellbeing of my family—my parents, my siblings and their families, my aunts and uncles and cousins, near and far. I worried, too, for my friends, my neighbors, my work colleagues. But just beyond those nearest and dearest in my life, the people I worried for most were artists, along with the staff of arts organizations. I understood all the ways artists keep our planet spinning on its axis. I feared for what might be lost when they were cut off from audiences and communities.

Resilience of the Arts and Culture Sector

For more than a decade, I had the privilege of working on behalf of the nonprofit arts sector in and around Philadelphia. I worked briefly at my favorite theater company in an interim role; and then for many years in an agency that matched arts groups with business volunteers and well-prepared board members. Several years into that role, I began to write for *Nonprofit Quarterly* (NPQ), covering arts and culture.

Over the next seven years, I wrote hundreds of arts-related pieces, mostly about management, governance, creative placemaking, and social impact. I went to work in the arts in 2007—just before the Great Recession knocked the sector sideways. I watched organizations slowly lose funding as audience members, donors, and government agencies all shifted their support elsewhere. Many people and institutions decided art was optional, not essential, during a crisis. But I kept showing up—buying tickets, visiting galleries and museums, nudging friends to do the same, and working extra hard to help arts clients adapt.

When I began writing for NPQ in 2013, the arts sector was still rebounding from what had been a gradual but still devastating decline in support, both in earned revenue (like tickets, memberships, or tuition) and grants or contributions. And yet, their resilience was evident. Lights still dimmed, curtains still rose. Subscription rates often stayed down, but innovative marketing approaches blossomed, and new audiences were cultivated. For a while, things were looking up.

An Unimaginable Scenario

One of the fundamental lessons learned by the arts sector during the Great Recession was the need for scenario planning. This concept helped many groups become nimbler at adapting to changes in the

environment. However, what no one in the arts anticipated—scenario-wise—was a total, overnight shuttering of every venue and live program: stages, museums, community centers, education programs, festivals, art exhibitions, book tours, public gardens, and historical sites. Unlike 2008, when the metaphorical lights dimmed slowly, in March 2020 everything stopped in an instant.

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But arts organizations rose to meet the moment. In the early days (and I mean *days*) of the pandemic, the focus was necessarily inward. What do we do about scheduled performances/programs/exhibitions? Can we keep paying our people? Do we use our cash reserves? (Do we even have any?) How do we communicate with each other—and board members, audiences, communities, funders? But within about a week, arts groups began to adapt and began to offer what we needed—the gift of escape—even though we all still believed the lockdown would be brief. Arts leaders still had to answer tough questions about how to move forward; but they also understood—before we, their audiences, did—that what they most needed to do was keep sending their work out into a badly shaken world.

Before March ended, performing arts groups had opened their vaults of archived performances—dance, theater, opera, music—which required special permission from both artists and labor unions. Performances were available to stream, or to watch together (but maybe still apart) at scheduled times. My favorite dance company, BalletX, offered weekly videos of past performances to anyone on their email list. Some arts groups had scrambled to record one final performance—without an audience—just before lockdown, and they shared these new works, often for free, sometimes for a modest fee, and always with a gentle reminder that they still needed support. The fees and donations those virtual offerings generated didn’t make a dent in the revenue gaps arts groups were experiencing, but they did bring people together—under a shared roof at home, or clear across the globe—in ways we had not experienced before.

New Approaches to Audience Engagement

Almost overnight, groups like the U.K.-based Sofa Singers popped up, allowing people anywhere to join a virtual choir and share in a communal experience, when enforced isolation was still new to so many humans. My friends at People’s Light, the theater company I have long thought of as my “home” theater, cooked up the virtual hootenanny idea, working with geographically scattered (yet acoustically harmonious) musicians who had graced their stage in past plays. Art-house movie theaters like Bryn Mawr Film Institute figured out ways to stream films and host discussions and classes online.

Zoom readings and book/literary journal launch celebrations proliferated, as did home-based concerts presented by locked-down musicians. Choral groups and dance companies used technology to stitch separate performances into seamless works, with artists often performing from improvised spaces. My personal favorite composite was “The Irish Blessing” performed by choirs and musicians from more than 300 Irish churches, representing every possible religious denomination; you need not be Irish nor even remotely religious to appreciate the joy and human connection packed into that seven-minute video. Museums and galleries created online tours, allowing people open access to places they missed or places they’d always hoped to visit. Tourism offices in places like Santa Fe curated virtual travel and culture experiences, allowing small businesses like Santa Fe Arts Tours to make new friends (like me).

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Many arts groups, as well as independent publishers and bookstores, understood it was essential to keep audiences engaged, to remind people they were still there and would resume in-person experiences on the other side of the pandemic. They were, of course, paddling like crazy under the surface, reluctantly cancelling summer programs and announcing delayed 2020-21 seasons with guarded optimism, while in the throes of three-dimensional-chess-type scenario planning.

For me, one of the saddest days of spring 2020 was when I got an email from Santa Fe Opera—an arts organization I admire deeply, even though I’ve only attended a handful of performances—announcing they had cancelled the 2020 season. I knew enough to mourn the domino effect of that heartbreaking (but inevitable) decision on the City Different, and its ripples across the global opera community—missed opportunities for apprentices, postponed world premieres, lost once-in-a-lifetime roles for artists. I also knew that every single cancelled arts event anywhere sent similar ripples of loss across communities everywhere.

Arts Groups Finding Their Virtual Footing

Still, all through that lonely spring artists and arts groups did everything they could—and far more than we ought to have expected—to keep us connected, to keep us distracted, to help us escape for an hour or two at a time, to help us hold on to a slim thread of normal. One remarkable difference from 2008 was the financial support made available to keep arts groups and individual artists afloat. It wasn’t enough—our artists rarely are valued as they should be; but the response was quick, and surprisingly generous.

The U.S. government offered funds through the initial pandemic relief package, and they offered more in modest waves later. Foundation grants and grassroots fundraising quickly materialized. Some funds subsidized basic costs of living or unexpected medical expenses. Others helped nonprofits and creative businesses innovate with virtual work or stay afloat until things got better. Which, for most of the spring, we mostly believed they would, by summer for sure.

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Then, as civil unrest fomented through the summer and tens of thousands of Americans (now, sadly, well over a million) died from the pandemic, arts organizations began to find their virtual footing, and/or figured out ways to offer live experiences in outdoor spaces, with social distancing. Movies and drive-in concerts were on display in public places.

One of my favorite days of the year—June 16, or Bloomsday—celebrates James Joyce’s extraordinary novel *Ulysses*. For several years, I had participated in all-day festivities commemorating this (admittedly obscure) holiday at The Rosenbach in Philadelphia, where the original *Ulysses* manuscript lives. Typically, dozens of people take turns reading passages from the novel for nine straight hours, in front of hundreds of attendees, on a tree-lined residential street. In 2020, a smaller number of readings were prerecorded and “launched” virtually each hour, to the delight of people from every corner of the globe. For one magical day, we all escaped 2020 and time-traveled back to 1904 Dublin.

Hybrid Seasons and Plan B Thinking

Arts groups were wildly creative in planning their 2020-2021 seasons, with virtual (sometimes live, sometimes prerecorded) offerings, interactive online options, and the possibility/hope of at least some-in-person performances by 2021. Orchestras produced socially distanced performances in empty venues, with musicians in separate plexiglass bubbles, that could be streamed or broadcast. Museums reopened, cautiously. Dance and theater companies adapted their art forms for virtual viewing. In fall 2021, some performing arts groups made full or partial returns to live venues, but with too many empty seats, and a lingering reliance on virtual/hybrid performances and connections.

“Plan Bs” were often activated as the virus continued to surge. Sometimes performers got sick, other times attendance was so low that the best hope of recouping expenses was to stream a virtual option during or after a live run. Despite their inventiveness, many arts groups could not recover from being shuttered for more than a year, followed by a so-so 2021-22 season; some organizations did not

survive. Fortunately, artists are used to reinventing themselves and their ecosystems—and so, the beat goes on.

Unexpected Pleasures

Virtual arts experiences are in many ways a lesser substitute for the real thing—watching a live performance together in a theater, letting a piece of music wash over us in a concert hall or a park, disappearing into a movie on the large screen, and then talking about what we've seen or heard or felt after the show. But virtual art was, for many months, all we had, and some of those virtual experiences were extraordinary in their own right.

For me, they yielded unexpected pleasures—the physical release of singing out loud in my quiet house, the small act of putting on earrings for the first time in months, the discovery of kindred spirits while discussing a book, the gift of birds-eye views (thanks to drones) of changing seasons at Chanticleer, a favorite botanical garden. I heard the voices of authors I never would have heard thanks to the gift of virtual book launches and readings. I felt sheer amazement at the creativity and resilience of the people making these escapes possible for me, often from their living rooms or kitchens, spinning magic out of thin air.

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I estimate, conservatively, that about 320 hours in my pandemic life were enriched with virtual arts and culture experiences. Those hours of escape included live-streamed events, prerecorded performances, Zoom-based conversations, and the countless small gifts of art delivered to my email inbox or my Twitter feed—one video, poem, story, or song at a time.

In June 2020, I wore myself out—virtually—one week with an artist studio tour, a dance performance, and a book launch on three consecutive evenings. Most weeks I escaped at least once into some virtual arts portal. Among the highlights were a Mary Chapin Carpenter concert streamed from Wolf Trap on Thanksgiving weekend 2020; the 7,000+ audience members included me, one of my sisters, and two of my best friends. While we watched separately from our homes in three states, we texted throughout the generously long performance, making it feel (almost) like we were together.

In December 2020, I spent a virtual weekend in Spain thanks to Untours; my fellow travelers were scattered across the U.S., but through the magic of Zoom, we shared a flamenco concert, architecture

and history lessons, two amazing cooking classes/meals, and wine and olive oil tastings. For 48 hours, I truly felt transported; I shared one of those afternoons with my 86-year-old mother, who happily chopped garlic and tended pots while a Spanish chef guided us through his recipes.

Art in My Mailbox

One spring day in 2021, a virtual arts experience arrived (in part) in my mailbox: samples of plant-based perfumes and plant materials; these were the prelude to an online experience shared by two dozen people across the country, featuring the extraordinary Santa Fe-based “apothecary” Illuminated Perfume. Soon after, I began to receive occasional packages as one of 100 lucky subscribers to an intriguing play-by-mail offered by Philly-based Tiny Dynamite. I hesitated to open the final package some weeks later because I didn’t want the experience to end. I attended a virtual tea party with artists who had helped deliver this epistolary treat, which included letters, postcards, and artifacts spanning more than two centuries.

One thing that made it easier to let go of that immersive postal experience was the anticipation of gathering again for live performances. One glorious day in April 2021 I attended an indoor poetry reading (masked) followed by an outdoor reception and dance performance by BalletX (unmasked). Soon after, I saw a couple movies (with socially distanced seating and masks); I got teary the first time the lights dimmed and I could relax into the imagined world of a film. In June 2021, I attended an exuberant, small-scale Bloomsday celebration. That fall, I braved a sparsely attended, masks-required, thoroughly enjoyable play. A few weeks later, I was back to virtual events, thanks (not) to omicron.

Returning to Normal

Even now, nearly 5 years after the start of the pandemic, many in-person performances and events attract smaller audiences than in the past. I was, until fairly recently, part of the problem. As eager as I was to return to live arts experiences, I remained hesitant to gather with strangers in most indoor spaces, even vaxxed and masked. But each new arts season has brought us closer to what we once considered normal.

My first tentative move was going out to see movies again. Over the last 18 months, I have gladly returned to live performances and in-person events—readings and plays, concerts and dance. Pandemic cautions have mostly faded into our collective rearview mirror, even if the virus itself refuses to do so. When the lights go down and artists and audience members melt into a shared experience, it feels doubly rich because of the long drought we lived through.

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I've also begun to travel again—for real, with luggage and airplane tickets. My first trip was to Santa Fe. While there, I sought out escape artists I wanted to thank for virtual adventures that took me somewhere new or transported me to somewhere I yearned to visit again in real life, but couldn't at the time. Closer to home, my gratitude tour has included performing arts groups and the local bookstore that delivered purchases to my doorstep, in giftbags, when their doors were newly shuttered but their shelves were still full.

When I've told artists and merchants what those pandemic experiences meant to me, they have consistently responded that the feeling was mutual: they needed me to receive what they were offering just as much as I needed them to offer it. While I believe them, I believe even more that any honest reckoning would show that those who sent art into the world during the worst months of 2020 and 2021 gave far more than they got. I will always hold dear my virtual pandemic escapes, made possible by the countless creative souls who somehow managed to keep it real.

Credits

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