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Article

Sustainability of Artists in Precarious Times; How Arts Producers and Individual Artists Have Adapted during a Pandemic

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Abstract: Making a living as an artist, whatever the discipline, is challenging. In addition to skills and talents, artists need resilience, adaptability, creativity, and the ability to withstand endless setbacks and rejections. Most critically, they need an on-going, stable income. Several studies have demonstrated that the income of most artists is usually very low. To survive, artists often find other sources of income aside from their creative work. Ideally, they also need a place to work, the capacity to do their work and a sense of validation from others of their work. When your livelihood disappears over night because of a pandemic, how do you then sustain that creative work? Using multiple sources of data and a qualitative methodology, including case studies and interviews, this paper addresses the ways that artists and producers from different art forms have addressed these challenges in Australia. It is concluded that while the impact of the pandemic on artists' lives has been considerable, some artists have been able to survive, adapt, and move forward.

Keywords: artists; sustainability; pandemic; adaptability; digital platform; income



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1. Introduction

1.1. Precarity, Sustainability, and a Pandemic

Since the onset of the global pandemic in early 2020, the arts and cultural sector has faced many challenges [1,2]. Overnight, theatres, festivals, and galleries had to close, and many thousands of artists from all art forms lost their income, livelihoods, and projected income [1,3,4]. This dramatic change of events affected individuals and organizations differently [4,5]. Some found it hard to survive and continue their practice while others have, after the initial shock, looked at ways they could adapt and still thrive at their artistic practice in this changed and changing world. It is this second group that we will be discussing here in the context of both the adaptations by arts producers to support artists and the adaptations by individual artists. In other words, what have some arts organizations done to support individual artists, and how have some individual artists managed to be 'sustainable as an artist' during a pandemic?

When the term 'sustainable' (see Merriam-Webster definition) is used here, it is referring to an approach that allows a practice to continue, without necessarily undermining the integrity of the work or causing harm in the longer term [6]. Thus, in the case of an artist, how can an artist continue their arts practice despite challenging external pressures? An issue for artists, however, is whether 'sustainability' means that artists need to embrace aspects of the marketplace to survive [6,7]. The relationship between art and commerce is always somewhat fraught [8,9]. However, being 'sustainable' may require being more commercially orientated, rather than, say, artistically orientated [6]. Achieving high artistic standards is usually a priority in an artist's career [10]. Thus, prioritizing commercial outcomes at the expense of artistic outcomes may be seen as an embedded paradox [11]. It is said, however, that artists need to find an audience to have a successful career [11]. Furthermore, artists often need to be entrepreneurial to survive economi-

cally [10,11]. Where the balance lies between the need to adapt and pivot an arts practice to make it commercially viable, without losing the integrity of the work, is an important and often unresolvable issue [9–11]. When we talk about the lives of artists (the term ‘artist’ is used here to describe anyone who has a professional artistic practice, whether it be as a musician, singer, actor, dancer, visual artist, craftsperson, film-maker, writer, video artist, and/or someone who works in a combination of artistic disciplines) during a time of great upheaval, it is important to remember too that most artists struggle to make a living under normal circumstances [7,12–15]. Artists within a market-driven environment are always needing to adapt to survive, as the nature of their work and their circumstances, are usually in opposition to the expectations of a capitalist society [6,12,13,15]. Furthermore, artists from different disciplines have distinctive requirements to work successfully within their professions [6,7,10,11,16]. Thus, the impact of a pandemic is likely to effect artists in different ways, depending on their artistic discipline.

David Throsby [17], with various collaborators, has documented the working lives of Australian artists over a period of 40 years. Throsby’s framing of artists includes actors, writers, musicians, visual artists, and craft practitioners. In their most recent report, they estimate that there are 48,000 professional artists across all disciplines in Australia and note that this figure has remained relatively stable since the 1990s [17] (p. 7). What is consistent in all the findings is that the average income of most artists from creative work remains very low (AUD 18,800 in 2017), and their overall average total income from all sources is 21% below the workforce average (AUD 48,400) [17] (p. 7). Often, artists subsidize their artistic work with other sources of income, such as teaching or the hospitality sector [17] (p. 5). It is also noted that the majority (81%) of artists work as freelancers or are self-employed; so, they are not protected by standard employment conditions [17]. Another recent Australian study focusing on the lives of musicians notes that the majority make their living from portfolio or contract work, and only around 20% of professional musicians have continuing work [18] (p. 2). They also note that up to 90% of a musician’s income comes from non-music work, and the impact of a precarious career and financial stress takes a considerable individual toll [18] (p. 2).

As the lives of most practicing artists were precarious before the pandemic, the true impact of the pandemic on the lives of artists is not likely to be known for some time [2,4]. UNESCO researchers have observed that the economic impact of the pandemic on the arts and creative sector internationally is already being seen as far more dramatic than, say, the impact of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 [1]. Furthermore, another international comparative study has noted how various governments prioritized their cultural institutions rather than protect the livelihoods of individual artists [3]. It is also noted that while the arts and creative sector has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, at the same time the work produced by artists has been crucially important for the community’s survival and well-being during this time [1].

1.2. Artists and Their Careers

Researchers have noted how artists sustain their careers by ‘piecing together’ various sources of income [6,11]. These may include grants, commissions, and prizes which can impact an artist’s life considerably but getting them is usually a highly competitive process. It is also noted that the career paths of artists are quite distinctive compared to those of the mainstream population in that they are driven by diverse needs that provoke different decisions over their lives [10,11,16,19]. While artists pursue a ‘career’ for example, the concept of a ‘career’ is different from that of mainstream occupations as it does not necessarily involve making a lot of money as a measure of success [11,16]. Instead, the focus is usually on the quality of the work produced and how that work is received by peers and critics in their field [10,11]. Furthermore, building a career as an artist is complex. It involves the participation of different gatekeepers and often an entrepreneurial approach by the artist and can require a lengthy time to build a reputation or even a brand [9–11]. There is commentary too that the artist should be grateful for exposure or for an opportunity

to work, even if that work is not paid for, as the artist is seen as someone who is always wanting/needing an audience [11–13,20]. The capacity for self-exploitation, as well as exploitation by others, is also a recurring challenge in the context of an artist's life being seen as noble, but pecunious [12,13]. Not paying for artwork, however, is another way of de-valuing the artist, and of seeing an arts practice as less worthy than, say, the work of a carpenter or a banker [13,20].

Female artists can struggle with the demands of an artistic career while managing the domestic relationships in their lives and are often in conflict over which should be given priority [21,22]. If they have a family, they are likely to prioritize the family's needs over their own needs as artists [21,22]. Artists can also suffer from a sense of being seen as different or as 'outsiders' [11,13,15]. While they may be highly educated and well-qualified, they are often not seen as socially equal to other professions [11,13,15]. This lack of social standing may be further compounded by their low income and precarious existence [11,13,15]. Furthermore, artists often move frequently for their work, and so, they do not necessarily have a stable existence, either monetarily or in where they live [23,24]. The precariousness of most artists' lives is a recurring theme in the literature, as is the need for multiple sources of income and/or a gig existence where short-term contracts are a rule rather than the exception [4,11–13,15]. On the other hand, artists develop a strong capacity for tolerance of ambiguity and insecurity, as well as a resilience to adversity, otherwise they could not survive the demands of their profession [10–12,16].

Artists strongly identify with their work even if their main income is from another source and usually describe themselves as an actor or a musician or an artist, instead of, say, a teacher, a hospitality worker, or a clerical worker [11,14,24]. It is noted too that artists tend to be motivated more by intrinsic stimuli, rather than external, while also needing certain conditions to be present to maximize their creativity [6]. It is also observed that while the creative industry model has idealized the gig economy and its unstable work conditions, only a few benefit from this industry model, and they are usually not the creative artists [15,25]. Thus, overlaying an already precarious existence with a pandemic that takes away all projected income for the next couple of years, makes life extremely challenging for the individuals concerned [1,2,4].

1.3. The Pandemic and Its Impact on Artists

There have been many initiatives across the globe by artists, producers, and governments to address the dilemmas faced by the arts sector as an outcome of the pandemic [3,26–30]. For example, there has been a need to adapt to digital means to make, exhibit, and promote work [26,29]. This has meant that many artists and arts organizations have had to quickly 'upskill' themselves in digital technologies and adapt or change their modes of working to suit the new medium [26,27]. Theatre and music companies have had to turn themselves into 'media' companies so that they can produce their work in a digital format [26,31]. Sometimes this can be challenging given the specific expectations of an art form which relies on a live audience [26,31]. In other cases, this has also brought them benefits as it is enabling a much larger audience to access their work [26,29,31]. Art galleries have put their exhibitions online, performers have developed 'YouTube' identities, and artists have adapted to Instagram and other visual platforms to show and sell their work [27–29]. Artists have established their own local, national, and global networks too, to share knowledge and skills and provide mutual support for each other during this time [27,28].

For example, in the United Kingdom, Artist Support Pledge (ASP) was set up by English visual artist Matthew Burrows in March 2020 as the impact of the pandemic was really starting to affect everyone [29]. Burrows decided to see if he could get other artists to buy and sell their work to each other. Burrows conceived the idea that artists could sell their work for a maximum of 200 pounds per piece [29]. When they had sold 1000 pounds worth of their work, they then pledged to buy the work of another artist for up to 200 pounds [29]. This created a market for artists, as well as members of the public, to buy each other's

work and provide an income for the artists. It also created a network of artists around the world who were engaging with each other and providing mutual support. They reported that by early 2021 they had ‘over 76,500 posts of artworks for sale producing an estimated £15 million worth of sales’ [29].

While the onslaught of the pandemic affected some nations more than others, and some individuals more than others, the impact on the arts and cultural sector internationally was generally catastrophic [1–4]. Artists from around the world, particularly in the performing arts, lost all their work overnight [1,3]. Most artists and support workers in the performing arts are contract workers and need to balance many different priorities and different periods of work [17–19]. This is how they manage to make a living in a precarious profession. Sometimes, it can take months or even years to set up work. When the pandemic began, artists saw all that hard work disappear in a few days. Visual artists who had exhibitions coming up found that galleries could not open; so, no-one could see the work [30]. Likewise, performing artists saw all their present and future work disappear given the enforced closures of theaters and other performing spaces [32].

Some governments understood the challenge and immediately responded generously with help for both the organizations and the individual artists [3,5,33]. For example, both Norway and Germany demonstrated a generosity and insight into the plight of individual artists by ensuring their survival during the closures [5,33]. However, others chose to ignore the issue, as they either did not understand it or did not value the contribution made by artists. Australia was in the latter category [2,32,34]. While it provided some emergency relief for its major cultural institutions, it was not until November 2020 that any significant Federal Government funding was provided for arts organizations, while individual artists were ignored [34,35]. The preference by governments to focus on providing support for their major cultural infrastructure rather than smaller cultural organizations and their individual artists has also been observed elsewhere [3,4]. For example, a cross-international study undertaken, that examined the pandemic response in the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, and Switzerland, noted that several nations focused on preserving their cultural infrastructure, rather than addressing the impact on their smaller organizations or individual artists [3]. It is noted, however, that this approach by governments may have a long-term negative impact on the capacity of the rest of the sector to recover [3,34,35]. Furthermore, some major cultural institutions demonstrated a preference for protecting themselves and their management staff at the expense of their artists [5,36]. This may cause both reputational damage and an alienated workforce in the longer term [5,36,37].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Approach

This research uses a qualitative methodological approach which, by gathering data from a variety of sources, develops a deep insight into the focus of the study [38]. The section begins with a discussion of the setting for the study, that is, the impact of the pandemic on the sustainability of artists and arts producers in Australia. Examples of adaptation by arts producers to support artists are then introduced. Some of the examples will already be in the public domain in various forums; others will be interviews that the researcher has conducted in Australia, either online or by phone, with individual artists and arts producers. In-depth interviews undertaken with 6 individual artists from different art forms provide a nuanced and clearer picture of how different artists have experienced this time. The intent overall is to build a rich picture of how artists and arts producers have survived and then adapted to the pandemic situation so that they are able to go forward. This too is a continuing story that will not be completed for some time.

2.2. Setting

When the pandemic shutdown occurred in Australia, there was a sense of unreality at first. Overnight, everything was stopped across the nation on 17 March 2020. Australia had

not been affected by the pandemic as seriously as other countries because of its geographical location and the fact that it was an island and could close its borders [39]. While the number of cases started to increase quickly in late March 2020, they never reached the scale of, say, the United Kingdom, the United States, or parts of Europe and Asia. Even so, there were many vulnerable communities at risk and drastic measures were needed to address this. Immediately the lockdown occurred, there were long queues of unemployed people outside welfare offices across the country. The Federal Government announced at the beginning of April 2020 that they were instituting two schemes, called ‘JobKeeper’ and ‘JobSeeker’ to help both businesses and individuals economically survive the pandemic. This gave many individuals an income to offset the lack of wages. However, not everyone was eligible for this income, including many arts workers [40].

State governments decided from the outset that the best method of addressing the pandemic was complete elimination, as compared with, say, tolerance of a certain level of cases. This has meant long periods of ‘lockdown’, particularly in the city of Melbourne, where the cases were highest. The impact of continual lockdowns and a subsequent inability to go to work, has affected arts workers dramatically [30,32,34,40,41]. It is noted that there is not just an economic impact but also a mental and emotional impact, given the close connection between an artist’s identity and their work [41].

As noted by others, the arts and cultural sector and the hospitality sector were the two sectors most immediately affected by the closures in Australia [42,43]. There were estimates from the Grattan Research Institute, for instance, that 75% of those employed in the creative and performing arts were likely to lose their employment [43]. The Australian Festivals Association and the Australian Industry Music Network created a website called ‘I lost my gig’ in March 2020 to document the amount of money performing artists had lost from the lockdowns [44]. The website recorded by May 2020 that at least AUD 340 million had already been lost from the sector. With further lockdowns in mid-2021, the website conducted another survey of nearly 2000 performers and arts workers. The website’s estimate was that the average loss of income since the beginning of July 2021 was around AUD 16 million per week, with the cancellation of around 23,000 gigs [44]. The survey also estimated that only around 7% of former arts professionals were able to function in the same way that they had before the lockdowns began in March 2020 [44]. Furthermore, of those who responded to the 2021 survey, around 60% said that they were looking at other ways of making a living outside of the arts sector [44].

2.3. Adaptations by Art Producers

The Melbourne Digital Concert Hall which later morphed into the Australian Digital Concert Hall was an initiative of cellist Chris Howlett and arts manager Adele Schonhardt [45]. They started the classical music onstream digital venue a week after everything was shut down in March 2020 to ensure that musicians had some form of outlet, both in terms of income making and performing. It was an immediate success, and by August 2021, they had presented over 450 concerts, attracting audiences of anywhere between 100 to 500 per event [31,45]. Their audience has come from all over the country as well as from abroad. Thus, by going online they were able to attract a much broader audience than if they were confined to just an audience from the city of Melbourne [45]. By March 2021, they recorded that they had raised over a million dollars for musicians and supported over 350 musicians through the venue [45]. Howlett said that in opening the venue “We wanted to give hope to as many artists as possible” [45].

Critical Stages [46] an independent touring performing arts company based in Sydney, was immediately affected by the closures and had to cancel all its tours in March 2020. Its director Chris Bendall noted, in a conversation with this researcher, that they had previous experience in cancelling at short notice because of un-planned weather events, such as cyclones. So, initially, managing the changes was not seen by them as too challenging. However, the scale of cancellations became an increasing problem. They then realized that their pool of independent artists and crew was not getting any support from governments;

so, they ‘pivoted’ and started a series of online workshops that would act as a support and a sharing network for their performers and crews. They also used it as a learning platform for various aspects of touring and getting shows together, as well as talking about how to adapt to putting more work online. This then became an upskilling exercise for everyone in terms of learning more about digital technologies and developing ways of improving the quality of the digital work being produced. Bendall was then able to access government funding to create a virtual studio or ‘screening room’ which their artists could use to archive their current work, further develop digital aspects of their work, or create new work designed specifically for the digital medium.

The House of the Arts (HOTA) [19] on the Gold Coast in Queensland pivoted immediately after the initial lockdowns in March 2020 [47]. Recognizing the desperate situation of many local artists, they immediately changed their creative development program to provide small grants of AUD 1000 each to 50 different artists (selected from 250 applications) to create artworks with digital outcomes [47]. After the end of the Job Keeper program and the reduction in JobSeeker in early 2021, HOTA, by talking to artists, recognized how much artists valued having a regular salary. So, HOTA then devised a new program called ArtKeeper where 4 artists were selected from 150 applicants to work 3 days a week for 6 months on their own creative project at HOTA. They were given a regular salary, a studio to work in, and were also invited to participate in the planning at HOTA [47]. Instead of artists being ‘outsiders’ in the context of the organization, they were being welcomed in to be an essential part of it.

2.4. Artists and Their Experiences

To get a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of artists during this time, the researcher undertook semi-structured interviews with six artists from different art forms. The interviewees were all located in Melbourne, as this city has been the most affected by lockdowns nationally. The interviewees were either known already to the researcher or were recommended by peers or by others involved in the study. The interviews were conducted by phone or online and lasted up to an hour. All the interviewees are anonymous in this paper and have been given pseudonyms for identification purposes. The six artists were from different art forms: two were musicians, two were actors, and two were visual artists. Two of the interviewees were male and four were female, and three were early career, two were mid-career, and one was a late-career artist.

3. Results

3.1. Interviewees

The focus of the conversations between the researcher and the artists was the impact of the pandemic and then the subsequent lockdown on those individuals and how they managed during this time. They were asked about their career before the pandemic, their response to the event, how the time has been for them, what impact the pandemic experience and the consequent lockdowns have had on their work, and what they feel they have gained from the experience. Table 1 below gives an outline of each interviewee’s profile.

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees.

Artist	Profession	Career Stage
Julie	Musician	Mid-career
Richard	Musician	Early career
Angela	Actor	Late career
Mary	Actor	Early career
Ann	Visual artist	Mid-career
Matthew	Visual artist	Early career

3.2. Research Themes

The responses from the interviewees were then divided into different themes after an analysis by the researcher of the original conversations and an immersion in the data [30]. These research themes are summarized under the following headings:

1. Initial Response
2. Benefits
3. Drawbacks
4. Challenges
5. Ways Forward

3.2.1. Initial Response

For some more than others, the impact of the pandemic and the consequent closures and lockdown shocked them. For example, the mid-career musician (Julie) talked about being quite shattered by the situation at the beginning. From having a regular job and income, she suddenly had neither. She also felt traumatized by the management of the organization that she worked with because the musicians were immediately laid off by their employer with no financial compensation. She notes,

‘... that, at the beginning, I had to access counselling. It felt that artists were seen as so unimportant’.

The early-career actor (Mary) too was immediately affected by the lockdown as all her work that was already programmed was cancelled, postponed, or just lost overnight. In addition, the casual work that she did between acting work also disappeared. She notes,

‘I was completely unemployed in one afternoon... I just felt like I will never come back. It just felt like the death of the arts. It was really bleak at times...’

The loss of both her immediate and projected income meant that Mary had to return to living with her parents. Overnight she lost her work, her home, her income, and, in a sense, her identity.

The early-career musician (Richard), however, had a different reaction. He talked about how he quite enjoyed the first period of lockdown. He said,

‘I did well, to be honest. Music was a part of it, but I just enjoyed things. My approach was more that I just want to make sure that I’m well and happy. I was reading and listening to music. I got into exercising more...’.

In Richard’s case he used the enforced lockdown to relax and enjoy the new reality. While he also had to return to live at his parent’s house, he enjoyed the experience as he felt relaxed and happy to be in a comfortable environment. He was also able to access unemployment benefit (JobSeeker), given that he was unable to seek paid work; so, he had a regular income.

Similarly, the early-career visual artist (Matthew) found that he had extra time from not working at his day job, which made it possible for him to concentrate on his artwork. However, he did lose access to his normal studio because of the pandemic and was forced to work from home in a smaller space. This also meant that he had to change the nature of his practice and move back into painting again, from previously doing larger scale installation pieces. This change turned out to be of benefit to him artistically because he was able to develop a new portfolio. He comments that,

“I was happy and healthy and my practice was going well and it was sustaining. I could spend whole days lost within my painting and so lockdown was bearable.”

Given his ongoing part-time job, Matthew was also able to access a regular income (Job-Keeper) which provided him with a more than adequate income through the lockdowns.

3.2.2. Benefits

For some of the interviewees, an immediate benefit of the lockdown and closures was the removal of the need to make a living. If the artists were eligible to receive income from

one of the government schemes introduced to support the unemployed, and their own living expenses were relatively low, some experienced a sense of relief at first as they did not need to go out and hustle for work. As Richard, the early-career musician, observed,

‘It was almost like a welcome escape to be honest. It was a period of rest. Just being able to reset, because when you’re being a musician you don’t get this long-term rest.’

Similarly, Matthew, the early-career visual artist, felt that while he lost the opportunity to show work during 2020, he believed he gained time to really develop the quality of his work.

After a delay, Julie, the mid-career musician, was also able to access a regular income (JobKeeper). While this was considerably less than her normal income, given her seniority as a full-time orchestral musician, it still enabled her to cover her normal living expenses. She decided that she would use the time freed up from not working at the orchestra, to focus on other work that was important to her. She already had her own performance group, a trio, and the lockdown time enabled them to commission new work for their group from local composers, thus helping to support other artists.

‘The break has given me money and time to focus on other projects’.

Julie organized gigs for the trio at a virtual concert hall that had been set up, focused on her role with a regional music festival, and undertook a personal development program that would support a new venture in arts training. Julie reflected more recently that the enforced time off has been an enormous blessing as she has been able to focus on her other work projects, spend quality time with her family, and not be so distracted by the responsibilities of day-to-day living and working. Julie also decided that in future the regional festival concerts would be video recorded and then be available online. Hence, she made an adaptation to ensure that the festival could still occur, even if it was in a different medium.

3.2.3. Drawbacks

There were several drawbacks for the interviewees because of the experience. For example, Mary, the early-career actor, found the experience of the lockdowns generally quite depressing because she missed the camaraderie of the rehearsal room and the company of her friends. Early on she experienced a week where rehearsals were conducted online. She found this experience challenging and admitted that she was relieved that it only lasted a week. She thought too that the digital medium did not suit the theatre discipline because she felt that theatre always needed a live audience.

Ann, the mid-career visual artist, works from a studio at home in her backyard. The proximity, however, of her studio to her domestic space caused issues for her over the several periods of lockdown. Both her partner and her two children also had to work from home during the lockdown periods. This meant that they also had to use her studio space to do their work from time to time. She says that this has meant that,

‘I have lost my private space to think. I have lost my mental state to think because my family is at home’.

Richard, the early-career musician, noted too that as the lockdown time went on, he felt quite sad, especially because he felt that the government did not seem to value the arts, given their slow response in providing any direct support to the sector. He also began to miss the stimulation of doing a gig. Julie, the mid-career musician, believes the emotional impact of her employer’s initial treatment of the musicians will last for a long time in both her and her colleagues’ consciousness. She felt sad too about the impact of this on her future in the orchestra.

3.2.4. Challenges

There were many challenges for the interviewees during the experience, both personal and professional. Ann, the mid-career visual artist, thinks that the pandemic has exposed

the way Australian society really feels about artists, despite the work of artists having a critical psychological importance for people during this difficult time. She says,

‘Artists contribute to the economy and to society.’

Furthermore, she feels that visual artists are even lower down in the hierarchy than performing artists, given that she believes that little attention has been paid to their situation during this time, despite the cancellation of exhibitions everywhere. She notes, for example, that two group shows in which she was a participant were postponed or cancelled. While the Federal Government offered help to performing arts organizations after several months, she believes that very little has been offered to visual artists.

Angela, the late-career actor, commented that she thought that the experience of the lockdown,

‘... would probably be a lot harder when you were a younger person than when you’re an older person in these situations in some respects ...’.

She thought that, given that she had already achieved some financial security, as well as having already had a long career, the experience for her was not easy, but she said that it was bearable. She imagined it was not the same for younger performers.

The younger artists all made comments about their feelings on the experience. For example, Mary, the early-career actress, said,

‘I think what we’ve learned in this is that the arts do return. It’s just at what cost?’

Richard, the early-career musician, also shows concern for the future of the arts when he says,

‘... maybe it might be a long time before the music scene really recovers from this’.

On the other hand, Matthew, the early-career visual artist, acknowledged that his own situation was better than that of many of his peers because he had a regular income. As noted already, Matthew received an income from having a regular job. However, some of his peers were not so fortunate. He noted that those peers who depended solely on their artwork for their income, had been having a very difficult time. He observed, however, that many visual artists supported each other by buying work that was promoted via Instagram. He said this worked well for several of them, especially those selling in the lower price range.

3.2.5. Ways Forward

Several of the artists talked about how the lockdown period clarified their own future goals. For example, Angela, the late-career actor, said the lockdown period reinforced that she just wanted to work with others, but it also made her more reflective about what she would do in the future in her acting work and not just choose to do anything on offer. She also observed that she was inspired by the various web workshops she attended, where she could talk to others in the same situation and learn new techniques for working online. Mary, the early-career actor, also decided that the forced breaks of lockdown made her review both her career and her values.

‘I just want to be doing work that I actually value and I love right now. It’s like you don’t have to be so busy in other words.’

For Ann, the mid-career visual artist, continuing to do her work is the most important thing, and she takes solace from it, even if there is no possibility that anyone will see the work in the short term. Matthew, the early-career visual artist felt that the ‘time out’ of his normal working life was a ‘gift’ in a sense because it enabled him to take advantage of several new possibilities, such as preparing for a solo exhibition and winning a prestigious fellowship. Richard, the early-career musician, said that the reality of not being able to play in public renewed his original passion for music. It gave him the time to both practice his instrument and to re-visit the music that he loved. Julie, the mid-career musician,

also commented that having the extra time available meant that she could give herself a complete refresher course in her instrument and that, in a sense, was a gift.

4. Discussion

4.1. Impact

The major challenges for artists during the time of the pandemic have been economic survival, an ability to still do their work, a place to work, a sense of validation or acknowledgement of the value of their work, and the necessity of maintaining good mental health [2,4,28,30,32,40,41]. For many, all of these issues have been problematic. As noted on the web site 'I lost my gig', it is likely that many individuals will decide after the experience of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns to retrain and follow another professional path [44]. It is known that performing artists have been very affected by the lockdowns because, in many cases, they are unable to do their work and are unable to receive any compensation for their lost income [2,32,34,40]. However, visual artists have been affected too because of the cancellation or postponement of planned exhibitions [27,28,30]. An exhibition can take many months to prepare, and if the opportunity falls through, it can dramatically affect your income because of a loss of potential sales, as well as the reality of less art form exposure [30].

The shock of the lockdown and the closure of all cultural activity was obviously huge for all the interviewees [2,4,28,30,32,34]. However, as the late-career actor noted, the shock for younger performers may have been harder. Developing a career in the performing arts is always challenging, and then to see it disappear in an instant is hard to imagine. The mid-career musician and the late-career actor were both more sanguine about this time, perhaps reflecting that they had already achieved much of what they wanted to achieve as artists. Alternatively, they could see that this was a time that would pass, but meanwhile, they would use the opportunity to do work that they had not had time for previously. The mid-career visual artist, however, felt that the closure of art galleries and the cessation of other activities connected with the visual arts was not publicly acknowledged in the same way that the closure of theatres and festivals had been [27,28,30].

The intrusion by family into the workspace of the visual artist is a reality for those who are in lockdown when everyone is being forced to be at home. As the visual artist's workspace is already at home, the capacity to escape everyone else is not possible. In fact, she has had to compromise her own workspace for the needs of the rest of her family. This has caused her mental and emotional anguish and inhibited her capacity to carry on with her work. This need for mental and emotional space to create is a critical issue for many artists, but it has a particular impact on female artists who are often working in a space that is also a domestic space [13,21,22]. In addition, the main responsibility for childcare usually falls to the female [21,22].

4.2. Adaptations

Monetizing work during the pandemic has been an issue for many. The early-career visual artist talked about how his peers are using Instagram as a way of showing their work and selling it. The example of Matthew Burrows of England and his site, ASP, demonstrates how artists can adapt successfully during a pandemic and still get their work out there and even sell it. In both cases though, it is often the artists themselves who are supporting other artists [29]. The presence of the digital concert hall in Melbourne has enabled many classical musicians to reach a wider audience, as well as continue making needed income [31,45]. For example, the mid-career musician enjoyed the opportunity provided by the digital concert hall and recognized the benefits of the digital medium for music presentation. This has meant that she has now planned for a different approach to her own regional music festival by ensuring all the concerts are digitally recorded. The pandemic has accelerated the use of digital technology for making work and marketing it, as well as providing an important networking tool for individuals [28,29,31,45].

The early-career actor expressed concern about the suitability of the theatre art form for the digital medium. While the pandemic provoked an adaptation by theatre groups and individuals to learn more about the ways of using the digital medium successfully, there are still acknowledged challenges for this art form, given its audience relationship [26,31]. There are many examples of theatre companies putting their work online, but it seems that it may be preferable for them if they can control the outcome [26,31,46]. The digital medium also presents advantages, such as those experienced by the Digital Concert Hall, as it enables access to a much larger and more diverse audience [31,45]. The touring company Critical Stages [46], for example, used the cessation of their own activity to upskill their members and look at ways of putting theatre performances online more successfully. This also confirms that those that have been able to survive and adapt, have been able to generate different approaches to working, which are likely to continue after the end of the pandemic.

Three of the interviewees were able to access a regular income, the mid-career musician, the early-career musician, and the early-career visual artist. All of them talked about how important that was to their well-being and productivity. The example of HOTA also confirms how significant it is for artists to have a regular income, both for their productivity and their psychological health. In the case of the mid-career musician, the lockdown time became a period of development and renewal of her dreams for her own professional future. The early-career visual artist remained optimistic through the time because he was receiving a regular income, and he was able to 'pivot' his own practice to suit his working situation. Likewise, the early-career musician enjoyed the opportunity to look after himself and focus again on the kind of music he most enjoyed.

It seems that the cessation of arts activities has been, at times, both a blessing and a challenge for many of the interviewees. It has allowed some to give renewed focus to their artistic practice without focusing on the necessity of making a living from it. This has been an important experience in terms of the sustainability of their arts practice. Others, however, have felt a sense of being somewhat adrift and lost in the experience. This possibly relates to several factors, including needing to work with others to make their work (as in the case of the young actor), being unable to make work because of the intrusion of others (as in the case of the older visual artist), and in all cases the need for a regular income. The importance of having a regular income and its connection with an individual's mental health have been documented elsewhere [13,40,41]. There is the connection too with the individual's identity as an artist and how challenging that is for them, if they cannot do their work [13,41].

4.3. Futures

From the study, there are four important issues that need to be addressed when considering how the work of artists can be sustainable. These issues are enhanced when considering the conditions of a pandemic. These can be summarized as a regular income, a place to work, a capacity to do work (relating to both the mental and the emotional factors, as well to time), and a validation of the artist's work. If all these factors are in place, then the artists can continue to do their work sustainably. Without even one of these factors in place, the sustainability of the artist comes under pressure. This is expressed in Figure 1 below.

The pandemic has provided a focus for seeing that if these requirements are not in place, then the individual artist suffers. Those artists for example who had all four conditions present were the ones who expressed less anxiety and stress (Matthew, Julie, and Richard). While none of the individuals interviewed contemplated a career change as a future possibility, they struggled with many aspects of the lockdowns and the impact of the pandemic on their sector. Yet, they were all determined to continue in their chosen careers once this time was over. Most of the individuals, however, expressed distress about how they believed that the arts were abandoned by governments through this period [2,30,32,34,35]. Furthermore, one individual expressed shock and distress about

the way her employer, a major cultural institution, treated its artists [2,3,36,37]. Some expressed a sense of sadness or even anger that their work as artists was not valued or respected [13,15,20]. They also felt a degree of invisibility during this time of social upheaval and felt keenly the paradox that the work of artists was so important to others but the artists themselves were being disregarded [1–4]. This reflects findings in the UNESCO study [1], in which artists comment on the importance of their work for the survival of others yet experienced a lack of help and support for themselves.

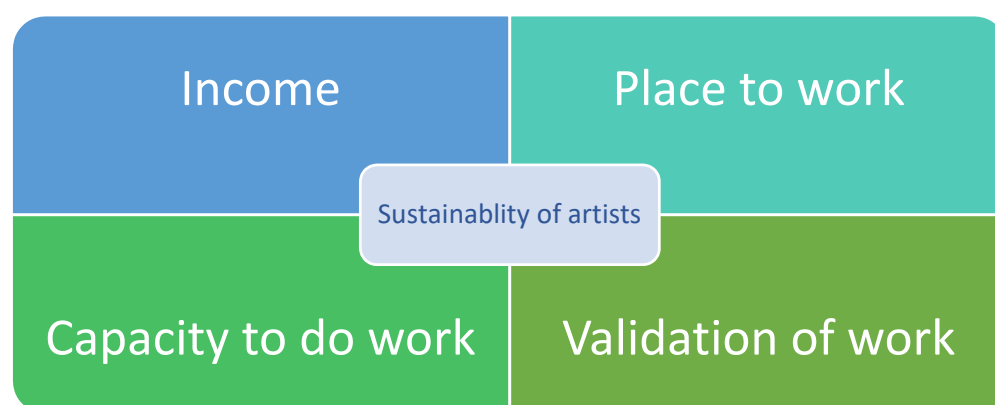


Figure 1. Factors that influence the sustainability of artists.

The art producers, by changing their work practices and placing artists first, demonstrated a model of how arts producers can respond successfully in a crisis [45–47]. In two of the examples, the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall and Critical Stages, their adaptation to the digital medium has provided benefits to themselves and to their artists in a way that would not have previously been considered. Both Critical Stages and the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall have upskilled their artists by providing experience and training in the digital medium. Moreover, the recognition, by both the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall and HOTA, that artists need a regular income, is providing benefits to both the artists and to the organizations. In the example of HOTA, their ArtKeeper program might provide a template for other arts centers to consider replicating in the future.

Some of the interviewees also talked about how this time has provided a reaffirmation of their reasons for doing their artistic work. In the case of the two musicians, for example, it has enabled them to really update their skills and come out of the experience renewed as artists. Similarly for the early-career visual artist, the lockdown experience was a period of artistic renewal for him, causing him to feel that he was stronger as an artist. Overall, for the interviewees, the pandemic experience and the subsequent lockdowns has been a reminder of what is important about their artistic practice. It also demonstrates that for many artists their work sustains them, and they will persist in doing it against all odds.

5. Conclusions

The past two years have provided a new and challenging experience for everyone in the arts sector. The reality of closures and lockdowns has prevented many from doing their work and caused considerable economic loss. It has also contributed to emotional and mental problems for those who have lost both their work and their sense of identity, which they also often derive from their work. Artists are always challenged by the need to make an income in a precarious profession. The overlay of the pandemic has heightened the difficulty of this.

Yet, it is also evident that many artists from all art forms, while experiencing great loss in several cases, have also adapted, pivoted, and grown through the experience. Those who enjoyed a regular income through this time, have had the better experience, as the need to be concerned about living costs, has been reduced. The enforced career breaks that they have also experienced, have given many of them more time to consolidate and

develop their art practice. This is a sustaining activity too, as it ensures that the artists will resume their careers feeling stronger and readier to contribute to their art form. However, it is also noted that female artists, who already experience challenges because of their gender, have further issues to negotiate when their workspace is taken over by others as a domestic space, as was experienced during the pandemic. In addition, a female artist's role within the family can intrude dramatically on her ability to do her artwork. This is a subject that needs further research.

Many artists have benefited from the opportunity to develop better digital skills that may enable them to use the digital medium more successfully in the future. Some artists, however, still express concern about the adaptability of the digital form to their discipline. Arts organizations in general are likely to continue to adapt and use the digital medium in a way that may provide great benefits in the future for both themselves and their audiences. There is, however, a lingering issue where artists have adapted to their changed circumstances but also experienced a sense of not being valued through it. This experience of not being valued was highlighted for many of them by an indifferent government response (and by the response of their employer) to their situation. This no doubt reflects a more generalized situation in which artists continue to feel like 'outsiders', even though their work may sustain the broader community during a crisis.

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