

Reflection

In response to 'Planning in the face of uncertainty' International Webinar and facilitation of break out session 4

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I was very glad to be invited to participate in the seminar event, which brought together a hugely talented, diverse and extraordinarily committed range of festival makers and artists from across the globe. It provided a valuable opportunity to learn about, discuss and compare our recent experiences of the impact of Covid-19 on individual festivals, and reflect on how much anxiety, labour, loss and grief had been generated by the pandemic. The insights into these experiences were incredibly rich, and the pain palpable, yet each participant generously gave their time and thoughts to the collective interest in recovery and renaissance of arts festival sector. Festivals were described by one representative of ACI as the glue for public engagement in the arts, the rationale for the cross-cutting investment in festivals being that they ground and make sure of the arts for audiences by bringing new experiences, productions and practices to their localities and underwriting the risks of engagement. All this has changed of course, with the risks of public health and poverty, empty venues and folding organisations, now being part of the new normal.

As has already been noted the panel, break-out groups and plenary did not generate a clear set of recommendations for the near- and intermediate future for the sector and its policy stakeholders. This was partly due to the technical constraints of using Zoom, which provides a great platform for the talking heads but is less suitable for dialogue requiring a more paced and patient approach to ensure democratic participation by all in the zoom room. But it was also, I feel, because it was more important to have a space for reflection and recognition, for people to say out loud their hopes and fears rather than having to come up with more immediate creative solutions. Most if not all participants had spent the last 4 months doing just that, scheduling work, pivoting digitally, disaggregating programmes and communicating with stakeholders and audiences at breakneck speed to keep on top of changing environments. Most I expect were too exhausted to try to assemble what the new world should look like into any meaningful form. One of the comments that stuck with me

from the break-out group I chaired was about how nice it was to finally have a weekend: everyone in the room agreed.

For me as a researcher of cultural policy, the comparative lens provided by the gathering was extraordinarily useful. It was fascinating to hear about the different organisational and policy responses in different countries across Europe and in the Global South, revealing different relationships between state, culture and society variously organised around hands-on or arms-length models. The panel and other delegates' accounts shone a light on varying welfare state capacities and approaches to support and subsidise artists' livelihood and attendant differences in the discourses and realities of accountability and risk management from their countries and places of origin.

Covid-19 has become an unwitting agent in framing and deriving cultural value: from a cultural economics perspective, by removing the opportunity for audiencing it has become a public good contingent valuation exercise bar none, showing how much people intrinsically value what has been taken away. Unfortunately this 'willingness to pay' exercise is being treated very differently by different states and their apparatuses, with the UK government at the time of the seminar being one of the most frustrating cases (as this was before the announcement of the £1.57bn grants and loan scheme). The distinctions between the different experiences of the festival makers were less remarkable: the sector is already internationalised and ultra-communicative, sharing, passing around and transmitting creative programming approaches across the globe whilst sizing up how friends, allies and competitors work to deliver their programmes collaboratively and progressively. The observations and reflections of new experiences when using digital and the concerns over quality and metrics were useful to share for mutual benefit.

There were, however, some notable absences in the conversations and statements I heard that were apparent to me perhaps because of my particular research interests in local cultural policy and participation. These concerned firstly any reference to the broader impact on those working in arts and creative industries, in events production, technical support, marketing, and broader creative economies, which rely on precarious and often freelance/temporary employment. Many statements were chiefly concerned with the festivals as arts organisations and the festival as an object made of further artworks, rather than a set of relationships connecting communities with social and cultural economies. There was some discussion about how there was an opportunity for some forms of festive arts – outdoor arts in particular – to lead in helping places with recovery.

I also felt that there was relatively little discussion about audiences and participants in festivals, and how the pandemic may effect audience development and community engagement. The resources brought by audiences to arts festivals, including the risks they are prepared to take to participate, are paramount – and it felt like sometimes the conversations were more supply-led than sensitive to these changing circumstances.

Overall it was an impressive event, which has hopefully brought some valuable insights to ACI as well as space for collaborative reflection, and collective hope for the future.

Dr Abigail Gilmore, 27 July 2020