Performing artists need policy support

How can cultural policy support freelance performing artists? It's a question Cecilia Dinardi has been asking in her latest research into the impact of Covid.

Dario Ayala during a circus performance with aerial straps in Buenos Aires
Photo by Jocelyn Mandrik

'Who am I if I am not able to sing?' - a self-employed soprano based in London wondered in angst a few months ago. When our sense of self is tied up to what we do, crises like the Covid-19 pandemic have profound consequences for our subjectivities, personal identities and social lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken up the cultural sector in unprecedented ways, with catastrophic consequences for artists and organisations, as has been widely documented. But what have we learnt from the pandemic? What specific actions can cultural policy take to support the self-employed in the cultural and creative sectors?

In a collaborative research project between Goldsmiths, University of London and the Universidad de Buenos Aires, we looked at how self-employed performing artists experienced the pandemic, what coping strategies they adopted to weather the crisis, and how they would like to have been supported by cultural policies. The project was funded by the British Academy and conducted by sociologists Dr Cecilia Dinardi, Prof Ana Wortman and economist Dr Matias Muñoz Hernández.

We engaged 73 self-employed performing artists (opera singers, musicians, actors, circus artists and dancers) from London and Buenos Aires, who were selected using an intentional purposeful sample. Our fieldwork was virtual as it took place throughout the lockdowns (November 2020-2021) and involved in-depth interviews and focus groups on Microsoft Teams. Using networks and social media posts, we recruited artists at different stages in their careers. We discussed findings and policy suggestions in two face-to-face policy workshops with artists, policymakers, industry representatives and researchers.

A catastrophic impact

We heard how the pandemic came to shatter an already deteriorated cultural sector, especially for those working in conditions of low pay, job insecurity and informality. The restrictions imposed to control the pandemic affected artists' personal and professional lives: from worsening their mental health (increased anxiety, frustration and depression), to a loss of income and job sources, complete uncertainty about their future and an inability to plan their careers. Most did not receive adequate – or sometimes any - government support as they were ineligible for different reasons. The cancellation of work meant, in most cases, little or no compensation for freelancers. As a London-based actor put it, *''Why coronavirus is a perfect storm is because everyone has a different second or third job... Whatever it is, all is freelance. All of it is zero hours and so they all collapsed and everyone had a bad time'*.

Some artists managed to diversify their practices and interests during the pandemic, for example by learning new skills and investing in equipment where possible. Staying at home was seen primarily as a learning opportunity for personal and professional development. However, none of the participants were willing to train in another discipline or change careers, indicating a strong sense of vocation across the industry.

The pandemic made visible the precariousness, instability and vulnerability in which freelancers in the performing arts work. They felt abandoned, forgotten and under-supported. Our research also found that resistance, together with resilience, was important in voicing artists' concerns, making sector demands and acting together through collectives and networks.

Diverse coping strategies and digital challenges

Artists adopted various strategies for facing the crisis, including accepting new temporary jobs unrelated to the performing arts, learning new skills that helped their lives as performers move online, teaching classes online, doing livestreams, taking up new outdoor activities, and helping others. Some moved back in with their parents or left the city so they could afford the rent. The sudden interruption of activities was generally received positively at first but later became a great weight for most.

The use of digital technology is changing cultural production and consumption, but livestreaming practices are linked to digital literacy and resources. The opening generated by digitalisation brought greater opportunities in Argentina, since it allowed expanding the horizons of audiences, collaborations and students towards an international audience. In the UK, however, this opening was already there and this gain was not felt. Although there was an increase in the use of streaming platforms such as Patreon, Tidal and Bandcamp to generate income, the need to learn digital skills for creation, production and distribution became apparent. Livestreaming didn't work for everyone, and many found it exhausting, difficult to do and not financially worthwhile if they did not have a large number of followers in social media. With the exception of music, there was a sense that technology didn't get along well with disciplines such as theatre, opera, dance and circus. As an actress from Buenos Aires put it, *'theatre must be face to face and with an audience or not at all'*.

Implications for policy

So what should cultural policymakers do to support freelance artists? Financial help is obviously essential, but support also needs to go beyond this. There are other areas where aid is needed - such as in overcoming the digital divide and providing pastoral care. It was also surprising to note that the policies related to the pandemic were not always the foremost thing in performers' minds - in the UK the impact on mobility (tours, exchanges and residences) due to Brexit rather than Covid were of more concern to some participants. Below are some of the practical suggestions put forward by the performing artists of our study:

1. Carry out a **census** of cultural workers ('how are you going to help us if you don't know what we do, how many we are and where we work?').

2. Provide **mental health** support ('we helped so many people cope with the pandemic with our work, don't forget us'). The way freelancers were treated during the pandemic negatively affected their wellbeing.

3. Show **empathy and appreciation** for cultural work ('don't tell us to re-train! It's patronising'). In practice this could mean having a public debate about the future of the sector considering what we have learnt from the pandemic.

4. Offer **tax relief** for cultural venues. Should there be another pandemic, this could come sooner rather than later. Culture was not a priority rescue area for the government and artists felt the help was little and late.

5. Impose **new taxes** on big corporate platforms (Amazon, Spotify, Apple, Youtube) and use funds to support freelance cultural workers.

6. Next time, establish a better **furlough scheme** for the self-employed and use more inclusive eligibility criteria.

7. Implement **universal basic income**

8. Support artists with **work visas** (especially those not eligible for universal credit) after Brexit

9. Generate **work opportunities** for freelance artists (use existing cultural infrastructure, guarantee monthly performances, commission them for media shows and public events)

10. Create **networks** of support, promotion and training for freelancers

11. Help artists **organise** themselves by centralising to tackle existing dispersion and divides in the cultural sector

12. Offer **artistic and digital skills training** and help artists build new virtual audiences

13. Improve access to **internet and digital equipment** (for example, by providing subsidies, loans or incentives to buy microphones, computers, cameras, and editing software)

At a time when rising living costs and enduring inequalities challenge the fragile recovery of freelancers, cultural policymakers could learn from the pandemic and put plans in action before the next crisis hits.

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Video of policy workshop in Buenos Aires