

# Eight ways to fix the arts industry, postpandemic

The past year exposed some of the sector's vulnerabilities, but the pause and subsequent workarounds have created an opportunity to identify deeper problems and create meaningful change in the long term

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The tap dancing has been impressive, but it can only go on for so long. A year into the shutdown that devastated a large swath of the arts sector, both in Canada and abroad, the shock of the catastrophe has faded and a postpandemic future is within sight.

Muscling through has been a bit of a miracle. But if the pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of the arts ecosystem, it has also created an opening for meaningful change. The pause and subsequent workarounds have allowed cultural thinkers to identify deeper problems – and some solutions.

Artist and researcher David Maggs’s coming report *Art and the World After This*, written for the Metcalf Foundation (an arts-forward non-profit) and the City of Toronto, points out that the sector is dealing with the effects of not just one disruption, but four: COVID-19, rising social unrest, the digital revolution and the sustainability crisis.

Maggs sees it as an unprecedented opportunity. Losing the familiar, he writes, does not always lead to things getting worse.

“Pandemic problems aren’t the problems we need to solve,” says Maggs, artistic director of Gros Morne Summer Music. “We need to solve issues of inclusivity, we need to solve issues of business models and we need to solve our larger purpose in the public imagination.”

He is not the only one calling for massive change. Calgary Arts Development (CADA) chief executive Patti Pon shared this analogy: “If your house burns down, when you build your house back, you don’t build it exactly the way you had it before. You make improvements. You do what you’ve always wanted to do. That’s what we have a chance to do here,” Pon says. “Build back better.”

## **Virtual events must be more than a spruced-up Zoom call**





Calgary Wordfest experimented with free and paid events as well as passes for its fall festival, and organizers were shocked at the number of passes sold, says CEO Shelley Youngblut.

HEATHER SAITZ/HANDOUT

When the federal government announced pandemic relief funding for the arts this month, more than \$50-million was earmarked to help arts organizations adapt or make work for virtual audiences. This will help performance companies, festivals, museums and galleries continue to present content online.

But to keep people attending virtual events, organizations have to do more than stick a camera at the back of a hall and hit record.

What Calgary Wordfest CEO Shelley Youngblut discovered was that by investing in the medium and thinking of the events as online entertainment – more like a TV show than a watered-down version of an in-person interview – “people will tune in. They’ll tune in regularly and they’ll tune in on demand.”

A big question around virtual events is how to monetize them. Wordfest experimented with free and paid events as well as passes for its fall festival. For that weeks-long festival, the organization sold more than 200 passes at \$100 each. “Which shocked us,” Youngblut says.

The online world has its advantages, of course: You can tune into a book launch or watch a film from anywhere (geo-blocking notwithstanding).

Equally exciting, local festivals have access to superstar guests. Consider this week alone: on Tuesday, Calgary Wordfest held an event with Nobel Prize winner Kazuo

Ishiguro. On Sunday, the Vancouver Writers Fest will host Ethan Hawke to discuss his novel, *A Bright Ray of Darkness*.

The sector needs to stop thinking about live-versus-online as a hierarchy, says Andréa Grau, whose Toronto-based public relations firm works with film festivals and other arts organizations – and think about them as different types of experiences.

Moving forward, expect a hybrid model – organizations doing both live and virtual events.

For companies concerned about competing with sophisticated bigger-city options, Tricia Baldwin, director of the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts at Queen’s University, says audiences are loyal to local companies. Further, exposure creates appetite. “It actually makes music and culture more ubiquitous in a very beautiful way.”

## **Innovate to get back to live events**

The hand-wringing over dwindling audiences for live performance such as opera and the symphony long predates the pandemic. So when COVID-19 shut down the sector, there was concern about possible long-term consequences.

Even with the uneven success of online shows, getting people off the couch and back into the theatre is going to take work. Audiences have to feel safe – and compelled by the material.

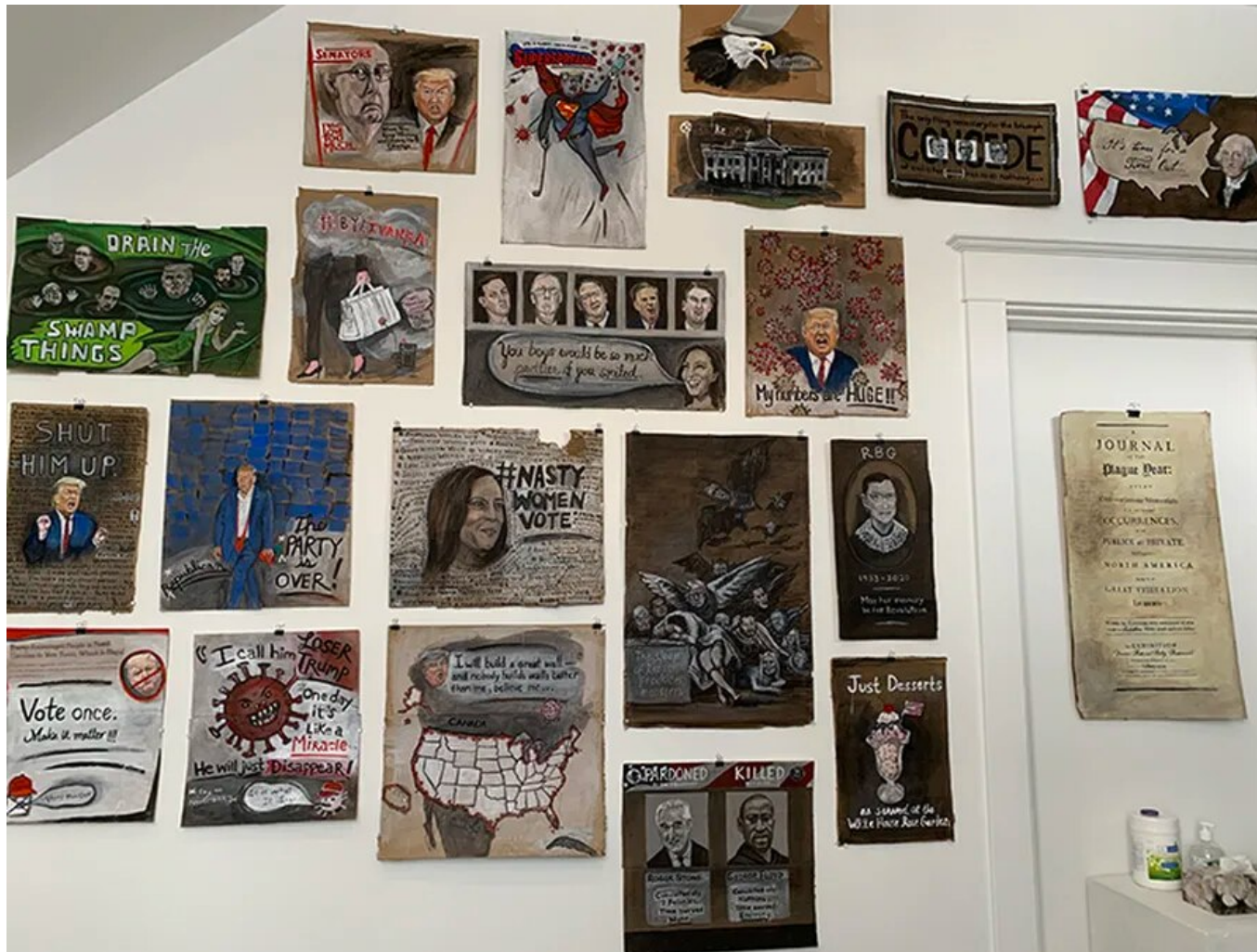
“There are many economic and technological forces who are deeply invested in pushing us online,” says Marcus Youssef, a Siminovitch Prize-winning playwright, actor and director.

“It’s kind of up to us to fight for that. And to resist. There’s pressure from funders: pivot, adapt, go online. And there’s lots of good things about that emerging digital space. But I really feel called to fight for the importance of our physical relationships to each other as storytellers.”

Live pop music is a different story. Younger audiences might be more willing to get back into the club or arena, but physical distancing will be harder to accomplish.

“We’re not going back to crowd surfing, we’re not going back to 35,000 people watching Weezer in a field until everybody’s vaccinated,” musician Jim Bryson says. “What’s insurance going to be like? Who’s going to underwrite a festival?”

**The value of the arts needs to be respected**



Betsy Rosenwald's installation at the Journal of the Plague Year.

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The way artists are paid, housed and forced to navigate a precarious gig-economy life has come to light during this tumultuous time.

In 2016, there were 158,100 Canadians who identified as artists – who spent more time at their art than any other occupation. That's almost 1 per cent of the overall



Canadian labour force. The median income for Canadian artists was \$24,300 – 44-per-cent less than all Canadian workers. And 52 per cent of artists were self-employed, compared with 12 per cent of Canadian workers.

During the pandemic, the CERB and CRB have been a lifeline – accessible for some artists owing to lobby efforts by organizations such as ACTRA. And that has fuelled discussions about a universal basic income.

In prebudget consultations with Ottawa, The Writers' Union of Canada asked the government to implement a Basic Income Guarantee program.

“How do you not advocate for ensuring a level of income that enables all of us to benefit so significantly, when the arts are as vital in a community as we have seen during the pandemic?” Pon says. “If we don't take advantage of this opportunity, no one's going to do it for us.”

There are other needs, too, including health care and housing. “I don't know how an artist is getting any dental right now, or any eye care,” she says.

More studio space would also help. Saskatoon-based visual artists Dawna Rose and Betsy Rosenwald, who recently collaborated on their *Journal of the Plague Year* exhibition at the same time as they lost the studio space they share, are calling for incentives to encourage landlords to rent out space to artists.

“We have this ecosystem that's really quite delicate,” Writers' Union of Canada chair Anita Daher says. “But you put a few supports in and it shores us all up.”

**Ditch some traditional models for non-profits**

The governance model for non-profits was borrowed from the corporate sector: a board of directors oversees the company's operations. But the board members are volunteers who may or may not have direct knowledge about the art they are championing. There is a growing feeling that this model is fundamentally flawed.

“What kind of policies does a board of business people create for a theatre? How does that translate? Make good theatre? What is good theatre? Get bums in seats? How is that compatible with good theatre?” says playwright Yvette Nolan, who has been an artistic director and served on boards.

“I’ve been yelling to tear it all down for a long time, but nobody was listening to me. And now the pandemic happened and it is all tumbling down by itself,” says Nolan, who is researching the governance model for her master’s degree.

She is calling for a change in the legislation so non-profits don’t all have to incorporate. She thinks each organization should be able to create its own governance structure.

Funding models are also under scrutiny. Maggs says it’s time to look at who dominates the funding landscape. Certain organizations are considered arts leaders

Dawna Rose's installation at the Journal of the Plague Year.

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within the Canadian non-profit arts sector, he writes in his report – and these organizations built themselves up while marginalized groups were unable to fully participate.

It's also time to reconsider the subscription model that many live performance companies use. If their generally older subscriber base isn't wooed back postpandemic, will their empty seats be filled by subsequent generations – who have not had the same sort of classical arts education, and often have different tastes? Maggs doubts it.

It's scary to contemplate, but considering this reality could take companies in the right direction.

“I think it'll be a long time before we're willing to sit shoulder to shoulder with other people. That can also be a blessing. Now we don't have to do *The Sound of Music* or *A Christmas Carol* again in order to fill a house,” says Nolan, who is based in Saskatoon.

“Maybe we want to take the time to develop those writers who have not had those forums,” she says. “To take the time to shepherd those voices to our stages.”

## **Diversity has to be about input, not just numbers**

In the midst of the pandemic, there has also been colossal social upheaval. The uprising led by Black Lives Matter has led to long overdue movement in the cultural sector. Companies have pledged to improve hiring and programming

decisions. To ensure the revolution sticks, change has to be intentional, authentic and comprehensive.

“Every decision or every hiring has to be looked at through that racial lens,” says Nathalie Younglai, founder of the organization BIPOC TV & Film.

Younglai says people in positions of power must look beyond their immediate circles when hiring, and the commitment to inclusion must be done holistically: from the creators to cast, crew, even suppliers. And in consultation with the communities you’re trying to reach.

Structures that keep BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) creatives and crew members on the sidelines – such as access to union membership – should be examined.

”There are a number of hoops to jump through,” Younglai says, citing as an example the need for Black hairdressers on Canadian sets. “We shouldn’t have to fly someone up from L.A. to do that job.”

Nathalie Younglai, founder of BIPOC TV & Film, says people in positions of power must look beyond their immediate circles when hiring.

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**Use technology for community-building and collaboration**

The pandemic has demonstrated that we don't need to be in the same room to hold a meeting – or a rehearsal. Even music collaboration is possible now, thanks to technology such as Stanford University's JackTrip open-source software, which allows for jamming in real time – minus the lags of Skype and Zoom.

Videoconferencing has also been a valuable tool for building community.

“I've often felt on my own island on the West Coast and not really connected to the Black community,” says Kesi Smyth, General Manager at 604 Records in Vancouver and a member of Advance, Canada's Black Music Business Collective. “I can now be in touch with all these other music industry professionals who are facing these same issues as me.”

BIPOC TV & Film started holding virtual sessions on weekends for its members soon after the killing of George Floyd. Initially called Solidarity Sundays, the name evolved to Self-Care Sundays. The initiative will continue into the new normal.

## **Advocate for the arts**

Jim Bryson is worried: When the scramble is over and governments are left with hefty bills, what will happen to arts funding?

“My biggest fear is that when we come out of this climate we're in, arts funding is going to get decimated,” the Ottawa-based musician says.

“I'm more afraid of what it's going to look like in three years, not what it's going to look like in six months.”



Advocacy is going to be key – and Bryson says artists must be involved.

Over the past year, the arts have provided a ticket out of the pandemic doldrums via books, binge-watches, music to dance or cry to. The value of the arts has been on full display. (Although Maggs says that is far less true for the Canadian non-profit arts sector.)

The economic benefits have also been in the spotlight. This is particularly true for the film and TV production sector. “It immediately became apparent what a large swath of economic activity it is,” says Pete Mitchell, president and chief operating officer of Vancouver Film Studios. The industry in British Columbia alone brought in up to \$3.6-billion in 2019-20, before the pandemic, employing up to 70,000 people.

Both points – the personal balm and the economic boon – will be important when it comes to advocating for support. Organizations may need to take on a bigger role in activism.

“I think the role of public funders is going to change dramatically after the pandemic, and if it doesn’t, shame on us,” says Pon, in Calgary. “We will be doing a disservice to the very sectors or communities that we were set up to serve.”

## **Consider a graceful exit**

When CADA launched its Organization Structural Grants program in February, Pon heard from funders across North America. The program is meant to help struggling

arts organizations find a resolution – not necessarily survival. Merging, collaborating, transforming and closing down are all good options.

“If you realize that, boy, there are whole processes and systems set up to help non-profits wind down with dignity ... I think there’s comfort in that,” says Mike Grogan, CEO of Calgary-based IntegralOrg, which consults for charities and non-profits.

Shutting down should not be a humiliating or isolating process. It’s part of a natural progression.

This is something Maggs encourages in his report. “If we are here to reflect and reshape society, how can it change so much, and we so little?” Better to step aside and allow others access to the resources and attention.

One surprising and illuminating finding in Maggs’s report came out of asking artists, arts leaders and researchers whether, if given the chance in a speculative future, they would reverse the events of the 2020 pandemic. Nobody said yes. It’s a tiny sample group and not statistically significant – and of course no one would wish for the deaths and devastation. But it

Calgary Arts Development (CADA) chief executive Patti Pon heard from funders across North America after launching the Organization Structural Grants program in February.

MARNIE BURKHART/HANDOUT

underscores this salient point: “The model is broken,” Maggs writes. “Things must change massively, and massive change is coming.”

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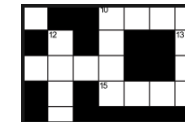
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