

Further signs of the “devastating impact” of the pandemic on arts and artists: What are the implications?

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The ongoing destruction of the jobs, incomes and aspirations of tens of thousands of artists of every kind in the US and elsewhere has implications that go beyond the immediate cultural sphere.

More astute bourgeois commentators are expressing concern. After all, what would it mean if this unemployed or under-employed, increasingly disaffected social grouping were to begin to think more critically about the economic structure of society, in short, to question capitalism? What would the consequences be if artists began in serious numbers “to hold ... the mirror up to” contemporary American life?

The news reports and statistics remain stunning. In September, the co-authors of a Brookings Institution report, “Lost Art: Measuring COVID-19’s Devastating Impact on America’s Creative Economy,” published the month before and to which we will return, issued a further appeal, “We need all hands on deck to save America’s arts and culture economy.”

Professors Richard Florida (University of Toronto) and Michael Seman (Colorado State University) observed in *USA Today* that the “COVID-19 pandemic has decimated arts and culture in America, wiping out as many as half of all jobs for performing artists and musicians, and nearly a third of jobs for all those who work in the creative economy broadly spanning arts, music, theater, design, entertainment and media.”

“From April through July,” they continued, “about 2.7 million jobs and \$150 billion in revenue were lost. As the crisis took hold this spring, the average income of American artists and creatives plummeted to just about \$14,000 a year.”

The two academics noted that as “brutal as the losses are in jobs and dollars, the longer-run costs to society are even more devastating.” Far too many of the “more than 100,000 community theaters, art galleries, music venues, performance spaces and arts organizations of all sorts have

closed their doors already; many more will likely shutter before the crisis ends.”

Florida and Seman expressed the hope in their *USA Today* piece that a Biden-Harris administration, were it to become a reality, would “put together a modern-day version” of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs for artists, such as the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers’ Project and the Federal Music Project, all initiatives of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Those programs collectively subsidized painters, photographers, writers and musicians, including Dorothea Lange, Jackson Pollock, Jacob Lawrence, John Steinbeck, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and others. The music project “not only supported professional musicians but also documented America’s indigenous music, from blues and work songs to folk, bluegrass and more.”

This is a delusional expectation. If Joe Biden and Kamala Harris take power, as they indicate in nearly every one of their actions and statements, it will be on an extremely right-wing, militarist and anti-working-class basis and program. The possibility of social reform on the level of Roosevelt’s policies has been absolutely excluded by the deep-going and advanced crisis of American capitalism.

The Brookings Institution is a prominent establishment think tank. The reference to the New Deal reveals that the concerns of Florida and Seman, as they themselves point out, are not merely economic. The subsidization of artists and others during the Great Depression was part of the greater effort to attach professionals and intellectuals to existing institutions, including the Democratic Party, and generally slow or prevent the eruption of social convulsions. After all, as another Brookings Institution paper (“Want to reduce global fragility? Empower civil society”), also published in August, commented: “COVID-19 is acting as an accelerant for instability and unrest worldwide.”

Notwithstanding their perspective and agenda, Florida and Seman point to facts in their “Lost Art” report that are

unprecedented. In addition to the figures cited above, the co-authors estimated that the “creative industries” would “sustain a loss of nearly a third (31 percent) of all employment and 9 percent of sales from April through July.” Florida and Seman calculated that the “hardest-hit sector” would be the fine and performing arts, which would “suffer estimated losses of almost 1.4 million jobs and \$42.5 billion in sales. These losses represent 50 percent of all jobs and 27 percent of all sales in that sector.”

On September 10, the *Art Newspaper* carried this headline, “It is not just artists who are starving: how the US can rebuild its creative industry post-Covid.” The article points out that along with the “starving” artists, museum workers face “mounting job cuts as institutions and non-profits slash budgets.” And, on the commercial side of the art world, “event venues and galleries are whittling staff down to a core few as business remains limited or suspended. A UBS and Art Basel report published yesterday finds that one third of galleries surveyed downsized their staff in the first half of 2020, losing an average of four employees, with around half of the losses being full-time employees.”

Americans for the Arts reported last week that by mid-September “artists/creatives” were “among the most severely affected workers by the pandemic. 63 percent have become fully unemployed. They expect to lose an average of \$22,000 each in creativity-based income in 2020 (\$50.6 billion, nationally).”

Other findings by Americans for the Arts:

- 95 percent of artists report loss of income.
- 79 percent experienced a decrease in creative work that generated income (62 percent “drastic decrease”).
- 67 percent are unable to access the supplies, resources, spaces or people necessary for creative work.
- 78 percent have no post-pandemic financial recovery plan.

Additional snapshots:

The Wisconsin Policy Forum reports that government officials estimate that 33.9 percent of those employed in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector in the state filed initial claims for unemployment between March 15 and July 5, which was the third highest among all sectors, behind only accommodation and food services (39.1 percent) and manufacturing (37.1 percent). “On a per-capita basis, Wisconsin ranked last in the nation in state funding support [for the arts], at 13 cents in 2020.”

Musicians of the Metropolitan Opera, according to Slipped Disc, who have gone unpaid since April, “say 30 percent of their number can no longer afford to live in the New York area and are seeking new lives elsewhere. Peter Gelb, the Met general manager, has said he will only pay the musicians if they agree to radically reduced rates. Federal support for the musicians is non-existent.”

This picture of cultural devastation, with governments unable or unwilling to assist in any serious manner, will contribute to the radicalization and shift to the left by serious artists. There will be no return to “normal.”

Writing in 1938, Leon Trotsky explained that “the union of art and the bourgeoisie remained stable, even if not happy, only so long as the bourgeoisie itself took the initiative and was capable of maintaining a regime both politically and morally ‘democratic.’” Such a relationship existed “in the same historical plane” as “granting special privileges to the top layer of the working class, and of mastering and subduing the bureaucracy of the unions and workers’ parties.”

The decay of bourgeois society, Trotsky continued, meant “an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions.” A crisis-ridden ruling class feared “superstitiously every new word, for it is no longer a matter of corrections and reforms for capitalism but of life and death.” All this has become very real and concrete in the US, along with the rest of the globe.

At the outset of the pandemic, in March 2020, we argued that the “ongoing and irreversible discrediting of capitalism will profoundly influence the further development of contemporary film, music, painting, literature and theater. Once again the naked drive for profit at any cost will provoke disgust and horror among artists, its underlying barbarism exposed for all those with eyes to see.

“It seems safe to predict that the attention of the best artists will swing in the direction of more critically examining the social and economic contradictions of the system in which they live, and which now endangers them and everyone else. The artists, along with the rest of the population, will want to know: How was this possible? Who is responsible? What can be done?”

This remains our view.



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