

US Midwest artists see collapse in income and careers during the pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has devastatingly affected the arts in the US.

Throughout 2020 and now halfway into 2021, millions of musicians, film industry workers, painters, and others in the US and elsewhere have had their incomes drastically cut or completely ended due to the inability to run concerts, film sets, festivals and other events and venues. Artists who rely on clients to provide them with income have seen their clientele being laid off themselves and unable to support them. At the same time, a good number of artists have died in the pandemic or been permanently affected by contracting the coronavirus.

The situation in the US is markedly worsened by the fact that the artists are almost entirely at the mercy of the “free market” and the whims of benevolent billionaire-philanthropists. Even before the current health disaster, federal programs like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were woefully underfunded (\$162.3 million in 2020), while trillions were handed to the military-industrial complex to make weapons for devastating future wars against major powers like China and Russia. Americans for the Arts has estimated that artists nationwide have lost \$12.5 billion in revenue since the pandemic began.

For artists based in the 12 states of the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota), the pandemic has seen their ability to make a living dry up dramatically.

Kansas City National Public Radio affiliate KCUR produced a podcast this April on the issue. Artist Inc., an organization that assists in the professional development of Midwestern artists, conducted a survey revealing that almost 60 percent of artists in the region experienced a decrease in creative output through 2020 and into 2021. Furthermore, 80 percent of artists reported that the pandemic has negatively affected their art practice.

Artist Inc. Program Specialist Kathy Liao explained on the podcast, “I think probably one of the biggest things that struck me as an artist myself is one in five artists, about 20

percent, still are not able to practice their art, and that’s a significant amount of artists in the region who still are not able to be in their studio, able to make the work that they do at this very moment.”

Artist Inc. has received numerous appeals for financial support and studio space from distressed artists. Also, many have sought support for mental health struggles that contribute to the regional drop in artistic productivity. One third of surveyed artists have been forced to find employment outside of the arts to survive. Forty-two percent applied for relief grants through nonprofits, foundations and other grant-giving entities. Within that group, 28 percent of artists applied for arts-related grants. Half of applicants received some sort of assistance. Three out of four artists reported negative or very negative effects on their practice, and 90 percent of Midwest artists experienced a loss of income from April 2020 to April 2021. Six out of eight artists have lost more than two income streams, which may include performance gigs, contracts, etc.

Performing artists in particular, such as musicians and dancers, have been at great risk of losing their entire incomes. The NEA reports that over 50 percent of actors, dancers and choreographers experienced unemployment in the third quarter of 2020. Temporary furloughs are an issue with employed artists. Richard Kuranda, Director of the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake, Illinois (45 miles northwest of Chicago), told Patch.com that the center was forced to furlough 40 percent of its staff during the pandemic. Only now is the organization beginning to rehire these employees.

The pandemic has caused visual artists to shift toward attempting to sell their work through social media and personal websites. Sales of gallery art for use as home decoration is one of the only art sectors that has seen an uptick in sales, as people forced to stay home due to lockdowns choose to adorn their residences. According to a recent Americans for the Arts survey, however, only 19 percent of fine artists’ sales come from social media. Eight-eight percent of visual artists have some kind of social media

presence now. Online crowdfunding through platforms like Patreon is another new potential income stream. Forty-two percent of artists in the Artist Inc. survey felt that how they deliver their art to the public has been permanently changed by the pandemic.

The statistics have been grim for every state in the Midwest since March 2020. When Americans for the Arts conducted a survey, it found that in Iowa at least 700 arts-related jobs had been lost in the period April-October 2020. During those months, Iowa was impacted to the tune of \$31 million by the halt of the arts industry. Iowa Workforce Development reported that 9,741 artists in all sectors claimed state unemployment during that timeframe. There are over 42,000 Iowans employed in the arts, according to the US Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Formerly in-person arts communities that met at galleries and concert or outdoor venues have shifted online through the major social media sites and through Zoom, the teleconferencing application that was used by millions of people daily throughout 2020. The lack of financial support threatens to see a significant portion of artists leave their professions and never return.

On May 11, the *Daily Iowan* published a piece on how University of Iowa seniors were faring during the pandemic. Students lamented the loss of in-person interaction with other students and professors, and potential career opportunities. UI printmaking student Alex Fox explained that the cancellation of his summer 2020 internship in Berlin was a blow to his artistic hopes. He expressed the intention, upon graduation, of moving to Chicago and trying to sell his work on Etsy. He acknowledged that this may prove difficult.

Like many other theater companies, the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska opted to stream online performances instead of shuttering their venue during the 2020-2021 season. Ticket sales usually account for half of the center's budget; in 2020 that figure dropped to five percent. Executive director Bill Stephan thanked donors for keeping the center afloat. "They also really appreciate the fact that we didn't just shut down, that we found a way to continue to bring the arts to the community, and they wanted to thank us, as well as be part of it."

Many arts fairs, concerts, performances and festivals scheduled to take place in winter and spring 2021 have now been canceled for two years in a row. Smaller events have struggled to survive this hit in income, and some small theatre companies and conventions have folded entirely.

Detroit-based WDIV Local 4 ran a story on the effects of the cancellation of the Ann Arbor Art Fair for two years in a row on local artists and stores. Lindsey Leyland, co-owner of clothing shop The Getup Vintage, commented, "I was

pretty sure Art Fair was going to happen. To miss that two-years in a row is kind of heartbreaking. Honestly, it's one of the highest-grossing weeks for us." Ed Davidson, owner of outdoor clothing store Bivouac, confirmed that the art fair brings in a lot of customers to the city. "[The art fair] is a huge, huge boom to the local economy. ... We're packed from dawn until dusk, so it's a huge loss to the community."

In short, many artists in the Midwest face poverty or the collapse of their artistic aspirations entirely; innumerable small businesses confront ruin. The region's billionaires, however, continue to rake in the money.

Hedge fund manager Ken Griffin, Illinois' richest person, for example, soaked up an additional \$4 billion from April 2020 to April 2021, increasing his net worth to \$16 billion, according to *Forbes* magazine. As Patch.com noted, "Griffin's 2020 income was about 192,000 times what someone working a minimum wage job would have earned last year—if they were lucky enough to keep their jobs through the pandemic. While many Illinoisans were waiting on \$1,200 stimulus checks last year to make ends meet, Griffin could have personally written each Illinoisan a check for that amount and still had nearly a \$1 billion left in the bank. And he's just one of Illinois' 22 billionaires." That list includes Gov. J. B. Pritzker and three other members of the Pritzker family, who between them control more than \$13 billion in wealth.

Michigan "boasts" nine billionaires, a list headed by Daniel Gilbert, the owner and co-founder of Quicken Loans, with a net worth of \$51.9 billion. Les Wexner, the founder of L Brands, is the wealthiest individual in Ohio and one of the state's eight billionaires, with a reported worth of \$6.1 billion. Wisconsin too has eight billionaires, with John Menard Jr. of Menard Inc., worth \$14.2 billion, heading the group. Glen Taylor, owner of the Minnesota Timberwolves, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and Taylor Corp commercial printing, with \$2.9 billion, is the richest of Minnesota's four billionaires.



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