

New York City's arts organizations have lost nearly \$1 billion in income due to pandemic

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One measure of the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken on American and global cultural life has been its impact on artists in New York City, the major cultural center in the US.

The Center for an Urban Future, using data from Americans for the Arts, released a report earlier this month, “Creative Comeback: Surveying NYC’s Cultural Ecosystem in the Wake of COVID-19,” by Eli Dvorkin, Charles Shaviro and Sarah Amandolare. It provides a glimpse of the harsh reality facing New York artists.

The study’s optimistic title, which manages to both refer to a “comeback” under way and to the pandemic as though it were a thing of the past, indicates the authors’ inclinations and limitations, but the information the latter provide is still striking.

The report first notes that although no industry in New York has remained untouched by the murderous pandemic, “few have been shaken like the arts and cultural sector.” The authors’ analysis of new data reveals “a cumulative decline in income of nearly \$1 billion (\$924.6 million) among city-based arts organizations—a 36 percent plunge from the year prior to the pandemic.” Relief funding has covered a portion of that, but the organizations’ collective shortfall still amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars.

Staggeringly, the survey indicates that New York is now “home to just half the number of arts jobs that existed prior to the pandemic,” which has wiped out “more than \$1.5 billion in wages.” The authors disclose that three in four arts organizations “have had to make budget cuts, resulting in thousands of layoffs, nearly a year’s worth of canceled programs, and the widespread loss of performance, rehearsal, and exhibition space.”

In terms of job losses, to be precise, “Creative Comeback” points out that employment in the three

major industries comprising arts employment—“performing arts, spectator sports, and related industries; promoters of performing arts, sports, and similar events; and museums, historical sites, and similar institutions”—declined from 76,100 in March 2020 to 39,700 in March 2021, a 48 percent drop.

Overall, the data, based on what Dvorkin, Shaviro and Amandolare assert is one of the largest surveys “of the city’s arts ecosystem to date since the start of the pandemic,” point to a year of “unprecedented loss for individual artists and arts organizations, including lengthy shutdowns, steep declines in revenue, slashed budgets, and sustained job losses.”

Some 45 percent of the New York arts organizations surveyed “have been forced to lay off or furlough staff.” According to the new report, the consequences of the pandemic have “hit working and teaching artists especially hard: Among individual artists and creative workers formerly employed by arts organizations, 58 percent were still laid off or furloughed at the time of the survey—more than a year after lockdown.”

Not surprisingly, smaller arts organizations were affected especially severely. The average small organization “saw its operating income plummet 40 percent” in 2020, significantly more than mid-sized and large organizations, which experienced declines of 12 and 21 percent, respectively.

Although, rightly or wrongly, more than three-quarters of the organizations in question expect to survive. A genuine recovery, the study’s authors observe, “will require major new public and private support.” They explain that only “one-third (34 percent) of organizations have a concrete plan to reopen, and an alarming 49 percent lost access to a physical space. Organizations report needing cash to fund a reopening plan, help rebuilding their audiences,

support to establish new physical spaces and invest in safety upgrades, and assistance with marketing and promotions.”

Other telling statistics in the “Creative Comeback” report:

- 84 percent of New York arts organizations saw a decrease in income/revenue.
- Among all organizations that stopped holding in-person events, just 15 percent have resumed any kind of in-person programming.
- The city’s arts and cultural sector experienced a total attendance loss of 35,107,123.
- 15 percent of organizations report that all their artists or creative workers are currently laid off or furloughed.
- 39 percent of the 243 arts organizations reporting layoffs or furloughs say that more than half of their total pre-pandemic employees are currently laid off or furloughed.
- Only 33 percent of furloughed employees had returned to work as of March 11.

The authors’ references to “arts jobs,” of course, are significantly misleading, although not intentionally so. The vast majority of artists in New York and elsewhere in the US find themselves forced at present to survive as “non-artists.” As a result of sharply rising costs, rents and debt, the increased domination of the music, art and publishing industries by a handful of giant enterprises and other related processes, very few young (and not-so-young) artists are able to earn a living in their chosen vocation.

In *The Death of the Artist* (2020), author William Deresiewicz takes note of a study by the activist group BFAMFAPhD [i.e., Bachelor of Fine Arts, Master of Fine arts, Doctor of Philosophy] indicating “that only 10 percent of the two million arts graduates in the United States make their primary living as artists, that 85 percent of artists in New York City have day jobs unrelated to the arts, and that the other 15 percent have median incomes of \$25,000.”

In this regard, Deresiewicz comments that as of May 2019, “median rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$1,540 in Chicago, \$1,890 in Seattle, \$2,280 in Los Angeles, \$2,850 in New York [\$34,200 a year], and \$3,700 in San Francisco. ... A private [artist’s] studio in New York will run you some \$2,000 [another \$24,000 a year]; a corner of a studio that you share with five

other people, about \$600.”

Deresiewicz also discloses the astonishing fact that “in the visual-art world [one of whose centers is New York], as of 2018, just twenty individuals accounted for 64 percent of global sales by living artists.” He shares the comment of Lizzy Goodman, author of a book about the independent music scene after 9/11, to the effect that “New York no longer has a cultural identity. ‘The identity right now is money,’ she has said.”

And this was the situation before the pandemic’s outbreak!

The Center for an Urban Future’s report and related facts and figures underscore the dire conditions facing artists in one of global capitalism’s centers. Wall Street’s parasites have thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic, while society’s creators, along with the overwhelming majority of the population, have suffered.

The situation is increasingly untenable. As the working class enters into systematic struggle, in opposition to the union bureaucracies and the Democrats, its movement will help revive artistic life, showing a way out of the current political and cultural crisis. In many cases, the serious, honest artists will have to find means of creating, publicizing and distributing their work outside the existing channels.



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