BACK TO THE FUTURE

Why we need to return to future thinking post-pandemic

Morvern Cunningham

"You'll Have Had Your Pandemic?"

Back in the dark days of the pandemic, disruptive and frightening as it was, there seemed to be real appetite for change. In fact, the change required across all our systems seemed almost tangible. While the pandemic acted as an amplifier to the very best and the worst in our systems and behaviours, we were all witness to examples of great resilience as communities locally rallied round, but also great ineptitude, mainly on behalf of our decision makers. More specifically, a general awareness rose into the common consciousness of the power imbalances and inequalities built into our current systems across the board. It became very clear early on that we weren't "all in this together" and that people's personal level of privilege defined their experience of the crisis. Retaliation against these power inequalities on display were probably most prominently witnessed in the Black Lives Matter protest movement that spread across the globe during lockdown in response to the murder of George Floyd, and also in related acts of civil unrest, such as the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol.

As governments floundered in their initial response to the global crisis, those forced to get off the hamster wheel of productivity had the opportunity to stop, reflect and dream about better worlds. This included me, when I wrote *"You'll Have Had Your City?"* and *Edinburgh Reimagined* in 2020 and 2021 respectively, alongside co-hosting the Future Culture Edinburgh event which took place at Leith Theatre in September 2021. Each of these pieces of work focused on futures thinking to reimagine a better future and more equitable cultural sector than that which had existed before and represent an evolution of my own thinking over this time period.

However now, as we face the first fully 'normal' year since the pandemic began, I have a growing concern that a great deal

hasn't changed in the intervening time. In fact, there seems to be clear evidence that the status quo is very much reasserting itself, albeit in a much more challenging climate, with apparently little to no change implemented in a sector that has just collectively experienced its biggest crisis in current living history. Instead, we have slowly returned to a former semblance of an unequal cultural sector and society, while I would argue that now is precisely the time to put the work of change into action. My intention here is to continue to advocate for the need for futures thinking when it comes to the cultural sector, to forget the lessons of the pandemic at our peril, and to continue to demand better from our institutions, funders and policy makers. Let us learn from the past and take its lessons into the future, let's go back to future thinking.

We are all very tired

We're now halfway through 2023, over three years since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives around the world, and the cultural sector workforce is exhausted. Exhausted by working through the ups and downs of the pandemic, or not being able to work through the pandemic; exhausted attempting to qualify for furlough, the Self Employment Income Support Grant, various emergency creative grants or none of the above; exhausted talking about whether audiences might come back to venues or not; exhausted by putting creative work online; exhausted by in person shows being cancelled, work being postponed, and now, we are all exhausted by the drive of 'going back to normal'.

Of course, quite how affected individuals or organisations were by the various lockdowns and social distancing measures, was founded on privilege. It was wealth that shielded a great many from the precarity that others were exposed to. However, no matter how buffered or not from personal tragedy or organisational challenge, everyone had to some extent (whether it be individual, group, company or otherwise) re-evaluate the way they did things - even if it was only navigating the huge initial challenges the pandemic posed. Some arts workers (the lucky ones arguably) went on eventual furlough, some received emergency covid response payments, many ploughed on regardless depending on what their work and lives demanded of them.

Now, as we find ourselves somewhat removed from that alien time, finally inhabiting the so-called 'post-pandemic' world that so many longed for, shouldn't we be relieved to return to a sense of normality that was once so distant? Unfortunately, it's more a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire, as the issues we now have to contend with have become even more challenging than before. For in this new normal into which we have emerged, we still have COVID-19 as a disruptive element in our society that is continuing to claim lives, with the addition of war in Ukraine, a global energy crisis and a crushing Brexit that got done while we were still knee deep in pandemic. A recession in the UK seems ever close, amid a chronic cost of living crisis that is making ordinary life for millions simply unaffordable. This is not the beautiful utopia we dreamed of emerging into whilst we were back in lockdown. And we are all very tired.

Culture in crisis

And what of the role of the cultural sector within this burgeoning dystopia to which we are all becoming accustomed? Well, for many cultural institutions coming out of the pandemic, there is a palpable back to 'business as usual' mindset as gradually all pandemic-mitigating protocols have been dropped and people are slowly returning to venues. But the reality is that it isn't business as usual. Although audiences are returning, visitor numbers are nowhere near where they were pre-pandemic, with some reports of an overall fall of as much as a third since 2019 levels, albeit with an ongoing upward trend. Ticket buying habits have also changed, with folk more likely to buy tickets last minute and on known names, displaying reticence however when it comes to taking a chance on unknown acts. A return to familiarity and 'what we know sells' when it comes to programming doesn't bode well for the increased diversity of the sector, so sorely needed pre-pandemic, practically at crisis point now. A knock-on effect of this could be that less funding may now be invested in new, experimental and 'unproven' work, which would have further negative impact on work from minoritised voices. And the business-as-usual mindset isn't working either. Cultural venues who were already experiencing problems prior to the pandemic are now in real trouble, some changing business hours, alternating operations, or in some cases, closing altogether.

Add to this the overall exhaustion of the cultural sector – a sector that already heavily relied on a culture of busy-ness and burnout as creative currency. The stresses of not working, or working under pressure during the pandemic, now compounded by overworking to compensate and catch up with 2019 levels of output, has taken its toll on its workers. The demands on the sector prior to the pandemic were already unreasonable, with an unspoken expectation now to return to pre-pandemic levels of output. As part of the hangover from the pandemic, there is already evidence of a talent drain from the cultural sector to other industries. This could be possibly down to the fact that creative freelancers who never felt properly valued by the sector before the pandemic have finally decided to take the hint, instead choosing to pursue a career in sectors that welcome them and pay them properly for their time. The sector hasn't yet fully woken up to the needs of its freelancers, even as they desert the sinking ship in their droves. And despite the wave of Black Lives Matter protests around the globe during the pandemic, there is yet to be a major shift in power in the sector, which remains overwhelmingly male, pale and stale.

But how did we get here? To consider this, we must reflect on recent events and the steps that led to the cultural sector being arguably at its lowest ebb in living memory, using the only example I know: Edinburgh.

2022: a reflection of Edinburgh's (almost) post-pandemic year that was

2022 was the first year since the onset of the pandemic which felt in some way normal to what had gone previous. Not that this was the case at the very start of the year of course - we opened 2022 in lockdown, with end of year pantos and other cultural gatherings having been closed down pre-emptively and Christmas nights out banned (though we of course know now there were still parties going on in Westminster). At the start of 2022, we had no idea if there would be an Edinburgh Festival that bore any resemblance to any of its pre-pandemic predecessors, but hope was in the air and there seemed cause to be cautiously optimistic. Culturally however, the challenges of the year ahead had only just begun.

A summer of discontent

In June, the Edinburgh Fringe Society launched a new vision and set of values, along with a series of development goals, for both the Society and the Fringe. These were developed independently to a background of findings of the Future Fringe steering group report, and the outcomes of the Future Culture Edinburgh event. In July, it was discovered via social media that there was to be no Fringe app for the festival - an omission that hadn't been communicated to performers by the Society when registering their show details. A public apology for the app's absence was read out at the Fringe programme launch, but app-gate wasn't the only challenge to beset the Fringe Society in what ought to have been a comeback story like no other. The impact of worker discontent (to which we are now becoming accustomed) began that summer with both the RMT and bin worker strikes in the Capital collectively causing travel chaos and mountains of waste to pile up during the last week of the festival. Now, those workers - once applauded for putting themselves at potential risk working through the pandemic - were vilified in the media, while local Edinburgh businesses (including festival venues) and residents turned scabs by attempting to clear up their own waste. News presenters beamed live daily from ever-increasing piles of rubbish and new council members blamed old ones for the mess, and vice versa. This wasn't all, once the festivals had finally stumbled over the finish-line at the end of August, the backlash began. Age-old unresolved criticisms of the Fringe reared their ugly heads once more, citing (to name but a few): the unrepresentative nature of the festival; its growth mentality; artists and residents being priced out of the city - with one Guardian critic demanding the Fringe 'change or die' [1].

The erosion of Edinburgh's cultural infrastructure

The Fringe Society wasn't the only cultural organisation in the city under pressure in the comeback year from covid however. On the very same day in October that Creative Scotland boss Iain Munro gave evidence to the Scottish Government's Culture Committee citing a looming 'perfect storm' for the cultural sector in Scotland, the Centre for the Moving Image (the charity that ran Edinburgh Filmhouse, Edinburgh International Film Festival and the Belmont in Aberdeen) announced to its 100+ staff and the rest of the world the shock news that it was going into administration effective immediately. The published CMI statement cited the very same 'perfect storm' of factors that Munro had alluded to in his address, including that of the ongoing effects of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, though there have since been suggestions that the organisation had not been in good financial health for some time [2], despite reportedly handsome pay packets for certain staff members and amid extravagant plans for a new 'temple of film'. Edinburgh now finds itself in the bizarre situation where administrators get to dictate the future of cultural cinema in the city, via the sale of its cultural assets to the highest bidder in order to recover the debts the former CMI presided over.

[1] Brian Logan, 'The Edinburgh fringe is too long, too expensive and too gruelling. It must change or die', The Guardian, 29 Aug 2022.
[2] Brian Ferguson, 'Accounts reveal six years of 'major risk' concerns over Filmhouse and Edinburgh International Film Festival', The Scotsman, 27 Oct 2022.

Since the closure and boarding up of the cinema on 88 Lothian Road, further building-based city centre cultural organisations, including Dance Base and the National Galleries of Scotland, have sounded public distress signals about the future financial stability of their venues, with the addition of the Edinburgh International Book Festival announcing their contraction of the 2023 festival and delivery team. Thankfully, this now no longer includes the scrapping the digital aspect of a festival which had become the gold standard for online engagement since the onset of the pandemic – which would have been a real blow for accessibility, to and by Edinburgh's festivals.

A last sting in the tail

If the city's cultural sector workforce hadn't had enough by this point, 2022 still had a few more tricks up its sleeve before the very last gasp of the year. A series of cultural resilience roundtables around Scotland were led by the Scottish Government in December in collaboration with local councils, including Edinburgh, to explore 'how the cultural ecology of the city might be protected'. These conversations amongst the great and the good of Edinburgh's cultural sector took place only days in advance of the crushing announcement of a 10% cut to Creative Scotland's cultural funding budget for the following financial year, to the tune of a whopping £7million. Although rescinded in the new year and reinstated after successful collective lobbying by the sector, the decision still means the arms-length funding body is essentially working with yet another year of standstill funding, with Regularly Funded Organisations (who are meant to be supported by 3-year funding rounds) having their agreed funding (based on 2018 budgets) endlessly rolled over, whilst many other creative organisations remain in the funding cold. You can forgive folk for being less than enthusiastic when the Westminster Government in their 2023 spring budget announcements surprisingly apportioned £8.6million to Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, with the Fringe receiving the lion's share of the loot for a capital building project with a figure (the magic £7million) that could help bail out a national funding body or purchase an under-threat arthouse cinema.

Now, as we face what is gearing up to be a bumper year in Edinburgh's festival season (albeit with the glaring absence of certain key venues), how can we collectively take steps to mitigate some of the damaging impacts of the lack of transparency and joined up thinking, combined with undervaluing of the arts and downright bad decision making onto the sector as a whole?

Lessons the pandemic taught us

Indeed, if we are to make any meaningful change going forward, we must heed the lessons of the pandemic. One key lesson we all ought to have learned during this life-changing time is that you can't have endless growth in any one area, let alone that of the cultural sector. The sheer obviousness of the negative impact of humanity on the planet during the pandemic was palpable; we can't simply now get back on the bandwagon of growth and expect things to improve as a result. Instead, in response to the crisis we witnessed a variety of different people coming together to address the immediate and long-term needs of their communities. Alternative areas of active work sprang up to meet the gaps in state provision, and it was this grassroots activity that really led the way in the early days of the pandemic. There were three areas in particular that I believe we would do well to remember and to centre in our systems now, that of Community, Care and Access. If we were to centre the learning these interrelated areas have to teach us, and thus attempt to rebalance some of the inequalities present in our current systems, this would go some way in achieving a more equitable and democratic cultural sector across the board.

COMMUNITY

Lesson 1:
Invest directly in communities

Well-connected communities (and the cultural organisations working in them) are best placed to respond to local need. In Edinburgh at the onset of the pandemic, under-resourced yet nimble community-based organisations such as WHALE Arts and North Edinburgh Arts essentially 'pivoted' to become food banks in their communities, in response to third sector systems shutting down. In time, the provision of resources locally extended to include art supplies as well as food, but the initial response was to an immediate need within their communities. City centre-based cultural institutions on the other hand, arguably more remote from the communities and audiences they serve, more commonly closed their doors, furloughed their staff and waited for the crisis to blow over in order to keep both their buildings and bank balances viable.

Although cultural institutions tend to be the better resourced and therefore wield more power in the sector, it is often community, grassroots and voluntary initiatives that are able to be more responsive to need and where it matters most. It could be argued then, that a better use of overall resource might be directed to those with the most actual impact locally - so much so that there is currently an ongoing Scottish Government committee inquiry into the importance of Culture in Communities, attempting to understand how these intangible connections and relationships can be better supported in the future.

Lesson 2:
Centre the work of community engagement within institutions

For too long now, cultural institutions in the city have treated community engagement within their organisations as an 'add-on' to their regular operations, and have not integrated the work of these departments as central to their ongoing programme of activities. Ironically, it is often the positive impact and human stories generated by these more precarious departments, that sits front and centre in funding applications and on the covers of annual reports - making the case for further investment in their organisations. But what if bums on seats was the add-on instead? It seems little more than a poor show to offer middle-class people subsidised tickets to arts events (which, let's be honest, they can probably afford to pay more for), when the real work of community engagement is regularly marginalised and sidelined within the cultural organisations undertaking this work.

However, the tide seems to be turning. Significant local and national government investment into community-based participatory cultural initiatives, such as the recent £10m nationwide 3-year programme Culture Collective, show a recognition on behalf of government of the importance of art taking place in communities. Hopefully, cultural institutions might be forced to recognise the importance of this way of working more formally going forward, as economic metrics of growth and audience numbers become less a measure of success than other positive impacts of the arts.

CARE

Lesson 3:
Put people before profit

At the onset of the pandemic, funders and governments mobilised to care for an ailing workforce suddenly put out of work. Furlough payments, the Self-Employment Support Scheme, and various Creative Scotland and local authority support payments for creatives were swiftly pushed out the door, in the case of the latter, often asking little of applicants to provide proof of their hardship. Trust played a big part in decision making, with cultural organisations also benefitting from the urge to send resource to where it was most needed. The removal of red tape contributed to a general responsiveness on the part of recipients – they were better placed to make decisions benefitting their local communities, as trust had been placed in them in the form of recognition and resource.

Care for people involves valuing them for the work they do, not just checking in with them regularly. It also involves slowing down, potentially doing less with the same resource or even doing less with more. It is imperative that the cultural sector implement better working practices, including fair pay for freelancers and all of the cultural workforce, notwithstanding the current economic challenges it faces. The subject of a Universal Basic Income is becoming a regular recurring theme when discussing how to address some of the woeful incomes that creatives take home, but this must be UBI for all, not just the cultural sector in order to avoid further issues of remoteness and elitism. Indeed, we need to do better by our freelancers, including paying for professional development opportunities, holiday, bereavement and sick pay where appropriate. Self-care isn't just a buzzword; freelancer burnout is real and we will continue to see freelancers leaving the sector if we don't care for them properly and value their contribution through better financial recognition of their labour.
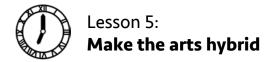
Lesson 4:
Build in time for reflection

For what seemed like the first time during the pandemic, individuals and organisations who had to halt their operations as a result of the crisis were given an opportunity to reflect on what might be the best or most useful course of action going forward, to really evaluate the extent of their operations. Outside of pandemic time, often evaluation of creative projects can be seen as an afterthought, an exercise carried out in order to obtain the remainder of a funding award from a funder. However, if organisations and arts workers are not honest with themselves on why things might have not gone as well as they could have, or as originally intended, then there is the danger of perpetuating potentially inaccurate narratives around the success (or not) of a creative project. These narratives can in turn perpetuate further unhelpful and potentially harmful work within communities, with similar mistakes in approach or management continue to be repeated.

Cultural institutions are often better funded in contrast with creative organisations working in communities, so they therefore tend to wield more power. As a result, unequal partnerships can arise where institutions believe they are in some way bringing the gift of culture to communities and the organisations that work with them. This 'benevolent' mindset can run through an entire project, and any challenges experienced during the course of the project can be overlooked once it comes to reporting and evaluation due to a need to prove the success of a project to funders and other stakeholders. But if there is not honest reflection during the evaluation of a partnership or project there is no room for learning (either during or at the end of a project), and therefore no change in the way things are done going forward. Indeed, the need to build in proper time for meaningful evaluation of the spectrum of success and failure across creative projects, and subsequent genuine reflection on how best to proceed with the information that is generated, is key.

ACCESS

Lesson 5:
Make the arts hybrid

After years of saying it couldn't be done, online access to arts performances became ubiquitous almost overnight during the pandemic. This wasn't in response to an articulated need by disabled people, people with children or folk that can't afford tickets to events to access the arts however, it was because general access to artistic activities had suddenly become a common challenge. In addition to this transformation, organisations who had previously told their workers they couldn't work from home, that it was for some reason imperative to be in the same room as their colleagues during office hours, embraced remote working and suddenly became more flexible around the daily demands of childcare and housekeeping.

However, as the world has begun to open up, the commitment to digital inclusion and online events that so many creative organisations embodied during the pandemic, has slowly dropped away in favour of in-person events and activities. It's true, there's nothing like being in a room together, but sadly, the people that need digital access the most still face the same access challenges as before, this time with the added complication of covid still existing in daily life. It's heartening to see grassroots initiatives such as Fringe of Colour Films dedicating their 2023 festival to a hybrid model that aims for an integrated parity of experience across the physical and digital spheres. Indeed, we all ought to be committing to a hybrid future, particularly given the accelerated learning that took place during covid, not simply returning to pre-pandemic methods of engaging with existing and potential audiences. Digital engagement should be built into organisational and project budgets, alongside additional access measures such as live captioning and BSL interpretation as a basic minimum standard.

Lesson 6:
Diversify power at the top

The arts have for some time now been becoming increasingly white and middle-class, and the inequalities baked into the cultural sector as a result, combined with the challenges of freelancers to remain afloat during the pandemic, have done nothing to combat this ongoing trend. We need increased representation of minoritised communities across the arts sector now, both on screen/stage, programming work behind the scenes and in positions of decision-making power. We now need to tackle the (white) elephant in the room.

For those that argue there isn't the talent available at an experienced level, this simply isn't good enough. Make pathways into power within your organisations, whether they be through long-term mentoring, internships, apprenticeships, residencies, shared roles and job shares to train people from underrepresented communities into positions of power within the culture sector. Empower organisations led by minoritised communities to better equip people with the skills required in the sector. Share power, or even better, give power to those who have been traditionally marginalised, and see how they begin to shape your creative programmes for the better.

Change is still possible

If the pandemic taught us anything, it's that we need to work together in order to achieve the outcomes that will benefit the majority of people. That we need to restructure things, in order to make things more equitable. That we need to focus on communities and on increasing community capacity to self-determine what happens in those communities. To break down silos that isolate individuals and workers. To empower local authorities, in order to make local decision-making truly representative. Not allowing market forces to dictate local outcomes. Doing things because they're the right thing to do, not because they generate income. Being people-centred, seeing beyond current short-term challenges to the long-term future. Establishing communities of care and believing that there is the possibility that we can do things differently, if we choose to do so.

The key is not to forget these lessons. We can't allow ourselves or our sector to revert to old mindsets and the f/ailing status quo to reassert itself, as this won't significantly change anything in the long run, other than merely keeping those already at the top in power. We ought to contest the structures that uphold inequality and demand better of our institutions and ourselves. We need to embrace risk, listen to artists (and fight for them). How I would like it to be is a world where we all resist returning to normal, and instead go back to futures thinking when it comes to envisioning and working towards a better cultural sector and building better systems in general. Because if we don't, we will simply lurch from one crisis to another, never fully addressing any of the systemic issues that blight our current way of doing things and continue to oppress us by keeping us all in a constant state of precarity. Instead of simply dealing with the latest crisis up ahead, the cultural sector in Edinburgh (and wider Scotland/the UK), needs to go back to thinking strategically long-term about the future sustainability of itself.

On a positive note, notwithstanding the seemingly unblinking race to normal going on currently, it seems to me that the cultural sector may actually be waking up to the scale of the challenges and deep-set inequalities it's dealing with - even if no one is particularly keen to publicly acknowledge it. Indeed, in some of the more recent conversations I've been party to, there seems to be widespread recognition across all echelons of power that nothing less than a seismic and systemic change is required to overhaul the challenges the sector currently faces. In order to create the systems change we need however, we will have to work in solidarity and collaboratively across the sector in order to achieve solutions to common challenges. In order to do that, we need to continue having open, honest and caring conversations about power – where it lies, and where we can flatten hierarchies and learn from one another. Maybe we also ought to be doing less, and instead dedicating more time to the work at hand, favouring quality over quantity and taking real time to rest in between. After all, if we are going to be more intentional with our work and with the scale of the challenges ahead, we are going to need the energy to work together as we collectively go back to dreaming into the future. The work of imagining better futures is for everyone.

Morvern Cunningham, June 2023

Reading list:

• *Culture in Crisis – Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here,* Centre for Cultural Value (2022)

• *The Illustrated Fair Work Employer Guide for the Creative and Cultural Sectors in Scotland,* Culture Radar (2023)

• *Learning from Local Responses to Child Poverty During the COVID Crisis,* Sinclair & McKendrick (2021)

• *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care,* Hayes & Kaba (2023)

• *Mapping Ecologies of Care in Creative Hubs During Covid-19,* Champion, Serna & Berridge (2022)

• *Regenerative Futures Fund Edinburgh: 6-Month Report to February 2023,* Leah Black (2023)

• *Structurally F-cked: an Inquiry into Artists' Pay and Conditions in the Public Sector in Response to the Artist Leaks Data,* industria (2023)

Playlist:

https://tinyurl.com/morverncunningham

To be continued...

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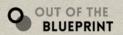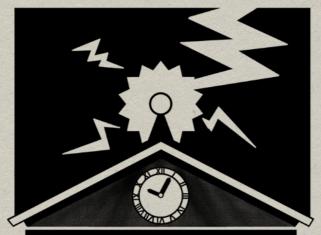
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