Covid Canal – Sheila MacNeill, 2021

ARTISTS' WALKING WORK AND COVID-19

Walking Publics/Walking Arts
Artists' Report, January 2023

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction p.2
2. Key Findings p.6
3. Artists' Spotlights p.8
   - Spotlight 1: Sara Shaarawi & Catrin Evans p.8
   - Spotlight 2: Jean McEwan & Chemaine Cooke, Wur Bradford p.13
   - Spotlight 3: Sonia Overall p.17
   - Spotlight 4: Laura Fisher p.20
   - Spotlight 5: Rasheeda Page-Muir p.24
4. Conclusions & Recommendations p.27
5. Acknowledgements p.33

INTRODUCTION

Walking Publics/Walking Arts: walking, wellbeing and community during COVID-19

This report shares some of the findings from the research project, Walking Publics/Walking Arts: Walking, Wellbeing and Community during COVID-19. Walking Publics/Walking Arts explores experiences of walking across the UK during COVID-19 lockdowns, and identifies the potential of the arts to sustain, encourage and more equitably support walking during and recovering from a pandemic.

Our definition of walking is inclusive of all kinds of bodies and technologies which help Disabled people and anyone with mobility issues to move around.

Walking Publics/Walking Arts was led by Dee Heddon (University of Glasgow), in collaboration with Maggie O'Neill (University College Cork), Morag Rose (University of Liverpool), Clare Qualmann (University of East London) and Harry Wilson (University of Glasgow). Our Partners and Associate Partners were Arts Canteen, Glasgow Life, Living Streets, Museum of London Archaeology, Open Clasp Theatre Company, Paths for All, Ramblers Scotland and Sheffield Environmental Movement. Our Project Advisor was Carole Wright.

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People's experiences of walking during COVID-19

Walking and arts play a role in sustaining and improving physical health and mental wellbeing.[1] Recent surveys indicate that people across the UK walked more during COVID-19 and aspired to walk more after the pandemic.[2] Walking Publics/Walking Arts helps us understand how people experienced walking during the pandemic. We also wanted to know about the impact of creative walking activities that people created or encountered during their walks. By 'creative walking' we refer to activities that people or groups may undertake whilst walking, which have an imaginative, playful or task-based framework. This could include, for

example, looking for rainbow posters or red cars, drawing shapes on maps or hunting for treasure using digital apps, or taking photographs to share online. It also includes creative interventions, made by others, that may be encountered on a walk, from chalk messages to art trails.

One of the main research methods we used to learn more about how people experienced walking during lockdown was a public survey, completed by more than 1200 adults across the UK. We supplemented this with 14 in-depth walking interviews with a range of people and organisations, including Sheffield Environmental Movement and Paths for All. Key findings from that survey demonstrate that:

- Lockdown restrictions were the catalyst for some people to explore their local environment in new and creative ways, which they felt were very positive.
- Simple interventions, such as painted pebble trails or window posters, helped create a sense of community and mitigated against isolation.
- Many people found walking a useful tool for their mental health and wellbeing, and this effect was enhanced through using creative methods alongside walking.

(Slightly) Relaxed Soundwalks – Debbie Kent & Alisa Oleva

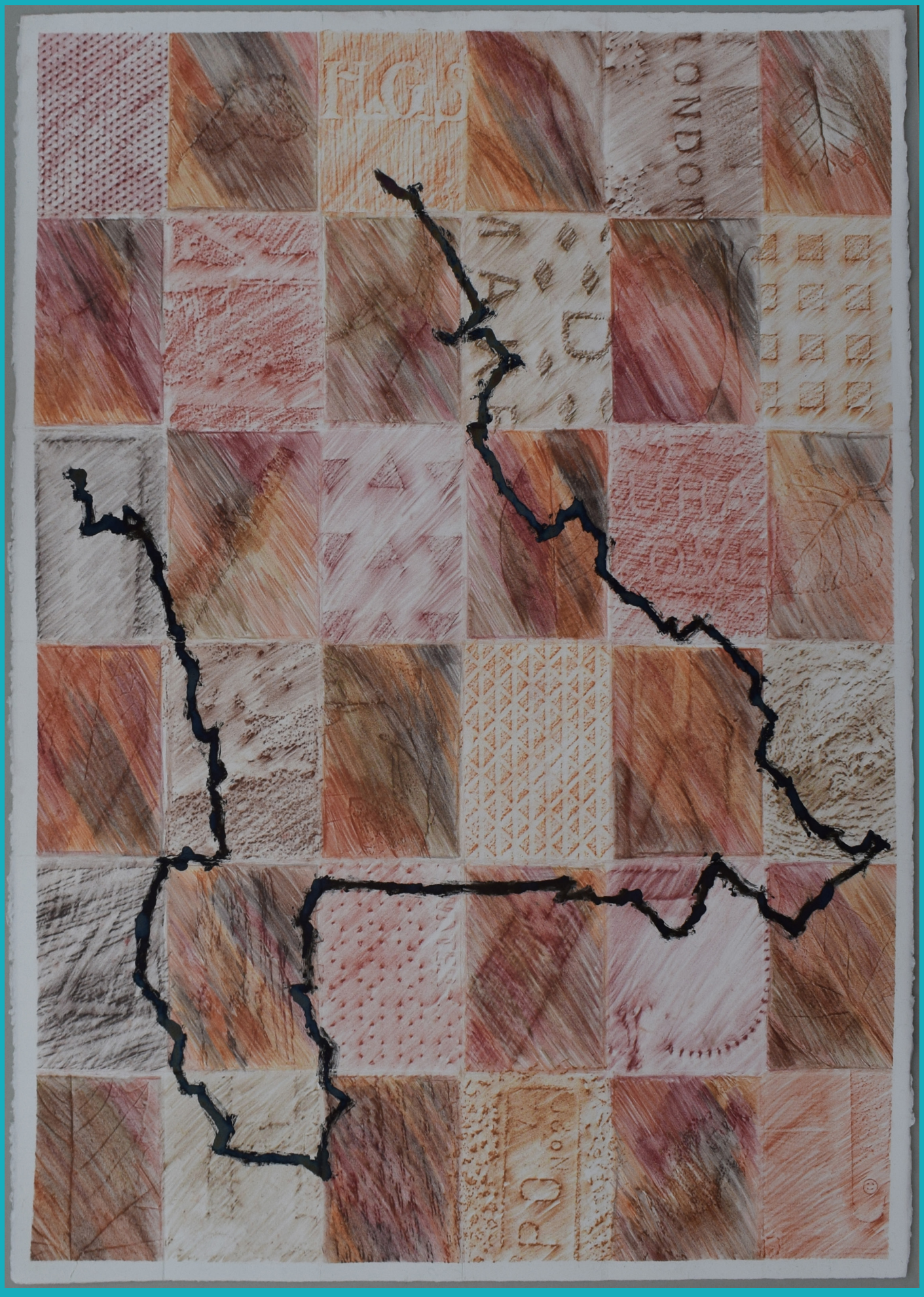
• Daily walking helped establish a beneficial routine when working from home and/or feeling overwhelmed by the impact of COVID-19.
• Nature, green space and encounters with wildlife, such as listening to birdsong, provided solace and inspiration; local parks played a vital role in communities.
• Pre-existing barriers to walking were magnified during the pandemic.

The full results from our public survey and walking interviews, alongside a 4-page summary, are freely available from our project's website: https://walkcreate.gla.ac.uk/walkcreate-report/

Artists' use of walking during COVID-19

We also wanted to understand how artists from across the UK used and adapted walking as part of their artistic practice or turned to walking as a resource for the first time. We were keen to know how artists deployed and evolved walking as a creative tool and what we could learn from their expertise and innovations. Our aim is to support more people to walk well, in and out of a pandemic. This is the focus of this report.[3]

"Artists' Walking Work and COVID-19", draws on the 151 responses to our online survey of UK-based artist/creative practitioners aged 18 or over who used or engaged with walking as part of their creative practice, spanning the period 23 March 2020 to 21 May 2021. We also include five interviews with artists. The examples and reflections offered by artists in both the survey and interviews demonstrate just how rich the avenues of 'creative walking' are. Artists offer a wealth of experience in using walking as a creative resource to engage and connect people, to explore and attend closely to environments, and to inspire imagination and creativity. During COVID-19, artists have had to inventively navigate shifting lockdown conditions and have created new and collaborative digital, remote and audio works of walking art, including for those shielding/isolating.[4] The works referenced here also exemplify the diverse ways in which walking arts practices support health and wellbeing and engage diverse communities, even – or especially – during exceptional times. We hope that artists, producers, arts and health organisations, funding bodies, and researchers working in cognate areas find value in our findings and find ways to support creative walking activities.[5]



Earth Day Walk – Åse Vikse

KEY FINDINGS

Here, we offer a summary of the key findings evidenced in the survey and in interviews with artists.

Who used walking & why?

53% of respondents had made artwork that included walking as a key material or creative resource frequently or regularly before COVID-19. A significant number (17.1%) turned to walking for the first time during COVID-19. Notably, most of the latter would choose to use walking as a creative resource in the future.

Walking was one activity that people, including artists, were still able to do in the context of pandemic restrictions and lockdown. Artists' reported that the combination of walking and art thus made sense in the context of the pandemic, and walking fitted their needs. Walking art practice also emerged as a creative activity out of their regular walking activity, the walking a catalyst to inspiration. Pandemic restrictions became prompts to which artists responded creatively. Working outside brought them significant pleasure and joy and was acknowledged by artists as vital to their wellbeing, providing them with space and time and a way to maintain social contact. Artists reflected on their immersion in their local environments, and the building of new or deeper connections to place.

Adaptions & opportunities

As a result of pandemic restrictions — including travel and prohibitions on meeting in groups — many artists (33.5%) advised us that they had to abandon or adapt their work, and that their commissions were cancelled. Most of the work made during this time was new (67.7%). Respondents referred to the surprising opportunities which emerged, including the learning of new skills and the creation of new networks. Artists felt that more time was available, which they used to consolidate work and increase confidence, to develop new methods of practice, to reflect, and to attend more deeply to place. This was often combined with a new connection with nature and a commitment to the local and home, explored by artists through their site responsive practice. Pandemic conditions prompted artists to slow down, and to be more attentive and focused. Many works made by artists were connected to the promotion of health/wellbeing.

Type of work made

Much of the arts practice was participatory, community-based, and socially engaged, with online/digital platforms featuring prominently. The range of work created was expansive, and included mapping and guiding, audio-walks, sculpture and painting, and photography. Unsurprisingly, most of the work took place outdoors, but a significant proportion was for both indoors and out, and a surprising amount for indoors only.

Timing

Works were made at all times of the year and at all times of the day. Some were undertaken daily, weekly, or monthly, and some extended across months and even years. Many of the artworks were part of a series. Temporal frameworks allowed artists to 'track' and document the changes and rhythms of the pandemic, including the personal, social, and environmental.

Location and commissions

Works took place across mainland Britain, and in major cities, smaller towns, suburbs and rural locations. The number and range of commissioning organisations, located across the whole of mainland Britain, is extensive and includes arts and cultural organisations as well as environmental and educational ones.

Artists' responses and the future

Artists mostly felt positive about the work they created. They found it cathartic and useful, and it afforded opportunities to learn and develop new practices, skills and collaborations. Nevertheless, lockdown also created limits in terms of what was possible, including travel and gathering of people, and generated frustration.

Many artists stated an intention to continue using or exploring technology, particularly in relation to virtual participation or hybrid forms of delivery. Technology enabled artists to create new, and often geographically wider networks. In contrast, some respondents now felt a greater commitment to the live encounter in shared space as well as time.

ARTISTS' SPOTLIGHTS

Alongside our Artists' Survey, we undertook 15 recorded interviews with a wide range of artists, including those who had not used walking before, to explore in more depth their experience of making walking work during COVID-19. Below, we share some extracts from these interviews.[6]

Spotlight 1: Sara Shaarawi & Catrin Evans

Niqabi Ninja – Sara Shaarawi and Catrin Evans

Niqabi Ninja, by Sara Shaawari, is an audio-play undertaken on foot, which immerses the listener in story and environment as they learn about a woman who transforms into a vigilante as she tries to right wrongs of male violence. Encountered throughout the walk are a series of large, colourful graphic posters, each depicting a scene from the play which is listened to through headphones.

Niqabi Ninja was presented in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Inverness during 2021.

Originally written by Sara Shaawari as a stage play, the pandemic forced a rethink of form. In their interview with researcher Harry Wilson, Sara and Director Catrin Evans reflected on the process and the outcome. Where Catrin had some experience of promenade theatre, and site-specific work, this was Sara's first engagement with walking practice. However, Sara had written a Master's dissertation on performance walks, and admits an enduring interest in public space as a performance space, specifically in the context of the revolution in Egypt in 2011, where the occupation of public space by demonstrators served to reveal just how private, controlled and surveyed it had previously been. Sara had always been interested in the tension between the politics and performance of public space. However, as a playwright, she found that theatre institutions were not particularly receptive to ideas of walking as a form suited to text.

When COVID-19 imposed restrictions on live performance, Sara and Catrin were invited to consider how they might still present the work. They considered presenting it in the round, as a socially-distanced performance for a small audience, but realised this may risk the visual and graphic elements, which were important to the work. A film version was considered, but they did not want an entirely digital experience. They also considered offering it as an audio play but had concerns about the ethics of this. Niqabi Ninja depicts scenes of sexual violence, which may be challenging for people to listen to. The audio play format, if simply offered as a download experience, would place the listener into an entirely individual and unsupported context, and this may cause them harm. Both Catrin and Sara felt the need to centre care in the experience, and that curating the experience for the listener was important.

Sara: *We talked a lot about the communal experience of theatre, and that felt again really important. And especially with the themes, to listen to that, and then be at home, and possibly be at home by yourself, just felt irresponsible.*

Turning the *w*ork into an audio-walk seemed to fit the piece:

Sara: *It's such an urban piece, and it's all set on the streets of Cairo. ... None of it is set in a domestic space, for example, or in a private space. All of it is in public space. … It's all about reclaiming public space, and standing up to authority, and then these incredibly violent things happen. So, there was something about engaging with the city that audience members find themselves in, and sort of putting it outside, … and asking people to go on walks with a friend and so on. … [It] not only captured the*

theatre experience, the communal theatre experience that we really, really were keen to keep. But [it] also felt like [that] might be a really interesting way to tell that sort, and for people to really look at the urban space they're in, in a different way. Or see what comes to light for them. I think it just felt right, when we sort of went through all the different options, it felt like…if we were going to do a Covid performance, this was going to be it.

The graphic novel feel of the intended stage play was retained by pasting six large graphic poster artworks at certain points on the route/in the story. These acted as punctuation points and moments of what Sara considers magic realism.

Sara: *If you are walking through the city and suddenly there's a poster drawing that is related to what you're listening to, there's something that for me is really theatrical and… encompasses that magic realism that I'm really into, in my personal storytelling.*

Shifting the format to an audio-walk brought significant challenges, but also revealed new possibilities.

Catrin: *We thought doing it as a walking route would be really straightforward. [Laughs] I don't know why we were so naive. But it was really complicated… ethically, logistically, practically. We rehearsed it on Zoom, recorded it. The actors were in a studio, but me and Niroshini and Sara, we were all on Zoom. It felt really distanced in some ways, whilst we were trying to create this really intimate experience.*

But also, just the different locations. Each place that we played, like Glasgow felt so different to Edinburgh, felt so different to London, felt so different to Inverness. … Each one really had to be interrogated, about what was the knock-on effect of choosing to put certain images in certain places? And inviting people to walk in a certain part of different cities. … It almost feels like the idea of moving through public space should be straightforward, but of course, it's not, because so much of public space isn't public. It's private space. Or it's… securitised space. Or it's highly volatile, or it's particularly politicised. … Every corner has different resonances. … There are probably things we missed, or things that we didn't even know or see. But we attempted to know and see them… which felt important.

Placing the work in the street revealed to Sara the place and work of theatres in the urban landscape, what neighbourhoods are served and what community is it embedded in, how do people get there, etc?

Sara: *It was almost like, uncovering all these things that we know about public space and urban space, and urban planning. And suddenly it became really tangible and really real, that we had to like, actually have conversations about it. And that was really rich I think, and… a huge learning experience.*

Placing the work into an urban environment made the experience of the play an embodied one, which in turn made perceptions of, and feelings about, place unavoidable. It brought the politics of place to the foreground in a more pronounced way than would have happened in a staged version.

Changing the work to an audio-play listened to through headphones also prompted changes to the text. As Sara notes, in its new form the work became more intimate. Responding to this, she removed some of the details of the sexual assault experienced by the protagonist.

In the process of making the walking work, Catrin realised that she needed to let go of the instructions to the audience which told them where to go, what to do, and when to encounter each image. It was simply impractical, if not impossible, as in reality people walked through the space at different paces and stopped where they wanted. Catrin understood that she was over-instructing the audience, trying to control their experience. The balance was found in encouraging people to move on at certain moments or do things at certain moments but knowing that there was no guarantee that text and place would align.

Reflecting on their feelings about using walking in their future practice, Sara would like to continue building on the experience of the work and to see more text-based theatre take on that form. She would particularly like to do it in Egypt and wants to continue investigating the form for its potentials of storytelling. There is no desire, now, to return Niqabi Ninja to its staged format.

Catrin: *I feel like we've made the piece. ... It's become the piece that, not necessarily that it was meant to be, but it's got to a place that we never expected it to go. … Creatively and thematically.*

The future that is imagined for it is that it is walked in other urban places, beyond the UK, the piece handed over for others to take on.

Sara: *There's an internationalist aspect here that I am excited about, about potentially handing over the walk and then, you could have loads*

of walks around the world. Around the same story, but in different cities, and different people and different bodies. And there's something really exciting, and really sort of again collectivist, and communal about that. … There is potential to create a really exciting invitation, and for me, that's something that maybe doesn't exist within traditional theatre, that needs the funds to bring over actors, and you know, that might not always be possible... It's again that act of trust, of handing something over, handing an invitation over and saying, this is what worked for us, or these are the rules. It needs to be a safe space that people can go into. And there needs to be this, this, this and this. In this moment, there needs to be a bench or somewhere to sit. And sort of like putting together these rules that we discovered through our process, and there's something exciting about potentially handing that over somewhere else. … I think that there's radical potential in that, that I am excited by.

https://niqabininja.net/

Spotlight 2: Jean McEwan & Chemaine Cooke, Wur Bradford

To Wander Is To Adventure – Wur Bradford, Purple Patch, Jean McEwan

Jean McEwan founded the grassroots organisation Wur Bradford ('Wur' means 'our' or 'we are'), in 2015. In 2016, Jean was joined by fellow artists Chemaine Cooke and Uzma Kazi. Researcher Morag Rose interviewed Jean and Chemaine.

Jean has been a visual and community artist for 15 years, her work focusing mostly on creating collages and zines, but also responsive, democratically based process-work with people. Jean set up the Wur Bradford Project in a market stall, to explore what it was like to undertake creative work in this space, and to interact with the people and environment. In 2017, with Chemaine and Uzma, they moved to another market space.

Chemaine's practice originates from movement and dance improvisation. She worked in integrated companies of disabled and non-disabled people, creating site-specific and participatory forms. This focus has continued into engaging with communities and spaces.

Jean's use of walking in her creative practice started in 2015, before the Wur Bradford Project. She did a two-year residency as part of a Creative People and Places project in Lancashire, called Super Slow Way, working with a group of adults with disabilities.

Setting up Wur Bradford in the market, Jean and Chemaine explored how to move playfully through public spaces, taking up space in indoor environments, and thinking about the politics of space. When they moved to another market, which was being demolished and rebuilt, their focus changed to thinking about how space and community survives, with work

co-designed by the traders, but also more open to members of the public coming into the space.

Chemaine also works for a local arts organisation, Purple Patch Arts, which provides innovative, inclusive, creative opportunities for adults with learning disabilities and autistic adults. Together, Chemain and Jean developed a collaboration with Purple Patch Arts, which again focused on movement through the market, exploring its sensory experience and taking up space. The particularity of the market space was central to the process.

Chemaine: *I think we always had a sense of, like, this is really multi-sensory. Creative walking. ... But also the market... it was so multi-sensory. And we talked about communities being siloed. ... We also saw those connections between people, so the banter between our participants and the traders. ... And then also that sense of food and independence and buying food and having close relationships.*

Having secured funding to enable them to continue delivering work with Purple Patch Arts, they were just about to start a new project in the market when pandemic restrictions emerged. A new group of people met weekly through lockdown, using the Zoom platform.

Jean: *We just began and thought, well how can we do walking online? How on earth?*

Recognising the variable factors at play across the group, for example whether people could move easily around their home, or go outside, they started very tentatively, drawing on Chemaine's movement-based practices and inviting everyone to just move away from their screen for a minute and do some walking.

Chemaine: *We all went to our front door, and that was our score. And touched the handle, and we all looked outside. You know, separately, and came back and shared. ... It was the first step, and then we just kept building scores. And confidence together. And feeling, all of us, that sense of connection through a screen.*

Jean: *Thinking about the challenges, this was a new group. Some of them knew each other, but not all. How do we create a community online, and people being new to that technology? … How can we create a sense of togetherness and friendship?*

Jean and Chemaine's commitment to democratic practice and to ensuring that the group had as much opportunity as possible to co-create the work structured their approach to the 90-minute Zoom sessions. Their initial priority was to develop relationships, engaging in playful exploration and getting to know each other. They also offered optional 'home quests' that could be undertaken outwith the Zoom session. For example, if people wanted to explore their local area, they would set a score or an invitation to support that. They also delivered creative packs through the post, for people to choose to use or not. The aim was to design and offer lots of different ways into the process and practice. In time, people began to design their own scores.

Awarded further funding, they followed up this initial block of activity with another one, focusing on mindfulness and the co-creation of mindfulness resources, still working online and remotely.

Chemaine: *We did visualisations and meditations together. A lot of the meditations, visualisations, were about walking. And different types of walking. So, walking that helps you dream, walking to hear your environment. A walking meditation at home, where you notice the small things, like edges and corners and doors and windows. A walk of chance. Flip a coin. Decide what room you go to. Decide where to stand. Find something. Collect an object.*

Reflecting on the challenges of moving their work online, aside from the technical issues, a key goal was creating a safe and inclusive community.

Jean: *Thinking about safety of the participants, and what was comfortable, what could be risked, what could we push the balance of those things within the work.*

The participants adjusted well to this new environment and were patient with each other. Jean and Chemaine also recognised that they too had to adjust to this new mode of delivery, as facilitators. Jean notes that in

this unfamiliar context, the workload for the facilitators was enormous, demanding a lot of time and energy.

Benefits of shifting to remote, online participation were that the geographical reach of the project and the community fostered was wider, beyond the Bradford area, and brought new people into the group, extending the connections. They also witnessed and facilitated a rapid shift to more inclusive use of digital resources and an extension

of digital resources, skills and confidence to communities which were previously excluded.

Chemaine: *The amount of people that are now more digital literate, so therefore have more independence, can keep in contact with friends, is staggering. And we were really, once again, collaborating with Purple Patch on this long-term collaboration together. They provided laptops to people. They were driving to people's houses, showing them how to log in. So that digital poverty, they were trying to rebalance it within their community. And I saw digital skills, not just with the participant, but within their families as well.*

Chemaine and Jean continue to work with the group, co-creating a series of seasonal walks. The group opted for a blended approach, which mixes zoom discussions and planning towards a monthly in-person walk, followed by a debrief on zoom.

Wur Bradford https://wurbradford.wordpress.com/
Purple Patch Arts https://purplepatcharts.org/

Spotlight 3: Sonia Overall

Distance Drift: puddle window – Sonia Overall

Sonia Overall describes herself, in her interview with Dee Heddon, as a psychogeographer and a ‘walking writer’. Her writing takes many different forms: long and short-form fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, scholarship, performance, and work that crosses genre. Sonia’s experimentation comes through her walking practice and engagement with place.

In lots of different ways, I do site-specific, site-responsive writing. Place-based writing. I also have a method of walking writing where I do ambulatory writing, so, I literally write on the hoof. I walk slowly. I have a hand palm-sized notebook usually that I walk with. And a pencil.

As she walks, she unspools her thinking and her observations onto the page, her notebook functioning as a multidirectional sketchbook. While she might start writing in a linear way, she ends up going around the edges and turning pages backwards, the writing itself becoming graphically mobile.

Before COVID-19, Sonia led occasional group and public walks. In April 2020, at the start of the lockdown in the UK, she initiated Distance Drift.

Distance Drift uses social media and walking-prompts to engage people to walk in shared time but separate space; a safe way of gathering people during the pandemic. Sonia already had some experience of setting writing and walking prompts via social media and had also previously created a deck of walking cards for psychogeographers. Sonia shares the origin of Distance Drift:

Some people that I knew on Twitter were talking to each other... about how they weren't going to be able to go for the walks that they usually went on, and what were they going to do? And they talked about walking remotely, but connected through social media. And one of them said, "I've got this deck of cards. Why don't we have a play with those and see what happens?" And they copied me into this conversation. And I said, "Oh, that's a lovely idea. You know, I'd be really interested to see what happens. And if you like, I'll deal. I'll deal some cards and I'll share them with you, and then you can follow them". And we agreed that we would use a hashtag, and I said, "What about #Distance Drift? It's kind of what it says on the tin". So, we did that. It was the first Sunday. It was just an agreement that Sunday morning was a good idea.

That first Distance Drift took place on the first Sunday of April 2020, at 10 am, and lasted an hour.

I was actually just in my garden, pulling cards out, taking snaps of them, putting them on Twitter. People were walking. And they were sharing where they ended up, and what they could see. And the idea was that... anyone who was really locked down would be able to join in, in a park or in a garden. But also just inside the house. Or round a block of flats. And it went down well, and we said "Oh, shall we do it again?"

Sonia has been leading Distance Drift every Sunday at 10am since that first one in April 2020. Started as a response to lockdown, the series has created its own momentum and following. Each week, Sonia sets out a prompt, publishes it on Twitter at 10am, and people join in, using the hashtag as a way of gathering and responding to the different threads and images posted by participants. The weekly prompts are diverse, and may be thematic, or draw on seasonal rituals or calendar events, or topical features (for example, follow yellow on Easter Sunday, or look for blue moons, spaceships, and astronauts on a Blue Moon Sunday). Participation is mostly synchronous now, though Sonia reports that in the thick of the pandemic, there were people joining asynchronously from the USA, Canada, India and Europe.

The social media platform has facilitated a new network of people, many unlikely to meet in person due to geographical distances. While it is open to all, Sonia recognises that a loose virtual community of Distance Drifters has formed.

And it's interesting, when somebody's not been around, not turned up for a while, people say "Has anyone heard from...? They haven't been to the Drift for a while". And people will send each other direct messages and see how they are.

Participants have told Sonia that Distance Drift has been important for their mental wellbeing during COVID-19.

It's given them a reason to do things. It's given them a sense of contact and reduced isolation. I've also had somebody say that it's actually really changed their practice. And people who have met through Distance Drift are now working together on other things.

As a weekly and ongoing event, Distance Drift requires significant commitment from Sonia. However, she recognises that it has become a protected space of valuable time and focus for her too.

The surprise for me is that instead of becoming a burden, it's actually been really liberating. ... I suppose to start with I felt I was giving something. And then I realised how much I was getting back by all of these people doing it. And I felt really honoured actually, I felt really… delighted that this is something people felt it was worth getting out of bed for, and joining in with. But also, knowing that it was needed was good for me, because it gave me something to think about. And get up for. And yes, carve that space out for myself. ... Before this, I would never have been able to give myself permission to say, "Every Sunday I go for a walk on my own for an hour". But now I can say that, and nobody argues with me. [Laughs]

http://www.soniaoverall.net/events/distance-drifts/

Spotlight 4: Laura Fisher

Going In / Going Out, Laura Fisher

Laura Fisher is a dance artist, producer and a performance maker based in Glasgow. In her interview with Dee Heddon, Laura explains that she makes work in lots of diverse ways, including film, site-specific performance, and audio, and working with sculpture, materials and participatory practices. Underpinning all her practice is an embodied or choreographic understanding of time, space, place, bodies, and the relations between these. Laura's work is informed by the social model of disability and her own embodied experience as a disabled person.

I think a lot about how we move through space, how we occupy space, who is visible in space, who has access to space, who doesn't have access to space and I guess asking questions about that in different ways and how I ask those questions feels quite responsive, the form is often responsive to the content. So, what is the space I am asking about, what is our existing relation to it and how then through artistic or performative intervention, maybe I can softly ask those questions through shifting our understanding or awareness of it?

During COVID-19, commissioned by Renfrewshire Leisure and Paisley

Arts as part of their Out of Place Festival, Laura created a pair of audio walks, GOING OUT/GOING IN and GOING IN/GOING OUT. Laura sometimes refers to them as sister works. The first one offers a guided walk through a local area.

It's about going outside into the world as a practice of deepening our attention inwards and noticing through this more inward gaze, or more embodied attention.

GOING OUT/GOING IN is intended to be experienced through earphones or headphones. By contrast, GOING IN/GOING OUT is an indoor work, to be listened to out loud.

That is almost like a reverse process, so it's about inviting a dropping-inwards into the body, accessing embodied memory and touch and then bringing in external stimulus, so through sound, found sound, in order to be able to access space beyond the four walls that you're in.

As someone who has spent several periods of her life incapacitated and unable to leave the house due to illness and disability, in the context of COVID-19 restrictions Laura considered what she might have to offer to other people, based on her lived experience.

I'd dealt before with this really hard thing that everyone was experiencing and I was finding myself in moments with friends or family members or even professional settings, being able to maybe offer something small. ... Just being able to share or finding that I was less thrown by it because this was much more of a normal experience and through that difficult but more normal experience, I had developed these practices. Practices of attention.

Laura talks about her dual experience; as a movement artist, she has to be able to drop in to the body and really feel and notice, but in order to live with pain, she often has to escape that as well.

I often talk about this practice of going in and going out as a kind of crip survival strategy that I've developed. So, I was thinking a lot about this and I was thinking a lot about people who were also very unwell and weren't able to move or leave [the house].

The work was also a response to her own changed conditions of practice. As a site-based practitioner who often works with people, Laura's options became restricted. The two sites available to her at that time were her

daily walk, which the Scottish Government permitted, and her home. These were the sites that she turned to, to create a gentle participatory experience. The work also taps into a changed context when more people walked, perhaps listening to podcasts while doing so, alongside a general sense of increased engagement with mindfulness. Laura hoped that there was a degree of familiarity in her invitation, and therefore higher trust at the outset. She was also alert to the need to provide an experience for people who might not be able to walk. Not just disabled people, but people who, because of the virus, were now chronically ill.

To create the work, Laura did a lot of walking, and also recalled walking. She sometimes recorded short sections and then would listen to them outside, testing them out, and making notes on them, then revising and re-recording and taking them out again. In constructing the pieces, Laura thought carefully about speed and pace, and slowing down.

I am an individual who moves through the world at a slower pace and I wake up and I'm stiff. I have to take the long route or I have to rest halfway. My joints have seized up, so my steps are small. For all of these different reasons, we talk about this 'crip time' - it's slow and it's non-linear and often it can feel a bit like being left behind. So that was one thing that felt different this time. When I've been incapacitated before, I've had a sense of being rooted in time and space whilst the world moved on. And at this moment it felt like everyone was rooted in a certain time and space and place at the same time and so it felt much less isolating.

The slower pace affords an intimacy with the local environment, and the works invite this attunement to place:

I know that that pavement is on a slight slope which hurts my hip, so I'll walk on that side. I know where the loose bits of ground are, where the trip hazards are, I know where the places might be to rest, to have a breather, I know where the nice view is, you know, it's just like there's this multilayered sense of place-knowing that comes from having to be really attuned to navigating space.

Asked whether anything in the process had surprised her, Laura reflected on the context of the release of the two works. Between their releases, Sarah Everard had been reported as missing and then murdered while walking home. This prompted Laura to reconsider what it means to be walking in public, and notions of safety. She recognised also that the COVID restrictions amplified racist stop-and-search actions by the

police, with Black men disproportionately targeted. Laura identified an uncomfortable tension between her offer of walking as a gentle activity, when for so many it was experienced as the opposite. But at the same time, walking as a repetitive rhythmic act might well be soothing, offering a way to engage with and process trauma, both embodied trauma and the trauma generated by the pandemic.

https://www.laurafisherperformance.com/

Spotlight 5: Rasheeda Page-Muir

The Woolwich Epic, Rasheeda Page-Muir, photo credit Stephen Burridge
Woolwich Speaks - a commission presented by Poet in the City and the Royal Borough of Greenwich

Rasheeda Page-Muir is young poet born and raised in Woolwich, South East London. Rasheeda talked to Dee Heddon about her route into The Woolwich Epic.

As a teenager, Rasheeda had been involved in local youth activism, and was part of Greenwich Young People's Council and was then elected to represent Greenwich Borough for UK Youth Parliament. From the age of 13, Rasheeda started writing and performing poetry, and running the youth poetry circuit. At the age of 16, she founded a youth organisation in Woolwich, Revolution London. This created a platform for young people to engage in social and political conversation in a way that was accessible.

In 2020, Poet in the City (an organisation which commissions poets to tell stories through community engagement) reached out to Revolution, and to Rasheeda, to discuss a potential project which would document Woolwich High Street, and the culture of Woolwich more generally. Revolution contacted local organisations and Rasheeda then interviewed people to find out their stories and their experiences of Woolwich, ranging from local business owners to young people and people who ran charitable organisations in the area. The result, The Woolwich Epic, was a poem written by Rasheeda, based on these interviews, which was dispersed around the high street for the month of August 2021. A film of the poem, Woolwich Speaks, was also created.

Rasheeda reflects on the complexity of Woolwich as a place, especially considering recent gentrification:

Woolwich is a very interesting area. It has a lot of different histories: naval history, military history. Greenwich generally has a lot of that really rich history. But I think that people in the last ten years have seen the area really changing a lot. There's incredible levels of gentrification, which people have really mixed feelings about. Like in one sense it's, 'oh, there's all of these new things that we can maybe participate in', and there's new apartments [and so on]. The other side of that is that people who've lived here for ages aren't necessarily able to access those things because of cost, because of cultural barriers. And so, a lot of people had a lot to say about that. And I really wanted to capture that in the poem. […] We spoke to people who had lived in Woolwich for, like, 40, 50 years, versus 14-year-olds who, you know, had a different kind of relationship with the area.

Through the interviews Rasheeda identified an over-arching theme, a "conversation about a tale of two cities, or a place that has two parallel stories existing alongside each other". Importantly, the young people that Rasheeda was speaking to were clear about seeking agency in Woolwich's future.

It doesn't have to be the story of gentrification in other places that we've seen, where one group is kicked out and another just take over. We can really create and carve out space for our stories to be at the centre as well, and to make our stamp here, without us just being washed out of the future of this place.

The form of the artwork – a poem placed across the streets of Woolwich – was a COVID-19 adaptation. The original idea was that creative work would take place in a building recently purchased by the Council. The project was collaborative, involving a visual artist (R.M. Sánchez-Camus) and a filmmaker (Joe Watkins) as well as Rasheeda. Through conversations across the creative team and in virtual workshops with the community who participated, all done online, the idea emerged from the community that the poem could be brought to life by dispersing it across Woolwich, as a poem to be encountered by walking. The poem would constitute a trail, available on a map, and people could complete the trail and put the poem together.

Parts of the text were scattered all around Woolwich. Some on Tesco's. Some on the Station. And people, if they wanted to, or if they had read about it, could complete the trail. But if not, they would have still seen parts of this poem just kind of displayed around.

[…] It was quite crazy seeing parts of stuff I'd written in places that are normally, like, just waiting at my bus stop. It was great! And it was interesting because unless you had read the initial [information] plaque in the middle of the square, you wouldn't know who wrote it, you wouldn't know the context of any of it. But I really like that, because it's like just art for art's sake, as opposed to promoting something or, people can just see a particular line and they might really resonate with it, and put it in a completely different context, than the context we had written in, or envisioned it for, which I thought was amazing actually. And I think that had a greater impact than if it was just written all in one place for people to read. I don't think people would've necessarily read it in that way.

Rasheeda felt that the poem perhaps brought to the surface some ubiquitous feelings, or experiences of local people and communities, which tended not to be discussed. The poem served to highlight them. The walking poem also aimed to foreground the diversity of the area by introducing people to parts of Woolwich with which they were unfamiliar, for example, residents of the newer (gentrified) parts of Woolwich visiting the older areas, and vice versa.

Though Rasheeda has always written about her lived environment, the experience of creating The Woolwich Epic forced her to really look at the details of it. Similarly, this was the first time that Rasheeda had written something that was not just intended to be read, recorded or recited. She appreciated the physical aspect of it, "encouraging people to traverse a place" and "would absolutely love to do something like that again".

https://www.poetinthecity.co.uk/the-woolwich-epic-rasheeda-page-muir
Woolwich Speaks: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-7ORRWcAws

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Key points to emerge from this survey and the Spotlights are:

1. Many artists had their planned and commissioned work cancelled because of COVID-19.

2. Artists who used walking as part of their practice prior to COVID-19 continued to use it during the pandemic, often adapting it in response to new regulations.

3. Artists who had not used walking prior to COVID-19 turned to it during the pandemic. Most of those artists state a desire to continue to use walking as a creative resource.

4. Artists ability to adapt their practice in response to emerging conditions, demonstrates flexibility, curiosity, and commitment.

5. While the impact of the pandemic on artists' income and wellbeing must not be ignored, many artists noted and took advantage of new opportunities which emerged.

6. Many artists developed new skills and methods during the pandemic, in part to support the adaptation of their plans, but also because there seemed to be more time available to engage with them.

7. A key focus of creative and skills development for many artists was the use of technology to support engagement, particularly to collaborate or to facilitate remote participation.

8. Place-based work became central for many artists, with work created in, for and with local places. This orientation to the local is unsurprising given the restrictions on travel. What is perhaps more surprising is the affective dimension: many people commented on just how much more appreciative they now were of their local spaces and registered a commitment to staying local post-pandemic.

9. Alongside attention to and new or renewed appreciation of the local, artists also reflected that the pandemic had afforded them more time, and an opportunity to take more time and to slow down.

10. Slowing down and taking time was, for some, accompanied by a desire to scale down their work post-pandemic.

11. Creating walking work during the pandemic was felt by many artists to support their health and wellbeing, particularly mental health. Walking offered a space outside of the home, a space to reflect, and/or an opportunity to engage safely with others. The work itself offered ways to make sense of what was going on during COVID-19.

12. Artists created walking work during the pandemic to support a wide range of communities and individuals. Some of the work served to highlight inequities of access to public space, and to address through the work exclusions and barriers faced by different people and communities.

13. Artists developed models of practices which took account of and responded to diverse needs, ensuring that walking approaches were inclusive, and included indoor and imaginative walking alongside physical, outdoor walking.

14. The number of walking works made by artists across all parts of mainland Britain, much of it in collaboration with other organisations, evidence not just the resilience and adaptability of these artists, but also the extent of the creative practice which took place during the pandemic, and the significant contributions made by these artists, despite extremely challenging conditions.

15. The range of practices engaged with by artists demonstrates how diverse walking art is, extending from audio and video work, to ceramics, guidebooks and graphic art.

Recommendations

We hope that this report can usefully be shared with other organisations, including commissioning partners and arts funders. We note that:

1. During the pandemic, walking offered artists a safe way to continue to make work, within the limitations set by the restrictions. The works collected in our digital gallery and summarised in our Spotlights provide rich examples of what is possible by using walking as a resource, material, and/or creative outcome. The mental-health benefits of making

this work are noted by many respondents. Much of this work is also participatory and socially engaged and brings multiple benefits to others. The value of the work that walking art does – connecting, supporting, communicating, reflecting – needs to be better recognised. All the artists featured in our Spotlights provide detail and evidence of what remains possible even during a pandemic, when challenges are approached creatively. Works created by artists offered people a way to reflect on, make sense of and make meaning from the complex lived experiences people were going through. This may have helped people feel less isolated. These artworks now exist as a rich and important archive of pandemic experiences. Funders and other organisations supportive of the arts and its multiple benefits might usefully consider how they could pivot existing artists' support, or adapt existing commissions, to ensure that artists can continue to make work during a pandemic.

2. Walking work, often in tandem with creatively deployed hybrid methods of delivery, provided a means by which artists could continue to create safe participatory work, reaching and engaging individuals and communities who might well be isolated, anxious, frustrated, bored, etc. Funders and other organisations supportive of the arts could usefully engage artists to create walking work which specifically connects with their communities, and which facilitates community coherence, rather than withdrawing all arts and community engagement practices. Equally, community organisations looking for inventive ways to continue to support their participants, even or especially in a time of crises, should consider working with walking artists to address new challenges, for example, walking together while apart. These artists have extensive expertise which can be applied in restrictive contexts.

3. In the context of climate crises, organisations and funders should encourage and support artists to make work that is for, in and with their locality. Many artists turned to their local areas and gained a new appreciation of them from this re-orientation. They also invited or inspired others to engage with their locality. This commitment to the local should be retained. One avenue for fruitful exploration is the partnership of local active travel and environmental organisations with local artists, embedding them as local creative workers in 20-minute neighbourhoods. Artists could be key partners with communities in addressing sustainable development goals.

4. While many artists focused on hyper-local activity, technology also enabled wider connections and solidarities, including virtual communities. Many artists upskilled their technical competencies during the pandemic, suggesting that further provision for and access to skills training would be valuable. Our artists also used technology to engage with diverse communities. Not all people have equal access to digital technology, or the same level of confidence in using it. Wide distribution of digital equipment is needed to address the digital divide. Artists working with communities can help participants build their confidence and agency in using technology to connect with others, explore their feelings, and document their experiences.

5. The pandemic has revealed that many artists felt time-poor before the pandemic. They appreciated the new time and space that the pandemic conditions forced. It is paradoxical that it takes a crisis such as the pandemic to positively change the conditions of work. It seems imperative, for the health and wellbeing of artists, that working conditions are improved. This includes reducing the precarity of the arts sector, and in particular of freelance artists. While some of our respondents were able to access government- or arts-council financial support during the pandemic, many were not. The precarity felt by many artists before the pandemic was exacerbated during it, as income streams were closed off, and commissions cancelled. In future crises situations, such as experienced during COVID-19, more and faster resource needs to be made available for freelance artists. Provision of basic income for artist would be one method for safeguarding artists' livelihoods and supporting continued creative practice – much of it delivering social and cultural benefit - during a crisis.[7]

ENDNOTES

1. Ramblers (2020), 'The Benefits of Walking Factsheet' www.ramblers.org.uk/advice/facts-and-stats-about-walking.aspx, Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn (2019), 'What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review' https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/329834/9789289054553-eng.pdf.

2. Gov.UK (2021), 'The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on walking and cycling statistics, England: 2020' (2021). www.gov.uk/government/statistics/walking-and-cycling-statistics-england-2020/the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-on-walking-and-cycling-statistics-england-2020#:~:text=Both%20men%20and%20women%20saw,to%20304%20stages%20per%20person, IPSOS (2021) 'A Year of Life Under Lockdown' https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/year-life-under-lockdown-how-it-went-and-what-people-will-miss

3. The data that informs this report, and more detailed analysis, can be found in our linked document "Data Analysis of Artist's Walking Survey: A Supplement to Walking Art & Covid-19".

4. Some of this work can be explored in our project's #WalkCreate Gallery www.walkcreate.gla.ac.uk/walkcreate-gallery. We have also commissioned from artists 30 creative walking recipes, which address challenges to walking identified by survey respondents. The Walkbook: Recipes for Walking & wellbeing can be accessed at www.walkcreate.gla.ac.uk/the-walkbook

5. Our focus in this summary report is on how artists used walking in their work during COVID-19. Survey responses demonstrate a wide range of reactions, and as our supplementary publication and analysis reveals, some respondents were not able to make any work during the pandemic and found the crises wholly negative.

6. Interview transcripts are available at the University of Glasgow's Enlighten Respository https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/

7. See https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-jobs-in-the-cultural-sector-part-3. See also Roberta Comunian & Lauren England (2020) 'Creative and cultural work without filters: Covid-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy', Cultural Trends, 29:2, 112-128, DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2020.1770577. The

authors of this report support a basic income for artists and welcome the scheme being piloted in Ireland. https://visualartists.ie/basic-income-guarantee-for-artists/

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Thanks to all the artists who agreed to be interviewed for our project. We only have space to summarise a few of these in this Report, but are planning future publications, and all the transcripts of interviews can be accessed via the University of Glasgow's Enlighten Data Repository.

Our sincere gratitude to all the artists who submitted their walking work to our #WalkCreate Digital Gallery:
https://walkcreate.gla.ac.uk/walkcreate-gallery/

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