10 Trends that Will Impact Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy in 2021

About this time last year, Americans for the Arts staff put our heads together to create a “Trends in 2020” blog post. We didn’t anticipate an economy-grinding pandemic, which has devastatingly shaped everything this past year, but we did hit some of the other trends that occurred—demographic change, rising division and distrust, shifts towards equity, the fight over who would get to vote and political power, and the primacy of data.

Across the arts field, most of us would agree that 2020 was a humbling, surprising, traumatic, and frustratingly unpredictable year. While trend forecasting in this moment is a tricky business, understanding what might be coming around the bend is crucial to our success as a field, particularly as we navigate such a volatile time.

Who knows, honestly, what 2021 will bring—but the staff at Americans for the Arts got together (virtually, this time) and here’s what we’ve come up with—10 trends that we think will impact arts, culture, and the creative economy in 2021.
1. Mass movement and coalitions will continue to disrupt the status quo and push for new possibilities and policies—from all directions.

Mass movements, uprisings, and insurrections will come in multiple forms this year. Whether you’re talking about the invasion of the Capitol by right-wing insurrectionists; the boosting of the value of stocks, digital currencies, and metals by day traders on message boards; or the continued advocacy for racial equity, environmental salvation, and social justice, we’re in a moment of massive action, work-by-coalition, and hunger for change.

Within the arts, 2020 sparked broad coalitions and movements ranging from Culture@3 coalition in New York City—600+ cultural organizations that meet at least weekly and have since March 2020—to national efforts like We See You White American Theater, the Put Creative Workers to Work coalition, the National Independent Venues Association, and Be An #ArtsHero. These groups are demonstrating unprecedented cooperation, pushing boundaries on what’s possible for funding, policy, and justice, and centering cultural and racial equity.

We see no reason why mass action and broad coalitions will slow down in 2021—and anticipate that these efforts will manifest in new and unforeseen ways.
2. **The economy will restart, but the creative economy will need help to keep up the pace.**

As of this writing (February 2021), President Biden has announced that he is seeking a nearly $2 trillion [American Rescue Plan relief package](https://www.whitehouse.gov/r Terror-plan) with plans to build out a follow-on recovery package. This shift in focus, coupled with the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine and anticipation from economists and health experts of a mid-year revving of the economy, says “recovery” is coming.

But what does that mean for the arts—an industry where 40% of cultural organizations have [used reserves](https://www.econfocus.org/2020/11/17/the-economic-outlook-for-2021-and-beyond/), over half of all creative workers report having [no savings left](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/employment UIB.0), and where there may be a serious challenge getting the engine restarted without assistance?

We, as a field, need to prioritize a one-two punch: relief funding to get both creative businesses and individual workers on their feet and also recovery funding to provide a “runway” to get production up and running again. If we can achieve that, we could strategize how to ride a cultural boom created from pent-up demand.

If we can’t, our doors won’t be ready to reopen and our products won’t be ready to sell, which will be problematic to both the creative economy and local economies of all types.
3. **Budget ripple effects in local and state governments will make 2021 a risky time for local and state arts agencies, arts educators, and the entire creative sector.**

Finances always have a long tail—never more so than with government budgets and philanthropic dollars. The economic rollercoaster of 2020, paired with an unprecedented need for relief and support, have strapped cities, states, and philanthropies going into 2021. 

[State revenues](#) will continue to decline or stagnate at less-than-pre-pandemic levels, and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies projects a [decrease in funding to state arts agencies](#) of 11%.

City budgets are created and allocated on such long lead times that the true negative impact of the financial crisis may not be [fully felt](#) until the end of 2021, and all the way into 2023. This could lead to downsized agencies, lost positions for arts educators, decreased funding for arts-based programming, and more.

On the philanthropic side, 3-year rolling averages for draw downs, which allow the stability of the foundation, have the potential to [decrease philanthropic investment](#) over that same period. And [individual philanthropy](#) is likely to suffer as well.

Agencies and organizations need to be firming up their cases for funding, mapping the disproportionate impact, and preparing for longer-term reductions.
4. **Americans will continue to reckon with historic and current racial inequities in a struggle between maintaining forward momentum giving into inertia.**

2020 marked a moment of stark racial division in the United States, which sometimes felt like a push-pull between essentially two camps—one of equity, one of racism. In 2021, we anticipate that, while the movements on either edge will stay visible and bold, the struggle for progress will fall to the middle: those seeking a “return to normal.” Unfortunately, that old “normal” is a state of racial inequity in the United States. 2021 will be a year of deciding how—and, crucially, whether—we, collectively, progress to a new, more equitable, vision of ourselves and the creative field.

Within and beyond the arts, consciousness around language, practice, and structures still needs to grow, even as engagement with things like pronouns, alt text, land acknowledgement, visual descriptions, ASL interpretation, captioning, etc. is increasing. In 2021, philanthropy will continue responding with new, large investments designed, in part, to perpetuate progress. More people will own that the inertia of “getting back to normal” means perpetuating an inequitable past and sets up an unsustainable and irrelevant future. Deeper reckonings with board and staff structures, endowment investment strategies, pricing, and the nature of creative work will begin, and will be both crucial and hard.

Even as anti-racist policies and practices emerge as more standard, many organizations and businesses, including Americans for the Arts, will continue reckoning with inequities in an effort to move towards an anti-racist vision.
5. The plight of the independent worker (and the creative worker in particular) will move up the priority list.

COVID hit independent workers hard, and creative workers particularly hard (63% unemployment). The momentary crisis of COVID, however, pulled back the curtain on a longer-term and more insidious reality about how independent and creative workers have been treated, both by broader systems and the fields in which they work.

The number of independent or gig workers in the overall U.S. economy has grown by 15% in the past decade, and now sits at 16% of the total workforce—including about a third of the country’s 5.1 million creative workers. Despite that growth, they suffer inequitable treatment. Independent workers can’t, in general, access unemployment; have a harder time accessing insurance; and are less likely to save for retirement. Almost 9 in 10 creative businesses are micro-businesses or solo entrepreneurships, which often have the most difficulty securing loans and growth capital. The undergirding of basically every cultural institution is a corps of individual, often poorly paid, creatives, precariously perched on the brink.

As laws like California’s AB-5 (and similar policies) proliferate and set new boundaries on how independent workers are classified and treated, cultural organizations may find themselves on the uncomfortable side of an argument about fair treatment and equity—and will need to figure out how to maintain organizational stability without relying on problematic wage and treatment practices. 2021 is the time for a reset on the relationship of the arts sector and the artists that power it.
6. **Digital is here to stay, and virtual engagement (at least some of the time) may be, too.**

As with most seismic shifts, the pandemic has forced almost everyone to relearn the fundamentals—in this case, how to work, connect, and live in a virtual space. The Zoom Room replaced the meeting room in 2020, and revealed the relative cost savings, convenience, and possible improvements to work/life balance that can come from being remote.

Digital arts engagement skyrocketed, with viewership of everything from Netflix to National Theatre Live spiking as people sought out culture in whatever format they could safely consume. Major artists started performing concerts on Fortnite and Roblox.

Alfre Woodard led an all-Black, Zoom-based reimagining of a *Golden Girls* episode. Masses of TikTok users group-created a new Disney musical (*Ratatouille*), which was then virtually performed in a fundraiser that raised over $2 million (!) for The Actors Fund.

Director Alejandro Iñárritu created a socially-distanced, VR-based, immersive experience called *Carne y Arena*, which put participants through the visceral experience of attempting to immigrate to the U.S. via the southern border.

The level of “virtual” in 2020 was intense. But what does a more moderated version of going digital look like once we’re able to go back outside? How will our habits reset, and how will they stay changed?
7. **Robots and AI are increasingly invading artforms and determining what we see and hear.**

At MIT, they've created [dancing robots](#)—a harbinger of things to come that makes the robot-proof-ness of the arts markedly less certain. As the video makes clear, tech isn’t always going to be clunky and silent.

In December, *Synced* published an article collating 10 AI-power art projects that included AI-generated or assisted poetry, 3D rendering, painting, drawing, and opera, among others. Our cultural viewing habits, at least from home, are driven by AI-derived algorithms that react to your viewership and curate your cultural feeds. Following a $432,000 sale of an AI-generated artwork in 2018, Christie’s will have its first all-virtual art auction later this year—and will accept cryptocurrency at it for the first time as well. The virtual visual arts market, driven by digital currencies like Ether, is ramping up, offering a completely different aesthetic, financial model, and set of questions about authenticity, security, value, and copyright.

Finally, the algorithms and AI behind the various social networks on which we almost all spend hours each day, as explored in *The Social Dilemma*, are determining where and how we get news, information, and content—and making it harder to cross ideological lines, engage in empathy-building and respectful debate, and think critically.
8. All aspects of health—from individual to environmental—will take the spotlight.

Our health has taken a hit, whether you’re talking about individual mental and physical health, community trauma, environmental fragility, or something in between.

The new Presidential administration has prioritized all of these aspects of health and well-being, and the arts and creativity have the potential to be an increasingly visible strategy to addressing them. Whether you’re considering trauma-informed practice to support students reentering school environments, artistic products to re-start local ailing economies, or the infusion of creative practice into pursuits like the Green New Deal, the arts are poised to be an essential component of our healing.

Acting on that front will involve an increased awareness around how the arts can prepare (and be part of broader preparation) for disasters and emergencies, continued concerted work on the parts of arts advocates to keep the arts at the table, and a willing engagement and altruism from creative workers to help the country navigate what’s next.
9. **Getting back out there—to eat, play, and travel—will start up again, but it may not look the same.**

While we don’t know the full pacing of the vaccine rollout and what it will mean for travel, new rules to make planes, trains, and other mass transit safer and increased prevalence of the vaccine will spark a resurgence in travel this year—though until June it will likely be mostly local or drive tourism. This is particularly true given inequities related to the vaccine rollout, both domestically and internationally.

According to the US Travel Association, half of American travelers are excited about near-term travel and more than half are already in a “travel state-of-mind.” When we can get back out there in the world, that same research says Americans will be looking for warm weather, outdoor activities, and a lack of crowds.

Social distancing, mask wearing, and other health measures are likely around for much of 2021—but people are anxious to congregate again when they safely can, so some arts groups will continue to get creative, to produce outside or in new modes, and to deliver content virtually.

Luckily, new tools and guidance already exist to help organizations and consumers keep track of what’s possible, safe, and legal as we move slowly into a post-COVID world.
10. Opening up and turning outward will be the order of the year for the country, and it will take some work.

In 2021, a new Biden administration will lead the way in a reinvestment in cultural relations abroad by first building trust and championing diversity and equity within local communities at home.

International relationships will, in part, be strengthened by new virtual cultural diplomacy and eventually through culture exchange investments. It will also be work that occurs, according to the Biden Administration, partially through “sub-national” international relationships between cities and states of different countries. This is necessary work; the destruction of historic international alliances and relationships is going to require a citizen diplomacy response to rebuilding trust. Technology has opened up the possibility of digital cultural diplomacy, and in 2021 we anticipate museums and other cultural institutions will begin to step into that space.

In this UN-led International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, embedding the work of artists and cultural exchange into diplomacy efforts will be essential, as will artistic responses to global issues such as climate, pandemic, racial disparities and injustice, the rise of authoritarianism and assault on democratic institutions, health and economic disparities, disinformation, and science denial.