

Reflecting on the Covid-19 Pandemic: Awareness and Survival Through the Arts

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Abstract

The unprecedented pandemic, which swept across the world in 2020, came with an avalanche of public health confusion and complexities. Every sector had to restructure its operational strategies in response to the 'new normal'. The creative sector also had its fair share of pandemic chaos. This paper argues that art was a major tool for combating mental, social, and financial difficulties during the pandemic. Adopting a qualitative approach to data gathering and interpretation, this paper purposively selects some groups and organisations within Nigeria that employed the creativity of the arts in combating the complexities of the pandemic. The paper highlights the strategies employed by these groups and organisations in achieving their specific aims during the initial spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper concludes that the arts should be recognised as a key contributor to the maintenance of social and psychological balance during the pandemic. As such, the arts should not be ignored as the world rebuilds.

Keywords: global pandemic, art and Covid-19, art and social awareness, art and entrepreneurship, art and well-being, art in Nigeria.

Introduction

Before 2020, the idea of a global pandemic seemed farfetched and alien to most people, especially the younger generations, commonly known as generations Y and Z. It was never a subject to discuss or consider. Who could have imagined that the world, with all its human and technological might, could be brought to her knees by a microparasite? But it happened.

The year 2020 brought with it an unprecedented public health crisis that challenged the very pillars that offer the world an illusion of balance. The world as we knew it changed. The fundamentals of human existence were put to the test. Every sector had to adjust and restructure its operational strategies in response to the 'new normal' (Herath and Herath, 2020). Schools were closed down. Businesses and industries came to a halt. International travels were also stopped (Chinazzi *et al.*, 2020; Devi, 2020). Governments around the world were unprepared for the level of damage and the casualties that followed the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Hale *et al.*, 2020; Imtyaz *et al.*, 2020).

The creative sector also had its fair share of the pandemic chaos. The white cube (art galleries) was declared unsafe for creative appreciation and contemplation (King *et al.*, 2021). Private and government funding for art projects was re-directed to combat the public health crises. This resulted in cut-downs and the shutdown of many public spaces such as galleries,

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museums, art schools, theatres, cinemas, and public studios (Samaroudi *et al.*, 2020). In the United States,

Thirty percent of museums that have closed will not re-open; a projected \$4.5 billion in losses among arts non-profits is expected in the next fiscal year; and institutions are laying off cultural workers and implementing pay cuts. In the performing arts, widespread cancellations, residency deferrals, and contractual defaults are leaving the majority of gigging artists (Wilbur, 2020: para. 6 line 4).

During this crisis, however, while some individuals battled with depression and other resultant psychological side-effects of the global crisis (Obschonka *et al.*, 2021), others channelled their energies towards diverse creative activities, such as online creative challenges and competitions, virtual workout sessions, virtual teaching and learning, and digital concerts and festivals such as Durban University of Technology's DIGIFEST, to mention a few. In the words of Rossello and Thomas (2020: para. 7 line 1) "access to arts and culture during lockdown has been vital for so many: assisting cultural connectivity, stimulating creativity and supporting health and wellbeing." In a similar thought, what was noticed by individuals such as Essig (2020: para. 3 line 1), during the spread of the virus there was "a reliance on artists and their irreplaceable unique creative products to help humanity through this crisis through music, media streaming, literary arts, and online galleries." In addition to this list, the researcher must include YouTube, as the researcher personally benefitted immensely from the numerous ideas shared on the platform.

Methodology

Adopting a qualitative approach to data gathering and interpretation, this paper presents purposively selected creative organisations within Nigeria that employed their creative propensities to deal with the complexities of the pandemic. These organisations were purposively selected for their prominence in the Nigerian contemporary creative industry, as well as their demonstrated resilience to self and society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper argues that art was a major tool for combating the mental, social, and financial difficulties experienced during the pandemic. To furnish this argument, based on the qualitative data gathered the paper catalogues the activities of the selected groups during the initial spread of the virus under two major categories: Art and Entrepreneurial Initiatives as well as Art, Social Awareness, and Mental Well-being. Thereafter, the paper highlights the strategies employed by these groups in achieving their specific aims, during the initial spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Qualitative data were gathered during the pandemic and towards the ease of the lockdown protocols in Nigeria. The primary data were gathered mainly through participant observation during the researcher's participation in some of the initiatives. As a result, some parts of the analysis are presented to reflect the researcher's experience of the creative initiatives during the pandemic. Where participant observation was not possible as a result of the restrictions on movements and social gatherings, secondary data from organisations' websites and peer-reviewed journals were relied on. The secondary data were also used to corroborate and enhance the primary data where necessary.

Art and Entrepreneurship During the Pandemic

As the public health crisis transformed from an epidemic into a global pandemic, stringent measures to control the spread of the virus had to be put in place. Restrictions on movement and physical gatherings were some of such global measures. As a result, business transactions and interpersonal interactions had to go digital (Samaroudi *et al.*, 2020). This is not to insinuate that business owners were not leveraging on the marketing innovations and opportunities provided by digital platforms prior to the pandemic. Nonetheless, the pandemic took away the luxury of choice.

Art and cultural actors and institutions were greatly affected by the crisis. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020: para. 1 line 1), "along with the tourism sector, cultural and creative sectors are among the most affected by the current crisis, with jobs at risk, ranging from 0.8 to 5.5 percent of employment across OECD regions..." This is also the reality outside OECD regions. Regardless of such realities, artists and stakeholders in the creative sector continue to contemplate other alternatives to the widening separation and isolation of persons because of the pandemic (Rossello and Thomas, 2020). Therefore, this segment of the paper highlights the activities of selected actors in the art and creative sector who, through digital means, harnessed their creative tendencies in creating entrepreneurship opportunities for themselves and others during the pandemic.

ART X Lagos 2020

The last quarter of the year in Lagos is a unique period for art patrons and enthusiasts, especially those interested in the rich contemporary expressions from Nigeria and across Africa. During this period, the drivers of the art and cultural sectors in Nigeria often create a space dotted with fairs, festivals, biennials, intensives, workshops, exhibitions, open houses, studio visits, concerts, artist talks, and carnivals, amongst several other activities. ART X Lagos is one of such events.

Tokini Peterside is the founder and director of Art X Lagos. The annual art fair, which is known as a significant platform for the sales of contemporary art in

Africa (Kennedy, 2021), was founded in 2016. It is explained in the article *About art x Lagos* (ART X Lagos, 2021) that:

ART X Lagos was launched as a dynamic platform to showcase and support the breadth of contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora. ART X Lagos is a unique cultural event that goes beyond the traditional bounds of an art fair and has welcomed over 40,000 visitors to several days of dynamic art experiences... Since its debut, ART X Lagos has grown to host galleries and artists from over 30 countries and become renowned for its ambitious programme, which includes ART X Talks - a lively panel discussion series; ART X Live! - a one-of-a-kind showcase featuring collaborations between some of the fastest-rising artists and musicians on the African continent; as well as specially curated presentations and interactive projects (ART X Lagos, 2021).

Themed *Present States; Shared Futures*, 2020 was the sixth edition of the art fair. Prior to this year, the fair was mainly a physical event. However, with the complexities and challenges that came with the pandemic in 2020, it became expedient for the ART X Lagos team to make a decision for the annual fair to run digitally. Thus, according to ART X Lagos (2021), the 2020 version of the fair was curated to take place exclusively online from the second to ninth of December, 2020. By implication, only digital tickets were sold. The digital fair showcased two hundred (200) curated works from ten (10) galleries and forty-three (43) artists. Although the fair's transition onto a digital platform has increased audience participation by circumventing the challenges of physical participation, one cannot help but notice a vivid reduction in the number of galleries and artists that participated.

The *About ART x Lagos* (2021) page tells readers that, starting from the debut edition of ART X Lagos, the fair has experienced a steady increase in its gallery and artist participation annually. In 2016, eleven (11) galleries and forty-one (41) artists participated in the fair. The year 2017 had fourteen (14) galleries and forty-seven (47) artists in participation. Eighteen (18) galleries and fifty-six (56) artists participated in the 2018 ART X Lagos fair; while twenty-two (22) galleries and seventy-two (72) artists were presented in the 2019 version of the fair. In 2020 however, the numbers dropped to ten (10) galleries and forty-three (43) artists. This decline in the number of galleries and artists participation is perhaps an indication that people around the world were yet to fully embrace the new realities of the global pandemic. This is in addition to the socio-political unrest that was experienced in Nigeria in the last quarter of 2020 – the #EndSARS protest.

The #EndSARS protest of 2020 was a collective outcry by Nigerian youths against police brutality and bad governance. Ekoh and George (2021), as well as Ochi and Mark (2021), narrate that some men of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad

(SARS) of the Nigerian Police were captured in a video brutalising and shooting a young man in Ughelli, Delta State. The victim was then abandoned by the roadside and his Lexus SUV was taken away by the SARS operatives. This video ignited the 2020 protest as it circulated social media on the third of October 2020. The poor management of the protest and the protesters by the Nigerian Police Force led to the death and serious injuries of many more young Nigerians (Ochi and Mark, 2021).

In the face of the pandemic, and subsequently the #EndSARS protest, 2020 was a year like none other for all Nigerians, including participants of ART X Lagos. An article titled *Art X Lagos Consolidates its Position as West Africa's Premier International Art Fair with Digital Fair* (ArtDaily, 2020) explains that just as the fair was due to launch in October of 2020, the #EndSARS protests happened. In response to this unrest, ART X Lagos launched a support initiative for 100 photographers who worked on the frontlines of the protest, thus, contributing to the documentation of the historic civil uprising. A selection of these photographs and videos formed the fair's special project tagged New Nigeria Studios, featuring images taken across seventeen (17) states in Nigeria.

As indicated in the curated theme for the fair, the challenges of 2020 did not stop ART X Lagos from holding its events. Rather, it became a springboard for creative contemplations and conversations focused on re-imagining the future of human existence and interactions considering the current state of things. This is why Tokini Peterside, in an article titled *Art X Lagos Consolidates its Position as West Africa's Premier International Art Fair with Digital Fair* (2020) concludes that:

In this challenging and difficult year in which a global pandemic has ravaged Nigeria's economy, and a political movement has altered confidence in our nation state; the artists and galleries, musicians and performers that took part in ART X Lagos 2020 have shown above and beyond the power of art to inspire, to build and to create community and hope. Our belief remains that the future is bright for Africa and its creative talent, and we are thankful to our community for joining us to make this a reality in 2020.

Abuja Art week, Digital 2020

On the second of October 2020, the researcher was contacted by Ihu Anyanwu, the founder of the Abuja Art Week (AAW), via email. She had gotten the researcher's contact details from Folakunle Oshun, the Founder of Lagos Biennial when she asked to be introduced to curators working in Nigeria who had participated in the 2019 edition of the Lagos Biennial. Anyanwu and her team were planning the 2020 edition of the AAW and were looking for curators and galleries from within

Nigeria and its diaspora. After a few virtual meetings, the researcher agreed to participate. The researcher's participation as a curator was under the umbrella of NowExpressions, a curatorial collective the researcher co-founded in 2019.

Abuja Art Week is a week-long annual event which comprises curated exhibitions, talks, workshops, screenings, and music concerts at various locations across the city of Abuja, Nigeria. The debut edition of the Abuja Art Week was a physical event held in November 2019 (Contemporary&, 2020). Exactly a year after its debut, the second edition of the AAW was held from the 11th to the 15th of November 2020. As the pandemic brought about restriction to movement and physical interactions, AAW saw it as an opportunity to expand its audience participation through digital means. Thus, thirteen (13) countries, which include Angola, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Italy, Nigeria, Panama, Senegal, South Africa, The United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe participated virtually. Sixteen (16) galleries and cultural organisations, as well as four (4) independent curators from different parts of Africa and its diaspora, were in the list of participants. The activities of the week included a digital exhibition that showcased an array of curated works by the participating galleries and curators on New Art City's virtual art space, a virtual conference, a virtual music festival, master classes, and an opportunity to network and connect with other actors in the industry. All events were virtually hosted on the New Art City website (New Art City, 2020).

Abuja Art Week was founded with the goal of presenting the nation's capital in a new way, as an emerging art and cultural destination in Nigeria (Contemporary 2020). This is one of the reasons why the AAW team tagged its 2020 edition "I am Gbagyi". This theme embodies the physical and cultural context of Abuja, the nation's capital. Before the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria was moved from Lagos to Abuja in 1991 (Ejaro and Abubakar, 2013), the geographical space was mostly occupied by the Gbagyi ethnicity. The Gbagyi people are agriculturists and potters. The abundance of clay in the region and their pottery tradition attracted the attention of the colonial government to the region in the early 1950s (Jari, 2015). Since it has been made the new Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, the region has undergone significant physical, economic, political, and cultural transformations. With the aim to draw attention to Abuja's rich culture, Anyanwu's 2019 statement (cited in Osazuwa, 2019: para. 6 line 1) tenders that "we are driving the idea that Abuja is not only a city for people who are looking for political positions or contracts. It is a place that has its own culture." Thus, the 2020 AAW's theme was carefully curated to invite participants into the Gbagyi cultural space to explore its beauty and creative dimensions through the series of curated events during the week. In addition to AAW's aim to reinforce awareness of the Abuja cultural space, it also had an apparent focus on the sale of artworks.

One would expect that the 2020 edition of the AAW would be curated to encourage conversations on the prevalent global health and social crises, as most other organizations including ART X did. On the contrary, the organising team stuck to their pre-set goals to showcase the art and culture of Abuja despite the pandemic. Considering this, it suffices to say that the team's focus and strategy were solely entrepreneurial in their intention to create a commercial relevance for the art and cultural space in Abuja, as is the case in Lagos.

Social Media Influencers

For over a decade now, social media has experienced a tremendous level of growth and an increase in strength, reach, and relevance. Year after year, app after app, the social, political, religious, economic, and judicial dimensions of the world have been constantly re-shaped and restructured by the social media and their influencers (Borchers, 2021; Hudders *et al.*, 2021). This change and the restructuring of the simple world, as it was known by the generations X and Y, have been so rapid that many members of the aforementioned generations are left in a constant struggle to catch up and understand the workings of this new and complex world.

Like never before, most business organisations as well as private and public institutions now have social media managers as key actors within their setups. Influencers with followers running into the hundreds of thousands and even millions on social media platforms such as Tik-Tok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, are gradually redefining the marketing and advertising world. Cited in Taylor (2020), De Veirman *et al.* (2017) found that having a large audience of followers fosters a belief that an influencer is likeable and popular, thereby creating an opportunity for the effective promotion of brands. Social media, which is dominated by generation Z, has been used as both a constructive and a destructive tool, one can argue, in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, researchers such as Ekezie and Bosah (2021) are of the opinion that the use of social media may have significantly increased during the COVID-19 global crisis because of its capacity to engage audiences in multi-way conversations and interactions.

However, to get a sense of the impact of social media and its influencers as constructive tools for entrepreneurship alongside the sensitisation that occurred during the global pandemic, this paper takes a look at the key findings of an insightful survey on COVID-19's impact on influencer marketing conducted by Amra and Elma (2020) on one thousand influencers. With specific reference to Amra and Elma (2020), Taylor (2020) informs that three major findings were made:

- i. Influencer engagement increased during covid, but advert prices are only rising modestly;
- ii. Higher social media usage bodes well for future influencer marketing;
- iii. On a cost-per-thousand exposures basis, influencer marketing is offering better value and more targeted messages.

Attention to and interaction via mobile phones replaced outings and physical interactions for most people during the pandemic. Consequently, a surge in social media activity was noticed (Samaroudi *et al.*, 2020). Since the pre-COVID mode of operation for most influencers was mainly an indoors operation, the lockdown only encouraged their content creation process. This is one of the major reasons that influencer engagement increased during covid, according to the findings of Amra and Elma (2020). In agreement, Taylor (2020) explains that many influencers have adjusted their content to be appropriate for the pandemic, by focusing on topics such as fitness, healthy eating, hobbies, or life advice. This targeted focus has helped lead Instagram influencers to achieve an average increase in likes of 67.7 percent and a more than a 50 percent increase in comments.

It will be merely stating the obvious if one says that these increases in social media usage and influencer activity has translated into an increase in income for the influencers. While the situation is virtually the same with influencers such as Aproko Doctor, Taooma, and Mr. Macaroni in Nigeria, a new trend has been noticed. The restriction in human movement further compounded the challenges of filmmaking. This has adversely affected film production budgets and timelines as well as the financial sustainability of full-time actors and actresses in Nigeria. As a result, a sort of collaboration was fashioned between social media influencers and the members of the Nigerian film industry. This way, as the influencers get paid for the advertorial content they create for business owners, the actors also get paid for featuring in such adverts. Consequently, the current trend in social media adverts is such that a message is conveyed that promotes products and services through short films and comedy skits; thereby featuring those Nollywood actors whose livelihoods have been adversely impacted by the pandemic. In summary, during the initial spread of the COVID-19 virus and the lockdown that followed, social media became a mental, economic, and social escape for influencers, members of the art and creative sector, and people in general.

Art, Social Awareness, and Mental Well-being During the Pandemic

While some people in the arts and creative industry explored ways of doing business profitably despite the pandemic, others focused on contributing to the sensitisation of the public to ways of combating the virus. This paper

considers the activities of two groups that used their creative energy for awareness creation during the pandemic.

Creative Cities Abuja: Boxed-In Project

In order to harness and collectively grow and benefit from the economic and social strength of the creative industries in the United Kingdom and Nigeria, the two nations collaborated on a creative programme which was curated by the British Council and tagged UK/Nigeria 2015-16 (British Council, 2017). *Creative Cities* is one of the different projects that made up the UK/Nigeria 2015-16 programme. After the programme, some alumni of the Creative Cities Project in Abuja came together to create *Creative Cities Abuja*. Since its inception in 2017, the collective has engaged different public spaces in Abuja with its public engagement initiatives.

Creative Cities Abuja's most recent project, tagged the Boxed-In, was initiated during the lockdown. Being a public sensitisation initiative, the Boxed-In project was conceptualised in order to contribute to several public and private efforts towards educating people around the world on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) approved strategies for combating the COVID-19 virus. The curatorial team for the project, according to Adewumi and Iorvihi (2021), is made up of five (5) members of the collective, Joy Iorvihi, Rowland Goyit, Gbenga Soyinka Billz, Stella-Cornel Aghamba, and Thomas Jeffery Seaman. Working in concert, they sought inspiration from the African masquerading tradition.

Masquerades in the African context are not mere sources of community entertainment; masquerades are custodians and agents for enforcing social laws and order. Alongside their entertaining tendencies, Obaseki (1993) explains that a masquerade's performance is an intervention process between the two worlds (the world of the living and that of the ancestors). It provides a link for the needed continuum between them. This is done in order to vitalise, regenerate, and value the essence of living and the issues of survival. Thus, the recognition of the supreme position of the masquerade and its roles in maintaining social health and order in the African context, amongst other ideas, formed the basis for the 2020 Boxed-In project. Thus, some fundamental similarities and partial variations are noticed between the typical African masquerade performance and the contemporarily contextualised version of the Boxed-In project. First, the collective chose to re-conceptualise the masquerade regalia using large carton boxes. To depict the colourful nature of most masquerades, the boxes were painted in a graffiti style with different attractive hues. This was essential because of the intended purpose of the performance, which was to attract the attention of people in public spaces around Abuja.

Symbolic motifs that visually connote the specific reasons for a masquerade's appearance in the public space are usually incorporated into the costume of the masquerade for semiotic purposes. For instance, on the mask and masquerading tradition of Burkina Faso, Roy (1987:328) explains that:

A mask with human features may have added to it forward-curving antelope horns and a great bird's beak because it represents a spirit that does not take human or animal form. Similarly, animal shapes do not mean the mask represents an animal, but recall the invented spirit which saved the founding ancestor of the clan (Roy, 1987:328).

In congruence with this idea, each colourful box created for the Boxed-In project carried informative captions presented in simple cursives, based on the World Health Organisation's and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control's (NCDC) approved guidelines in reducing the spread of the virus (Adenle and Akande, 2020). Some of such captions include 'Avoid Crowded Places'; 'Wear Face Masks'; 'Stay Two Meters Apart'; 'Wash Your Hands Regularly'; 'Stay Safe'; 'COVID-19 is Real'; amongst others (Adewumi and Iorvihi, 2021).

As explained by Iorvihi Joy (2020), a member of the collective, in July 2020, during the partial lockdown in Nigeria, a procession of colourful masquerades bearing COVID-19 messages paraded the streets of Abuja, sensitising people on the safety measures against the deadly virus. The painted masquerade boxes paraded different relatively busy locations such as the UTC Market in Garki and the Federal Secretariat in Abuja. These locations were chosen for their peculiar demographics. While the Federal Secretariat is a centre for the organised government and privately owned establishment in Abuja, the UTC Market in Garki is a busy area that presents a mixed population of both white and blue-collar workers, as well as buyers and sellers in their organised and not-so-organised business establishments. Given such demographics, these locations presented the collective with opportunities to reach different types of audiences. The aesthetics of the boxes and the performance as a whole attracted passers-by to the procession. As they enjoyed the entertaining dimension of the performance, they became informed and educated as well.

Perforated paper bags were worn over the heads of the volunteers as masks. This was not done so as to merely capture all the components of a masquerade's regalia; on the contrary, it was done to conceptually symbolise the WHO's recommendation that wearing a face mask also helped in curtailing the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Cheng *et al.*, 2022). As such, everyone was mandated to wear a face mask in public spaces. Therefore, to further stress this imperative recommendation, the Boxed-In

performers were masked. Although the project was executed physically, the collective made use of their social media handles (Twitter and Instagram) to further publicise the project, so as to reach a wider audience.

Arts in Medicine Fellowship, 2020

The Arts in Medicine Fellowship is a subsidiary of the Arts in Medicine Projects. It was founded in February 2018 by Kunle Adewale, a visual artist and a 2019 Atlantic Fellow of the Global Brain Health Institute at the University of California, San Francisco. Kunle is also the founder of the Tender Arts Initiative. The Arts in Medicine Fellowship was launched to foster collaborations between students and professionals in the arts and healthcare fields. This collaboration aims to leverage different forms of artistic expressions to facilitate healing and hope for patients and their caregivers in healthcare centres and hospitals. Elements such as images, music, nature, and creative words are believed to be powerful tools in uplifting the spirits of sick persons (Arts in Medicine Projects, 2019).

Since its launch in 2018, the fellowship had always been a physical event. But 2020 was an exception. Having successfully done the 2018 and 2019 editions of the fellowship physically, its 2020 version had to be done virtually as a result of the global pandemic. Instead of cancelling the fellowship, as some organisations did due to the lockdown, the organisers of the Arts in Medicine Fellowship 2020 opted the digital alternative. Similar to the case of AAW, the organisers of Arts in Medicine Fellowship saw the pandemic as more of an opportunity, rather than an obstacle. The travel restrictions, as occasioned by the global lockdown were seen as an opportunity to digitally expand participation in the fellowship to other African nations, without having to deal with the immigration requirements for the prospective participants.

Consequently, the 2020 edition of the fellowship was tagged a Pan-African experience. From about 95 participants during the 2019 class, as reported by Olatunbosun (2019), the 2020 class increased to 200 participants from Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Sudan, Mauritius, Botswana, Namibia, and Nigeria. This is a result of the digitality of the 2020 Pan-African Experience which eased the complexities of international participation despite the global pandemic and lockdown (Olatunbosun, 2020).

All activities during the fellowship were entirely digital through the social media handles of the Fellowship. Instead of administering the projects at physical healthcare facilities and communities, as was the case prior to the global pandemic, the cohorts for the 2020/2021 Arts in Medicine Fellowship enacted their projects on social media communities or platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Tik-Tok, and

Zoom, amongst many others. Although this strategy reduced the emotional connections that come with physical interactions, it, however, helped the projects reach wider audiences across Africa (Arts in Medicine Projects, 2022).

The group projects that were initiated and executed during the fellowship were mostly geared towards increasing awareness of the COVID-19 virus, as well as collecting stories and experiences of people who caught the virus and (or) struggled with mental issues during their period of isolation. Other ideas explored through the projects include mindfulness, care for the aged, art as therapy, accounts, and awareness of COVID-19 through the voices of children from different socio-economic levels, mental health, care for the sick through the arts, connecting with the isolated, as well as dance and music for health. The Arts in Medicine Projects has since expanded its operations to include a National Arts in Health Conference (NAHCON), a Global Arts in Medicine Fellowship, and recently, a Mental Health Fellowship.

A Note on the Role of the Arts in Times of Crises

Having catalogued these different forms of creative responses to the pandemic in Nigeria, it is important to point out that despite ART X Lagos' entrepreneurial focus, some part of the 2020 edition was dedicated to public sensitisation on the global pandemic as well as the socio-political issues ravaging its host country, Nigeria. Similarly, the activities of social media influencers were not restricted to only entrepreneurship. In order to increase awareness and sensitisation to the World Health Organization's prescribed safety tips and measures for combating the virus, different private and governmental organisations partnered with some influencers in disseminating the relevant information to their target audiences. For example, Aproko Doctor, in his collaboration with Viral Facts Africa on the #MakeWeChangeAm campaign¹, is a Nigerian example to back-up this notion; while Abena Antwiwaa², a 29-year-old fashion blogger in Aurora, in her Colorado state-sponsored vaccination advocacies, as cited by Anderson (2021), is another example in the United States. This is in

¹ The #MakeWeChangeAM campaign is conducted together with Viral Facts Africa, a social content hub launched in March 2021 by the WHO co-hosted initiative, Africa Infodemic Response Alliance to produce and distribute digital productions to combat health misinformation online. See <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/09/covid-19-celebrities-mobilise-against-vaccine-apathy-2/>

² According to James Anderson (2021), in Colorado the state pays citizen influencers up to \$1,000 a month for their work on Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook and other platforms. The influencers post about their own vaccine experiences, dispel myths and misinformation, alert followers to pop-up vaccine clinics, and direct them to information provided by state health authorities. See <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-technology-joe-biden-social-media-business-a2992b2881fcf68e1144efa7b869844>

recognition of the contemporary influence of social media and influencers on numerous followers.

In their chapter contribution to the book titled *Crisis Management Beyond the Humanitarian Development Nexus*, Gómez and Kawaguchi (2018) framed their argument around a notion iterated in 1991 by the United Nations (UN) that relief is not enough in the management of crises; therefore, it is expedient to activate a continuum from relief to rehabilitation and development. While the provision of relief through different forms of interventions is noble and laudable in times of crisis, it should not be the ultimate goal for crises managers. In relation to the focus of this paper, while these creative organisations have demonstrated laudable resilience in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, it is not enough to stop at their interventions during the pandemic. It is imperative to follow such humanitarian action up with other sustainable measures to foster proper rehabilitation and development for all in need of such measures. The relevance of the arts in times of crisis is clearly articulated in the introductory note of Jones (2018:9):

As our planet flirts with existential crises, people find themselves more frequently on the move – escaping war, genocide, pandemic, tsunami, earthquake or climate change...How do we process such layered trauma, so deep and wide that it includes loss of everything once held familiar, understood and loved by us, including our words? It may be surprising to know that by accessing our creativity, on a preverbal level, words can be found, and trauma can be alleviated (Jones, 2018:9).

It is quite instructive to note that Jones' prescription of artistic interventions in times of crisis are not only for the sake of relief. Art in this instance is being prescribed as a viable path towards rehabilitation, recovery, and, perhaps, development. In its democratic and inclusive nature, art is recognised as an expressive language when verbal expression becomes tedious and unavailable. For children at the Children's Cancer Centre in Melbourne, whose situation was compounded by the COVID-19 crises, art and art therapy became a source of relief in the face of such complexities (Samarasekera, 2021). To achieve sustainable rehabilitation and development through the arts, artists, creative organisations, and memory institutions such as museums and heritage organisations need to work in concert to rid society of the residues of crisis and trauma.

Conclusion

The bottom line in all the cases presented in this paper is that of resilience and commitment against all odds. Even in the face of social crises such as the pandemic, we must constantly seek out strategies to circumvent the

odds and contribute our quota toward making the human environment more livable and sustainable. This paper has also articulated the roles of the arts in managing and maintaining social and psychological balance during the pandemic. As the world rebuilds, it is important that individuals, corporate institutions, and governments around the world recognise the role of the arts in this process. Creative and cultural organisations should be properly factored in and integrated in the strategies for recovery and rehabilitation. Given how the arts were trivialised during the pandemic, as evidenced by cuts and diversions of funding to art projects, it is expedient to state that relegating the arts to a place of secondary relevance in the rehabilitation of our traumatised society may be a precursor to an imminent social and mental health crisis.

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