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## Imagining a Post-Pandemic Reality through an Arts-based Methodological Framework
## Imaginer une réalité post-pandémique à travers un cadre méthodologique basé sur les arts

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Résumé de l'article

La pandémie de COVID-19 a exacerbé la précarité des moyens de subsistance des artistes dans l'ensemble du secteur des arts et de la culture. Les efforts déployés pour réparer les préjudices du passé et réimaginer des avenirs plus équitables s'accompagnent de la nécessité de centrer les expériences vécues par les artistes sur la recherche et l'élaboration des politiques. Partenariats durables : Collaboration et réciprocité dans les villes créatives est une initiative de recherche participative basée sur les arts qui rassemble les secteurs culturel et universitaire pour imaginer conjointement des avenirs dans lesquels les artistes peuvent prospérer. Dans le cadre de cette initiative, cinq chercheurs et cinq artistes commandités de Toronto, représentatifs d'un éventail de disciplines, ont documenté en collaboration les défis et les prochaines étapes potentielles. Cette collaboration a été encadrée par les méthodologies de cristallisation, d'échantillonnage de cristaux et de photovoice. Notre objectif est d'intégrer avec art des voix artistiques dans la pratique de la création de connaissances et de tracer des voies politiques pour les institutions et la communauté afin de créer des relations à long terme fondées sur l'équité et la réciprocité. La visibilité de l'expérience des artistes locaux en matière de pandémie vise un large public, y compris les instituts de formation artistique, les décideurs politiques et les universitaires, et renforce l'appel à la connexion, à la conversation et au changement.

# Imagining a Post-Pandemic Reality through an Arts-based Methodological Framework

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*Abstract*: The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the precarity of artistic livelihoods across the arts and culture sector. With efforts to repair past harms and reimagine more equitable futures comes the need to center the lived experiences of artists in research and policy development. *Sustainable pARTnerships: Collaboration and Reciprocity in Creative Cities* is a participatory arts-based research initiative that brings together the cultural and academic sectors to jointly imagine futures in which artists can thrive. As part of this initiative, five researchers and five commissioned Toronto-based artists representative of a range of disciplines collaboratively documented challenges and potential next steps. This collaboration was framed with the methodologies of crystallization, crystal-scaping, and photovoice. Our objective is to artfully integrate artistic voices into the practice of knowledge creation and map out policy pathways for institutions and the community to create longer-term relationships built on equity and reciprocity. The visibility of local artists' pandemic experience targets a broad public, including arts training institutes, policymakers, and academics and heightens the call for connection, conversation, and change.

*Keywords:* Artists; cultural workers; arts-based research; participatory research; curatorial practice; higher education

*Résumé* : La pandémie de COVID-19 a exacerbé la précarité des moyens de subsistance des artistes dans l'ensemble du secteur des arts et de la culture. Les efforts déployés pour réparer les préjudices du passé et réimaginer des avenirs plus équitables s'accompagnent de la nécessité de centrer les expériences

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vécues par les artistes sur la recherche et l'élaboration des politiques. Partenariats durables : Collaboration et réciprocité dans les villes créatives est une initiative de recherche participative basée sur les arts qui rassemble les secteurs culturel et universitaire pour imaginer conjointement des avenirs dans lesquels les artistes peuvent prospérer. Dans le cadre de cette initiative, cinq chercheurs et cinq artistes commandités de Toronto, représentatifs d'un éventail de disciplines, ont documenté en collaboration les défis et les prochaines étapes potentielles. Cette collaboration a été encadrée par les méthodologies de cristallisation, d'échantillonnage de cristaux et de photovoice. Notre objectif est d'intégrer avec art des voix artistiques dans la pratique de la création de connaissances et de tracer des voies politiques pour les institutions et la communauté afin de créer des relations à long terme fondées sur l'équité et la réciprocité. La visibilité de l'expérience des artistes locaux en matière de pandémie vise un large public, y compris les instituts de formation artistique, les décideurs politiques et les universitaires, et renforce l'appel à la connexion, à la conversation et au changement.

*Mots clé :* Artistes ; travaill.euses.eurs culturels ; recherche basée sur les arts ; recherche participative ; pratique curatoriale ; enseignement supérieur

## Introduction

Numerous reports attest to COVID-19's devastating impact on the livelihood of workers whose primary income is from the arts sector: artistic livelihoods are left at stake, at risk, threatened, or worse yet, lost. Artists in Toronto and internationally bore the consequences of unrenewed contracts, reduced hours, and the cancellation of live performances (Better Toronto Coalition, 2020; Chen, 2021; Wong, 2021). However, the precariousness of artistic livelihoods is not a new reality nor are the conversations around changing that reality (The Consulting Matrix, Inc., 2019). Improving the economic position of artists and cultural workers is often a focus, given that *livelihood* refers to financial income. More long-term funding and contracts, more commissions, better and more stable pay, as well as government support through the creation of a universal basic income are all viable routes toward addressing the long-standing precarity and fragility of artists' working lives (Chen, 2021; Wong, 2021). While financially supporting artistic livelihoods is crucial, there is a more expansive meaning of livelihood to consider, albeit one that has become obsolete. According to the Oxford English Dictionary ("Livelihood, n.1," 1993), the origins of the term can be traced to the Old English *liflad* meaning the course of a person's life. This then shifted to the Middle English *lifelode*, a means of keeping alive. When the suffix became '-hood' in late Middle English, another meaning emerged: a lively state or condition. Tapping into the etymology of livelihood brings us beyond a purely economic focus and toward one that considers what artists need to keep alive over the course of a creative life, what a lively state for the arts would mean more broadly, who is able to live an artistic life, and what is at stake when these artistic means of living are threatened. After all, artists are not just workers but "fully fleshed out people whose capacity for creative work is shaped by their wider lives and circumstances" (Wong, 2021, p. 19). This short history lesson also raises an important question: what does it mean to support sustainable artistic livelihoods if lively hood means more than financial income?

*Sustainable pARTnerships: Collaboration and Reciprocity in Creative Cities* is a participatory arts-based research initiative that brings together the cultural and academic sectors to jointly imagine futures in which artists can thrive. The objectives of this initiative are as follows: to consider what knowledge

artists seek, keep and share through their craft (epistemology); how artists embody and contribute to knowledge through lived experience (ontology); and the value artists bring to society as well as what society values in artists (axiology). For each of these considerations, we employ methods as diverse as our inquiries. We think through arts-based action, research, and curatorial practice to address the differences in knowledge generation between scholars and artists. We use techniques of video and microethnography (Garcez, 1997) for insight into the lives of artists.

In this article, we present this project-in-process and the many sides of *Sustainable pARTNerships* that frame our central question: how do we support artists in a precarious sector? We begin by describing the context that brought the *Sustainable pARTnerships* research team together and how we responded to that context by collaborating with five commissioned Toronto-based artists. After providing an overview of the methodologies that inspired our collaborative interview approach of crystal-scaping, we detail our process of witnessing artist collaborators' stories through this approach. We then connect the facet of witnessing to the art-making, curating, and sharing components of *Sustainable pARTnerships* before describing what is still to come: discussing, transforming, and documenting. In creating both virtual and physical space for dialogue on precarity and vulnerability, the visibility of local artists' pandemic experience targets a broad public, including arts training institutes, policymakers, and academics and heightens the call for connection, conversation, and change.

## Assembling the Team

Artists' activities internationally were put on hold or lost funding during the pandemic (Wong, 2021). The Canadian Association for the Performing Arts (CAPACOA), using data from Statistics Canada, noted a 37% drop in employment in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector from February 2020 to February 2021, and, for performing arts companies, a 61% drop in "total actual hours worked." CAPACOA put the GDP, in December 2020, of this sector at 62% lower than in February 2020 (*COVID Impact Statistics*, 2022). It is important to acknowledge that COVID-19 did not impact all artists and cultural workers equally. Rather, the pandemic exacerbated the significant disparity in opportunities and outcomes for artists, a gap that is largely a result of systemic barriers that further marginalize underserved groups (The Canada Council for the Arts, 2021; Wong, 2021). The question of who is able to live an artistic life is closely linked with the question of who is able to pivot their artistic life when that life is no longer viable.

The loss of one's livelihood can have a detrimental impact on well-being. The Fédération nationale des communications et de la culture (FNCC-CSN), a consortium of unions and professional associations from the cultural industries in Quebec, published a report in 2021 connecting the financial precarity of cultural workers, and especially those who are self-employed, to issues of mental health (Fédération nationale des communications et de la culture, 2021). This report surveyed not only musicians but also actors, writers, librettists, producers, directors, sound technicians, lighting designers, costume designers, makeup artists, and so on—the full spectrum of workers who make the performing arts happen. 64% report a "high" or "very high" level of psychological distress, well above the already untenable percentage—48%—of workers in general in Quebec reporting high levels of psychological distress during the pandemic (p. 16). Of the cultural workers surveyed, 43% percent showed symptoms of severe depression (p. 18). Nearly 12% reported suicidal thoughts in the previous year. Among respondents who

indicated feeling symptoms of psychological distress anywhere from "sometimes" to "all of the time," 68% reported that these symptoms had affected their productivity and their creativity, and 70% reported an impact on their ability to concentrate (p. 17).

One of the first scholarly publications to address the impact of the pandemic on the arts and culture sector was a special triple issue of the open-access journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* co-edited by Daniel Fischlin, Laura Risk, and Jesse Stewart entitled "Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Fischlin et al., 2021a, 2021b). In addition to peer-reviewed articles, these two volumes contain over 60 community voicings from musicians, performers, scholars, arts presenters, and other cultural workers. As the co-editors note,

> In between the sounds and silences of the pandemic is space to rethink the musical economy along more equitable and more sustainable lines. Many of the voices in these special issues… [call] upon policymakers to—as in so many other facets of our economy—build back better, in this case by establishing a basic level of economic and social security for freelancers working in the performing arts. (Fischlin et al., 2021c, p. 3)

This project was notable for the diversity of voices represented, and the range of presentational formats, including videos, audio recordings, a podcast, and a zine.

One major facet of *Sustainable pARTnerships* is to center the lived experience of artists in research and policy development in order to fully inform the process of "building back better". Before inviting working artists to participate in the project, we first turned inward to consider our positions not only as academics but also as artists and cultural workers who know first-hand how difficult it is to pursue an artistic livelihood. We include our narratives here to demonstrate this process of reflection and emphasize the importance of transparency when entering into collaborative and reciprocal partnerships with artists.

**Ely:** In March of 2020, I was preparing to support a tour of culturally deaf artists with the Deaf Culture Centre, curate a sound installation with a consortium of American Universities and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services, manage the creation of a new interdisciplinary music and health research center at the University of Toronto, and launch a program for newcomers and refugees working in the Canadian arts sector with the Toronto based not-for-profit Airsa. These projects were halted to assess and eventually deliver alternatives for presentation, the design of creative space, and to provide access to professional development training. Much of this work was made possible by the privilege and power that come with salaried positions in higher education and large scale arts organizations with substantial operational funding. While these new arrangements were being negotiated over Zoom, a crisis was taking place on the ground. From my home office desk, I witnessed the collapse of systems that uphold the arts and entertainment industries - the first of which to go was gig work. Precarious work, including contracts and seasonal hiring that are essential to the success of live performance, similarly disappeared. Together these employment types make up 30% of the Canadian workforce (Hennessy & Tranjan, 2018; Jeon et al., 2019). To better understand the damage done to artists' livelihoods, a group convened to form *I Lost My Gig Canada*. Led by fellow arts worker Jessa Agilo, CEO of ArtsPond, this community of practice offered artists a space to discuss the challenges of the pandemic and their novel solutions to perform online or in-person with new safety measures, as well as offer advice on navigating government subsistence programs like the Employment Insurance program (EI) and the Canada

Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). With arts administrators and scholars working together to find better means to support artists, in the spring of 2021 I reached out to colleagues Nasim Niknafs and Laura Risk to explore how we might contribute to these efforts.

**Laura**: I was 9 months into my first "real" job when the pandemic hit. I'd worked as a freelance fiddler for over 20 years, based first in California, then in Boston, and then in Montreal, making ends meet through a combination of touring, recording, teaching, and other short-term music-related contracts. In July 2019, I took a position as an assistant professor at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Nine months later, nearly everyone in my extended musical community was out of work. Meanwhile, for the first time in my life, I had a monthly paycheque arriving in my bank account via direct deposit. I felt both undeservedly fortunate and guiltily unsettled. In March 2020, early in the shutdown, I wrote an OpEd for *The Globe and Mail* on the resilience of community-centered music-making and the need to support artists through the coming months (Risk, 2020). Through conversation with colleagues at my own and other universities, I began strategizing how to tap the resources of academia to directly support arts and cultural workers and, in the absence of traditional venues, to create new spaces for their voices to be heard on their own terms. Eventually I partnered with Daniel Fischlin (University of Guelph) and Jesse Stewart (Carleton University) on the above-mentioned triple special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, which included numerous commissioned pieces. That led me to a new set of conversations with Nasim Niknafs and Ely Lyonblum, which eventually coalesced into this project.

**Nasim:** I began the pandemic by having to cancel a memorial concert co-organized with another concerned colleague and students for the victims of the Ukraine International Airline Flight PS752 that was shot by "an Iranian surface-to-air missile" on January 8, 2020 (Global Affairs Canada, 2023). Having grown up as a middle eastern woman in a country that saw public music learning, teaching and performing as problematic, I am particularly attuned to communities whose resourcefulness and socio-political influence cuts across domestic and international divides. I thus have an extensive track record of engaging with historically disenfranchised groups through research and professional practice, such as youth in detention or Iranian rock musicians whose access to music making has always been volatile. Thinking through educational (in)equities in the arts and music in the city of Toronto, collaborating on this timely research was the most logical next step. Ely Lyonblum, Laura Risk and I gathered to think critically about our roles in the institution and capacities to create a sustainable partnership with the arts and culture sector from the bottom up. Since all three of us were artists first and have had extensive experience within the field, we found it necessary to focus our attention on artists' lives and sought student co-researchers with a similar experience: artists with critical perspectives.

**Adrian:** When the pandemic became real, I was in New York City at a tiny practice space under the Manhattan Bridge. As a recent transplant to Toronto, I had flown into NYC to play sax in a 15 person Dexys Midnight Runners coverband. We were preparing to leave on a 2-week tour down the East Coast in the next few days. Within 24-hours, the booked venues began to call and shows were canceled one by one. In just 2 days, I watched the city that never sleeps become quiet and still. I flew back to Toronto as soon as I could in fear that Canada might close the border to an American like me– still waiting to get my permanent residency status. For 8 years, I made my living as a touring musician in the US rock and punk scene, but since that moment in March 2020, I haven't been on tour or played a live show with a band. With my industry at a standstill, I found myself firmly planted in one place for the first time in 8 years,

forcing me to reexamine my professional trajectory and innovate my creative practice. I decided to pursue my MMus in Music Technology & Digital Media at the University of Toronto. Over these two years, I re-tooled my professional practice and asked, *how can my creative practice and vision make sense of and sort through this collapse? What does my future as a cultural worker look like?* What used to be an exclusive focus on making records and touring became a multifaceted approach that bridges music production and performance with contemporary art, research-creation, and activism. I am fortunate to have found this multidisciplinary group of creatives to make sense of this world with.

**Hayley:** I was teaching violin at a local music studio in Toronto at the time of the initial pandemic lockdown. Within one week, all one-on-one and group lessons had to be moved online: "it was a world where my students and I would be together but kept apart, able to hear each other but not play together" (Janes, 2021, p. 53). I was grateful that I could continue working and yet the toll of online learning weighed heavily upon me. The transition to virtual lessons was the hardest for my young beginner students, who became frustrated with "bad sounding" instruments they couldn't yet tune and who asked constantly when we'd be able to play our "cheesy cheesy pizza" rhythm together again. All I could do was reassure them that music making is so much more than a Zoom room set to original sound. Months later, I found myself entering this virtual world as a student when I began my PhD in Music Education at the University of Toronto in September 2020. By then my artistic and pedagogical practice had shifted considerably. Nothing else seemed to matter but finding and strengthening connections. As a doctoral student, I gravitate towards arts-based and community-engaged research because they position relationships, care, reciprocity, and creativity in the foreground. These multidirectional connections remind me of the importance of not only increasing public access to university resources and scholarship, but also pushing the university to embrace artistic ways of knowing, being, and relating.

**The artists:** Our goal as researchers with *Sustainable pARTnerships* has been to work collaboratively with artists, cultural workers, and arts organizations to document the challenges they have been facing as well as map out next steps. While we have engaged with a wide range of arts workers and arts organizations across the culture sector in various ways, our focus has been on artists and arts organizations that work closely with those most disenfranchised in our current system. Our research therefore focuses on individual arts workers and small-scale arts organizations in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), and does not include the arts in public education or arts organizations with annual operating budgets over $500,000. In seeking a collaborative and reciprocal partnership between the university, arts workers, and arts organizations, our aim is to cultivate a sustainable relationship that can support these players who, in turn, work to address social inequities and injustices through their creative practice and role in the community.

To date, five Toronto-based artists were invited to participate and commissioned as part of this project. These artists, whom we selected through personal connections within the arts and cultural sector, work across a range of disciplines including ceramics, visual arts, literature, music, performance art, and multimedia video creation. To fully engage with their commissioned pieces and the stories they shared about living as an artist required a unique multi-faceted approach that embraced the creative expression of these artist collaborators. The coming-together of five academic researchers and these five artists formed the basis of *Sustainable pARTnerships* and the artful approach that followed.

## Sustainable pARTnerships: Collaboration and Reciprocity in Creative Cities

*Sustainable pARTnerships* was funded by the School of Cities at the University of Toronto from January 2022 to April 2023. To respond to the call to "build back better", this project joins in the work already being done in the arts and culture sector (e.g., ArtsPond, 2020; *Center for Music Ecosystems*, 2022; WorkInCulture, 2021). *Sustainable pARTnerships* was a direct result of numerous consultative processes, including (1) faculty and staff participation in an advisory group of Newcomer artists; (2) a COVID-19 Task Force convened by arts organizations; and (3) a now defunct Institutional Strategic Initiative supporting faculty participation in a workshop on arts in the pandemic, hosted at the University of Toronto, in which participants underscored the importance of combining research with advocacy to produce a sustainable environment for the arts. Early in the pandemic, these advisory groups circulated surveys, reported on data (ArtsPond, 2020; WorkInCulture, 2021), and developed a community of practice for practitioners across disciplines to discuss potential solutions to common problems.

While conferences, symposia and workshops are common in cross-sectoral exchanges between higher education and the arts, arts-based methods used to facilitate knowledge mobilization sessions that center lived experience are in their nascency. Ultimately, our goal is to infuse the process of *Sustainable pARTnerships* with the artistry and creativity that characterizes the work of our artist-collaborators and invited presenters. With this initiative, we artfully integrate artistic voices into the practice of knowledge creation and map out policy pathways for the institution and the community to create longer-term relationships built on equity and reciprocity. The more ways there are to engage, the more entry points there are into the conversation for our varied stakeholders.

## Crystallization, Crystal-Scaping, and Photovoice

To design an approach for engaging deeply with the lived experiences of artists and cultural workers, we drew on the broad methodological framework of crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). Crystallization was initially conceptualized by sociologist Laurel Richardson (1994) as a form of resistance to scholarly writing conventions that uphold the boundaries of art, research, and science. Blending and breaking boundaries remains central to crystallization, through writing but also through other mediums. Ellingson's (2009) framework of crystallization brings together multiple ways of generating knowledge, analyzing data, and representing research in order to combine more standard qualitative research approaches with arts-based modes of engagement (e.g., coding, thematic analysis, semi-structured interviews, poetry, visual art, audiovisual media). In contrast to triangulation or mixed-method design, both of which attempt to produce a more definitive truth in line with a (post)positivist paradigm, crystallization aligns with a postmodern and social constructionist paradigm, thereby assuming that there are only multiple and partial truths that researchers can co-construct with others. A framework of crystallization embraces contrasting ways of producing and representing knowledge and offers complexly rendered interpretations of a phenomenon; a significant amount of researcher reflexivity; and claims that are always considered to be situated, partial, constructed, and enmeshed in power relations. In *Sustainable pARTnerships*,

crystallization informs our desire to illuminate the topic of precarity in the arts through a number of angles (e.g., interviews, website, commissioned art pieces, exhibition, policy, research article), to hold a forum for marginalized perspectives, and to serve the community outside of academia by producing more accessible research outputs. The time, space, and fluency across multiple research and artistic genres needed in order to produce a crystallized project has certainly required a full-team effort.

The overarching framework of crystallization inspired Hayley and Adrian to design our more specific practice of crystal-scaping as an approach to interviewing our artist-collaborators. The process of crystal-scaping is based on co-creating knowledge in many forms to elicit multiple entry points into a conversation. Through this process, individual crystal-scapes are generated. We conceptualize *crystals* as multi-nodal shapes of a lived experience. These crystals are situated within *scapes*, referring to the surrounding environments, structures, and systems that produce these crystals and that will continue to shape them.

To produce a crystal-scape for each artist-collaborator, we expanded upon Pamela Burnard's (2012) adaption of critical incident charting. Burnard's (2012) Rivers of Musical Experience is a visual-based elicitation tool for representing, constructing, and reconstructing significant moments from a participant's life, thereby helping "to crystallize ideas, attitudes, and beliefs, many of which may have previously been held unconsciously" (p. 177). Rather than invite artists to draw a timeline in the form of a winding river, with significant turning points marked on the bends, we adopted a more freeform mode of engagement involving the use of various arts and crafts supplies (e.g., markers, clay, string, foam, beads, popsicle sticks, large blank paper). In preparation for our meeting, each artist-collaborator received a list of questions to generate reflection on a significant moment from their journey as an artist and cultural worker. Some of the questions included: *What is the story of this significant moment? What was happening before, around, and since this significant moment? Why is this moment significant? What does this significant moment offer? How does this significant moment influence your hopes for the future?* To further encourage tacit embodied knowing, we invited artists to not only think of a significant moment, but to also bring something to our conversation that connected to their moment (e.g., object, photograph, song). Additionally, artist-collaborators received a picture of our set-up indicating the seating arrangement and camera placement, as well as a picture of a sample crystal-scape.

We met with each artist-collaborator individually for about an hour at a residential art studio with at least two members of our research team present. During our time together, a researcher and an artist-collaborator charted the artist's significant moment through conversation and through creating, drawing, writing, and sculpting atop a large blank sheet of paper. To chart a moment is to crystallize a moment - to give these significant experiences and narratives form, substance, structure, dimensionality, and definition. Once some of the initial hesitancy and perhaps fear of the blank page subsided, a rhythm of collaborative synergy took hold. Together, the artist and researcher would engage with any of these materials, in any way, and at any point during the conversation. We documented the process of charting these moments along with the scapes in which they are situated through video and audio recording (i.e., three cameras produced a wide-shot, interviewee shot, and an aerial shot looking down at the crystal-scape). In addition to extensive audiovisual footage, a physical crystal-scape emerged from the large paper adorned with creative expressions of the artist's lived experience that emerged collaboratively during conversation.

Our decision to use crystal-scaping as a form of arts-based research is largely in response to our goal of longer-term relationships built on equity and reciprocity with the artists and cultural workers with whom we are collaborating. Centering creative, collaborative, and caring ways of being together also speaks to the state in which we currently find artistic livelihoods. Writing in the context of theater and drama education, Julie Salverson and Bill Penner (2020) think through "the difficult job of *staying with, staying put*: feeling the place that is this world, grieving what we have lost and are losing, and dreaming forward" (p. 34). Rather than extract stories of pain and struggle,

> Can we instead be attentive listeners, acknowledging and witnessing? To be a witness, I must find the resources to respond. It isn't only passing on a story that matters; I must let the story change me. This makes me vulnerable in the face of another's vulnerability. I participate in a relationship. (p. 37)

It is this sentiment of witnessing that encapsulates the role of crystal-scaping within the larger *Sustainable pARTnerships* project. To witness is to be in proximity, encounter, listen to, and validate another's story. To disrupt the role of researcher and participant or artist and audience and instead "reconfigure these roles as witnesses to each other" (Gallagher, 2018, p. 98) challenges epistemologies of extraction with ones of reciprocity. Crystal-scaping as artfully bearing witness to the implications of precarity on artistic lively-hoods amplifies the "with-ness" (Gallagher, 2018, p.103) potential of qualitative research of which the academic and cultural sectors are in desperate need.

Witnessing through crystal-scaping is only one facet of *Sustainable pARTnerships*. In addition to crystallization, we draw on the multi-staged approach of photovoice to underpin the other components of this research initiative. Photovoice methodology is a form of participatory action research, arts-based research, and community-based research that situates participants as experts on their lives and experiences (Latz, 2017). Coined in the mid-1990s with the work of Caroline C. Wang and Mary Anne Burris, photovoice is at its core "a powerful and visceral approach to policy change" (Latz, 2017, n.p.). Amanda Latz (2017) distills photovoice down to eight stages in her comprehensive overview: (1) identification, (2) invitation, (3) education, (4) documentation, (5) narration, (6) analysis, (7) presentation, and (8) confirmation.

We began by (1) identifying artists and stakeholders within the arts and culture sector in the Toronto-area before (2) inviting these collaborators to join the *Sustainable pARTnerships* initiative. Ultimately, we worked with five commissioned artist-collaborators: ceramicist and emerging scholar Aitak Sorahitalab, writer Linh S. Nguyễn, multidisciplinary artist and curator Maryam Hafizirad, multimedia storyteller and performing artist Olivia Shortt, and multidisciplinary artist and cultural worker DENT. For stage (3), we educated ourselves about the process of ethical practice and held conversations about informed voluntary consent with invited artists. This was also an opportunity to consider some of the possible pitfalls of photovoice research and how infusing our methodological framework with principles of crystallization might help alleviate these shortcomings. Specifically, photovoice research may become damage-based research (Tuck, 2009), in which the research presents a one-dimensional display of damage in order to compel the very institutions that have caused that damage to change their practices (Tuck & Del Vecchio, 2018). Here, the power to enact change is located outside of communities, in the art viewers rather than art makers. Crystallization resists one-dimensional representations and absolute truths, instead aiming to

produce complex, multi-layered, and rich portrayals of the situation. Such an approach aligns more with desire-based research:

> Desire-based research seeks out the complexity of a lived life, the sparks of agency grabbed and pocketed throughout a day, the subtle resistances and overflows, the planned forgetting and the planned unforgetting, the expertise gained in being at the bottom of hierarchies which rely on one's labor and erasure. (Tuck & Del Vecchio, 2018, p. 81)

Crystallization creates space for multiple, conflicting stories including those of damage and strength, despair and hope. With this framework, all these stories are partial truths, a starting point for discussion rather than a totalizing representation of damaged artistic livelihoods.

The art-making stage of *Sustainable pARTnerships* reflects the (4) documentation stage of photovoice. We commissioned the above five artists to create artworks exploring the theme "imagining a post-pandemic future". We expanded on the photovoice methodology by inviting these artists to engage through any artistic medium, broadly defined, rather than photographs as is typically the case with *photo*voice. Specifically, artists created multimedia works (e.g., video, interactive websites, animation) that were then supplemented with a synopsis and presented in the form of a digital coupon on a website. The form of a grocery store coupon suggests that the arts are an essential good while also playing with the absurdity of taking what artists and cultural workers offer to society and confining it to a standardized, narrowly-defined box.

Of the five artist collaborators, Olivia Shortt, DENT, and Maryam Hafizirad created audio-video works employing original and found footage, creative editing, and animation. Aitak Sorahitalab created a ceramic sculpture and Linh Nguyễn developed an in-person interactive collaging session. In some cases, this range of artistic outputs gave us the opportunity to support the artists by contributing our own time and creative expertise to assist in translating their work to a digital medium. Members of our team functioned as creative collaborators and consultants at times working through project ideas with the artists, translating physical works into digital works, or co-creating alongside an artist that needed a collaborator that worked in a different medium. For example, Adrian and Hayley worked with writer Linh Nguyễn to translate her vision of an in-person collaging session into an interactive digital collage hosted on the website. Adrian also worked closely with painter and ceramicist Maryam Hafizirad to co-create a collage-style animation incorporating images of Maryam's physical ceramics and paintings, and narratives from her life. From this collaborative process, collage emerged as a technique for sense-making that brought the bits and pieces of complex lived experience into new imaginings for cultural workers.

The (5) narration stage was the focus of our crystal-scaping sessions with artist-collaborators. The (6) analysis stage and (7) presentation stage took place concurrently as we analyzed thematic threads woven throughout the commissioned artworks and narratives in order to curate an exhibition. The purpose of holding an exhibition is to share the artistic creations of participants and connect with community stakeholders in order to encourage change as defined by participants. *art(un)done: private lives, public encounters* is a traveling exhibition that presents the coupons as large-format vinyl banners (40" x 60") that, through QR code, give viewers access to the multimedia imaginings of our artist-collaborators. This exhibition is an artist-centered initiative that seeks to cultivate collaborative relationships, ignite critical conversations, and crystalize sustainable artistic futures. (7) Presentation and sharing of the artistic

documentation has also occurred through digital versions of the coupons which are hosted on our website, *The Artists' Broadsheet*. Taking the form of a virtual broadsheet (i.e., a long vertical page), this website is a scrolling artifact: a living document that captures this moment in the arts community as shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, decades of underfunding, and chasmic societal inequities. Upon entering the website, the viewer is immersed in full-bleed techni-color graphics inspired by glossy newspaper advertising culture, complete with movable scissors. In a hyper-pop maximalist style, the page is covered with columns of equally vibrant digital coupons. Each coupon plays with the standardized aesthetic of this mundane tool of consumerism, allowing the artist to engage with elements such as "the fine print", "price", "quantity", and "product". When clicked, the coupon pops up for closer viewing and is flippable. On the other side, the viewer will find the artist's work of art in the form of video, audio, .gif, or image.

Sustainable pARTnerships engages with communities physically and digitally. These outputs are conceived as collaborative working spaces to consider the systemic challenges faced by the culture sector, and an opportunity for arts workers and arts organizations to seek common purpose with university researchers more broadly. With this initiative, we integrate artists' voices into the practice of knowledge creation and map policy pathways based on reciprocity.

## Preliminary Findings and Next Steps

The final stage, (8) confirmation of impact, is part of the next phase of *Sustainable pARTnerships*. This stage will involve: discussing possible transformation for the academic, arts and culture sectors through gatherings, workshops, and roundtables; supporting that transformation through policy change; and documenting the entirety of the project through a multimodal digital flipbook. A series of community outreach activities will include gatherings with our artist-collaborators, workshops, and roundtables with stakeholders, artists, and international, national, provincial, and community-based partners. In addition to considering how access to university resources and space might play a pivotal role in supporting artistic livelihoods, these outreach activities will aim to connect arts workers and arts organizations with those in a position to enact policy change. The policy report that will follow from the *Sustainable pARTnerships* research will summarize our findings and make policy recommendations informed by the lived experiences of artists. This includes recommendations regarding the types of support needed moving forward and the ways in which the university may cultivate more accessible, collaborative, and reciprocal partnerships with artists, cultural workers, and arts organizations.

Finally, we will create a multimodal digital flipbook to document the following components of this project:

- witnessing through the collaborative interview approach of crystal-scaping;
- supporting art-making through commissions;
- curating through the exhibit, *art(un)done: private lives, public encounters*;
- sharing through the website, *The Artists' Broadsheet*;
- discussing through gatherings, workshops, and roundtables; and
- advocating for policy change.

The multimodal digital flipbook will be openly available online and will include text, video, audio, and images. This online multimedia publication will provide multiple ways to engage with this research as well as access to knowledge generated for a wider public. Similar to *The Artists' Broadsheet*, this flipbook will be dynamic and responsive to ongoing activities, meaning that it can expand to document additional facets of *Sustainable pARTnerships* as they arise. Ultimately, our goal is to establish *Sustainable pARTnerships* as a scalable project in partnership with other researchers, organizations, and stakeholders. Such partnerships could involve: sharing of information, research, and resources (e.g., space, promotion, platform, publicity, networks, connections); developing and strengthening a community of practice for research within the arts and cultural sector; connecting university resources with the needs of the arts and cultural sector and those already conducting research within the arts community; cultivating a critical mass of interest that can align to inform public policy; and creating the infrastructure for artists to make art and thrive.

The 2021-26 strategic plan of the Canada Council for the Arts (2021) states that "we need artists to imagine a new reality now more than ever" (p. 9). Imagining things otherwise requires a belief that something else is even possible. The academic and cultural sectors have an important role in helping to create the conditions for artistic imaginings. Re-framing what is meant by artistic livelihoods and acting on the responsibility that comes from witnessing the loss of creative lives, lively artistic states, and artistic means of living is a step toward fulfilling this role. The opportunity to change course has come at such a high cost that to waste it and retreat to the always problematic normal would be to undermine artistic livelihoods in the full meaning of the term.

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