**SOLO: Surviving or Thriving? What changes have self-employed and sole-trader creative practitioners in East London made to their work in response to the COVID-19 crisis?**

**A research project funded by UCL East Listen and Respond**

**July-September 2020**

***‘There comes a moment where you think, well, I can't pay the rent anymore, you know, there's a reality to that. But flexibility in terms of thinking, recontextualizing or repositioning yourself is what an artist is good at….the point is that as long as they can, people will always want to make work….whatever job I need to do to make ends meet, I will always make work.’***

***‘I've never really been big on social media….but I think the use of Instagram to do my project has been quite interesting. I made quite a lot of contacts! I am definitely proud of the street project acting as a kind of a glue for the community. I never received so many personal messages thanking me for something that I was doing.’***

**Introduction**

The East End boroughs of London are a base for very many self-employed and sole-trader artists and craftworkers, whose work has been particularly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They are archetypal examples of both ‘passionate workers’ (McRobbie 2016), typically concerned as much about the quality of their work and contributing to the community’s quality of life, as well as to earn an income; and of what McRobbie (2002) sees as a growing structural feature of the rapidly changing Creative Industries sector: employment precarity. This group plays a key role in the uniqueness of the area, and in its developing economy.

This project investigated the way the pandemic has impacted on this group, encouraging them to reflect on their experiences and feelings during the lockdown, and at the same time throwing light on changes they have made in their work and what they have learned.

Extended interviews with practising artists enabled them to articulate their experience and use it for their own learning, and to share their insights and experiences with a wider audience. Key questions in the interviews were:

* What changes have they made to their practice, and the organisation of their work?
* How were these changes designed and implemented?
* How do they evaluate these changes?
* What lessons have they learned?

**Summary of the project: what happened?**

Funding for the SOLO project was agreed on 19-06-20. A long-established and experienced Creative Industries freelance creative practitioner, active and a long-term resident in the London Borough of Hackney, was immediately recruited as project researcher to identify potential interviewees, carry out the interviews and contribute as an expert adviser to the data analysis, as well as to be interviewed herself. She was available and agreed to take on this work partly because significant projects she herself was scheduled to work on were cancelled or postponed due to the COVID lockdown. She recruited five other Hackney-based freelance creative practitioners who agreed to be interviewed, using her long-established networks. She also recruited a Hackney-based editor and filmmaker to edit and help produce the project podcast and video.

The recruitment of these interviewees included getting formal consent to be interviewed, and about the extent to which they agreed to their words being used in the project report, video and podcast, and whether they wished to be identified by name. All interviewees were paid a £50 honorarium.

The interview schedule was developed and piloted in early July 2020. 6 x 60-90 minute interviews were carried out using the Zoom platform between 17-07-20 and 25-08-20. Recordings of these interviews were transcribed automatically using an online digital transcription service. Analysis took place between 26-08-20 and 11-09-20 and a brief was then prepared for podcast and video production.

Recurring themes in the interviews included: the shock and psychological impact of the lockdown; the importance of daily routines including physical exercise, for mental health and for staying productive; that the lockdown provided time, for reflection, for strategic thinking, for formal learning, and for returning to undeveloped or personal project ideas; that part-time teaching work (higher education tutoring for example) was often relatively undisrupted and could often provide a continuing source of income; the unsurprising importance of flexibility and adaptability: redesigning existing projects so that they could be delivered online, or simply starting to work in new media, new materials, and finding new sources of inspiration.

Much of this involved learning, in some cases formal (through online programmes) or completely informal, self-driven and exploratory. Many of the interviewees were quite explicit about gradually realising that they were finding themselves taking up the role of witness to these unprecedented events, and recording various kinds of response to them, including their own. For two of them their family or their street became a new source of inspiration and of material for their practice: for one of them this was almost completely unplanned and would certainly not have happened if it were not for the pandemic.

The income of all the interviewees was, and continues to be, seriously threatened. Some were lucky to have recently completed work for which they were paid just before the lockdown, which provided a cushion. Others negotiated with their funders to adapt their contracted projects so that they could be carried out online: this usually had to be achieved very rapidly, and involved intensive learning, a degree of trial and error, and openness to new techniques for their practice; it would not have been possible without flexibility from their funders. Others found themselves engaged in personal projects through which, unexpectedly, income-generation became a possibility. Others developed their work in new directions simply as a result of their changed circumstances, the most important factor being that they had more time.

Finally, the interviews all emphasised explicitly and implicitly that the categories of ‘freelance’, ‘self-employed’, ‘sole trader’ or ‘employed’ are not mutually exclusive in practice. Most of these interviewees, at different times or at the same time, work within more than one of these categories. This is an indicator of their flexibility: they may prefer to work and to identify as one or other type, but in order to continue to produce their ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie 2016), they need to ensure an income, using whatever opportunities present themselves. One of them has just taken up a role as ‘COVID Manager’ on a film production, managing the health and safety logistics during rehearsals at a large London arts venue. This work has little to do with her ‘passionate work’, but will enable her to continue with it. Whether to take jobs like this is a continuing feature of the balancing act that most Creative Industries practitioners are forced to engage in even in normal times, but in a much more acute manner during a crisis such as the present pandemic, simply because income-generating work is so much harder to find; and this is because of the widespread prejudice, particularly at policy level, that the arts are a luxury that people and society can, at a pinch, do without.

**Who were the external communities involved on this project?**

All the interviewees work on a freelance or sole-trader basis within the Creative Industries, living and permanently-based in Hackney, (one of them spent time early in the lockdown staying with a friend in Manchester). Two interviewees are freelance commercial and editorial photographers, one is a musician, visual artist, and community event venue manager, one is a sound designer and multi-media artist, one is the freelance strategic artistic director of a community theatre organisation working with young people, and one is a photographer and freelance arts trainer specialising in developing the skills of Creative Practitioners.

**What did the project aim to accomplish?**

4.5m businesses in the UK are sole-traders (DBEIS 2020). There are also 4.8m self-employed people in the workforce, over 15% of the total (ONS 2018). Many of these people contribute not only to the rapidly-growing Creative Industries sector but also to creative work in other sectors (Caves 2000, Nathan et al 2016). In the context of the borough of Hackney, ‘over 11% of local jobs are now in the Creative Industries. In 2018, the arts and entertainment sector accounted for around 5.4% of all employment in the borough, which roughly equates to around 6,000 jobs. It is one of the top three employment sectors in Hackney and accounts for the largest number of registered enterprises in the borough.’ (London Borough of Hackney 2018). A significant number of these jobs, in Hackney and in the other East London boroughs, are sole trader enterprises and self-employed practitioners.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted very many people’s lives, both at a personal level and in terms of work, and particularly affected are people who own and run sole-trader micro-businesses, or are self-employed. For these people, and perhaps particularly for those working in the Creative Industries, work is often a vocation: not just a means of generating an income, but a key part of their identity, and central for them as an arena of creativity, fulfilment and a sense of achievement. They may think of themselves as artists or craftworkers, and while the bottom line is always important, they are often explicitly focussed on developing and improving the quality of their work, not just on maximising their income, in what has been referred to as ‘passionate work’ (see for example Sennett 2008, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, McRobbie 2016, Marchand 2016). Furthermore, for many of these people, just as much as for nurses or teachers, work is a way of making a worthwhile contribution to the wider society. These factors complicate traditional economic analyses of the sector, which have mostly adopted neo-classical perspectives in which different and interdependent motivational factors, not to mention the typical continual shifting of the work of such practitioners between periods of employment, commissioned contract work, and voluntary or personal projects, tend to be ignored (see for example Pratt and Hutton 2013).

Creative Industries practitioners and educators, in a huge range of disciplines including combined arts, visual arts, multimedia and digital arts, literature, dance, music and theatre, play a highly distinctive and visible role in the uniqueness of the borough of Hackney, in terms of its cultural diversity and social history, and of the rapid development of its Creative Industries economy.

This project aimed to investigate the way the pandemic has impacted on self-employed individuals and sole traders based in Hackney, operating within the Creative Industries sector, focussing on the specific changes and innovations they made to their activities and creative practice in response to the COVID-19 crisis. It hoped to throw light on how they managed changes to their work practice, what they adapted, designed and implemented, how they felt about their work, what they were learning, and the extent to which the organisation of their work was likely to be changed in the short and longer term.

A further aim was to directly support the professional practice and learning of the interviewees, for their benefit and for the benefit of their fellow creative practitioners, in four ways:

* revealing potentially valuable insights they have had into the effects of the crisis on work in their specialist field, as self-employed and sole traders working within the Creative Industries;
* highlighting specific innovations and learning that have occurred within individuals’ creative work practice, which will be valuable in helping people prepare for and protect themselves against the effects of this and perhaps future pandemics;
* enabling them to express their feelings about the challenges that they face in their work, and in this way contribute to acknowledging stress and concerns that they may be experiencing as a result of the crisis;
* helping individuals to articulate their experiences useful to further develop their practice, as well as to the wider audience, who could benefit from listening to practitioners’ lived experience.

Finally, the project hoped to improve understanding of:

* The role of arts and culture in recovery and resilience;
* How people have been affected, both mentally and physically, by living through the pandemic.

The interviews were analysed and edited into a podcast and a video, and will form the basis of an academic article which will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. They will be available on the UCL East Listen and Respond website to support the knowledge and resilience of creative practitioners based in East London and beyond; these resources support the work of the UCL East Community Engagement, Hackney Culture team, and East London Culture Teams linked to the Olympic Park Campus, about the ways in which practice, learning, motivation and innovation are interrelated, both theoretically and in the real world, so that work processes, workplaces and policy frameworks can be designed to support work that is more productive, innovative and resilient (Pratt 2015).

**The interviews:**

**Christian Sinibaldi**

Christian is a self-employed commercial and editorial photographer, renowned for his international photo-journalism with the Guardian newspaper. Christian’s commercial and international journalism work was heavily disrupted by COVID, though he was able to finish an international project just before lockdown which gave him a financial cushion.

**COVID period project**: Christian documented his neighbours on their doorsteps in Evering Road, London N16 and E5, during the lockdown. He started talking to neighbours while they were supporting the NHS front-line workers in their front gardens or front steps, befriending them and then asking to take their portraits. He took one portrait for each day of the first lockdown in March-April 2020, and created an instagram [gallery](https://www.instagram.com/everingroad/?hl=en) of 70 portraits with captions written by the subjects of each picture. These created a real impact, both locally and more widely. He made many new friends and felt more connected to his local community through this project, receiving hundreds of positive responses. The project attracted attention internationally, having been featured in an editorial in the Saturday Guardian magazine (it was also featured in the Hackney Gazette and on the instagram accounts of Vanity Fair Italia, BBC London, and the Migration Museum Project. A photography book ‘Evering Road People’ was published following a successful kickstarter not-for-profit campaign, and all the books produced have been sold.

*‘I think the fear and then the human instinct of survival took over. And so the immediate reaction was to do nothing for at least the first couple of weeks. And then eventually, yeah, the urge of leaving the flat, doing something, try to document this historical moment because we are living in a historical moment, a community shared trauma.’*

*‘Sometimes the individual goes through, you know, like a near death experience or illness or something which is kind of quite dramatic and impactful on the persona and might change the way you act or you think, or you behave - this is the first time as a community and worldwide, we experience something like this. And obviously that will affect the way we interact and the way we do things. I think we were all a bit desperate to talk to people for a change.’*

*‘I was able to complete a commercial job literally like within hours of the lockdown pretty much. And that was commissioned by an Italian client, where in Italy, they were already locked down. That was good because I knew that I could count on some sort of income that was due to me. And nobody knows, how long will be this kind of situation.’*

*‘My project starts, it's kind of you start talking to somebody and then it's, can I take your picture while you are emotional? It just started with a very spontaneous interview. And then I started researching my own road, Evering Road. And I figured there was something quite interesting and specific about the road, that connects leafy Stoke Newington with slightly more working-class Clapton.’*

*‘I was quite lucky because the Guardian Weekend was asking photographers if they were developing any projects about local communities, so that gave me the push. So I worked quite hard for like the first 10 days, tried to gather together some stories. I submitted to them and they used it in the magazine, but this kind of pushed me to do more and more and more so that eventually I ended up opening an Instagram account for Evering Road and posting one picture a day.’*

*‘So I ended up with some 60-70 photos, one for every day of the lockdown phase one. And then the nice thing: the Instagram account become a bit of a hub for the community, people were actually using it to talk to each other, to come out, and realize that there is a community and we are all part of it.’*

*‘[In the photographs] there's a lot of people with no shoes, because obviously we were still at home. Even if you were sitting in your front garden you were still kind of sitting in your home. And so somehow I think we exported the living room outside - for the first time we lived a little bit more kind of a Mediterranean life where, you know, you are quite happy to sit down and see the world, the very slow world, passing by at that point. And then it changed because we were able to go to parks. Another very interesting thing is how the socializing aspect was different. So that was very interesting to photograph and to witness.’*

*‘I think the best experience for me was also to share these with the 70, 80 people that I photographed. So like never before I met so many new people in my life. So I probably exchanged views and had conversations with them, or maybe nearly 200 people I would say, and they made me feel that I wasn't alone. I also talked to people who had had maybe some mental issues or problems in the past and all of them pretty much, you know, they were very aware that this was a kind of communal problem, it's not personal. So I know that the lack of work for instance, is not something to do with my own personal problem. It's nothing to do with my capability as a photographer or whatever. It just the fact that everything isn't normal, but I learned that as a freelance photographer, as an artist, whatever you want to call it, you have to trust your own instinct and you need to be more proactive.’*

*‘Editorial photography will have to shift and adapt to the new changes of what's happening today. While there may not be many newspapers that will be printed, perhaps the ceasing of printed newspapers, there might be more magazines, it might be weekly magazines. At that point, rather than the quick photos, news pictures, or the portraits, maybe they will need something, which would be more in depth, so reportage, something which is more researched and documented. Long form stories. If and where they would find a budget to finance those kinds of reportage, that's a big question, so I'm not sure if I'm positive or negative, but this definitely is a big change and I don't think it will be a very transitory change, I think it will be a change for good. Still photography or other digital language will definitely be needed very much. So we just need to adapt.’*

*‘Some [photographers] have a contract with a specific application. Some other people work exclusively commercially. Some people have agents or representatives and I don't, I'm trying to somehow work as a bridge between different fields in photography, which has been proving quite challenging because clients, or directors whatever, they try to give you a little label, you’re either an editorial photographer or you’re an artist, you're a charity worker or whatever, but sometimes the line is not very defined.’*

*‘One of my best clients is a pharmaceutical company and they work with plasma and it's been five to six years and basically I'm their photographer and I've been helping them develop their visual identity from pretty much zero. We’ve been travelling across the globe, documenting their activity, photographing real patients, real people, real blood donors. For me, it's as interesting as any other reportage that I do, because I'm still photographing real people in real situations. If the photo is used commercially to advertise a product, I have no problem with it. I'm actually quite proud of it, if anything.’*

*‘So charities are great because they really do operate in countries and situations where it would be quite difficult to access, they give you access to the authorities because they're working there. So they offer that kind of entry and support.’*

*‘I'm developing my skill set as a photographer. You know, you always try to experiment, you always try to do a little bit more, you can try new lenses etc. I've never been like a geek, I don't really care too much about the equipment as such. I may develop slightly more into the video side to diversify, but otherwise, I think I try to refine my own skills by doing what I do and doing more and more and more and developing my network and developing my content because ultimately that's what really gonna bring me more work.’*

*‘I think maybe something that I learned about the pandemic or whatever is I've never really been big on social media, I never really cared about social media - that hasn't really changed much, but I think the use of Instagram to do my Evering Road project has been quite interesting. And I think I made quite a lot of contacts! I am definitely proud of the Evering Road project, as I said before, acting as a kind of a glue for the community. I never received so many personal messages thanking me for something that I was doing.’*

**Yves Salmon**

Yves Salmon is a freelance commercial and editorial photographer and artist. She also works as an Associate Lecturer teaching documentary photography part time on a BA (Hons) at a London University. Teaching has become more central to her work recently, and she sees her MA completed three years ago, as critical in this process. Her MA final project involved researching the impact of the Brexit referendum on EU nationals, mostly in Hackney, for which she made portraits overlaid with photographs of flowers and plants from the subjects’ countries of origin. Part of her motivation for this project was that she is herself the child of Caribbean immigrants. This work was widely celebrated and published by The Royal Photographic Society.

**COVID period project:** During lockdown Yves had time to focus on an unrealised long term project, to record landmark locations in the City of London, which her father had worked on as a carpenter during their construction. These include the Barbican Centre and Tower 42, iconic post-war City landmarks. Yves’ project relates to her family history, her father coming to the UK from the Caribbean as a skilled carpenter. He passed away twenty years ago, and her family have kept his tools. Yves had photographed the crowded city locations in 2018, but now these spaces are hauntingly empty.

*‘I think there was a part of me that was thinking someone's going to ring me up and offer me a job next week. And it took a while to realize that actually that wasn't going to happen, but I wasn't going to have any work in May. I wasn't gonna have any work in June. The likelihood of that was going to be really, really slim. So in a way I kind of relaxed because I thought, wow, I have got time. I've got time to do pretty much what I want.’*

*‘I decided that I was going to keep a routine from the beginning. So I got up early every day. We were allowed one hour a day where the government said we could go out for walks. I decided to follow that. It probably took about four or five weeks to really make a mental adjustment to the shutdown. You sort of get used to it, and then you suddenly see things that make you realize the enormity of the situation, that the world has almost stopped, almost like life had been cancelled.’*

*‘….no one knew lockdown was going to last as long as it did.’*

*‘In my exercise hour, I would take my camera out and just shoot my neighbourhood because the weather was really good. It was time to kind of look around at where I live, think about what I had been hearing in the news about the government's handling of the pandemic and making images that actually related to those news stories. I realized that I had all this time.’*

*‘My father came here at the beginning of the sixties, he was a carpenter. Most of his working life was actually spent within the Square Mile – he ended up working for some of the bigger contractors and property developers. There was a lot of rebuilding to be done, because obviously a huge part of the city was blitzed during the war. He was part of that contingent that came over worked on some of the most iconic buildings in the London skyline. He worked at the Lloyds building, the Barbican and the NatWest tower, which is now called Tower 42. He passed away nearly 20 years ago and we've got loads of his tools at home. So I decided to use the tools as a basis of the project, to look at his working life in the city.*

*My father came from a rural environment in the Caribbean. So often when I'm walking around, I'm thinking what it must've been like for him as a young man to come from that environment into this urban, congested (in comparison to where he grew up) space. There are lots of things he really loved about the city, because even though he worked in the city, we would still have these for weekend jaunts as a family to explore. That’s what he liked to do, he liked to explore London when he wasn't working in it.’*

*‘One of the good things about lockdown is time to read, time to reflect. I really like learning, so it was time to learn. So I went off and did two very short courses with colleagues of mine…the thing that I really did like about the course was the practicalities….learning new stuff, meeting new people, and not feeling so isolated.’*

*‘I think the biggest gift is having time to think, then to make decisions about how I want to do things differently.’*

*‘‘I suspect I will be more discerning about what jobs I take on. I’m probably going to calculate how many hours a month I actually want to work. I realize now that I want to spend more time on my practice, but obviously I have to balance that with having an income. I want to hang on to my time. So going forward, I want to be selective about the jobs that I do. I don't think I'll go back to just taking almost anything. I'm going to be quite strict. I'm going to carve out days, which I had started doing last year anyway, carve out a studio day. So that's my day to work on, my project. If I'm lucky, I might even carve out two days.’*

*‘I've had time to remind myself why I did the Masters in the first place and why I was interested in doing documentary work. It's not really to earn any money, it's because I've got something to say and there are very specific things that I want to have documented and stored somewhere.’*

*‘God don't get stagnant.’*

*‘I have an idea, a thought, sparked by a conversation or a book or a sentence in a book or a newspaper article. That's like one paragraph, and then it's like candy floss which is thick, with sugar granules. And you start to spin it into something and you can make it as big as you want or as small as you want.’*

*‘For me, there is nothing like education. whether you're doing it in a formal setting or whether you go and buy a pile of books and work your way through them.’*

**Pete Bennett**

Pete Bennett is a freelance musician, visual artist, community organisation events venue manager and skills-based trainer. Pete sees his creative practices, skills training, community venue management and politics as integral parts of a whole. Pete comes from a DIY Cultural practice, and his work in community development management art and music aims to undermine the dominant economic and cultural practices of UK society from below, and to foster, nurture and support bottom-up, inclusive, participatory community activities of all sorts. For Pete, community development work is part of his creative practice.

**COVID period project:** Pete relocated temporarily to the centre of Manchester (where he was raised), just before lockdown began. On his officially-sanctioned daily walks around the city centre, he drew pictures of homeless people on the streets in urban areas which were otherwise empty during lockdown, as a document of how society has been treating homeless people during the pandemic. This project has affected the social purpose of his art. During lockdown, as a musician with no live gigs, Pete taught himself how to use digital music composition software apps and visual filmmaking apps to combine his music and art into audio-visual moving montages. Teaching himself music annotation, scoring and composition has become a key part of his creative process. <https://www.instagram.com/petebennettsart/?hl=en>

*‘It's changed my work. It really has, and I've just been super creative. I didn't for one moment feel that it was affecting me in a negative way.’*

*‘I had friends who were in prison when I was a kid, when I was a teenager, and they just said, "If you need to get through something, you need a routine." I did loads of press-ups and things like that, so I just said, "I'm going to get a routine and drink a lot less”. Didn't spend hardly any money, because there was no temptation to eat out, or get a pizza. I just cooked, about every other night I cooked a meal.’*

*‘I got up every morning, and I did Chi Kung, what you see old Chinese people doing in parks. I did that, and then I'd do two hours of climbing exercises on an app that I've got called Crimpd. Then, in the afternoons, we'd take our walk for an hour, and walk on the canal paths or through the city, because it was empty. During that time, I'd take photographs of the buildings and the homeless people that I saw, and we kind of got to know them and chat to them, and gave them money and stuff. I took surreptitious photographs of them, so they're often from a distance, quite blurred, or quite out of focus, or not very detailed, and I just began drawing them. I started drawing the buildings, and then I started drawing these people, hundreds of drawings. I did 262 drawings. I'd say about 200 of those, maybe, are, were the people who were left on the streets during lockdown….Every day, I was doing four drawings, or something like that. I got through more and more sketchbooks, so I was having to buy them on bloody Amazon, something I hate, because I couldn't get any paper. Running out of paper, and pencils were like my dad's pencils when he used to work for the council. They were a stub, like an inch long. Properly saving money. That's what I did.’*

*‘I got a lot better at drawing. If you do things more and more, you just get better at them. Whether you're rubbish to start with, you will be better at the end. You won't get more rubbish, I promise you.’*

*‘The main tool I had on me was my phone, so I had Photoshop Mix, which is an app that allows you to mix or cut out fairly accurately, so I cut out sections of the buildings and started reassembling them into montages. Then, they kind of changed into very futuristic, slightly absurd sort of dystopian kind of buildings. I did about 14 of these over the lockdown.’*

*‘Then literally, I had a dream that I was writing music, and I downloaded a high-end orchestral composer's app called Notion. I sort of taught myself to write sheet music, up to a point, and they were a minute long. I'm not saying they're great compositions or anything - you can obviously listen to them and make your own judgments - but I wanted them to have a beginning, they needed to state a theme. They needed a variation around that theme in the middle, and then they need to restate the theme and have a conclusion. To do it in a minute was quite an exercise. You have to throw loads of stuff away, really edit it and really work at it. I went to bed at 3:00 in the morning once, and then spent the next day, entire day in bed without moving from the single spot with a pair of headphones on and my massive chunky sausage fingers, trying to write music on an iPhone - then it was at 7:00 at night, and I said, "I think it's finished." I think that was quite a revelation, of my level of OCD capabilities.’*

*‘Well, I think that the series of drawings of the homeless people will become big paintings, and I think it's changed my way of ... I didn't do a lot of figure drawing, and it's completely changed me, that. The composing is something that I'm going to carry on, absolutely. I've acquired a skill set that I've wanted all my life. I actually just had the time to do it.’*

*‘Everything I do is a new challenge, and that kind of gives it the freshness….Maybe sometimes you need to stop drawing the figure that you know, and go and just scrawl a bit, lose your skill a bit. You won't lose the stuff you've learned, but you will find some new avenue for it. It's not a forward process, making art….It's a vocation. It's not a profession.’*

*‘I was a tree surgeon. I'm going to make an analogy. You climb up a tree and you climb to the end of the branch, and that's what you're doing with one particular avenue of your art. At the end of it, it's stopped growing. That's as far as it's grown, so you climb back in and you find another branch and you go up there, and then maybe another one. Then you come back to the first one, and you realize that while you were absent from it, something's growing. It's grown another two feet, so you can go a little bit further, but you can't just sit there waiting for it to grow. You have to go and do something else, and it's not dilettantism. It's kind of, it's just that it isn't a linear process. You have to go sideways and through other twisted paths, but keep returning to this kind of core trunk, if you like, which is your childhood experiences, your ambitions, and your doubts and fears, that you're always constantly addressing as an artist or a musician or a writer, or insert your profession. I'm sure it might even work for stockbrokers.’*

*‘I'm like, "Hi, I've joined your community. Is there anything I can do? I've got many skills. I can cut trees down, and I can make art. I can teach climbing." "Yes, there is. Can you look after my kids for three hours and do art with them?" Things like that really, that's what I think artists should be doing. When there's something politically happens, on a local level, they should go out and fight it rather than ... Actually fight it, not just kind of make a nice piece of art about it and sell it. It should be actually ... I might sell the homeless drawings to raise money for the homeless, or something like that. I don't know.’*

*‘I don't think you can be an expert at art. You can't be an expert without treading on someone else's ... Rauschenberg rubbed out a de Kooning drawing. Who's the bigger expert? De Kooning gave him the drawing because he thought it was hilarious. Which of those two is the more expert? Expertise is kind of like truth, isn't it? Truth is debate, and expertise is probably a kind of amalgam of quite a few things. When I go to a hospital, I really believe that the person operating on me is an expert. They bloody well better be….Unless you're a doctor, expertise doesn't exist.’*

*‘Anything can happen, I think, in the world. You can try and stop them from happening. They're usually caused by other human beings. Ask anyone who's had somebody who died of AIDS in the eighties. It wouldn't be hard to find someone like that. Something that isn't human just comes along and wipes out all this kind of quite arrogant kind of belief that we're in control of a system.’*

*‘It's a survival strategy….I believe in portability of ideas and everything, that you can pick something up, put your ideas in a suitcase, and when you have to leave suddenly, you can reopen that suitcase and there's your culture and there's your ideas, and you've put it somewhere else. There's always that in the back of my mind. You need portability. If you can't put it in a suitcase, it's not a very good idea.’*

**Anonymous**

She works as a sound designer, editor and artist in film, sound, theatre, multi-media, on both commercial contracts and on her own projects. She is also a university lecturer.

**COVID period project:** She’s postponed income-generating projects and has used the time created by lockdown restrictions to think strategically about what's going to happen to creative work, how to engage with audiences in different ways and examine potential alternative ways of working in collaboration with artists. She has ‘audited her skills base in relation to the new context’ and worked on her website. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, where most contact is limited to online remote platforms, she moved from making mainly digital sound work to re-connecting with her analogue work and making paintings and drawing, part of the fine art practice she trained in.

*‘Artists have been really valuable in this time, even if they are not necessarily being paid, but they have found very creative ways to connect people for different reasons, just to even cope, you know, or connect…. it's beyond survival economically, that's really vital and important, and there is such a huge contribution made towards creating jobs, but it has been really invaluable for the society during this time to sustain people - flexibility in terms of thinking, recontextualizing or repositioning yourself, I think, is what an artist is good at….maybe there's a way of thinking about that, so that somehow artists can be financially rewarded as well.’*

*‘What does that mean about work, how can you work with people, what does it mean to have an audience or to work with people online? Yeah, I've been trying to think about it.’*

*‘I think artists have to make work that is incredibly flexible and resilient anyway. I think those skills are there anyway. I mean, there comes a moment where you think, well, I can't pay the rent anymore, you know, there's a reality to that. But flexibility in terms of thinking, recontextualizing or repositioning yourself is what an artist is good at. I think having the technical skills that I learned helps because you can also offer that as a service.’*

*‘I've got a friend who's a great artist. She's also a hairdresser, you have to survive. My friend's doing a PhD, she's also a painter, but she has to think of other jobs just to get the money in and the practice continues. And I think the point is that as long as they can, people will always want to make work. And I see myself in that position, that whatever job I need to do to make ends meet, I will always make work.’*

*‘So in terms of practice, because it becomes so intense working on Zoom, for my practice I've been working very much with paint and paper and analogue processes to try and get away from the digital. So my work is very much studio-based [at the moment]. So that process has been quite interesting for me as an artist, going back to the paint and paper, really interesting. And my ideas lend themselves to that medium at the moment….the value of being in the physical, you know, needing to be there and needing to connect people, the absence of the mediated space, the absence of a certain interaction that they can't fulfil to a certain degree, but also seeing its value and its necessity.’*

*‘I'd already been having these conversations about a potential collaboration prior to the lockdown and the pandemic, but through this happening, the framing of the project has brought up questions between the potential collaborators, how it's responding to that. So the work has had to work within that frame, that context as well. The very reality of it is bringing that conversation up, so it has to be in there. So by the nature of its existence [the pandemic] is changing practice and I'm on that journey in this dialogue and in this process of making a potential project and how it might be useful, how it might have value.’*

*‘Just keeping up to date with what the new updates are and what's happening in the industry, you have to keep up to date with things. So no, that hasn't changed really, but it's just another thing. Keep the skills updated.’*

*‘That's the constant anxiety of an artist as well. You're always pushing your practice. I mean, if you're a painter you're still pushing, but I think if it's digital or equipment-based, you know, whether it's photography or sound, you need to keep at the front of it, you know?’*

*‘I'm quite self-contained, which is a good thing, which is why I can work remotely if I need to. It’s also a good thing to have your own set up to be mobile. To be mobile for me has really been a big help.’*

**Tanya Harris**

Tanya is a freelance photographer, an arts and cultural education consultant and trainer. She initially worked in the film and TV industry sector then moved into the public sector working with arts funders and institutions. Tanya trained to teach art and design, film and photography, and has been a passionate trainer for 15 years, supporting young people into arts and leadership and facilitating artists who face barriers to the art world into work with galleries and museums.

**COVID period project:** She was due to lead a course for artists exploring a Museum collection within an NHS site in Yorkshire, as part of a three year heritage-funded programme, but this work was postponed until 2021 due to lockdown. Tanya collaborated with the Arts and Health charity to trial delivery of three training courses, adapting each course programme delivery to work on Zoom with smaller groups, so that instead of being entirely face-to-face, they became wholly online.

*‘I've currently been training artists to develop their confidence to talk about their artwork and advocate for themselves to potentially galleries, museums, for residencies, to apply for commissions or to submit bids. So, it's person-centred, it's about their practice. I'd be enabling them to think about how they would develop their artistic career. It might be about funding or avenues they want to progress. It might be around mentoring. … I do teach photography to people who are not as experienced.’*

*‘I think that I'm very lucky though. Because this organisation trusts me, because they're prepared to allow me to redesign something to fit what I think would work and because they're prepared to read the feedback and then readjust and adapt and we're saying it's a pilot, it's very exciting. If you're an educator…a creative and you're trying to shape that journey, if I was just told, "This is your script. This is your model and this is what we want you to do and we know it will work and if it doesn't it's your fault," I would not be happy about doing this.’*

*‘Because you don't leave home to get to the training, you don't have any experience before or after. You just kind of get your clothes on, go down or wherever you are, and then you're on camera. So, people are less empathetic I find sometimes on Zoom than they would be face to face. They're not necessarily as generous with each other as they would be if they were in a room together. Because they're not making each other a cup of tea or they're not asking after each other, there's no chats, there's no downtime. People are in their own homes and they're locked in still, so this isn't positive for some. So, they're on the screen but they're not able to feel like they're in a different space at all. So, I think for a whole range of reasons and body language, you only see this much of people.’*

*‘I'm really struggling [myself] with being in a room upstairs, locked in and not in any way seeing my family most of the time because it's like this ... I thought I would have no work and now I know I'm so lucky as a freelancer to have work when so many people don't. I feel there's a level of guilt about it. But it's very hard to manage, it’s hard to manage the irony, you know, that people are working harder on Zoom than they would've been if they were traveling to their place of work and back. I feel as creative doing this as I would taking photographs.’*

*‘I used to work in health and safety, risk assessment on TV and film production, I have that as part of my work as a trainer. I have a natural tendency, as anyone how knows me will say, to consider health and safety, and risks. So, I train around duty of care, I train around risk assessments of working with vulnerable people, It's part of what I do in my practice. I’ve been thinking about applying for funding…because there will be a lot of potential work within arts and health after lockdown. There's definitely going to be a need. So, I want to continue to work within arts and health after this.*

*I have become frustrated with very short-term projects that are great at the time and then you go and there's kind of dissipation. And the nature of a lot of arts facilitation work or programs is you have an impact, you measure an output and then it’s over’.*

*‘I think the way I prefer to collaborate now is on equal terms. So, if I had the budgets available and the kind of programs that I'd like to arrange, it would be to work with creatives, people who are bringing their expertise and experience to share, that I can learn from them and there's a certain amount of repartee between us. So for example, if I was able to work in women's health but with artists, arts, health and creativity.’*

*‘Do I see myself as an innovator? To me, it sounds like a male term…it feels like someone that invents or makes, creates inventions and it seems like it's to do with ego. So, no, I wouldn't describe myself as an innovator. Despite that, I have definitely managed to create an offer for people who have access needs online that is going well within this sector. I am an opportunist and I am adaptable, but I don't think I'm an innovator.’*

*‘I took a sabbatical in 2017 and travelled around the world looking at innovative projects around engaging people in learning. A lot of the way we could identify innovation was to do with great change and overcoming an obstacle and finding simple solutions. It seemed easier to notice and record when the culture or the opportunities were less wealthy, how people made changes happen that really had an effect and were positively influenced.’*

**Vicki Hambley**

Vicki is the Strategic Artistic Director of Hackney Shed, an inclusive theatre company and charity working with children and young people, supporting Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and neuro-disabilities. Originally from Canada, Vicki started at Hackney Shed on a freelance contract 7 years ago initially working part time. She came to the UK having completed training in acting and theatre, and with experience of working in Canada, Italy and Japan. She gradually built up her work with Hackney Shed, helping it grow and gain more funding, and was appointed artistic director. Since last year she has been working full-time, but still on a freelance contract.

**COVID period project:** Lockdown meant the closure of almost every project and activity that Hackney Shed was engaged in, including theatre productions which had completed their rehearsals and were just about to start performing to audiences. She persuaded the Board and their funders to keep the staff on for a temporary period, during which the staff team, in consultation with their young participants and freelance theatre facilitators, collectively designed a range of new activities which take place entirely online, a highlight of which is a Youtube soap-opera called [Corona-nation Street](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzSV-iJ4Zd5ro2_nBx4dQ4w).

*‘We had to stop all our sessions and rehearsals. We were a week away from another National Theatre Connections performance. They were about to perform at Arts Depot, a different performance. So all of that had to stop. We had more informal performances, the Jubilee performance, that had to be cut. We did the radio play instead. The main thing was just, everything stopped really quickly. And I was very aware that my staff were vulnerable and concerned that they were going to be out of work because everyone's contract-based and we were at the end of the contract, everyone was worried there was going to be no work the following term. I was worried we were going to have our funding either pulled [00:10:00] or paused, it was just very, very uncertain. It was abrupt because it went from like the week before nobody thought it was like a big deal. And then that Monday we still thought things were going to go ahead. And then they made that announcement where they advised people not to go to the theatre - nothing was shut yet, but it was like friendly advice, not to attend theatre spaces, which is when we shut everything down. Cause we were like, if that's that, there's no point in carrying on if that's going to be the case.*

*‘I had to contact my board of directors to tell them like we were a week and a half away from the end of a contract period. I was trying to get the board to okay me giving them different work to do so that we could continue to pay people for the next week or so, which they said they were happy to do as long as the funders were in. So it was just a lot of real logistical kind of back and forth with funders making sure it was okay with them, to redeployed staff in a different way in the short term, until we worked out what we were going to do with our projects. I put together proposals to the funders, like, we can't deliver that project, but this is how we could re redeliver it in the current circumstances. If the funders had told us we couldn't redesign our projects again, we would have had to stop. Also, we have a very supportive board of trustees, and I think that they could have dug their heels in and there would have been nothing I could have done about that. They trust me and they trust our team to be able to sort of carry on. So I think that is one major bonus in the organization. Another thing is that we're small and I think it's easier for small organizations to pivot more quickly. I think if there's more people it takes more time to manage and for people to be able to move.’*

*‘Then we sent out surveys to all parents to find out, first of all, how people were doing, and they wanted, so that we weren't gonna design something that nobody wanted to do anyway. Any parent that didn't respond, we called. So we had a full day where if we hadn't heard from a participant, we were just calling and making sure that everyone was all right. We had a lot of people that we didn't hear from back from email that were really appreciative when we gave them a phone call.’*

*‘The fact that we don't have premises was a major bonus. A lot of good organizations in Hackney still had to pay for their premises, whereas we were almost in the opposite situation, where all of a sudden, that grand or two that we would have spent on premises, we can redeploy that into paying for Zoom, training people up on using things remotely, getting someone to do more online content.’*

*‘Doing the sessions online is not what we want to be doing, but it's better than the alternative of not having anything. So we were trying to do little short films. So that was a huge learning curve, ‘cause none of us know how to do any video editing. We're having to like download, you know, video editing software and just trying to learn how to do it - it's not any of our skill sets to do that kind of stuff. The kids were enjoying making the films and things so hopefully they like watching them at the end. We tried to doing something different in the summer, the soap opera, which in hindsight is way more work than we anticipated. So that's what's happening right now.’*

*‘The soap opera is called Corona-nation Street. We knew there were always going to be young people that wouldn't be able to attend every session because it was the summer, right? So people would be maybe on holiday for a week or so. And we didn't know if things were going to be opening up more than they have even as well. So we thought if we do a soap opera, it doesn't matter if someone's not there the week before or whatever, they're just not going to be in that episode. But because we had such high numbers, we can't predict the number of scenes we create in any given week. We can't put them all in the episode. Otherwise it would be way longer than anyone would want to watch. So it's just turning into a much larger thing, we're going to be releasing episodes almost three weeks after the program stops because we still have so many scenes left that we've done.’*

*‘I think I've learnt that our most extroverted young people, I think they've been suffering the most really. This lack of face to face engagement has been really, really hard for the 13 to 15 year olds, especially those who are more extroverted - our more introverted 13 to 15 year olds have really excelled in this format. I think the under-eleven's in general have all been doing quite well with it.’*

*‘I think that we would probably continue to explore using online sessions. We've been looking at ways of engaging people who physically wouldn't be able to make it to a session either through distance or, you know, hospitalization or things like that. We have a handful of young people now that are attending our sessions that had to leave Hackney Shed in January because they got rehoused and they were too far away. But then once we started delivering online, they were able to start coming again. So that was a benefit. They were really great members that we'd lost that were able to then join us again because the distance wasn't an issue.’*

*‘I think no matter what, even when you're collaborating, you still need to have someone who's steering, so to speak, someone who's directing. So on any given project we run at Hackney Shed, there will always be someone whose eye is over overlooking [everything].’*

*‘Watching kids support each other on stage is for me, a really good sign of something that's gone well, like when you see someone not able to do something and the rest of the group able to pull that person back in…’*

*‘I think one of the things we learned really quickly [about online working] was that we had to be as energetic as we would be in person if we wanted to get the young people to be as energetic. So it was key to get people out of their chairs, to get people up and moving. And because the first zoom trial session we did everyone was sat down, we got to the end, like, ‘that was boring’. [We realised we had to] start running it as if we were all in the same room and telling everyone to get up and move their chairs.’*

*‘I would rather not be on zoom, I'd rather be face to face. We're looking forward to starting face to face sessions. I have no idea what that's gonna look like. And I guess our next step is how to have an integrated online and face to face session - for our core group, we'll be having some people in face to face sessions at the same time as people online. And how do you create a cohesive piece of work when some people are online and some people are face to face?’*

**What worked well and why? What problems emerged during the project and how did you deal with these problems?**

There were no major problems carrying out the interviews, analysing and reporting on them. We could have used more time for video and podcast editing, to ensure a better ‘finish’ to them, but we are happy with them as they are.

**Themes and ideas emerging from the project**

**1. Feelings, emotional responses, coping with the pandemic:**

* The suddenness of lockdown and the cancellation of projects – Yves, Vicki, Tanya, Christian, Anon.
* Immediate period of inactivity while coming to terms with the implications of lockdown - Christian, Yves, Anon
* The importance of routines for mental health, well-being and resilience- Yves
* The importance of exercise and keeping healthy – Anon, Yves, Pete
* Creative practitioners as witnesses to, and recording unprecedented historical events – Christian, Yves, Anon, Pete

**2. Resources and tools:**

* Time made available by the lockdown – Anon, Pete, Yves, Christian
* Digital skills development, using new apps and software – Pete, Vicki, Tanya
* Friends, family and colleagues – Yves, Vicki
* Past and present employers and funders – Tanya, Vicki, Christian
* Teaching and training work – where these were able to move online, they represented a relatively secure, and even increased source of income – Yves, Tanya, Vicki, Anon

**3. Strategic themes: dealing with unexpected threats**

* Using the sudden availability of time for reviewing career strategies, revisiting uncompleted projects, taking formal educational courses, re-assessing work-life balance – Yves, Tanya, Anon
* Teaching as a relatively secure income-generating activity – Tanya, Vicki, Yves, Anon
* Designing educational programmes for disabled and neuro-diverse people during lockdown - Vicki, Tanya
* Art and creative activities as sources of mental health and well-being, for creative practitioners themselves, participants, and for the community in general – Vicki, Tanya, Yves
* Unpaid work, personal projects, as investment – Christian, Yves, Anon
* Formal educational activity as community engagement and development – Tanya, Vicki
* Informal educational activity as community engagement and development – Pete
* Collaborative project development and design as community engagement and consultation - Vicki
* Go local: start new projects within lockdown travel restrictions. They may produce unexpected results, including new paid work - Christian, Yves, Pete

**4. Exploring new territory:**

* New media for creative work – Pete (sound composition, new apps), Vicki (Zoom theatre), Tanya (Zoom teaching and training)
* Redesigning and replacing existing activities with new ones – Pete (teaching himself how to compose music using *Notion*, then using Photoshop Mix on his phone to turn them into short films which he uploaded to Instagram and Soundcloud)
* New focusses, locations and/or inspirations for work – Christian, Yves, Pete, Anon
* Revisiting analogue working because there’s more time – Christian, Anon, Pete
* Keeping creatively active, but that doesn’t necessarily mean working intensively – everyone
* Education as creative practice – Tanya, Vicki
* Family history as an inspiration for creative work – Yves
* The COVID pandemic as an inspiration – Pete, Christian

**5. Learning:**

* Using the time to pursue significant formal online development programmes – Yves
* New apps useful to enhance and augment existing creative practices and forms – Pete
* The potential of Instagram and other social media for contributing to ‘community glue’ - Christian

**6. Employment and contract working:**

* Freelance work, zero-hours contracts, and working as an employee are not mutually exclusive: many creative practitioners juggle all at the same time - Pete, Anon, Yves
* SOLO doesn’t mean working on your own: everyone values collaboration -
  + sometimes with other creative specialists: Anon, Vicki, Tanya, Pete
  + sometimes with clients or non-specialists: Vicki, Tanya, Pete, Christian

**7. Messages for other Creative Industries practitioners**

* COVID-related work: the value of recording and acting as a witness to the way people are responding and reacting to the pandemic - Christian, Yves, Pete
* Go local: start new projects within the restrictions. They may produce unexpected results, including new paid work - Christian, Yves, Pete
* Recording injustices accentuated by the COVID crisis – Pete (homeless people on the street during lockdown)
* Family history as a source of inspiration - Yves
* Projects based on digital technology do not simply replace face to face work, but, in a new form, they are different projects. They do some things better, and other things not so well – Tanya, Vicki, Pete, Anon
* The COVID crisis has created serious economic, social and organisational challenges for Creative Industries practitioners and organisations, but it has also offered unexpected opportunities – Tanya, Christian, Pete, Yves, Vicki

**What are the key impacts or changes that have taken place as a result of your Listen and Respond project or activity?**

A video, podcast and a project report have been produced and will be accessible from the UCL Listen and Respond website: it is clearly too early to say much about their impact, but the project will be followed up with tweets and a webinar planned to take place in late October.

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