

How Minnesota Arts Nonprofits Have Adapted During the Pandemic

There is hope, but much has changed for organizations like Springboard for the Arts and TruArtSpeaks

By **Robyne Robinson** - March 15, 2021



Puppeteer Esther Ouray performs in Minneapolis for “Artists Respond: Combating Social Isolation,” an event by Springboard for the Arts

Photo by Uche Iroegbu

Splashes of pink and purple spotlights whirl around a dark room as DJ Yonci taps her laptop, sways, and adjusts sound levels while bass pumps underneath a mix of old-school hip-hop and neo soul.

A dozen screens on the video feed come alive with bodies moving, faces smiling. The chat fills up: “Got me sweating already!” a guest types. Another teases, “Queen, I see you dancing!” and responds on camera with arms waving to the delight of fellow partiers. A disco ball lights up someone’s screen. Then a guest puts on a papier-mâché panda head, fists pumping.

“I appreciate y’all!” Yonci shouts, as the onscreen crowd and music come together for an extended virtual groove.

The annual fundraiser for St. Paul-based literary and spoken word center [TruArtSpeaks](#) is in full effect—streamlined, online, and refreshingly new: an interactive hip-hop and poetry showcase where the audience is also part of

the show.

“Even in a pandemic, we’re still going strong. It blows my mind,” says TruArtSpeaks founder and executive director Tish Jones, adding, “We didn’t have much choice.”

In the year since COVID-19 was first reported in the U.S., virtually all nonprofit arts organizations canceled events, almost two-thirds of their venues closed, and more than a third still have no idea when they will reopen. The losses in arts and culture spending could total \$15 billion nationally. In Minnesota in 2020, the money usually generated by 1,600 arts nonprofits and 30,000 artists was nowhere near the \$2 billion mark reached in 2019.

[Research by Americans for the Arts](#) says more than 60% of artists and creative workers are fully out of work. Ninety-four percent lost wages. A majority are expected to lose approximately \$21,000 in income because of government restrictions, dark or disappearing stages, and audiences shying away from enclosed spaces.

Still, even in the best of times it takes nimble creativity and economic flexibility for artists to stay afloat. Many artists like Jones see the coronavirus as an unexpected opportunity. “It’s giving poets the chance to stretch and explore.”

An endowment at Icehouse, the Minneapolis Eat Street restaurant and music club, paved the way for the virtual TruArtSpeaks fundraiser. In the two years leading up to the pandemic, TruArtSpeaks’ “Sistahs with Soul” event had become a packed-house draw. After Icehouse temporarily closed, and after George Floyd’s killing, Jones got busy. The public celebration of “womxn artists” became an interactive stage for the community to log in, turn the camera on, and “vibrate high” together—in the safety of everyone’s quarantined kitchens and living rooms.

“There’s a joy component to Black life. We’re used to speaking to each other, but we’ve been looking at squares and talking heads for a year,” Jones says. “What does that mean for the implication of Black voices? We wanted to figure out a way to make the gathering interactive.”

All the online innovation isn’t replacing lost budgets and audiences, but what’s especially important to artists like Jones is keeping that collective creative spirit alive. That has meant rethinking how we fund, view, and create art in the Twin Cities. “It’s an opportunity for change,” Jones says, “for grassroots organizations that are innovative, and for individual artists.”



Dr. Eboni Bell painting a community mural at Springboard for the Arts
Photo by Uche Iroegbu

Outside the Box

Today, arts organizers dream of a future where we can come back together in person to appreciate displays of creativity. Indeed, attracting venue-shy audiences to public art projects has been a top priority for some. But art consultant Kate Iverson expresses concern over the idea of “luring” people to gather during a global outbreak.

“Since activity at galleries, museums, and events were put on hold, artists have had to work extra hard to sell and share their work with the world,” she notes. “So, coming up with ways to engage people and create work that speaks loud and clear during a chaotic time is a creative challenge in and of itself.”

One of Iverson’s bigger clients is Rosedale Center, where her firm [Bishop/Iverson](#) has curated in-house for the past two years. She and partner Mike Bishop had to completely rethink their mall-wide art exhibit slated for the spring of 2020—an exhibit Iverson says was originally filled with installations and interactive components.

“We adjusted for a slower individual exhibit roll-out over the summer,” she says. “Our messaging was simple: While you’re here, stop and reflect on a work of art. We positioned the exhibits as respites, not as attractions.”

Going forward, Bishop/Iverson is refocused on helping organizations create “safer spaces” for these times, as so many Twin Cities creatives must rethink how to fund, create, and stage art.

In line with that more casual mode of viewing art, Carl Atiya Swanson, associate director of the nonprofit [Springboard for the Arts](#), predicts the pandemic will result in a stronger desire among audiences to encounter public art on their own terms, on their own timelines. “These are trends that existed before the pandemic, but having to distance and find asynchronous ways of engagement are speeding that up,” Swanson says.

New Lease on Art

Live audiences may not be the only thing artists and nonprofits have trouble luring back. It’s also about dollars, with safety restrictions potentially changing the way public art is funded. “We haven’t experienced a significant slow-down because of budget cuts, but more [because of] delays due to the restrictions related to safety guidelines in workplaces and public gatherings,” says Theresa Sweetland, executive director of the nonprofit [Forecast Public Art](#).

In some cases, arts-based foundations have lifted fund usage restrictions and opened new cash flows to pandemic-impacted artists and organizations, according to Sweetland. The Minnesota State Arts Board canceled longstanding programs in favor of more flexible funding, to cover more people and groups more quickly. Other COVID-specific examples include the Cultural STAR program transforming into an emergency-relief program for St. Paul artists, and the grants offered through the National Endowment for the Arts’ jobs-preserving CARES Act.

Leading TruArtSpeaks, Tish Jones has seen firsthand how local foundations are striving to keep the arts out of financial straits. Jones worked tirelessly with nonprofits [Juxtaposition Arts](#) in Minneapolis and Arts Us in St. Paul last summer on the free Village Project event. It provided food, books, and art resources to local Black communities, and staged meditation and yoga sessions to destigmatize pandemic-related mental health issues. Organizations like Springboard for the Arts and the Jerome Foundation also filled in funding.

In 2020, Springboard for the Arts raised more than \$1.25 million for more than 2,600 artists and creative workers statewide. Swanson says the organization spent much of the year expanding an emergency-relief fund for artists, “as a bridge to unemployment and other resources.”

Radically Accessible

In addition to financial shifts, the year's social unrest shifted art organizations' cultural focus, too. "It added to the urgency for philanthropy in general, to consider racial equity and justice," Swanson says. "Artists dream up new futures, and that's what we need right now."

Some of the year's most radical and imaginative work has covered plywood boards and has marked racist monuments in the form of protest art, says Swanson. Such art has documented uprisings across the country, no traditional venue required. "That is art that is happening in public, although much of it has been informal, or led by [artist groups] like [Creatives After Curfew](#) and [City Mischief](#) here in the Twin Cities," Swanson says, referring to teams of artists that painted murals aligned with summer's protests.

Graffiti artist [Peyton Scott Russell](#) is one of Minnesota's most prolific public artists in this vein. Russell became known in 2020 for creating the powerful, black-and-white George Floyd mural recognized as a symbol of at the south Minneapolis memorial site, as well as the gold-star tribute to Prince spray-painted onto the First Avenue nightclub. "I believe a lot of people in 2020 got a chance to see public art in a new way, as a true form of expression," Russell says.

"I love the idea of arts on the street—bringing it back to that level," says TruArtSpeaks' Jones, who, like Russell and Iverson, sees COVID-19 as the catalyst for a new beginning. "Collaboration and skill sharing is what's gonna keep the arts alive. So many things are possible."

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