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Learning from the Pandemic: Artistic Freedom & Mobility Beyond the Covid-19 Crisis

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A Martin Roth-Initiative Publication

Learning from the Pandemic

Artistic Freedom & Mobility Beyond the Covid-19 Crisis

Pelin Çakır

Martin Roth Initiative

GOETHE INSTITUT

ifa Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen

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Foreword by ifa's Research Program "Culture and Foreign Policy"

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the cultural sector especially hard. More than 90% of countries closed or partially closed museums, theaters, and memorial sites. Moreover, activities at grassroots level, that are vital for the creative development of societies, were inhibited due to a lack of funds, income, and spaces to meet. In addition to these challenges, evidence shows that the pandemic has been instrumentalized by autocratic regimes, using emergency laws or, as the author shows, strategies similar to "economic censorship" to silence artistic freedom and freedom of expression.

The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing patterns of restriction, precarity and inequality within and between societies. Yet, it also made visible again the strength of many creatives that had been previously exposed to restrictive contexts and constant uncertainties to develop coping strategies in response. Nevertheless, support is needed: Pelin Çakır shows the vital importance of "improved legal and social status of artists; more (and fairly distributed) state support for the sustainability of arts and cultural practices; and more spaces to reconnect, mitigate social isolation, share their work, and establish collaborative partnerships" (p. 84). At the same time, this study reveals the need to critically reflect on criteria in risk assessment when these criteria have been developed with implicit expectations from historically privileged social contexts.

ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) is committed to peaceful and enriching coexistence between people and cultures worldwide. We promote art and cultural exchange through exhibitions, dialogue, and conference programs. As a competence center for international cultural relations, ifa connects civil societies, cultural practices, art, media, and science.

This study here from the Martin Roth-Initiative forms part of the research at ifa and the ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy, in which experts address relevant issues relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim to provide expert advice

for practitioners and policy-makers. Writing the preface at the beginning of the third year of the pandemic, we do not know when Covid-19 will end. But we can learn a lot through this study to build and foster social resilience in the cultural sector through solidarity, collaboration, and advocacy for artistic freedom. As many artists interviewed in this study emphasize the lack of social interaction as the major challenge to their artistic practice, they precisely indicate the significance of the cultural sector for social coherence, psychological well-being, and constructive developments in shaping the future.

Dr. Odila Triebel
Head of Dialogue and Research "Culture and Foreign Policy", ifa

Foreword by the Martin Roth-Initiative (MRI)

International exchange and mobility for artists and creatives are predicated on the possibility of social interaction, cross-border travel, adequate financial resources, and other conditions that allow for inspiration and creativity. For two years now, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to restrictions of opportunities for people working in the cultural and creative sectors worldwide. Simultaneously, it has impacted the ability of international mobility and relocation programs to support artists who are threatened or persecuted in their home countries. Under normal circumstances, temporary relocation enables artists and other civil society actors to go abroad for a limited time, where they can rest, have a respite, and ideally continue their work. However, with the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, how such programs can keep supporting artists' freedom and mobility was thrown into question.

Support organizations worldwide sought to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic by creating alternative measures to cross-border travel. The Martin Roth-Initiative (MRI), for instance, funded "virtual residencies" of 30 artists and cultural activists as a way of addressing the fact that planned international residencies had to be postponed or cancelled. The virtual residency projects of some of the artists can be found here: https://www.martin-roth-initiative.de/en/virtual_residencies. However, it is obvious that virtual cooperation projects cannot entirely replace the experience and benefits of physical mobility, both in terms of artistic inspiration and protection. Therefore, the question of how to build more adequate responses to the needs of artists who work under conditions of restricted freedom remained unanswered.

To better inform its future work, the MRI sought out conversations with artists and other partners and commissioned this research report. Its results confirm that we can learn a lot from both artists and organizations who had been living with uncertainties and restrictions even before the pandemic. For many, it was and continues to be difficult to achieve economic security under the precarious conditions of the arts sector, and to acquire visas for cross-border travel. To foster

knowledge exchange among artists, arts and support organizations, and researchers, the interim results of this report were opened to discussion at a digital workshop in September 2021. To make its key results and recommendations more accessible, it is accompanied by a summary document, which is available in English (https://doi.org/10.17901/akbp1.02.2022) and Turkish (https://doi.org/10.17901/akbp1.03.2022).

This report is published within the research program of the MRI. This Berlin-based temporary international relocation program for artists and cultural activists was launched in 2018 by the ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and the Goethe-Institut. Previous MRI publications examined, inter alia, regional relocation for at-risk artists in Latin America (Cuny 2021) and on the African continent (Blackmore 2021), as well as the impact of relocation programs on human rights defenders' home communities in the case of Kenya (Mutahi/Nduta 2020). Building on one of its reports (Seiden 2020), the MRI recently published a comic on the question of what comes after a funded relocation period (Atukunda/Bwengye 2021). It has additionally issued a collection of good practices (Bartley 2020) and an animated short video on psychosocial wellbeing during periods of relocation. For an overview of all publications, see: https://martin-roth-initiative.de/en/publikationenevents.

Many thanks to the artists and other interview partners who contributed to the research and provided images for the report, as well as to Dr. Odila Triebel and Maik Müller for their contributions to this project. I would also like to thank Emily Pollak and Aysu Uygur for their translation and editing work.

Dr. Lisa Bogerts (MRI Research Coordinator)

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the creative and cultural sectors hard; it has led to further risks and restrictions for artists, particularly for those who were already vulnerable, marginalized, or persecuted. It also hindered opportunities for cross-border mobility and collaboration, thereby creating major obstacles for mobility and temporary relocation programs which aim to enable artists from restrictive political contexts to continue their practice. By learning from the experience of the Covid crisis, and particularly from restrictive contexts such as Turkey, this report explores how to support artists and maintain spaces of artistic freedom despite these circumstances. The report provides artists' perspectives and experiences related to the challenges of the pandemic, and presents the strategies they used to cope with them. As Covid exposed the interlinkage between economic, political, and psychosocial risks, the report provides a critical perspective on the concept of "risk" and of being "at-risk." It also examines the challenges and opportunities that affected the work of organizations supporting artistic freedom and mobility, and how those organizations were able to respond to the needs of artists in this period. Drawing on practices that emerged in response to the pandemic, the report develops recommendations to guide future attempts to expand transnational solidarity for artistic freedom in the face of the pandemic's long-term impacts, as well as any future threats or obstacles of similar nature.

1. Introduction

1.1 How to maintain spaces of artistic freedom and mobility in a world transformed by Covid-19

> *Artists were in the first row in the support of the human world after the pandemic by providing their work for free. This is why we are supporting artists: because we need them, not because they need us, we need their work to keep being able to imagine a better future. We cannot live in a world without the arts.*[1]

Not until the first curfew was declared, spaces of everyday encounters were shut down, weekend plans had to be cancelled, or access to basic services were restricted, did we perceive what a pandemic is. As March 2020 unfolded and countries started to announce protective measures one by one, it was no longer possible to deny the signs of the approaching global crisis. Perhaps we initially expected a quick end to social distancing rules and a return to normality. But already after a few months it was clear we need to reconceptualize what we understand from social life, or even normality.

Restrictions and measures introduced against the global spread of Covid-19 had an immediate impact on the enjoyment of cultural rights and artistic freedoms. Social distancing and quarantine measures have led to the closure of exhibition and performance venues and the cancellation of events, causing the creative and cultural sector to suffer from major economic challenges. Arts and culture practitioners had to survive lowered or complete lack of income, rely on state, community, or family support, and find alternative ways to maintain the production of creative work in the absence of venues, studios, or facilities. Worldwide border closures and travel restrictions hindered cross-border collaboration and exchange opportunities for artists, as well as their mobility and temporary relocation practices. While striving to maintain their practice under

[1] Online interview with Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.

extraordinarily challenging circumstances, artists (particularly those who offer a critical or controversial voice in repressive contexts) had been facing additional problems, such as criminalization, marginalization, and censorship. The UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights defined Covid-19 as "a cataclysm for cultural rights," and the International Labor Organization labelled it the "worst global crisis since the Second World War" (Bennoune 2021: 3).

> *We shouldn't go back to what it was, because obviously it wasn't functional on all levels and Covid just exposed that.*[2]

Covid-19 shed light on pre-existing weaknesses in the creative and cultural sector, which included irregular and atypical working conditions, inadequate social security and support, and exclusionary systems. Many countries with poor cultural policies or economies treated art as a non-essential field and failed to implement public measures for the survival of arts and culture in general. Some countries used the pandemic as an excuse to sanction further restrictions on the freedom of expression, quash the dissident voices, and control public space. This report presents the case of Turkey to shed light on such contexts in which mechanisms against artistic freedom have emerged alongside the country's Covid response. A common phenomenon emerging in some Middle Eastern countries as well as other repressive contexts (see e.g., Freemuse 2021; Yeluri et al. 2021) has been the instrumentalization of public health measures toward the securitization of the public sphere, the limitation of freedom of expression and assembly, and the imposition of economic censorship of dissident or critical voices (as mentioned by the participants in this research). Many arts and cultural practitioners from such repressive contexts did not find the consequences of the pandemic so unprecedented, as they already were living in a perpetual state of crisis, in countries where economic instability, political violence, natural disasters, and social injustice are normalized and poorly managed by the authorities. They have also been facing

[2] Online interview with Khaled Barakeh, 7 July 2021.

curtailed freedom of movement and artistic expression. However, their capacity to cope with economic challenges, professional interruption, social isolation, and the psychological impacts of the pandemic differed according to what extent they had access to support mechanisms, or (virtual or physical) spaces that allowed for solidarity, connection, and collaboration with others.

In the face of several risks, threats, and restrictions challenging artistic practice, a variety of actors at the local, regional, or international level make efforts to secure and promote free artistic expression. Among those efforts, temporary relocation schemes are found to be effective particularly at responding to the needs of artists, and to be useful for expanding solidarity. Temporary relocation is a model to support individuals (often artists, journalists, or human rights defenders) to leave a threatening or dangerous context and stay in a safer space for a limited time (usually between two months and two years), as a means to secure their well-being and maintain their practice. However, the implementation of this model was highly curtailed by the lockdowns, cancellations, and tightened visa and travel restrictions due to Covid. Still, artists, particularly those in countries with high levels of persecution and threat to artistic freedoms, show a growing interest in temporary relocation. It allows them to find the space, resources, and connections necessary to sustain their creative practice.

Overall, all that the pandemic has caused, exacerbated, or exposed will probably not cease from one day to the next. It is necessary to prepare for a world transformed by Covid by learning from this period. By understanding the evolving conditions that have challenged specifically vulnerable, dissident, and persecuted arts and cultural practitioners, it is possible to rethink existing practices and design appropriate responses. The aim of this report is thus to present the lessons learned from the pandemic in order to find ways to maintain spaces of artistic freedom and mobility during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 Research design and content

This report presents the findings of research that I conducted between May and September 2021. I endeavored to answer the following questions:

- How have vulnerable, persecuted, and dissident artists[3] been experiencing the pandemic? Which sources and practices have enabled them to cope with the specific risks and restrictions they faced?

- How have organizations supporting artistic freedom, mobility, and temporary relocation been responding to the needs of artists under these circumstances?

- What kinds of strategies, alternatives, and good practices have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic so far? What can be learned from those experiences and recommended for future practice?

The research process comprised a desk review of relevant literature and publications, as well as in-depth interviews with arts and cultural practitioners and professionals working at organizations which support artistic freedom and mobility. The desk review consisted of gathering and comparing information and perspectives from reports on Covid's impact on the fields of arts and culture. It also included research on artistic mobility, temporary relocation, and "artists-at-risk"; statements by arts organizations and collectives; and news and interviews with various actors in the field. My own interviews aimed to expand an understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and needs of the practitioners in the field. I conducted 28 semi-

[3] Such artists are commonly referred to as "artist-at-risk." However, since some of the respondents I interviewed have voiced discomfort with this category of self-identification, this report avoids imposing that label. Reluctant to propose yet another label to define a complex experience, this report refers to "artists-at-risk" at times for the sake of brevity, still acknowledging the complexities involved, and with an attempt to deconstruct the concept.

structured interviews,[4] after conducting two preparatory talks with another researcher and managers of Martin Roth-Initiative (MRI). 18 of the respondents are artists or cultural practitioners and include several individuals who manage arts and cultural organizations and who are members or initiators of artist collectives or solidarity organizations. 15 of the respondents are professionals (directors, coordinators, or staff) working at organizations which support artistic freedom and mobility. As these numbers imply, most of the respondents have multiple roles and positions in the field, which include curator, researcher, or activist too. To achieve a regional focus, 19 respondents (mainly artists and cultural practitioners) were selected from Turkey. Three of them were based in Turkey but are originally from other Middle Eastern countries, and three artists from Turkey were relocated in European countries during the period of research. Nine respondents are from other Middle Eastern countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iran. Finally, five respondents, mainly professionals from artistic mobility organizations, are from different European countries and one from the US. Seeking to reflect the vast diversity of the field, I selected the respondents from different arts disciplines (such as dance, cinema, theater, visual arts, and performance arts), different locations, age groups, and gender identities. Equally, organizations, networks, artist mobility and relocation programs were selected with diverse sizes and types as much as possible. However, focusing on the perspectives of vulnerable, persecuted, and dissident artists and cultural practitioners, those involved in my research were selected based on their shared experience or self-perceived risk of oppression, persecution, marginalization and vulnerabilization. Furthermore, the initial findings of the research were presented and opened up to discussion at an online workshop in September 2021.

I additionally focused on the case of Turkey, where freedom of the arts is severely restricted. It is one of the five countries with the highest rates of persecution against

[4] See list of research participants, p. 100.

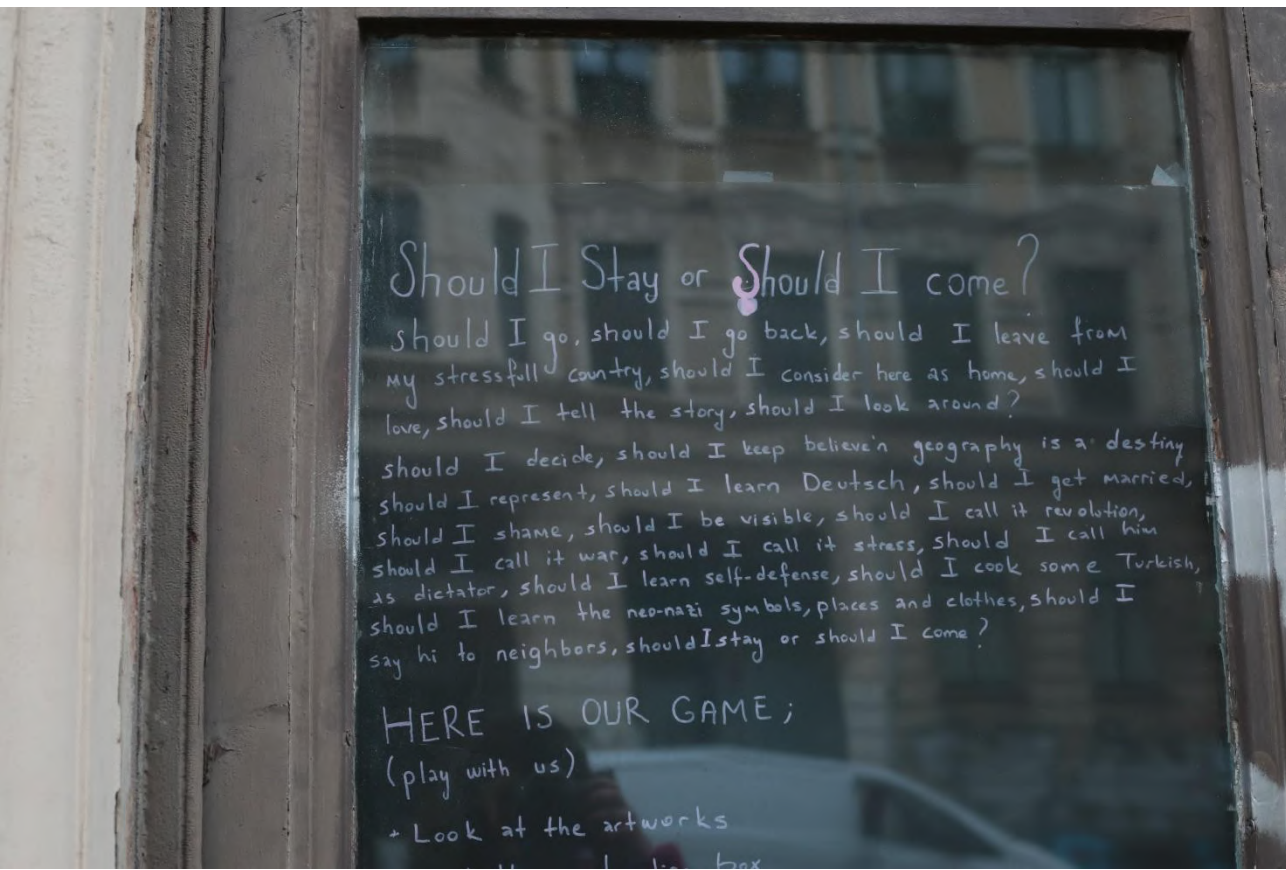
freedom of expression in recent years (see e.g., Freemuse 2016; 2020; 2021), and has a significantly high number of artists requesting assistance from artistic freedom organizations. For example, among the assistance requests received by Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) up until 2021, those from Turkey make up the second largest group (Fine and Trébault 2021: 18). Since the impacts of the pandemic have motivated many actors and organizations to seek and develop strategies not only at international but also regional and local levels, a closer focus on Turkey may inform future attempts to address needs at the peripheries of Europe or in the broader Middle Eastern region.[5] Although more and more shelter and relocation programs have begun to operate around the world, still far fewer are located in the Asian and Middle Eastern regions (Jones et al. 2019: 12) than in other regions. Yet in those regions, particularly the Middle East, strikingly higher numbers of artists seek protection or relocation due to threats of persecution (Fine and Trébault 2021: 18). The findings and recommendations presented in this report are developed with a bottom-up approach by giving voice to those in areas where support is needed and requested, with the intent to provide a guide to expand transnational solidarity for artistic freedoms.

The report is composed of six chapters. Chapter 2 presents an overview of Covid's impact on the field of the arts and culture, and on artistic mobility and freedoms in general. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the case of Turkey which may enhance an understanding of those who are sustaining artistic and cultural practices despite a hostile environment and inadequate policies and support measures. Chapter 4 aims to focus on the experiences, needs, and perspectives of artists who particularly face risks and persecution, and who maintain a dissident and controversial practice in repressive contexts. After highlighting the factors that complicate artists' precarity and their

[5] This does not mean that Turkey is representative of the whole of Middle East, a region with complexities and diversities among and within countries. I rather assume that understanding Turkey might clarify some similar patterns in other Middle Eastern countries, given the geographic affinity, similar political and economic challenges, and populations of migrants and refugees (including artists who are forced to leave their countries) from the region.

understanding of the concept of risk during a state of crisis, this chapter illustrates the coping strategies they have developed accordingly. Chapter 5 examines how mobility and temporary relocation practices have been maintained during the pandemic, as well as which existing challenges and opportunities have become apparent during this time. This allows for a clearer indication of strategies that might serve toward building more adequate responses to evolving conditions and needs of artists. The final chapter summarizes the overall findings of the research and lists recommendations that are proposed by the participants in this research. A list of practical resources and tools on artistic freedom, mobility, and Covid-19 can be found at the end of this publication. Also included is a list of participants who contributed to this research by responding to interviews and by providing information and feedback to improve it.

Fig. 1: Filiz İzem Yaşın: image from "Should I Stay or Should I Come", window installation, A und V e.V, Leipzig//20; © Filiz İzem Yaşın



2. Covid's impact on arts and culture

2.1 Closures and cancellations

Following the announcement of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020,[6] countries all over the world started to introduce basic measures to protect public health. As those measures required limiting non-essential in-person and social activities, ventures in the sphere of the arts and culture were immediately put on hold. Museums, galleries, theaters, and performance venues were closed; festivals, concerts, and other events were cancelled. According to a report released by UNESCO in May 2020, 90% of museums worldwide (more than 85,000 institutions) have temporarily closed, and an expected 10% might never reopen due to the economic hardship caused by the pandemic (UNESCO 2020b: 4). Yet arts and cultural spaces come in all shapes and sizes, and their resilience to such a disruption vary widely. Grassroots cultural venues such as small music venues, LGBTI+ venues, and independent arts spaces, which had hardly been operating even before the pandemic (if they had not shut down already), were among the most severely impacted by the closures. It is estimated that 90% of grassroots venues in London face permanent closure due to the crisis (OECD 2020: 21).

The loss of grassroots venues would have unavoidable repercussions on the broader cultural field as they would not continue to nurture innovation, experimentation, and creative content; "other sectors of the culture industry can be at risk of locking themselves into already established formats and ideas" (OECD 2020: 21). For this reason, Omar Berakdar from Arthere (an independent artist solidarity space initiated by refugee artists in Istanbul) argued that independent arts spaces should be better supported, as opposed to mainstream industries, which push artists into a dominant Western model of creation.[7] Ferdinand Richard, who supervises funds for Middle Eastern artists, also confirmed that the

[6] https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020.
[7] Interview with Omar Berakdar, 4 June 2021, Istanbul.

growing trend of the hyper-concentration of cultural agencies in the hands of big business has been leading to (self)censorship, threatening the existence of small independent actors and compelling artists to conform to the demands of the market.[8] It is for this reason that supporting grassroots cultural venues is essential to the protection and promotion of artistic freedom.

Some of the artists I interviewed mentioned drifting away from their arts practices due to curfews and closures. One painter said she could not draw at all because the general atmosphere did not allow for inspiration.[9] A street artist could not paint in the streets because of the tightening of security measures – nor could he find a place for himself in the art galleries that did continue selling art in this period.[10] As he lost all customers for commissioned work as well, he eventually quit art during the pandemic. Artists who face greater vulnerability or marginalization such as queer drag performers, as recounted by one respondent, lost their main income sources when the very few places they could work (on an irregular basis and with daily wages) were shut down.

Overall, the lockdowns and restrictions catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic have had severe economic impacts on the creative and cultural sector. Along with the tourism, the creative and cultural sector was among the most severely impacted sectors in OECD countries, with venue and performance-based sectors being the hardest hit (OECD 2020), and with a total loss of 31% of its 2019 turnover in Europe (EY Consulting 2021). According to research conducted for the CULT Committee of the European Parliament, "the great lockdown measures" (the halting of international mobility, social activity, and non-essential physical production and distribution), together with "the post-lockdown measures" (such as the restrictions on mobility and social activities, and the reopening of non-

[8] Online interview with Ferdinand Richard, 27 May 2021.
[9] Online interview with Watfaa Wahb, 15 July 2021.
[10] Online interview with Ill, 23 June 2021.

essential activities), unleashed a wave of social and economic effects on the creative and cultural sector. These effects included, on one hand, the loss of income opportunities for organizations and non-standard workers, downsizing and bankruptcy, brain-drain and increased precariousness for workers; and development of new skill sets, new forms of activities, sectoral initiatives, and cross-sectoral collaborations on the other (IDEA Consult et al. 2021: 10-13).

2.2 Constrained mobility

Along with the closures and cancellations to slow the spread of the virus, countries and international authorities closed borders, restricted travel between certain locations, or imposed strict requirements on travelers. The measures eventually rendered mobility, a crucial element for artistic creation, encounters, exchange, and collaboration, nearly impossible.

Despite the growing trend towards mobility in the field of the arts and culture in recent years, a number of obstacles to mobility were already in place. These included the myriad rules and regulations across countries and limited access to funding, in addition to the atypical forms of employment and geographical imbalances across the sector (Culture Action Europe and Dâmaso 2021: 17). Before the pandemic, the signatory parties[11] of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of UNESCO committed to facilitating cultural exchange by granting preferential treatment to artists and other cultural professionals, regardless of where they are from. But Laurence Cuny (2020: 29) reminds us that freedom of movement and the transnational mobility of artists have been increasingly restricted in the years leading up to the pandemic, mainly due to rising security concerns around the world. Another UNESCO report also confirms that artists were often deterred

[11] 148 states and the European Union, as of January 2020.

from joining a residency or tour in a foreign country even before the health crisis by the following factors: increased immigration restrictions, a climate of insecurity, and the high costs and extensive requirements of visa application processes (UNESCO 2020a: 51). Eda Yiğit's survey with artists in Turkey, for instance, revealed that only 19% of them have ever participated in an artist residency (2021: 28).

It has always been difficult for some people to travel, as the respondents I interviewed also emphasized. But with Covid-19, those who had been privileged enough to travel without restrictions beforehand were also confronted with barriers now, and the contradictions inherent in existing border regimes were further exposed. One respondent who is part of an artist solidarity network initiated by Syrian artists said he finds it funny to talk about how people are suffering Covid-specific travel restrictions, especially when there were already a lot of people who could not travel before Covid due to their unemployment status or not being permitted to travel.[12]

During the pandemic, if cross-border travelling was not stopped altogether, visa processes would become an almost impossible hurdle, as many interview respondents asserted. The obstacles to mobility were also experienced disproportionately in certain regions (due to disadvantaged positions in the global visa regime) that were subject to different and changing visa procedures and travel restrictions.

A director of a cultural organization that supports artists in the Middle East commented that mobility was nearly halted for artists in this region. She added that mobility was possible only in between certain cities in the region, and even this depended on visa procedures and travel restrictions which have been

[12] Interview with Omar Berakdar, 4 June 2021, Istanbul.

constantly changing throughout the pandemic.[13] On the other hand, another professional who has experience in facilitating Middle Eastern artists' travel to Europe claimed that, while the pandemic has not completely frozen mobility, it has slowed it down. With more time and preparation, complicated travel requirements could also be fulfilled, in their experience.[14]

The director of a residency program based in Istanbul and Berlin mentioned that before the pandemic, the challenge was to get a six-month visa; after the onset of the pandemic, it became impossible to get one even for one month. Although that program collaborated with the partner countries' cultural authorities, the German consulate refused to issue visas for its participants from Turkey. Artists from Germany, meanwhile, could participate in the residency in Turkey only by providing a PCR test.[15]

2.3 Support and relief measures

While the pandemic's preventive and mitigation measures halted a great deal of arts and cultural activities, time has shown the need for the arts as a resource to heal and to cope with the adverse impacts of the global outbreak. Countries which recognized the significance of the arts in this sense have introduced measures to protect artists and support the cultural sector. Still, many countries view art as a luxury and often neglect the basic needs of those in the broader arts community. This has been the case for the respondents of this report who are from Turkey and the Middle East. They considered arts and culture practitioners to be treated unfairly when it came to public support, particularly in the lack of adequate cultural policies and economies.

[13] Online interview with Helena Nassif, 8 June 2021.
[14] Online interview with Ferdinand Richard, 27 May 2021.
[15] Online interview with Asena Günal, 7 June 2021.

At the time this research was conducted, the types of support and relief measures provided by states or international agencies ranged from direct funds and grants for artists and cultural professionals, to compensations for financial losses in the sector, tax relief and other incentives for production and investment, unemployment payments, or social insurance contributions. They also included funds for psychosocial counselling, commissioning and purchase of works, and digital campaigns and projects to promote the creation and distribution of artistic and cultural content.[16] The most common measures introduced in different parts of the world have been direct financial aid and creation of fee-based platforms for streaming artistic content (UNESCO 2020a: 13).

However, financial support was not always sufficient or fairly distributed. According to a survey by Res Artis, a global network of artist residencies, 45% of their respondents were unable to access or were ineligible for emergency government aid in September 2020, and in time that rate has even increased to 68%, as reported in the second survey in January 2021 (Res Artis and UCL 2021: 5). Support was not received due to immigration status, lack of consistent income, and high competition for grants. Res Artis has concluded that assistance has been vital for individuals' survival, as 80% of responses indicated using the emergency support for the purpose of covering daily living expenses, and only 34% used it to fund the creation of new works (Res Artis and UCL 2021: 5-6).

Respondents from two Beirut-based arts and cultural organizations made a field assessment in the Middle Eastern region, which demonstrated that artists primarily needed emergency funding, particularly after the explosion in the Beirut harbor in August 2020, and especially vulnerable groups, such as young, LGBTI+, refugee

[16] See UNESCO's online platform on policy and measures in the field of arts and culture (https://en.unesco.org/creativity/covid-19). UNESCO's policy guide "Culture in Crisis" (2020a) presents an inventory of measures taken by different actors and gives examples of some good practices from around the world.

artists, artists with health problems and with dependents.[17] ARC's director Julie Trébault also mentioned identifying a surge in requests for financial help by their applicants immediately following the outbreak of the pandemic.[18]

A striking contrast emerges between the experiences of artists who lived in Turkey during the pandemic and those who were in a European country in a residency or with a scholarship. The artists who had the privilege of relocation and financial support could continue their creative work, establish new projects, and collaborate, while others focused on their basic needs and priorities such as mental and physical well-being and found strategies to survive the crisis. A respondent from an arts and cultural organization in Berlin also argued that the pre-existing economic gap between the relocation partners working in the Global North and Global South has widened during the pandemic, as public support has been insufficient in many countries outside of Europe.[19]

The discrepancy between the financial support for artists and arts organizations in Europe and in the Global South is also evidenced by the data gathered by Res Artis and UCL (2021). When the responses to "access to emergency funding support in the participant's country or region" were grouped for European states and countries from the Global South (including Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries) separately, the rate of not receiving funding support is 85% in the Global South, in comparison to 59.6% in Europe.[20] The most common reason for this lack of support is "lack of relevant funding opportunities," as cited by 35.6% of artists in Europe, whereas the same reason applies to 61.3% of all participants from the Global South.

[17] Online interview with Helena Nassif and Reem Khattab, 8 June 2021; and Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.
[18] Online interview with Julie Trébault, 30 June 2021.
[19] Online interview with Can Sungu, 8 July 2021.
[20] Res Artis, 2021; data obtained through personal communication.

2.4 Justifying further restrictions on artistic freedoms

Measures and regulations adopted to prevent the spread of Covid-19 sometimes resulted in restrictions on basic freedoms, such as freedom of expression and assembly. According to Freemuse's 2021 report, authorities often instrumentalized the pandemic to implement measures that restricted the freedom of expression. Restrictions of cultural events intensified the suppression of artists' voices, who additionally have been subject to censorship and threatened with charges of criminal offenses and imprisonment in overcrowded prisons with a high risk of infection (Freemuse 2021: 6). The report considers 2020 a year when artistic expression was under attack, as evidenced by a record number of cases that resulted in legal persecution of artists who engaged in peaceful expression:

> *At least 322 artists were arbitrarily detained, prosecuted or sentenced to prison terms, primarily on political grounds. Mainly, people were sanctioned for expressions deemed critical of public authorities or insulting of state officials and national symbols, as well as for staging and participating in anti-government protests and criticizing the authorities' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Freemuse 2021: 6)*

In some cases, authorities used the pandemic as an excuse to implement measures to restrict spaces and activities which do not necessarily threaten public health, but which were perceived to be noncompliant with the political agenda of the regime. Luigi Galimberti from Res Artis confirmed that certain regimes took advantage of the pandemic to impose mobility restrictions for political reasons.[21] Julie Trébault from ARC described how a new norm has developed for authoritarian regimes that target dissident voices and expand repression: they adopted anti-terrorism

[21] Online interview with Luigi Galimberti, 18 June 2021.

laws along with regulations to prevent the spread of Covid-19, and used these to arrest and prosecute targeted activists, artists, and cartoonists.[22]

Most of these violations against free expression that were committed in the context of Covid-19 occurred in the Global South (70%) (Freemuse 2021: 20). Turkey has some of the highest numbers of persecution against artists. 75% of global cases of the misuse of counterterrorism measures against artistic freedom, for instance, took place in Turkey (Freemuse 2021: 21). Referring to the hostile context in Turkey, Sumru Tamer, an activist and professional in the field of artistic freedom said, "Before, we were confronted with 'ban on assembly and events' cases; now we see instead the use of pandemic measures to justify banning all events."[23] Barış Seyitvan, a Kurdish artist from Turkey adds, "Covid has doubled the ongoing problems in our region. It has been used for intimidation and as an excuse for political interventions to eliminate people's living spaces, and spaces for self-expression."[24]

2.5 Exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in the sector

The European Commission's Voices of Culture report suggests that the pandemic has shed light on the precarity of the arts and cultural sector by exposing the socio-economic gaps among various workers in the sector, "depending on the country they are based in, their positions and roles in the value chain, their privileged/disadvantageous background, the extent of dependency on public support, and many other factors" (Saviotti et al. 2021: 58). A UNESCO report also summarized the situation as below:

[22] Online interview with Julie Trébault, 30 June 2021.
[23] Online interview with Sumru Tamer, 2 June 2021.
[24] Online interview with Barış Seyitvan, 5 July 2021.

> *The crisis has revealed fault lines in the world of arts and culture – weaknesses that were already there but have been exacerbated by the crisis. It has revealed gaps in the social and economic protection available to those at the heart of the cultural and creative industries, the artists and cultural workers who are often freelancers with multiple employers, placing a strain on the schemes that already existed. (UNESCO 2020a: 6)*

The respondents I interviewed have also agreed on the fact that Covid has only made more visible certain systemic problems and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Economic challenges such as lack of public support, loss of income due to economic instabilities, or irregular working conditions have always existed particularly in countries with weaker cultural policies. Perhaps these challenges now reach a broader population, yet still at varying degrees for each group with different privilege positions along the divisions of young/old, poor/rich, North/South, and according to gender and social security or legal status. According to one interview respondent, one side effect of the pandemic has been the tendency to hold Covid responsible for everything. He stated that all the problems in this field had existed in the Middle Eastern region before the pandemic as well, due to government policies that shifted from supporting artistic development towards investing in profitable industries such as tourism.[25]

[25] Online interview with Ferdinand Richard, 27 May 2021.

3. Close-up: the case of Turkey

This chapter presents the state of artistic freedom and mobility before and during the pandemic in Turkey to introduce a context in which artists face greater risk and restrictions. The situation described here is specific to Turkey, so the practices and coping strategies presented may not offer replicable, all-encompassing solutions for (post)pandemic challenges. Still, the coping strategies and practices contained in this overview and the common principles that define them may inform others who are (or will be) dealing with similar conditions of restrictions, risks, and permanent crises.

3.1 Artistic freedom in Turkey before Covid-19

Turkey legally recognizes and guarantees freedom of expression and the arts through constitutional law and is compelled to do so through international human rights agreements.[26] However, the exercising of those rights was often constrained, and public policy towards the arts and culture was rather to control and censor artists and practitioners than to support them.[27] The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), which has been in power for nearly 20 years, has fomented discourse and politics that are hostile towards the arts and artists, discrediting the latter as a threat to public order or traditional values; the arts were cast as a "backyard of terrorism," with elitist artists[28] or "freak" artworks.[29] The atmosphere of violence and repression that was growing in the country by 2015 and 2016 led to expanded constraints on cultural and artistic rights along with other basic freedoms. Following the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the State of Emergency laws and regulations implemented severe restrictions

[26] Such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified in 2003.
[27] See https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/02/developments-cultural-policy-effects-freedom-arts-ankara/.
[28] Ibid.
[29] https://news.artnet.com/art-world/turkish-president-erdogan-fined-for-insulting-sculpture-celebrating-the-reconciliation-between-turkey-and-armenia-274454.

on the freedom of expression and rights to assembly. Emergency decree laws and government-appointed trustees replaced many key actors from public offices and institutions, and closed numerous organizations, including cultural associations, theaters, galleries, and publishing houses. Freemuse and P24's joint submission to the 2020 Universal Periodic Review of Turkey confirms that the protection of fundamental freedoms was significantly deteriorated through the enforcement of the State of Emergency legislation, which was later normalized by law, despite the lifting of the State of Emergency itself in July 2018 (Freemuse and P24 2020: 4). The authors document several cases of how certain pieces of legislation have been implemented against artists and creative works in a way that breached the rights to freedom of expression, association, and other guarantees under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Turkey's Constitution (Freemuse and P24 2020: 4-7). Such pieces of legislation were the "anti-terror law" (1991 Law no. 3713), the "law on meetings and demonstrations" (1982 Law no. 2911), and the codes on "denigration of religion" (Article 216/3), "insulting the president" (Article 299) and defamation (Article 125), as well as praising crime or criminals (Article 215).

The changes made to the Anti-Terror Law (no. 3713) in 2013 expanded the category of terrorism to criminalize any kind of political and artistic expression. The law was commonly used to suppress dissident voices. Artists who expressed their opinions on current issues in Turkish politics through their artwork or social media, or made films about the Kurdish movement, as well as some publishing houses and theater companies, were charged with such offenses as "disseminating terrorist propaganda" or "inciting hate and animosity" (see Whyatt 2014; Freemuse and P24 2020). During the pandemic, Turkey enforced anti-terror measures to silence at least 30 artists in total, which made up 75% of cases worldwide where counterterrorism measures were used to curtail artistic freedom (Freemuse 2021: 21).

Barış Seyitvan gave an account of the cultural devastation wrought in the Kurdish region of Turkey, with the eradication of a recently flourishing arts and culture scene by the trustee mayors appointed by the Turkish government.[30] After 2016, many projects and investments in the cultural sphere were halted, including those to which he was contributing, such as Amed Art Gallery, the Diyarbakır Municipality Art Gallery, Diyarbakır Art Biennale (which was planned but never realized), and the coordination center of the Diyarbakır Prison Museum Initiative. Projects and spaces which cultivated, restored, and protected Kurdish culture were all lost, and the people involved in those projects fired and/or charged with crimes. Moreover, the archives and catalogues created by the art galleries were destroyed, as were the physical facilities. One of the two new galleries in the city was turned into a prayer hall, and the other was reconstructed as a sports hall, Seyitvan recounted.[31]

Another piece of legislation that is commonly instrumentalized to cancel arts and culture events is the law on meetings and demonstrations (no. 2911). Prohibitions were made based on provisions like "public morals," "public health," or "public order," but were invoked especially for events in Kurdish cities, during periods of mobilization (like 8th of March, or pride week), or if the events had been organized by the LGBTI+ movement or community (Freemuse and P24 2020: 11).

3.2 During Covid: increasing restrictions, inadequate support

Today, "with the excuse of the pandemic," as respondents articulated, more and more restrictions to the freedom of expression and artistic creation have been

[30] Turkey took control of 94 Kurdish municipalities by appointing trustee-mayors, dismissing and criminalizing Kurdish politicians, see https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/07/turkey-kurdish-mayors-removal-violates-voters-rights.
[31] Online interview with Barış Seyitvan, 5 July 2021.

introduced. Asena Günal, director of Anadolu Culture, one of the very few cultural associations committed to protecting the freedom of the arts and culture in Turkey, is afraid that the situation will continue to deteriorate. She asserted that artists' spaces have shrunk exponentially while self-censorship was already the norm due to constant threats of criminalization of actions like insulting the president, promoting LGBTI+ causes, or so-called "pornographic content." With the pandemic, freedom of expression in public spaces is restricted even more; "Today, people on the street are pepper-sprayed for the excuse of public health," she added.[32]

In this hostile atmosphere, artists and cultural workers are even more vulnerable as they are not sufficiently protected by the privilege of a legal status in Turkey. An established artist in the visual art scene mentioned during her interview that legislation related to the definition and recognition of the status of artists is based on very traditional categories. For instance, as the social security system fails to register her as an independent artist, she is categorized as a "housewife." Similarly, many others are categorized as "unemployed" due to their unconventional or irregular working conditions. This may preclude artists' chances from transnational mobility, as visa applications require proof of employment and income through social security records.[33]

Lack of organizations such as labor unions or professional guilds for workers in the arts and cultural sector contributes to this misrecognition and to artists' precarity, as mentioned by the participants in my research. The survey conducted by Yiğit (2021: 19-23) between August and September 2020 demonstrates artists' precarity in Turkey: 31% of the survey respondents did not have access to social security, 97% had an average income below the poverty line, and 43% under the hunger limit. 64% were dependent on economic support from parents (31%),

[32] Online interview with Asena Günal, 7 June 2021.
[33] Online interview with Banu Cennetoğlu, 8 May 2021.

partners (13%), or others, while 80% found it necessary to have a secondary source of income. Another survey conducted at a later stage of the pandemic indicated that 73% of the responding artists and cultural professionals have a much lower income compared to what they had in the beginning of the pandemic, to the extent that 63% of the respondents needed urgent economic support, while 27% would not be able to sustain themselves for longer than a year (Lena 2021).

The pandemic has exposed how arts and cultural practitioners have been made into second-class citizens through public policy. Turkey has not developed systematic support measures to address the precarity of artists and arts organizations since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak. The state introduced measures only to bypass economic losses and debts experienced mainly by businesses and institutions in the creative sector. Turkey's primary response was to introduce an "Economic Stability Shield Package" for institutions and taxpayers involved in artistic activities and the event-organization sector. This package only postponed repayments of loans for three months, and monthly taxes and social security premiums that accrued in the period of April to June 2020 for six months (IKSV 2020). The Human Rights Association of Turkey (IHD) criticized this package for being "mainly composed of loans offered and debts deferred," since the amount of direct financial support provided to citizens who had lost their jobs and/or incomes remained quite low. In this context, the regular Unemployment Insurance Fund has barely served as a primary source for financial aid for citizens (Human Rights Association and Dertli 2020: 5).

Not until news spread about the suicide attempts by approximately 100 musicians in the first year of the pandemic (according to the Musicians' Union[34]), was there an effort to acknowledge the dire situation artists were struggling with. Following the public reactions to these news, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism

[34] See https://www.birgun.net/haber/salginda-aylarca-issiz-kalan-100-e-yakin-muzisyen-yasamina-son-verdi-315809.

introduced a support program in December 2020 that provided a payment of 1,000 Turkish liras[35] to musicians who were eligible to apply. The application required submitting a sample of their work to prove their artistic engagement. Many artists did not attempt to apply, as they found the requirement to prove their skill and the amount of support offered humiliating.

Moreover, the criteria used by the Ministry of Culture to determine eligibility were highly contested. Independent cultural institutions and artists whose work was deemed to be in opposition to the government were excluded from the allocation of support (Freemuse 2021: 121). Susma, a platform to defend the freedom of expression, revealed that the Turkish state has failed to fulfill its responsibility to sustain cultural and artistic production in this period, while the state's monetary policy on selectively supporting arts and culture created a mechanism of "economic censorship."[36]

Yiğit's survey (2021: 40) of 150 artists from Turkey shows that only 24% of respondents received public support in the early stages of the pandemic. Another survey conducted between April and May 2021 with a larger sample painted a slightly better picture; the rate of those who received support had increased to 56%. Still, only 38% received support from public organizations, whereas 17% was from civil society organizations, 4% from private enterprises, and 41% from "other" sources (Lena 2021).

The majority of my interview respondents (i.e. all except those who were residing in Europe) stated that they had not received any financial support or emergency funds from the state. Some had applied but were denied; a couple of them

[35] 1,000 Turkish liras is far below what is needed to meet the basic needs of a family or a single person. To compare, in December 2020, 3,147 Turkish liras was the amount to cover the basic living costs for a single person in Turkey. See http://www.turkis.org.tr/Aclik-Yoksulluk-k91.
[36] Online interview with Sumru Tamer and Lara Özlen, 2 June 2021.

suspected that the decision was based on political motives. Some were already ineligible to apply due to conditionalities that do not fit with the realities of the arts sector. Others preferred not to apply to avoid direct contact with the state and consequently be exposed to their control and surveillance mechanisms. A theater collective in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, for example, did not apply for state support since it would give the public officials the right to monitor their work. The monitoring report prepared by the Association of Producers and Workers of Theater (TÜYAD) criticized the state's pandemic policies for being politically led:

> *Many theater workers consider the reasons provided for the closure of theater halls – under the same circumstances when factories and shopping malls remain open, political parties hold conventions in indoor sport halls, and the president of the country approves them, and when political events and rallies are organized for crowds in open air disregarding the pandemic measures – as a political approach, shaped by ideological preferences. (TÜYAD 2021: 6; own translation)*

A Kurdish theater artist from Turkey saw the pandemic as a catalyst for the state to enact its desire to eliminate public spaces:

> *Before the pandemic, the public spaces left for us were cinemas, theaters, cafés, and pubs. Other spaces had already been eliminated. Now these are also eliminated. While the whole world provided support to sustain these spaces, what they provided here is not even enough to cover our rent. Because they don't care if those spaces may disappear; the recent music ban after-midnight also signals to this.* [37]

Lastly, with the outbreak of Covid-19, artists were additionally prosecuted for creating artwork criticizing public policies on the pandemic. Interview

[37] Online interview with Yavuz Akkuzu, 2 July 2021. He refers to the government's decision to lift all Covid-19 measures on 1 July 2021, except the music ban after midnight. See https://bianet.org/english/society/246069-government-faces-backlash-after-lifting-all-covid-measures-but-music-ban-at-night.

respondents working for Susma observed a slight decline in the numbers of censorship cases, which actually resulted from artists' inability to maintain their work during this crisis. They mentioned several trials of artists; most were charged with terrorism, insulting or degrading the Turkish nation, or inciting hate and animosity. Another trend the respondents identified is a "digitalization of censorship" that parallels the increase in the digitalization of arts and cultural activities in this period.[38] With the new social media law introduced in October 2020, the Turkish state gained the right to monitor and impose sanctions on content disseminated by social network providers.[39] Social media companies' permission to operate is dependent on Turkish authorities. As such, some content may be prohibited before it makes it to a digital platform, or companies that publish "objectionable or mischievous content" may receive a warning or fines.

Overall, the pandemic served to normalize and justify the tightening of security measures, including monitoring, restriction, and censorship. It also expanded these measures to encompass not just marginalized groups, but the broader public as well. As Sumru Tamer comments, Covid had an equalizing impact in this sense:

> *All artists started to live the same situations that artists in Turkey have been living in. What was happening in the last five to six years in Kurdish cities – curfews, prohibitions on events, the purge of cultural and arts workers from municipalities, appointed trustees – was all forgotten because the whole country has entered into a state of emergency. Suddenly everyone is experiencing the same thing. This somehow 'justifies' the state of emergency, with the prohibitions that were passed on the basis of 'public order,' now were passed on the basis of 'public health'.*[40]

[38] Online interview with Sumru Tamer and Lara Özlen, 2 June 2021.
[39] See https://bianet.org/english/media/231932-new-law-requiring-social-media-companies-to-open-an-office-in-turkey-comes-into-force.
[40] Online interview with Sumru Tamer and Lara Özlen, 2 June 2021.

Fig. 2: Fatoş İrwen: Perdeli Sur - Sûr Under Curtains, Diyarbakır / Sur - 2020;
© Fatoş İrwen

3.3 Dealing with uncertainty: learning from repressive contexts

The pandemic brought extraordinary times to nearly the whole world. But people who were already living in restrictive and repressive contexts did not find the consequences of the pandemic to be that unprecedented; they were used to struggling with constant uncertainties or crises. The coping strategies established under the circumstances of vulnerability, high risk, and constant or erratic challenges and obstacles, may provide guidance to others who have not faced such adversities before. According to Abdullah Alkafri, institutions should not only learn from Europe, but also from other contexts, to better respond to such crises and the needs of "artists-at-risk". Alkafri speaks from his experience as an artist and director of Ettijahat, an organization that supports arts and cultural practitioners from Syria. He asserts that Syria is a country in an ongoing lockdown, where

people are not safe but resilient. As such, their experiences of resilience can be inspiring to share with others who experienced a lockdown during the pandemic.[41]

Indeed, many of the countries in the Middle East (such as Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Turkey) are in a state of perpetual crises comprising enduring political tensions, economic instabilities, and social upheaval due to corrupt or undemocratic governance. Those countries often make use of crises or emergency conditions for their own benefit by imposing further repressive measures or burdens on specific segments of their society, and particularly on people and artists who are contrary to or discordant with their politics. Living under what he calls "failure-states" in the Middle East region, Alkafri says, "We are shifting from crisis to crisis; if it's not the pandemic, it will be something else in the future."[42] This is the reason for which Ettijahat focused on how to carry on beyond the acute crisis of Covid – by elaborating on the issues of "safety" and "injustice" throughout their activities in this period. Before the pandemic, Ettijahat had already developed a toolkit[43] on how to design creative interventions in times of crisis, based on the authors' experience of using the arts and culture to respond to disasters, crises, and uncertainty. At the beginning of the pandemic, Ettijahat adapted their programs to offer grants with more flexible and personalized support directly to artists. They provided direct support such as healthcare and financial and legal aid to Syrian artists, with a specific focus on more vulnerable groups who were particularly affected by the pandemic. Meanwhile, they had already been working in a conflict-impacted environment; the explosion in Beirut's port completely destroyed their office, for instance. Through their programs, statements,[44] and online events (see Chapter 5.4), they advocated for social justice, as well as for the establishment of community and solidarity. They were able to deal with the dire circumstances

[41] Online interview with Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.
[42] Online interview with Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.
[43] See https://www.ettijahat.org/page/1173.
[44] https://www.ettijahat.org/page/1049?_lang=1.

mentioned above and maintain their work through consistent communication with grantees, allowing for flexibility for partners to shift their activities when necessary, and extending deadlines for more than a year.[45]

Turkey is an exemplary case of a state in permanent crisis in the Middle East; the conditions there compelled arts and cultural practitioners to seek relief in their own community and trusted networks. They organized, found different forms of fundraising and economic solidarity, built mechanisms of community care with digital tools and online platforms, shared resources, and experimented with new methods of overcoming limitations. According to Yiğit (2021: 57), new methods to cope with a treacherous and unpredictable future in the field of the arts appeared in "creative practices that are experienced in small groups made of few number of artists getting together on the one hand, and, on the other hand, online meetings where the past's naïve expressions on solidarity practices and organization models are transforming into huge discussions."

The following are some examples of practices and mechanisms that were initiated following the outbreak of the pandemic to establish support for artists in Turkey:

- **İzole Project:** A group of 20 artists initiated a web-platform to convene and share their works with an audience and each other, as they felt "public spaces, streets and our individual worlds are in a deadlock"[46] with the outbreak of the pandemic. The platform was aimed at creating a new space for discussion through storytelling, and at uniting artists who work in different disciplines. At its height, the platform hosted 80 participants who convened through regular Zoom meetings to discuss their common needs, such as understanding the pandemic, adapting to virtual reality, or finding psychological support (Yiğit 2021: 62).

[45] Online interview with Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.
[46] https://www.izoleproject.com/izole.

- **Omuz:** A group of artists and cultural workers initiated Omuz as a network structure to facilitate the sharing of resources among those working in the arts sector by bringing together individuals who seek financial support with individuals who want to provide support. Bi-monthly application rounds are coordinated by a group of volunteer facilitators in rotation; selected applicants receive a one-time payment of 1,000 Turkish liras. The initiators of Omuz designed this structure to be an unreciprocated sharing network based on the principle of "trust;" so the main principle for the selection procedure would be randomness, without any probing.[47] Omuz was one of the very few support measures cited by the respondents of this report as being effective or responsive.

- **Cengaver, Istanbulite Queer Performers Solidarity Fund:** This fund was born out of a network of around 80 drag performers in Istanbul who have lost their income sources due to the closures of performance halls. They used online fundraising platforms to spread their call for donations. As of April 2020, Cengaver raised enough funds for food, housing, and basic health needs (such as transgender hormone medications) for 22 drag performers for 8 months.[48]

- **Tiyatro kooperatifi (Theater Cooperative):** Private theaters have been significantly disadvantaged in accessing public support during the pandemic due to requirements imposed by the ministry and chamber of commerce that are not compatible with the theater's economic and labor structures. Therefore, they became increasingly organized under the Theater Cooperative in order to seek and negotiate social and economic rights with public authorities. The Cooperative played a significant role during the pandemic in the advocacy for legal amendments and public support; they also created reports, established collaborative partnerships, and inspired the emergence of other regional cooperatives.

[47] Online interview with Banu Cennetoğlu, 8 May 2021.
[48] Online interview with Metin Akdemir, 26 July 2021.

In Turkey, there are very few arts and cultural organizations that have opened spaces to marginalized or controversial art content during the pandemic. Despite rare resources and repressive context, they hosted dissident artists, provided support, or facilitated community-building and collaboration to strengthen the resilience and practice of artists. Some of the practices developed by such organizations in response to the pandemic are as follows:

- **Arthere** is an independent center that hosts an open studio, residency, and artist solidarity space in Istanbul where artists of different backgrounds (including individuals of diverse nationalities, refugees, or people under pressure), can connect, work on projects together, or initiate their own projects "without having to appeal to a mainstream arts institution."[49] During the pandemic, as the whole world experienced a common feeling of being imprisoned and threatened, these artists perceived the chance to establish a socially engaged art project that posed the question: "Might this remind you of what happened to refugees?"[50] As a sign of solidarity at the local level, they 3D-printed face shields and masks and distributed them in their neighborhood. Although travel was restricted, they continued to organize an international residency program to host artists from countries where it was possible to travel to Turkey by applying specific health precautions. Meanwhile, they sought funds to support individuals who were impacted by Covid restrictions, particularly those who were denied access to support measures on the basis of not having (residency) status, and shared them within their network. Lastly, they focused on maintaining Arthere by improving their online presence and upholding the fundraising strategies they had already designed based on their prior experience of surviving in precarious conditions. Those strategies included obtaining international funding, selling art, and establishing mutual aid connections – they only had to close their café during the pandemic.

[49] Interview with Omar Berakdar, 4 June 2021, Istanbul.
[50] Interview with Omar Berakdar, 4 June 2021, Istanbul.

- **Karşı Sanat** is an independent and collective arts space, and "a nest of solidarity for the survival of vulnerable and precarious artists in Turkey."[51] Karşı has faced violent attacks by nationalist and conservative groups due to their support of controversial content in the past. With the outbreak of the pandemic, the team of Karşı moved some of their activities (panels, workshops, and artist talks) to digital platforms, but continued to hold in-person exhibitions as well. As opposed to the trend of reducing human resources in favor of digitalization, they foresaw the advancing unemployment crisis and instead employed young professionals as a way to use funding strategically. Their exhibitions were designed to build solidarity with the most neglected or marginalized groups during the pandemic and highlight their living conditions; these groups included prisoners, arts students, and workers of essential production. At the beginning of the pandemic, they organized an exhibition in solidarity with China, for which they achieved to bypass customs restrictions through the use of alternative mailing methods. They opened the space to persecuted artists, exhibited artwork created by prisoners in collaboration with human rights organizations, as well as TikTok videos created by construction and seasonal agriculture workers, as examples of "ironic and joyful" video art that represent those individuals' living and working conditions.[52]

3.4 Snapshot: Ankara Queer Art Program

The following section provides more detailed insight into an arts and culture organization that managed to maintain support for artists who are particularly marginalized and impacted by repressive state policies. The Ankara Queer Art Program is also an interesting example because they offered mobility support for

[51] Interview with Ezgi Bakçay, 1 June 2021, Istanbul.
[52] Interview with Ezgi Bakçay, 1 June 2021, Istanbul.

artists during the pandemic by adjusting their program to the new and changing conditions.

The Ankara Queer Art Program was initiated by a prominent non-governmental organization (NGO) called KAOS-GL that advocates for the culture and rights of the LGBTI+ community in Turkey. The program was developed in reaction to an emerging need to diversify activist tools to wield against the political atmosphere that was turning more authoritarian starting around 2015. In that year, the activist and LGBTI+ community in Ankara were shattered with the horrendous 10 October bombing[53] and the gradual shrinking of civic spaces. By deciding to showcase the creative work of the community with whom they stand in solidarity, KAOS-GL opened the first exhibition *The Future is Queer* between 2015 and 2016. Having encountered extraordinary interest and participation in this event, they were convinced to proceed with regular exhibitions. In 2017, after the governorate of Ankara implemented a ban on all LGBTI+ related events, they relocated their next exhibition to Istanbul, to a safer venue that was not easily discoverable, and announced the event only through word of mouth. Still, an unexpected crowd of 350 attended the opening.[54]

As the program director Aylime Aslı Demir explained, they maintained their activities by finding ways to overcome the restrictions and bans: "We did unpredictable work in unpredictable times." Despite the governorate's ban on LGBTI+ events and the generally restrictive context, the exhibition was later moved to Berlin as well, "giving marginalized and prohibited queer artists the opportunity to mobilize and share their work in another place."[55] Demir stated that the exhibition was made possible through the support of human rights organizations, which provided funding without requesting visibility. In contrast

[53] Two explosions at a peace rally killed 109 people and injured more than 500.
[54] Online interview with Aylime Aslı Demir, 17 June 2021.
[55] Online interview with Aylime Aslı Demir, 17 June 2021.

with the majority of donors that expect visible outcomes, particularly when supporting artistic activities, their donors – whose background was in human rights – showed sensitivity to this issue. However, Demir also noted that human rights organizations may not be as familiar with artistic activities as other donors are. In this case, the donors' sensitivity proved to be an advantage, but in other cases they might expect artists to use traditional activist tools, like case monitoring, for example.[56]

After a while, the impact of exhibitions was not enough to support artists and artistic work. In response, KAOS-GL designed the Ankara Queer Art Program to offer a structure for artists' further needs in the studio and in production and research. However, the inauguration of this program in 2020 coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic, and they had to reconfigure the entire program before it could begin.

The first term of the residency program went digital when the borders were closed and international participants could not travel to Turkey. Still, the fees that were to be allocated for the production and living costs of the artists were immediately transformed into a support fund to be delivered wherever the artists were located. "We didn't think we had the luxury of delaying this," Demir reported. Instead of the artist talks that had originally been planned for the program, they organized in-depth conversations with artists and curators from Turkey and online workshops to discuss how they were experiencing the pandemic and how it has influenced their production processes. They scheduled an exhibition for when the restrictions of the pandemic are removed, and will host the same artists as were selected prior to the pandemic.[57]

[56] Online interview with Aylime Aslı Demir, 17 June 2021. The key position of the funding organization in this example shows the necessity to build sound mutual understanding of each other's context, between actors from the artistic sector and the human rights sector.
[57] Online interview with Aylime Aslı Demir, 17 June 2021.

The second term of the program was restructured as a domestic residency, and the program directors decided to continue as such until 2022. This way, artists from different parts of Turkey could stay in the artist residency in Ankara. A domestic residency provides an important form of support for queer artists in Turkey who lack resources and safe spaces to focus on their production. However, the program will rather be open to participants from both Turkey and abroad in the future as its primary aim is to "facilitate encounters among the practitioners of queer art from different places."[58] Although the program was initially designed to support transborder mobility, the team of Ankara Queer Art Program later considered exhibiting artists' pieces as an alternative to physical mobility, as they were seeking safer formats to avoid causing a health risk for the participants during the pandemic. Moreover, the impossibility of face-to-face encounters compelled them to discover the possibilities of the digital sphere, such as online artist talks. Still, some components of the program could not be adapted digitally and were inevitably put on hold; these included a research project on Ankara's nightlife.

The program sustained artist support in the face of myriad challenges, changes, and disruptions, thanks to constant efforts toward readjusting plans and negotiating the changes with all actors involved. Demir reported that they had not been planning to have a strict structure for this program already before the onset of the pandemic, as they were aware of the shifting needs and unprecedented conditions inherent in the field. Now, they are still convinced that they should insist on a more flexibly designed program – open to negotiation with their partners – to ensure that it is adaptable to the special conditions of the artists they work with and of the country they are based in. Finally, she described the key role of unpredictability and diversification in their survival strategies, which has been characteristic of the strategies employed by the queer movement in Turkey in order to actualize their events and mobilizations despite the recent ban and oppressive measures:

[58] Online interview with Aylime Aslı Demir, 17 June 2021.

Fig. 3: Özge Özgün: screenshot from the video "I'm a 'tamed' pansexual animal!", 2020; © Özge Özgün

> *As the atmosphere in the country is growing more authoritarian, more people are under threat: we, artists, anyone who does not comply with norms. The recent police raid at the exhibition in Bogazici University exposes how violence targets even the representation of a representation. Within all this criminalization, we reclaim that uncertainty which has been smeared over everything. We plan our support and activities with unpredictable strategies in the face of this uncertainty. For the exhibition in Istanbul for example, we had considered A, B, and C plans in advance, including making it a digital format, disseminating the works in artists' houses, and so on. As we are navigating uncertainty, we see the need for diverse mechanisms to support artists. Some support may be focused on output, some may be based on providing incentives or opportunities. The more diverse support practices we have, the less will be the vulnerability of artists.*[59]

[59] Online interview with Aylime Aslı Demir, 17 June 2021.

4. Artists: at the intersection of risk, restrictions, and precarity

This chapter sheds light on how the pandemic broadened the definition of "risk" and complicated the idea of "artists-at-risk," given the interlinkage between the economic, political, and psychosocial challenges many artists are facing. Arts and cultural practitioners who have been interviewed for this report are mainly from Turkey, living in the country or abroad, and from other Middle Eastern countries but living and seeking refuge in Turkey. All of them have lived and created art in oppressive contexts, under authoritarian rules, surveillance, or censorship. They are politically or socially engaged artists and/or artists facing threats or marginalization because of their identity or their critical or controversial practice. Additionally, the artist participants in my research are all precarious workers in the creative and cultural sector. None of them has regular income or employment; they depend on ad-hoc support from their social network or (mainly international or civil society) donors. They are not covered by the state's social security scheme, unless they have secondary employment, and they are not represented by a guild, union, or another organization. They face political, social, and economic risks, and the parameters determining those risks are at times interlinked.

Artists' employment status is complicated: they may be self-employed, freelancers, work short-term or part-time jobs, or be both employed and self-employed; they can equally have project-based work and inconsistent work patterns (EENCA 2020). Their chances of survival in the sector are also determined by their privilege, based on their gender, race, ability, or nationality. Multiple sources of income and irregular income through self-employment, royalties, grants, and subsidies in a fractured labor market also contribute to artists' low-income and precarious status. Due to such atypical forms of employment and precarious working conditions, experts have identified the necessity of specific policy responses to ensure artists' social protection, career development, and investment in their skills, particularly in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, during which access to support measures has been a challenge (Culture Action Europe and Dâmaso 2021: 12-39).

4.1 How to understand and respond to risk for artists during a crisis

As several perspectives highlighted (see Safe Havens 2020; UNESCO 2020; Culture Action Europe and Dâmaso 2021; Cuny 2021), the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing patterns of precarity and inequality experienced by artists. In contexts with limited support, it has put them at additional social, economic, and psychological risk. Neither precarity nor crises are necessarily intrinsic to what is commonly understood as "risk" when considering a so-called "artist-at-risk." But these factors may be interlinked with other factors threatening an artist's work or freedom and may aggravate the harm caused by the risk. In Turkey, dissident or convicted artists are not able to find regular employment as educators or in public institutions for arts and culture. Some of the respondents I interviewed were dismissed from their regular positions by the decree laws issued under the period of the State of Emergency. Young artists who strive to advance their career and make a living may separate their activism from their art practice and avoid explicitly touching on controversial topics out of fear of losing income opportunities. As one researcher, artist, and curator explained in her interview, "An economically dependent artist does not have the adequate ground to express their artistic freedom, so we should not only think of the state violence, but we must also think of the potential impact of these factors on artists' decision-making processes concerning how to live from the arts." For this reason, she insisted that we need to discuss and define what precarity means in the field of arts: "There are many factors, and they differ from the criterion of precarity in other fields."[60]

On the other hand, it is still crucial to recognize how the toll of the crisis might be heavier for dissident and persecuted artists. They are excluded from support mechanisms; they cannot find a place in main arts and cultural institutions, while

[60] Online interview with Eda Yiğit, 3 June 2021.

independent arts spaces struggle to survive. Those who are exiled might be completely excluded from the support schemes of the countries in which they are seeking refuge. Deteriorating economic conditions broaden the spectrum of those under threat and limit artistic freedom even more. Creating artwork critical of a country's pandemic policies can also lead to being targeted now. Moreover, economic hardship is drawing artists into risky living and working conditions; LGBTI+ artists are moving back to their family's houses where "they cannot exist with their open identities;"[61] other artists are seeking employment in high-risk sectors to make ends meet.

One interview respondent argued that the definition of risk has expanded with the pandemic: "We can tell this by acknowledging how the precarity and the state violence has confined us so extensively because of the nature of the pandemic; we are all at risk, yet we may discuss the forms of being impacted by it."[62] A young dance artist told how she experiences pressure and restrictions on her work by referring to the basic resources she lacks: "The space itself is something that conceives the work, so not having a studio, having to move out of my home, turned into pressure for me, blocking my artistic production."[63] Another respondent elaborated how the period of the pandemic has complicated what a threat on life could mean: "Some artists exercise their arts like breathing, I mean there are many musicians who committed suicide for example. So this was a matter of life and death for them. Therefore, they are not 'artists-at-risk', they are artists no longer living." Further she stated, "The lack of resources needed for production is also a sort of risk, particularly in this period of the pandemic, when working was not possible."[64]

[61] Online interview with Metin Akdemir, 26 July 2021.
[62] Online interview with Eda Yiğit, 3 June 2021.
[63] Online interview with Dilan Yoğun, 21 June 2021.
[64] Online interview with Banu Cennetoğlu, 8 May 2021.

By examining experiences and perspectives on risk in general and during the Covid crisis, the following questions arise: Who is "at-risk"? What is risk? How can we understand and identify it at times of crisis? Most research respondents, when asked, were hesitant to define themselves as "artist-at-risk." Yet they all touched upon the widespread threats, mechanisms of pressure, and restrictions at different levels (societal, peer, sectorial, state-based) that are influencing both them and others; they also mentioned experiencing different forms of violence, harassment, barring, dismissal, etc. A respondent underlined the multiple layers and hierarchies of risk on the spectrum from daily to life-threatening, while she expressed her discomfort with the instrumentalization of "at-risk" as a label:

> *So, am I quote-unquote at-risk? Yes. But do I have an actual court case? No. Would I flee [from the country] if I had one? Maybe. But blowing this probability up in a way to seek benefit is a delicate matter to me, so that I avoid it. After all, that [creating a 'controversial' work] was my own decision, and so is living here. I find it problematic to use [risk] as a label. Some artists are seriously at risk; on that I have nothing to say. But sometimes risk is a very subjective notion. There are very concrete risks – and there are those that linger like a shadow above most of us.*[65]

4.2 The discordance between self-perception and assessment of risk

Most of the time, "risk" is identified through categories, criteria, and conditions defined by certain bodies, organizations, and people empowered to make decisions. The participation criteria applied by temporary international relocation initiatives, for instance, require an evaluation of risk according to the specific definition they have adopted. The definition used by each initiative varies

[65] Online interview with Banu Cennetoğlu, 8 May 2021.

according to each entity's views on "the urgency (chronic vs. emergency), type (psychological vs. physical), and level (high vs. low) of risk facing individuals;" or their preferences for individuals working in "attritional" environments or for particularly vulnerable groups (such as women or Indigenous people); otherwise they focus more on acute and imminent risk of physical harm (Jones et al. 2019: 25). In the case of African countries, Kara Blackmore (2021) reports that more than 30 organizations worldwide offer protection and relocation to at-risk individuals from the continent by evaluating the conditions of risk according to conventions established by the United Nations (UN). However, she qualifies that

> *[...] the lived experience of risk is also influenced by both the legacies of state-based human rights violations and the proximity to safety, meaning that people who have endured long-term violations understand risk differently from those who live in robust democracies. (Blackmore 2021: 16)*

In his study on temporary relocation initiatives, Martin Jones (2015) considers risk to be a highly contested notion yet central to the provision of protection to human rights defenders. He draws attention to the similarities between temporary relocation schemes and international refugee protection regimes. Indeed, migration scholarship and refugee protection regimes have long been grappling with methods to assess risk, respond to the need for protection, and the dilemmas intrinsic to those processes. Several migration researchers (see Zetter 2007; Bakewell 2008; Crawley and Skleparis 2018) draw attention to the incompatibility of categories and labels to capture and respond to complex human experiences. Their critique addresses how categories and labels superimpose certain patterns on the actual living experiences of people, and therefore fail to understand and respond to those who do not fit in the expected patterns. Categories and labels also essentially function to convey a form of power by entitling who is deserving of protection and resources. This criticism resonates with some debates on the failure

of temporary protection schemes to adequately address the needs and experiences of artists in complex situations.

Some interview respondents also mentioned how protection schemes create the expectation that artists should "deserve" the benefits of it. Artists who fail to market themselves as being "at risk" or refuse to adopt that label (as they do not necessarily consider themselves as helpless or brutally threatened), are thus excluded from networks or resources of support. There, the power dynamics involved in the processes of designating a certain status or to label someone also merits attention. Artists often commented on the privilege these processes require, how they create hierarchies between protector and protected, and how this adds up to a narrative of who is deserving and who is not.

The aforementioned critical perspective on the nexus between migration and asylum may help elucidate the complexities inherent in identifying and responding to risk in contexts where economic conditions intersect with the political conditions that cause risk. Those migration scholars react to the tendency in migration-related policies, guides, and legislation to distinguish economic migrants from refugees, by demonstrating how threats to an individual's safety can go hand-in-hand with lack of economic resources, how political upheavals occur simultaneously with economic difficulties, and how these factors influence jointly a person's decision to migrate or flee (Crawley and Skleparis 2018: 52). A similar situation applies to artists-at-risk in crisis conditions, as made clear during the pandemic: it has now become more difficult, at times even unnecessary, to distinguish economic risks from political risks.

There is increasing acknowledgment of the fact that the struggle for basic livelihood also puts the work of artists – and therefore the artists themselves – at risk. Likewise the definition of "at-risk" recently used by the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights includes "[t]hose who needed to leave a

country or their profession due to the incapacity to survive economically" (Safe Havens 2020: 10). Such complication of common notions under conditions of crisis or emergency, together with the contradictions and criticism of other protection regimes, confirms the need to avoid creating further top-down categories, or other static and homogenizing criteria to assess people's compliance with those categories. The organizations which aim to provide support and protection to artists who need and request it, can instead build on horizontal forms of solidarity and partnership with artists around the objectives they have in common to promote and advocate for artistic freedom.

In an attempt to shift the narrative from artists being passively "at-risk" to actively "in defense" of their rights and in order to bestow agency on those who are struggling with risks and threats against their artistic freedom, some experts propose using the concept of "cultural rights defenders" (see Blackmore 2021; Cuny 2021). The artists I interviewed were not keen to use the term "artist-at-risk." One even suggested to stop using it altogether as a first step. Yet there was neither a tendency nor the suggestion to create another label to replace "artist-at-risk." The artists often tended not to focus on individuals, but rather on systemic challenges to elaborate on how to collaborate with different actors to build mutual support mechanisms, instead of becoming subjected to rigid and paternalist protection schemes.

Overall, the perspectives mentioned here point to a need to update our understandings of risk in times of crisis, and to decolonize the processes of assessing risk. The latter becomes possible through the liberation of the concept of "risk" from the criteria and expectations developed by those who are historically privileged – and maybe biased – by dint of global power imbalances, i.e., donors of protection schemes based in countries of the Global North. Decolonization also functions through the cultivation of a perspective that is sensitive to diversities and multiple layers involved in the experience of risk. As a concept, risk may be highly contested,

subjective, and changing, but it is still a core factor in (co-)deciding how and where to offer support for the survival and resilience of artists despite crises, restrictions, and threats. The global experience of the pandemic has demonstrated that risk cannot comprise a static list of conditions. It is defined temporarily, within a specific context, and in negotiation with the subject's psycho-socio-economic capacities, decisions, and access to resources or strategies to respond.

Fig. 4: Screenshot from "Aorta"; concept/choreography/performance: Dilan Yoğun; camera: Fatma Çelik; music: Cansun Küçüktürk; thanks to: Emrah Karakurum; © Dilan Yoğun (https://dilanyogun.com/en/)

4.3 Artists' perspectives towards the pandemic: care and connectedness as key components

Before and during the pandemic, the artists I interviewed had encountered different levels of risk. Some had felt the pressure of their hostile environment exerted on "different" voices, others admitted to self-censorship. Some had to contend with the prohibition, cancellation, surveillance, and destruction of their work, and some were criminalized, detained, or imprisoned. However, they often mentioned being accustomed to living in adverse conditions, calculating potential risks in every step, and finding ways to keep creating despite restrictions. Similarly, they were unfortunately familiar with economic challenges and precarity, and did not expect to make a living wage from their art.

When artists were asked about the major challenges they faced during the pandemic, they mainly specified the lack of social connections, losing spaces of encounters with audiences, peers, and a wider social network, and the feeling of isolation and being abandoned as the hardest of all. These were all rather new conditions they had no ready solutions or strategies for. They also referred to the psychological impacts of lockdown, a deepening uncertainty regarding the future, and an inability to create art. Due to social isolation measures and travel restrictions, some artists lost the opportunity to relocate and receive their scholarship; some could not prepare, perform, or exhibit the projects they had been planning.

Young artists, queer performance artists, and artists with more vulnerable statuses (such as refugees), have expressed that they have been facing major financial difficulties leading to the inability to meet basic needs like food, housing, or health, in addition to needs associated with artistic production. "Not being able to meet my basic needs, having zero income, losing my job; I could sustain my home for

six months with the support of my parents," a respondent recounted the process that forced her to move to her parents' home.[66] Another respondent summarized the impact of Covid simply as "dealing with hunger." As a young artist she also felt "deprived of a vision of the future," since she fears that young artists can no longer follow established career paths; they are deprived of resources and connections that they rely on.[67]

Still, many artists were already used to struggling with financial scarcity, irregular income, and lack of support, like many from countries with weak cultural policies and economies. They tended not to interpret the pandemic as a source of major economic devastation because "the situation was not any better before;" they had already been facing severe economic need. Similarly, cross-border travel has always been difficult because of the high costs and visa requirements for those who do not benefit from more freedom of movement by dint of the passport they hold. Moreover, living under authoritarian regimes, they already had to cope with threats to their freedom, only this time the excuse was rather "public health." Thus the most difficult factors for many artists interviewed for this report has been the loss of social connections or activities, audiences, or collaborations; coping with psychological impacts of uncertainty, isolation, anxiety, fear, transformations in social and personal relations, lack of motivation, and being deprived of sources of inspiration.

One respondent commented, "I didn't have regular employment; I was only doing cinema, so, not much changed with the pandemic." He added that the lockdown disrupted his life the most. It had a huge effect on his psychology, and this diminished his motivation to practice his art. "This is more dangerous for me because [cinema] was my only pursuit, I fell into a void."[68] Other artists also

[66] Online interview with Dilan Yoğun, 21 June 2021.
[67] Interview with Filiz İzem Yaşın, 24 May 2021, Istanbul.
[68] Online interview with Ali Kemal Çınar, 18 June 2021.

confirmed that they needed social contact and encounters to maintain their creative practice. Artists particularly involved in grassroots arts organizations considered their activities (festivals, cultural events, residencies, etc.) to function best with in-person interaction. As digital alternatives could never meet their expectations, they felt the main purpose of their artistic activities and those of their initiatives were not fulfilled. One artist who also coordinates an independent arts organization confirmed that the most challenging factor for their organization was shifting focus from artistic and cultural production to humanitarian support. He emphasized, "We had to assure that everyone is healthy, safe and sane."[69]

The overall circumstances pushing artists into economic vulnerability, isolation from broader social networks, and perhaps causing mental and physical health issues have led to an acknowledgment of the need for care – i.e., the set of (inter)personal mechanisms to secure well-being and maintenance. For some, responsibilities to care for their loved ones became a priority, which hindered maintaining artistic engagement. Others were challenged by becoming dependent on their closest relatives, like parents or partners. On the other hand, many respondents said that – at least in the beginning – the pandemic provided an opportunity for self-care; it was a period that offered a break to rest, reorganize, restore one's capacity to create and be introspective. Some explored the skills they had neglected, such as focusing on writing instead of making films. Others changed their artistic practices, for example, by working on video art instead of dancing. Some spent the time planning and building strategies for the future, rather than forcing themselves to produce art.

Finally, the needs artists mentioned in their reflection on what would nourish and secure their artistic creation had both economic support and social connection at the center. They referred to an ever-existing need for the improvement of

[69] Online interview with Khaled Barakeh, 7 July 2021.

economic conditions and social security status of artists, and for public resources conveyed to independent artists and arts institutions – yet even more so now, since the pandemic has exacerbated these needs. Given the lack of such fundamental benefits, private funds and support from transnational and civil society are sorely needed. The artists additionally highlighted that such funds need to be more applicable and adaptable to the conditions on the ground. Therefore, donors should be more flexible and swift in adjusting to abrupt, unexpected, changing, and challenging conditions in crisis, particularly in repressive contexts. Moreover, artists mentioned the need for maintaining spaces that are adjustable to the pandemic conditions to enable encounters, exchanges, and collaboration. They found it necessary to build mechanisms to facilitate mobility and physical meetings despite the restrictions, and to maintain relationships based on connection and care. Lastly, many artists found it necessary to create safe spaces and build cross-border solidarity to strengthen their capacity to cope with the challenging contexts in their countries.

4.4 Artists' coping strategies and resources

Social and economic challenges compelled some artists and arts initiatives to develop their own strategies to survive during the pandemic. Using Turkey as an example, Chapter 3.3. showed how artists collectively created online platforms to share their work and maintain interaction within the artistic community, organized fundraising campaigns and networks to care for those who were more disadvantaged, and advocated for better economic, social, and legal conditions.[70] Here the focus is on how they individually developed coping strategies. Understanding these strategies will help those involved in the ecosystem of

[70] Also, many online resource lists, tools, digital platforms, podcasts, and webinars were released during the pandemic to share resources, build mutual aid, and support artists' resiliency. See list of practical resources (p. 96) for a compilation of such initiatives and other useful information.

supporting artistic freedom to engage with and develop adequate responses for different situations. Artists coped with challenges of this period with the help of the following:

- **Learnt resilience:** Being an activist, having prior experience of struggling with similar obstacles, and navigating various restrictions have prepared many artists that I have interviewed to accept crisis and use or adapt their pre-learned coping mechanisms in response. Having lived in a state of emergency, imprisonment, or under authoritarian rule, these artists have already built up emotional resilience and mental agility to transform limitations into creativity, as well as flexibility to adapt to changing conditions and prepare alternatives.

- **Prioritizing mental health and well-being:** Despite challenges and adversities, each artist has sought ways to care for their personal well-being. Some have focused on activities and ideas which helped them feel good and hopeful; others focused on resting and preserving their creative energy, some exercised self-care practices. For example, one artist applied for an international solidarity fund and used it to cover the costs of their psychotherapy.

- **Creativity:** Artists sought new ways to maintain artistic creation and share and exhibit their work. Their creativity produced extraordinary methods to mitigate their isolation. For example, Leman Sevda Darıcıoğlu used the façade of a building in Berlin to exhibit their installations, and display windows of art spaces for their performances – though it is necessary to note that this was only possible in a safer context for artistic expression (i.e. in Berlin). Others tried to keep producing and sharing their work by making use of digital platforms and social media (see Chapter 5.4). Artists also used their time in lockdown toward self-development and to learn and experiment with new methods, tools, or practices. In response to accelerating digitalization, they took efforts to

improve their digital skills, tried to integrate digital tools in their existing practices, and invested in their online presence.

- **Solidarity and community care:** With the lack of public support or sufficient resources, artists have turned to their own networks, family, and friends to seek support for their basic needs. They have found support for projects they have developed in this period from civil society funding, and relief for their basic needs from the fundraising and resource-sharing initiatives that have emerged in response to the pandemic (such as Omuz or Cengaver Solidarity Fund, see Chapter 3.3). Transnational solidarity connections have also helped artists to continue producing art by hosting their work, and by offering collaboration and funding. Some artists mentioned participating in online healing and emotional support communities, as well as meetings to share work and collaborate, seeking ways to cope with the emotional challenges in this period.

- **Seeking mobility and safe spaces:** Many artists mentioned that they have created or found safe and accessible opportunities to travel despite the restrictions. They managed to visit places that inspired them, or where they could have encounters with people to collaborate and develop ideas in reaction to the conditions of the pandemic. Those who were able to participate in residency programs mentioned the benefits of being in a new environment, having structural support, and finding chances to connect with people for their creative work and well-being.

Fig. 5 (p. 59): Filiz İzem Yaşın: Size Wonderful, Sadporn Series, Leipzig//20; text: "Solidarity makes you survive"; © Filiz İzem Yaşın

DAYANIŞMA
YAŞATIR

5. Imagining mobility and relocation beyond the Covid-19 crisis

5.1 Artistic mobility and relocation during the pandemic

As mentioned before, travel restrictions and confinement measures introduced by the pandemic have imposed challenges on artists' mobility. Prior to Covid-19, the growing trend towards mobility in the cultural and creative sector had already been compromised by many states' politics of increased security in migration and border regimes. With the start of the pandemic, if mobility was not halted altogether, it was slowed down or complicated with travel restrictions, border closures, and unachievable procedures required for visas. Consequently, support, temporary relief, protection, and mobility that had been available to artists in conditions of heightened distress and vulnerability – such as temporary relocation programs, artist residencies, and safe shelters – were also cancelled or delayed after the onset of the pandemic.

Res Artis published a statement after the outbreak of Covid in May 2020 to describe how it influenced all sides involved in artistic mobility by introducing so much uncertainty:

> *Artists are navigating cancelled residencies and adapting their practices so that residency outcomes can continue while physical exchange cannot. Arts residencies are negotiating the return of artist fees, pause in local and international community partnerships and the evolution of their programming so that stay at home, studio-based and virtual residencies can occur. Funders and arts councils are scrambling to find emergency funding and incentives to support artistic and cultural activity across the globe. (Res Artis 2020)*

Res Artis conducted a series of surveys (see Res Artis and UCL 2020; 2021) to assess the situation of artistic mobility in the face of the coronavirus crisis. The first survey conducted in May 2020 revealed that more than half (54%) of the

respondents' planned residencies were cancelled, postponed, or otherwise modified due to the pandemic. Moreover, 53% of the arts organizations have postponed all their activities and 9% had to close indefinitely. Finally, 47% of the survey participants (artists and professionals) said that "the cancellation of residencies has significantly or critically impacted their finances" (Res Artis and UCL 2020: 6).

Many participants in my research were also exposed to similar obstacles, yet their experiences with artistic mobility and relocation programs were diverse. Those who could participate in a mobility program could do so because either their relocation started before the outbreak of the pandemic, or they were already in Europe for another project or residency. They admitted that they were lucky or privileged to be benefiting from the conditions provided by their mobility, in that they could continue producing art much more than their peers in their countries of origin, thanks to better economic and social resources, even despite the restrictions. As one relocation participant put it:

> *As Corona coincided with my guest artist fellowship, I had extra protection. Others who are working in the documentary field in Turkey came near to not being able to sustain their work with the deterioration of the political atmosphere. The fellowship helped me to maintain production. I could probably not have realized it in Istanbul, yet I had the chance to transfer my project here. It also supported me psychologically. I developed new projects in this period.* [71]

Artists who were expecting to participate in an international relocation program from Turkey had to face a period of waiting and uncertainty, and eventually changed or cancelled their plans. One of them, Metin Akdemir, had a rather positive experience when their planned mobility program had to change. They could negotiate alternatives and finally agreed to modify the residency into a

[71] Online interview with Necati Sönmez, 29 May 2021.

virtual program, for which they were paid the promised stipend prior to the beginning of the program. Having maintained a close communication with the program managers, Akdemir said they felt cared and valued overall by the kind and facilitating approach they were met with. During their virtual residency, 10 queer artists came together regularly through online meetings to discuss on their creative works. Each artist was assigned a mentor who guided them through the process and encouraged them to reflect freely on the question, "How do you express yourself as a queer artist?" Akdemir appreciated that they were not forced to produce a completed output or "a polished product" at the end of this process. They enjoyed building a community through continuous exchange with participants and having meetings to organize the digital exhibition of the residency, its opening, and future projects. Thus, although they were disappointed with the cancellation of the original program, they felt supported throughout the whole process, from the application procedures to the creation of the final output of the virtual residency.[72]

A Kurdish artist from Turkey, Fatoş İrwen, had the opposite experience. İrwen was released from prison after serving a term of three years around the outbreak of the pandemic. She stated, "My imprisonment ended, then a new imprisonment started."[73] She commented that she had no income, housing, or a studio after her release, so she accepted the relocation and funding offered to her without giving a second thought. But as the pandemic proceeded, she was informed that her fellowship had been cancelled. While a prolonged period of waiting had precluded her from attempting or accepting other projects, on top of that, she was not offered an alternative to the relocation program or compensation for her financial loss when the fellowship offered to her was cancelled. As she would have expected the organization to "have an understanding of the needs of the people they aim to

[72] Online interview with Metin Akdemir, 26 July 2021 (they/them). See also https://www.eaststreetarts.org.uk/2020/10/13/metin-akdemir/.
[73] Interview with Fatoş İrwen, 23 June 2021, Istanbul.

support," and ask what help it could offer in that situation, she found the program's response "rude" for suggesting her to ask for support again in the case that she was at "high risk," which made her feel like being treated "as if waiting in a line." She asserts that they responded with a "colonial approach," that in a way abuses the artist: the program directors made it seem as if they were supporting her while acting irresponsibly about the support they promised. She found them unable to understand her conditions or to recognize her vulnerability and trauma at that time. "I was left defenseless against all the elements of violence; they reproduced the kind of violence the state exerted on me," she said, recounting daily police raids, close surveillance, and the economic sanctions she was going through in Turkey, in addition to the conditions of the pandemic. She felt she was forced between the extremes of either "getting close to death" or marketing herself in a way that she might "deserve" compensation: "I just want to live and create. If they overlook this or treat me as if I'm looking for chances to escape, it is their failing," she reproached.[74]

One of the interviewees took part in a domestic mobility program in Turkey, the Transformative Art Project for Activists (TAPA), which was designed before the outbreak of the pandemic and adapted to the new conditions with some additional measures. For them, the residency had a nourishing and transformative impact, particularly in the face of the challenges that Covid enforced:

> *The possibility of meeting and consulting each other, for activist artists who are not so prominent or cannot find space for their work, has been very transformative. To do something like this during Covid was impossible per se, but [the residency] opened a space for production for us. Normally you cannot go out, have limited communication, and the online [events] start to challenge, create pressure. Then again, it has been so supportive for enhancing togetherness, above all, rethinking 'living together,' understanding each other and taking care*

[74] Interview with Fatoş İrwen, 23 June 2021, Istanbul.

> *of one another's boundaries. [The residency] was isolated from the outside – even we forgot about the pandemic from time to time – but the togetherness inside broke the isolation, helped us to touch each other.*[75]

Other artists either applied and got rejected or did not have the chance to apply at all due to fundamental barriers such as language requirements or travel restrictions. Freedom of movement is in fact a right given only to those with regular residency status and necessary documentation – be it for travelling across the borders or between cities:[76]

> *Theoretically, temporary relocation or artist residency programs are good solutions for me, because what I need as an artist is the support that will allow me to continue my career, like getting support to buy art supplies, getting a space to make an atelier, etc. But from a practical standpoint it is impossible for me to leave Turkey for another country because my passport is expired. And it is very difficult to renew it from the Syrian embassy as someone in opposition to the Syrian regime. And if I get out, I will not be able to come back because I am a Syrian refugee; for sure I will need an invitation from a Turkish person or a work invitation.*[77]

Finally, some of the artists were critical of temporary relocation schemes, particularly those targeting "at-risk artists", and did not consider joining a

[75] Online interview with Özge Özgün, 7 June 2021 (they/them).

[76] In Turkey, Syrian refugees with "Temporary Protection" status and asylum seekers are obliged to reside in a certain provincial area and allowed to travel between cities only under certain circumstances and the condition of obtaining travel permission. Some artists in exile prefer to live with a residence permit in Turkey for benefits such as freedom of movement, but they may fail to renew their permits due to strict requirements and become undocumented. Unable to meet the requirements for any regular status, others are already living undocumented. In recent years, the tightening of security in intercity transportation, regular police controls, and checkpoints have led to mass detention and deportation of migrants and asylum seekers without the required documentation.

[77] Online interview with Watfaa Wahb, 15 July 2021.

residency in this period. According to one of them, relocation programs contribute to desertion and extinction of cultural scenes by tempting artists to leave the areas in upheaval, like the Kurdish region in Turkey. He said that he was recommended to apply for a relocation program, but he feared that his absence from the city (where there were only two theater groups left), albeit temporarily, could lead to the weakening or end of his group. Although he was aware that this opportunity could strengthen his individual skills and capacities, he would not prioritize himself, since his life was not threatened and he was not experiencing any other severe risk.[78]

5.2 Challenges and opportunities for mobility and temporary relocation of artists

Most of the experiences presented in this report refer to temporary mobility, art residencies, or relocation schemes offered to artists in distress, activist artists, or specific vulnerable groups, such as queer artists. However, not all of them are necessarily linked to "temporary relocation programs," as the term refers to a specific support model offered to human rights defenders, "artists-at-risk", and other civil society actors, to leave a context of distress or threat. Temporary international relocation initiatives started to develop after the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in 1998, and the initiatives in place today have mainly been founded since the 2010s. Still, only some temporary relocation programs are designed for artists (either specifically or as human rights defenders), since the broader artistic community has started to pay attention to the relocation of "artists-at-risk" more recently (see Jones et al. 2019: 11-12; Cuny 2021: 9). Temporary relocation programs are often run by regional or international NGOs connected through networks, but they can be emergency grant or relief programs,

[78] Online interview with Yavuz Akkuzu, 2 July 2021.

or fellowship programs run by universities, governments, city shelter programs, or guest/host initiatives (GHK Consulting 2012). For the relocation of at-risk artists specifically, a recent study categorizes three models: academic (relocation within a university setting), municipality-based (in partnership with a dedicated city), and arts residency-based (a more prevalent model and one with considerable advantages to the needs of artists) (Blackmore 2021). In 2012, a mapping of temporary relocation initiatives documented initiatives as being predominantly in Western countries in the Global North (GHK Consulting 2012). However, recent studies point to the rise of relocation activities in the Global South as well (Jones et al. 2019: 11); those in the South tend more to relocate individuals nationally or within their region (Eriksson 2018: 485).

Among several strategies to provide protection and relief for artists at risk, temporary international relocation initiatives were found to have certain advantages: they offer immediate safety, solidarity is broadened to a global level, and a diversified support mechanism is in place. Therefore they are deemed to be a good practice by the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights (Jones et al. 2019: 9). Temporary relocation is also commonly requested by artists who flee persecution. The most common request by artists (29%) so far received by ARC – which facilitates several different support mechanisms – is "to flee threats by relocating to a safer area, either temporarily within their country or region or long-term" (Fine and Trébault 2021: 19). A director of a host organization from Berlin pointed at the increasing number of applications particularly from non-European contexts to temporary relocation programs: this volume doubled or tripled for many organizations he knows of. He thus argues that the need for such programs has been exposed with the pandemic and will probably keep growing in the future.[79]

[79] Online interview with Can Sungu, 8 July 2021.

A director of a Berlin-Istanbul artist residency program also confirmed artists' rising demand for international residency programs, mainly because of the environment of hostility towards artistic freedoms in Turkey. This became evident with the applications they have received, even though the program originally did not prioritize "artists-at-risk":

> *Our priority is artistic exchange, but recently most of the applicants from Turkey express their motivations along with 'I don't feel free in Turkey,' 'I want to go and be able to concentrate on my own work;' so, [the program] served to save people from the suffocating atmosphere here.*[80]

Nevertheless, temporary relocation and shelter schemes also have certain contradictions and weaknesses, which require attention to understand how Covid has exacerbated the pre-existing systemic weaknesses in supporting artists. According to Eriksson (2018: 487-489), there are certain factors limiting the access of an individual at risk to such protective fellowship schemes. These factors include a language barrier, caused by the level of foreign language skills required by some schemes to maintain daily communication or to participate in activities. Disadvantages related to gender, such as less available training opportunities and family care responsibilities that disproportionately influence women may also pose another limitation. Lastly, visa challenges and the requirement of affiliation stipulated by many programs may sideline people working independently and reinforce a "class divide," as only well-connected people receive protection.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the definition and criteria of risk adopted to identify and select participants among those attesting to be at-risk, may wield a contested, victimizing, stigmatizing, or discriminating effect. Some procedures for relocation of at-risk human rights defenders and artists also involve certain mechanisms to assess the credibility of the applicants' risk. The requisite of having an identifiable artistic career again leads to the marginalization of those with

[80] Online interview with Asena Günal, 7 June 2021.

unconventional profiles (Jones et al. 2019: 28). When the relocation period ends and artists have to return home, another challenge is the probability of facing legal and economic obstacles to artists' resumption of their professional activities, as well as the potential trauma and intersectional prejudices awaiting them (Safe Havens 2020).

When the respondents I interviewed reflected on artistic mobility and relocation programs as mechanisms to support artistic freedom and protect persecuted or dissident artists, they found both positive and negative aspects in them. Having recognized even more the significance of social interactions and community support in nourishing artistic practice and solidarity throughout the Covid crisis, some respondents considered temporary relocation schemes and safe shelter models as undesirably individualizing and isolating mechanisms – unless programmed with due emphasis on collective and engaging mechanisms. At times it was feared that they eventually distance artists from their local community, too. Respondents recommended an increased support for artists to keep producing wherever they were originally based, particularly to strengthen the local arts community in a restrictive context. They also suggested that artistic freedom can be supported by developing alternative mobility and exchange models (such as short-term, project-based, local, and for groups/collectives) and assisting the sustainability of artistic production by providing opportunities for co-working and engagement with artistic or other like-minded local communities. Others drew attention to ethical dilemmas that emerge in protecting artists through temporary relocation schemes, as they may unintentionally lead to brain-drain from unstable contexts and cause artists from these areas to portray themselves as victims: "The conditions the artists are living in vary so much from country to country, and these programs enable people to sustain their lives, so they try to

market themselves, act what is expected from them to receive the fellowship, be it a role of a victim."[81]

Another critical aspect to take into consideration for temporary relocation is the ecological impact of mobility, which was also highly debated since the destructive consequences of travelling were manifested once it was halted by the pandemic. For one of the respondents, this period has led to questioning the role of the arts community and artistic mobility in contributing to the climate crisis:

> *While supporting artistic freedom we must think of the costs of even three pieces of paper travelling, or the emissions caused by cheap flights… and consider reducing mobility. The sanctity we attribute to art and to the idea that art should travel everywhere may change and the forms of presenting art may involve long-distance and new collaboration forms.*[82]

In the future, the programs supporting the mobility of the arts are expected to take into account two factors that were thrown into sharper focus by Covid: the impact of mobility on the environment and the capacity of the digital environment to generate new virtual forms of mobility (Cuny 2020: 51).

On the other hand, interview respondents have found different benefits to their artistic practice in temporary relocation programs, especially in such hard times. These include finding support to maintain artistic work despite deteriorating economic conditions and lack of resources; distancing themselves from hostile environments, which have turned even more restrictive and prison-like with the pandemic; connecting and collaborating with people despite social isolation; and finding hope, peace of mind, and a safer space to practice their art freely.

[81] Online interview with Can Sungu, 8 July 2021.
[82] Online interview with Leman Sevda Darıcıoğlu, 24 June 2021 (they/them).

Fig. 6: Leman Sevda Darıcıoğlu: photo from the performance "There is an ocean between us," Berlin 2020; © Leman Sevda Darıcıoğlu

For instance, Leman Sevda Darıcıoğlu, a queer performance artist who maintained a distinctly high level of productivity in comparison to other respondents I interviewed, was in Berlin on a personal sponsorship at the beginning of Covid and decided to stay after the end of their artist residency. They made several live-stream performances, three live performances in display windows, one public intervention, and participated in two collective exhibitions in this period, during which most of the other respondents could not complete more than one or two projects. They said, "I was more advantaged than the artists in Turkey so I could keep producing and sharing my work," by dint of the residency, fellowship, and sponsorship. "If I didn't have these, I couldn't have the capacity to take care of myself, nor a space to think about [my work]," they added.[83]

[83] Online interview with Leman Sevda Darıcıoğlu, 24 June 2021.

An Iranian street artist living in Turkey considered a residency to be a huge chance for those in more repressive contexts, be it an authoritarian state or a pandemic. He was arrested several times in Iran for painting in the street and his practice was influenced by the great stress he felt. He explained that he became afraid of "living in a country where you are always limited" both by the authorities and the community. He was relieved from this stress only when he traveled to Georgia for a residency, where he felt free for the first time to create whatever he liked, and without feeling "the shame that you should make art according to an order [set by the state authorities]." "Once you get out of Iran to an arts residency you can compare it to going out of pandemic into an arts residency," he commented.[84]

5.3 Navigating mobility restrictions: strategies and alternatives

All the challenges and opportunities of artistic mobility and temporary relocation need to be reconsidered in light of the evolving conditions following the outbreak of Covid-19, as do new opportunities and forms. The ecosystem of supporting artistic freedom and mobility consists of an immense diversity of actors and the specific contexts that those ecosystems are based on are defined with different resources and obstacles. Therefore it is not possible to propose one-size-fits-all strategies to maintain spaces for artistic freedom and mobility. Yet the experiences and perspectives presented here may hint at how to overcome some major challenges inherent in or caused by mobility and aim for better practices. This is possible by additionally taking into account the multiple global crises of our day – the pandemic, the border crisis,[85] and the climate crisis – and reconfiguring mobility together with long-distance modalities.

[84] Online interview with III, 23 June 2021.

[85] By using this term, I refer to the highly militarized border protection regimes of (Northern) countries, which severely impede the right to travel and to seek asylum.

The following is a summary of responses and strategies attempted by organizations supporting relocation and mobility of artists who are in distress or danger. The practices differ when the organizations responded with 1) ways to facilitate mobility, 2) alternatives to physical mobility, or 3) practices that indirectly contribute to artistic mobility and solidarity.

1) Ways to facilitate mobility: Despite the Covid travel restrictions, some of the organizations providing artist relocation or residencies could still facilitate mobility by readjusting their schemes to the conditions of the pandemic with the help of following practices:

- *Investing time:* Arts organizations like Fanak Fund managed to realize mobility projects by putting more time and effort into fulfilling health and travel requirements.

- *Domestic and regional relocation:* Some programs opened their spaces to participants from the same or neighboring countries, since international guests from many other regions could not travel. The Ankara Queer Art Program readjusted their international residency program to relocation within Turkey. For Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy it was possible to facilitate relocation within the region and across specific cities where travelling is possible. TAPA offered a safe space that was isolated from the outside and by taking (and negotiating with selected participants) the necessary precautions to support artists.

- *Social support during relocation:* The Human Rights Defender Hub in York observed the advantage of having a volunteer support group in their program since it helped them to better respond to Covid-specific needs like assisting the guest artists during their quarantine.

- *Extension of funding:* Some artists mentioned that they benefitted from the extension of the support and funding that was offered before the pandemic until the emergency of the crisis has (at least partially) subsided, an alternative plan was made, or the project objectives were achieved.

2) Building alternatives to physical mobility: When stakeholders agreed that it is impossible to go through with a mobility program physically and across borders, the following practices helped achieve positive outcomes:

- *Negotiating changes with selected participants*: When conditions hindered mobility, negotiation with participants assisted the organizations in developing and choosing better alternatives among domestic, digital, or hybrid formats. Although most artists are unsatisfied or frustrated by digital alternatives, they do prefer to have some digital component to cope with delays or at least partially achieve the goals of the program. For the organizations which could not facilitate cross-border travelling of participants, useful alternatives included offering the same opportunity to national participants or an alternative virtual residency with modified activities.

- *Providing an artist fee or scholarship*: In the contexts where public support measures were not available or adequate for artists, the loss of income caused by the cancellation of projects and residencies had a more severe impact. In these cases, when the budget allocated for physical mobility support was unconditionally and immediately provided to artists as a virtual residency fee or emergency support, it was received very positively. The lack of such an adjustment resulted in disappointment and exacerbated precarity for artists.

- *Exploring alternative forms of social protection:* Some organizations had fewer mobility requests, while others were not able to carry out relocation due to different obstacles. They reallocated their mobility budget or adapted their

programs to respond to the emergency needs of artists. Ettijahat and Al-Mawred provided direct support for financial, healthcare, legal or other basic needs of artists. Coculture organized virtual community meetings and exhibitions; Arthere maintained physical existence on the ground to facilitate community support and mutual aid.

- *Collaboration and networking across borders*: Particularly in such vulnerable times, some organizations took efforts to create and strengthen their network of trusted contacts in different locations. By exploring different modalities for strengthening bonds across different actors in the field and connecting people, they could build case-specific solutions for artists who needed protection or mobility support.

3) Offering practices that indirectly contribute to artistic mobility: Some of the practices – regardless of whether they were directly connected to a mobility program – were suggested as ways to contribute to the strengthening or sustainability of artistic mobility in the broader sense.

- *Strengthening local infrastructure:* Some actors provided support for infrastructural development (e.g., for internet or technological facilities) and capacity-building in restricted regions (such as conflict zones, refugee camps, etc.).

- *Improving self-capacity:* Arts organizations made use of reduced program activities by shifting focus to reinforcing their own technological infrastructures, digital presence, and capacity-building in terms of internet safety or engaging digital tools.

- *Opening space to artists:* Art spaces like Depo, Karşı Sanat, Amed City Theater, or Arthere offered their spaces for local dissident artists to practice, rehearse, produce work, perform, or exhibit – even more so than before the pandemic.

- *Organizing solidarity work:* Arts and cultural organizations advocated or provided support for the needs of other initiatives which work under more adverse circumstances. Some moved their exhibitions or events across borders when mobility was halted completely. They developed campaigns for producing marketable artworks such as posters or digital work, organizing wholesales, and other fundraising activities.

The practices mentioned above were based on some common principles that served organizations to cope with the obstacles in this period:

- **Flexibility:** Most of the organizations interviewed, particularly those who have struggled with hostile, restrictive, and uncertain contexts, survived through the obstacles in this period by staying flexible. This involved preparing multiple plans, diversifying tools and strategies, hybridizing their conduct, increasing the number of their partners and allies, and adapting their programs to the needs of the artists (or the group/community to whom they are providing support) and to the changing conditions in the field. To cope with the conditions imposed by Covid and to achieve the goals they planned, artists and arts organizations often had to negotiate with donors and grantees to demand flexible allocation of funds or extensions. Flexibility also helped some to respond to the crisis with creativity and with swift responsiveness.

- **Grounded practice:** Actors who remained flexible were often adept by virtue of being grounded and having strong connections and familiarity with the field. The organizations or networks that had already established close contacts with local actors achieved a better understanding of the needs and conditions

of the artists and communities in the field. This allowed them to identify local resources or key players to activate, so that the needs of the artists could be addressed swiftly and effectively. Actors who maintained a physical existence on the ground could rapidly assess needs and challenges, and identify potential responses to the crisis.

- **Maintaining contact and communication:** Arts/support organizations who achieved better outcomes with their projects in this period emphasized that this was owed to close communication with other artists, donors, and other organizations, though this aspect was exhausting. Communication was key to negotiating changes, finding alternatives, and assessing needs and opportunities, as mentioned above. It was also essential to cultivate a culture of care, since many recognized the significance of listening to each other and showing partners and peers that they were not alone or abandoned, in order to survive and recover in this period.

Fig. 7 (p. 77): Furkan Öztekin, "Letter to a Friend", Dou Printstudio, Ankara/Turkey, August 2021; © Furkan Öztekin

5.4 Focus: digitalization

All the interview respondents experienced digitalization in the pandemic, by choice or as a last resort. The positive aspects that they mentioned in exploring digital tools and transforming artwork, events, and performances into digital platforms are as follows: broader access, fewer economic and administrative burdens, efficiency in terms of time-saving and organizational efforts, and, in some cases, the facilitation of communication and language barriers. On the other hand, almost all participants mentioned a discontent and fatigue with digitalization in this period. Some said the quality of the content decreased when the quantity of digital works and events increased excessively. Some found digital tools insufficient at replacing physical encounters due to the artificial nature of the experience or to poor adaptation caused by lack of technical facilities or know-how.

Organizations supporting artistic freedom and mobility sought to maintain their practices through online events, exhibitions, the shifting of relocation into virtual residencies, or the use of digital tools. Some, such as Karşı Sanat, introduced hybrid forms; this organization preferred to keep using its physical space for exhibitions (as much as the restrictions allowed), while using online platforms to organize panels and discussions. Ezgi Bakçay from Karşı Sanat stated that increasing digitalization leads to fewer encounters; therefore, it cannot be an alternative to physical events. She thus recommends digital platforms be used in future only if the work or event is produced "for digital spaces."[86]

Like many other arts organizations, Ettijahat also started producing more online content in this period. However, considering the digital fatigue and difficulties with accessibility within the Middle Eastern region, they focused on designing and curating the content in an appealing way, rather than merely publishing more

[86] Interview with Ezgi Bakçay, 1 June 2021, Istanbul.

digital work such as films or songs. For instance, they contributed to the building of the online platform called "Beyond the Now: Social Art practice for a Post-Pandemic World."[87] They advocated for the use of digital platforms as an alternative public space in the Arab region by organizing talks around topics such as, "How the authorities used the pandemic as a tool to control artists, activists, and journalists to make more restrictions on public spaces as well as digital spaces."[88] Ettijahat also adapted their community work to the digital world. They launched a "home edition" of their art program called "Create Syria" to support artists "to develop ideas in the places they live, about community." Since the pandemic has been challenging the concept of community, the program aimed "to challenge the challenges." Reflecting on these experiences, Abdullah Alkafri highlights that the accessibility assumption about the digital world is not true, as "it is another space that needs to be decolonized, liberated from social authorities," arguing that the discrimination of people who do not have the necessary infrastructures or capacity should be questioned.[89]

Many respondents found digital platforms to be alienating, or that they hampered deeper discussions, genuine exchange, spontaneity, and were inadequate at providing a creative and connecting atmosphere. The abrupt transformation to digitalization with the outbreak of the pandemic felt like "being thrown into a deserted science fiction world," for Fatoş İrwen, as she was just released from jail, where she had not even used a smartphone. She admitted she enjoyed digital tools and tried to integrate them in her artistic practice normally; however, she refused to attend to digital meetings for a while after her release because it "erases human contact."[90] Moreover, some artists were concerned about becoming an open target for surveillance by authorities when using digital and online tools.

[87] https://beyond-the-now.com/.
[88] Online interview with Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.
[89] Online interview with Abdullah Alkafri, 11 June 2021.
[90] Interview with Fatoş İrwen, 23 June 2021, Istanbul.

On the other hand, Filiz İzem Yaşın, who produces content that might be considered "mischievous" in the local context of Turkey, found digital platforms to be liberating, as they open space for her to share her work and reach a broader audience. As accessibility of the arts has expanded with more focus on documentation and digitalization during the pandemic, such practices should be maintained for the future, she asserted.[91] Necati Sönmez also confirmed that digitalization has helped certain films bypass censorship; however, for occasions like film festivals, he recalls the value of face-to-face encounters for maintaining human relationships. For this reason, he believes hybrid forms that can balance physical interaction and global accessibility would be best.[92]

For a Kurdish director from Turkey, this period of digitalization created the opportunity he had already been seeking to achieve better access and visibility for cultural production in the Kurdish language; he opened up some of his work to free access by making a YouTube series.[93] However, a theater group from Diyarbakır was reluctant to digitalize their work both due to the high cost of the necessary infrastructure, and because they think the digital experience cannot replace live interaction with an audience, which is what they consider to be the core element for their artistic creation. Having to shift to digital tools or being part of virtual events during this period did not provide them the human interaction they yearned for. Still, while their stage was closed from March to July 2020, they prepared short comedy sketches for television. But they could never see those as their artistic creation; rather, as an alternative source of income generation.[94]

Similarly, organizations and artists agreed that virtual residencies cannot replace the experience of physical mobility. Such digital formats mostly served as an

[91] Interview with Filiz İzem Yaşın, 24 May 2021, Istanbul.
[92] Online interview with Necati Sönmez, 29 May 2021.
[93] Online interview with Ali Kemal Çınar, 18 June 2021.
[94] Online interview with Yavuz Akkuzu, 2 July 2021.

alternative to respond to situations of emergency. For example, in the case of the Ankara Queer Art Program, it was possible only to shift part of the previously organized activities to digital formats (i.e., artist talks but not field visits). However, online meetings still helped artists and juries connect with each other. From the perspective of one artist who took part in a virtual residency, using online tools helped establish and maintain contact with a community of artists and mentors. In sum, many might agree that virtual residencies were "better than nothing" if no other options were provided after the residency had been cancelled.

The respondents expressed the need to further discuss a number of issues, such as the ethics of the digital realm, how to improve and share capacity on digital security, how to be more hospitable online, and how to transform into virtual while maintaining quality.

6. Findings and recommendations

This report presents the experiences of artists who have been struggling with vulnerability, risks, and threats to artistic freedoms during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as those of the arts organizations supporting artistic freedom and mobility. As such, the report demonstrates ways to maintain spaces of artistic freedom and to support the resilience of artists operating under circumstances of exacerbated risks and restrictions.

Various reports, statements, as well as the respondents' experiences covered here point to the fact that lack, inadequacy or instability of income, and of other economic resources, has always been a major challenge to the survival of all actors involved in the field of culture and the arts. To varying degrees, people working in the cultural and creative sector everywhere already had to cope with precarity, irregularity, and the inadequacy of their legal status and social security before Covid hit. The pandemic has only exposed the weaknesses of the system. The further economic loss, travel restrictions, bans, or limitations of certain activities due to Covid-related regulations have exacerbated the pre-existing vulnerability of arts and cultural practitioners. As a result, the cleavages between the Global North and the Global South or rich and poor are deepened. Artists in vulnerable groups like LGBTI+, refugees, individuals living in conflict zones, young artists, and artists who are targeted, marginalized, or persecuted because of their work or identities, had to face additional economic, psychological, and social risks. Independent cultural and arts organizations and grassroots venues open to dissident and marginalized voices experienced insurmountable damages, leading many to close indefinitely.

Chapter 3 outlines experiences with maintaining artistic freedom and mobility in repressive contexts by presenting the case of Turkey. There, before and during the pandemic, artists and cultural practitioners had to live in a state of permanent crisis, defined by precarity, insecurity, and inadequate and contested policies

towards arts and culture. Arts and support organizations adapted their formats and practices to the pandemic conditions. These adaptions included, for example, direct grants to cover artists' emergency needs (i.e., healthcare, financial and legal support) and digital tools to strengthen community and solidarity. Others opened their local spaces for dissident or disadvantaged artists and workers from different sectors to rehearse, practice and produce, or to exhibit their artworks. Few programs managed to uphold their arts residencies with constant modifications. In the example of the Ankara Queer Art Program, the solution was first to offer a virtual residency for participants who could not travel to Turkey and then to readjust the program to be a domestic residency for artists relocating within the country. Flexibility, negotiating changes with partner artists and organizations, keeping close communication with grantees and encouraging them to engage with what is happening in the field are all means that have been helpful in coping with obstacles.

By providing the perspectives of vulnerable, dissident, and marginalized artists, the report illustrates how the experience of emergency, intensified precarity, and deteriorated economic conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic has complicated the definition of risk. Economic, political, and psychosocial risks may be interlinked and hardly separable; artists may cease practicing art or producing controversial content while they struggle for basic livelihood, or else, they may be forced to subject themselves to even riskier working conditions. As complicated and multilayered as the experience of risk becomes, artists also hesitate to don the label "artist-at-risk," as it creates certain power dynamics, endorses victimizing and top-down perceptions, and at times appeals to artists in unstable areas who seek relief to fit themselves to the expectations created by the label. However, risk is formed temporarily and experienced diversely in each specific context, in negotiation with the subject's psycho-socio-economic capacities, decisions, and access to resources or strategies.

Artists and cultural practitioners who I interviewed identified the main needs they recognized in this period as: improved legal and social status of artists; more (and fairly distributed) state support for the sustainability of arts and cultural practices; and more spaces to reconnect, mitigate social isolation, share their work, and establish collaborative partnerships. Many specified the lack of social interaction as the major challenge to their practice and overall well-being, since other challenges related to economic hurdles and limitations on freedoms were intense but not unprecedented. To cope with these challenges, they created online platforms to share their work and maintain interaction within the artistic community (e.g., İzole Project); launched fundraising campaigns and networks to care for the vulnerable (e.g., Omuz, Cengaver); and organized to advocate for better economic, social, and legal conditions (e.g., Tiyatro Kooperatifi). In their individual practice and coping strategies, some artists preferred to focus on their well-being, prioritize mental health, introspect, and restore their capacities. Particularly artists with prior experience with restrictions found ways to transform limitations into creativity by using different tools and materials (such as video and digital tools) or spaces (public spaces, display windows, etc.) to practice and share their art.

As the centrality of social interaction in inspiring and strengthening arts and cultural practices was reacknowledged with the pandemic, this report argues that the contradictions involved in temporary relocation schemes were brought into sharper focus. Respondents criticized temporary relocation schemes for reproducing structures which further individualize artists, isolating their practice, excluding those with limited access to resources and support, and weakening the local arts and culture scene by distancing them. The pandemic confirmed that mobility and temporary relocation programs are not adept at responding to artists' needs in emergencies and it drew more attention to their ecological costs. However, mobility during the pandemic has had an economically, emotionally, and creatively supportive impact on artists as well. When cross-border mobility or

physical residency became impossible, developing alternative formats (such as regional, domestic, hybrid, or virtual residencies), negotiating changes and offering alternatives to program participants, and maintaining caring and considerate communication all had positive impacts on artists. In some cases, it was possible to maintain artistic mobility despite the restrictions by taking extra precautions, giving more time and effort for visa and travel arrangements, and creating alternatives in accessible locations.

Additionally, this report attempts to present both pros and cons of transforming artwork, events, and performances into digital formats and online platforms. Digitalization allowed for broader accessibility and fewer economic and administrative burdens. It helped maintain organizational efficiency and facilitated communication. On the other hand, almost all the respondents mentioned experiencing digital fatigue and alienation in the context of online events and practices. Due to lack of resources or capacity, previously in-person practices were often poorly adapted to digital platforms. Online meetings and community-building attempts, virtual events, exhibitions, or festivals were considered to be insufficient for enabling deeper and genuine exchange, spontaneity, and creative atmosphere, all of which is more likely to exist in physical encounters.

Finally, as Covid revealed the vulnerabilities and the inadequacies of existing systems, solidarity became a key concept for the survival of particularly marginalized and neglected groups and independent, dissident, or controversial artists and arts organizations. The respondents I interviewed emphasized their willingness to maintain learned solidarity practices and to continue building stronger networks based on sustainable and horizontal structures of collaboration.

Below is a list of the recommendations to reinforce support provided for artistic freedom and mobility, taking into account lessons learned from the pandemic. They are gathered from the respondents' own experiences, the needs they observed in the field, and the perspectives they have for the future. These recommendations address national and international policymakers, authorities, members of the broader creative and cultural sector, and the various actors who are or might be involved in the ecosystem supporting artistic freedom and mobility.

1) **States should fulfill their responsibility and obligation to support artists, arts and cultural organizations,** and to develop adequate cultural policies to address artistic freedom and mobility. The pandemic should not be used as an excuse to blanket the major problems in the field or to justify sanctions that further impede on justice and freedoms.

2) **Funding should be flexible and adapt to changing strategies to cope with crises and repressive contexts.** As actors may need to change their plans or establish alternative models and multiple strategies to survive in a hostile environment, funding should be available without rigid conditions, administrative requirements, or expectations of output. Funding should be easily accessible to independent artists and local arts actors with a variety of statuses and in remote locations or outside networks built according to privilege, popularity, or affinity. To provide more adequate support, donors are recommended to gain a better understanding of local dynamics, visit and collaborate with local actors, and maintain a connection and a proactive engagement with their practice.

3) To facilitate mobility during the pandemic and its possible aftermath, it is necessary to **further improve on the newly developed formats, hybrid forms, and strategies to enhance connection/collaboration and artistic practice in the face of increased restrictions, crisis, or**

emergency. These strategies include the investment of extra time and effort in the fulfilment of health and travel requirements, the development of domestic and regional relocation alternatives, and the strengthening of social support. Future programs should be designed to be adaptable to the diverse conditions of the local contexts of partners as well as to administrative complications or emergency situations that may arise. They should be developed to be more sensitive to participants' health and well-being needs, as well as to the ecological costs of mobility.

4) **Digitalization should not come at the expense of quality, artistic value, human interaction, and social justice.** Virtual formats cannot always replace physical encounters. Alternatives like using public spaces for artistic practice and hybrid formats for events and residencies to advance accessibility and maintain social interaction should be endorsed. Support is needed to improve digital security skills and infrastructure in disadvantaged and restricted areas.

5) To overcome even stricter visa regulations, actors involved in temporary relocation should **advocate and negotiate diplomatically to address border regimes and migration policies**, which hinder access to protection by individuals at risk. Granting special travel permission to artists may facilitate their access to protection and support. Yet, to address these obstacles more systematically, advocacy should take into consideration that border regimes often restrict mobility indistinguishably or at the disadvantage of those who are more underprivileged. Among those whose cross-border mobility is curtailed by unachievable visa requirements, there are arts and culture agents who play a role in the healing and cohesion of the societies in a world transformed by the pandemic.

6) Actors in the temporary relocation ecosystem should extend their networks and practice to span other sectors toward cross-sectoral collaboration. They should **develop a coalition of a variety of actors to contend with the legal, economic, political, local, or global obstacles to artistic freedom and mobility**. Actors who can fulfill different roles such as advocacy, emergency or direct support, policymaking, and providing space, infrastructure or resources should be included to address the diverse needs and complex conditions of artists. Such collaboration should extend to regional, transnational, and semi-informal networks, as well as local civil society movements, and should reinforce local ecosystems by exchanging skills and resources.

7) **The provision of support and protection to artists who are threatened, marginalized, or persecuted needs to be decolonized.** This is possible by liberating the understanding of "risk" from the top-down rules and expectations held by actors in positions of power. Decolonizing the approach would require being open to learning from others who have authentic experience and practice-based knowledge. Likewise, grounded practices and cultivating care through collaboration and communication will help actors understand and respond to diverse needs, preferences, and holistic conditions of supported artists. The mechanisms of support and protection across the divides of different positions of privilege and power should be sensitive to the biases of paternalism, exploiting the work of partner artists for one's own "savior" image, or (re)producing (or even fetishizing) artists' vulnerability or victimhood.

8) Instead of relying on rigid schemes and top-down categories to identify whom to provide support or protection, organizations supporting artistic freedom and mobility should focus on **building partnerships of solidarity around the common cause of advocating for artistic**

freedom and maintaining an independent, non-conforming, grassroots arts and cultural practice under challenging circumstances. Therefore the practice of solidarity should be based on **the principles of sustainability, responsibility, horizontality, and mutuality**. Discussion is needed on how to build cross-border partnerships and share resources, strengthen solidarity mechanisms across North-South and rich-poor divides, regardless of differences in nationality, race, language, or gender identity.

[Temporary relocation] structures should turn into spaces that form the basis of our empowerment, for that we need to nourish each other. This should be through taking some responsibilities in the long term and strengthening mechanisms of solidarity – not as a temporary favor. If we leave each other alone, we'll keep talking about state violence for nothing. Some of us will withdraw, despondent, and stop confronting risks, yet we are compelled to confront risks all the time. Solidarity should empower me when I´m confronting risks, too.[95]

[95] Interview with Fatoş İrwen, 23 June 2021, Istanbul.

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List of practical resources

Resource lists, tools, and toolkits on Covid-19:

Artist Communities Alliance: Covid-19 arts preparedness + response resource list for residency programs.
https://artistcommunities.org/covid-19

On the Move: A compiled list of information and initiatives that are related to the pandemic.
https://on-the-move.org/resources/collections/coronavirus-resources-arts-culture-and-cultural-mobility

Frontline Defenders: Physical, emotional, and digital protection when working from home in times of Covid-19.
https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/physical-emotional-and-digital-protection-while-using-home-office-times-covid

Res Artis: A temporary page to provide Covid-related updates and resources for artists and arts residencies.
https://resartis.org/covid-19-updates

UNESCO: A database of international Covid policies and measures.
https://en.unesco.org/creativity/covid-19

Some digital platforms/projects about Covid, arts and artists:

Beyond the Now: A social practice platform aimed at opening up new creative, cultural, and political affinities for a post-pandemic world.
https://beyond-the-now.com

Compassion Contagion: An online archive to record acts of compassion during the pandemic through stories and art.
https://www.compassion-contagion.com

The Lockdown Collection: An arts initiative founded in 2020 to capture South Africa's historic Covid-19 lockdown and support vulnerable artists.
https://www.thelockdowncollection.com

Arctivism Project: Collaborations of activists and artists across the world who are responding to the outbreak of Covid-19 and its implications for human rights defenders, activism, and a shrinking civic and political space.
https://www.hrdhub.org/arctivism

From Turkey:

Kuirfest Queer Solidarity Network.
https://kuirfestka.org/

Short stories from long quarantine days, e-book.
https://paperstreet.com.tr/products/uzun-karantina-gunlerinden-kisa-hikayeler

İzole Project.
https://www.izoleproject.com

Photography in Covid Times.
https://www.koronagunlerindefotograf.com

Podcasts/webinars/testimonials in response to Covid-19:

Resiliart: UNESCO's global movement to support artists and access to culture.
https://en.unesco.org/news/resiliart-artists-and-creativity-beyond-crisis

El Arte No Calla! Spanish-language podcast series with several episodes on how the pandemic affected art, freedom of expression, and human rights in Latin America.
https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/el-arte-no-calla-a-podcast-in-spanish

DefendDefenders: Daily content on well-being & resilience for HRDs during June 2020.
https://defenddefenders.org/june-2020-hrd-well-being

Art on Lockdown: A series of public webinars on challenges to artistic freedom caused by the pandemic.
https://artistsatriskconnection.org/story/art-on-lockdown

Res Artis' collection of digital learning for artists and arts residencies, virtual residency activities, case studies, interviews etc.
https://resartis.org/covid-19-updates/digital-learning-2

Information on artistic freedom and mobility in general:

International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) cultural organizations, digital security, guides for advice, mobility and arts rights, residencies, scholarships, etc.
https://www.icorn.org/resources

Safety Guide for Artists by ARC
https://artistsatriskconnection.org/guide/safety-guide-for-artists

University of Hildesheim: Arts rights justice library.
https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/arts-rights-justice-library

Artistic Freedom Initiative: Pro bono legal representation and assistance for immigration and resettlement for persecuted or censored artists.
https://artisticfreedominitiative.org

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List of abbreviations

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
ARC	Artists at Risk Connection
COVID/ COVID-19	Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2
CULT	European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education
EENCA	European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual
HRD	Human rights defender
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IHD	İnsan Hakları Derneği (Human Rights Association, Turkey)
KAOS-GL	Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans(gender), Intersex and other groups
MRI	Martin Roth-Initiative
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCR	Polymerase chain reaction
TAPA	Transformative Art Project for Activists
TÜYAD	Tiyatro Üreticileri ve Yapımcıları Derneği (Theater Workers and Producers Association, Turkey)
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

About the author

Pelin Çakır is a researcher, practitioner, and activist who works across fields connected to mobility, resistance, vulnerability, care, and culture. She has an interdisciplinary academic background in political science, sociology, with extensions to cultural anthropology, social work, psychology, migration studies, arts, and cinema. Her research builds on counter-hegemonic knowledge production, decolonial and feminist theory, narrative and co-creative methods. She has worked with local and international civil society organizations in the fields of human rights, migration, and gender. She has written for cultural magazines in Turkey and acted as an editor and content producer for HarekAct (blog reporting on the Turkish-EU border regime). She has given talks and workshops on topics such as border regimes, social movements, collective care, and feminist self-defense. As a doctoral candidate at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, her current research focuses on collective care practices of communities facing trauma, political violence, and crises.

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Learning from the Pandemic

Artistic Freedom & Mobility Beyond the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the creative and cultural sectors hard and continues to restrict the mobility and opportunities of artists worldwide. What have we learned from this period about how to support artists and cultural activists under political, social, and economic threat? With a focus on Turkey, this report relays perspectives and experiences related to the challenges faced by artists during the pandemic, as well as their strategies to cope with them. It also examines the responses of organizations supporting artistic freedom and mobility in this period and provides recommendations for future practices.

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