A Reflection on Community: The NOLA Arts Scene During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Spring 2025

Word Count: 3122

Introduction

Art, in all its forms, has served as a vehicle for the expression of humanity's emotions and ideas for many millennia. Across centuries and continents, art has played a role in shaping values and reflecting the tensions and resilience of societies. In New Orleans, this claim is especially evident. From second-line parades to traditional mardi gras costumes, or jazz music of the Quarter to the murals of the Bywater district, New Orleans hosts a thriving art community. When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe in 2020 this artistic community was met with several challenges.

In this paper, I will explore how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and reshaped the artistic communities of New Orleans while also providing contextualization of broader questions such as: *What constitutes art? What defines a city's artistic culture? How are regional identities tied to creative expression? And what happens when the public spaces that enable art-making are closed off?* As the research will show, the explanation and consideration of these questions enable one to have a more liberal understanding of the complexities and challenges art communities hold.

At a national level, the pandemic hit the arts sector hard. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, arts and cultural production contributed $876.7 billion to the U.S. national GDP in 2020. However, this figure represented a 6.4% decline in real value—nearly twice the rate of decline seen in the overall U.S. economy (NEA). While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional institutions of art in New Orleans, it simply amplified the importance of community-based and culturally rooted art. These expressions not only provided an outlet for creativity under constraint but reaffirmed the city's historical legacy of resilience through artistic practice.

As Sanford Ikeda asserts in his essay "A City Cannot Be a Work of Art," cities should not be mistaken for static masterpieces. Rather, they are organic, emergent systems shaped by the countless decisions and interactions of individuals. He draws on Jane Jacobs' work to argue that urban planning that attempts to impose rigid beauty or order often drains the vitality from city life (Ikeda 80). This distinction—between curated design and lived experience—mirrors the dynamic between institutional art and street or community-based art. The latter, often decentralized and participatory, can more effectively reflect the complexity of life, especially in moments of crisis.

Theoretical Foundations

To explore how art changed during the pandemic, we must first ask: *What is art?* The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy outlines two major schools of thought. They see art as intentionally defined, a product of cultural and historical systems, like museums or academic instructions. This definition emphasizes the context in which a work is created or received. The second view emphasizes aesthetic properties like form and sensory experience, as central to understanding what constitutes art (Adajian). Both frameworks are relevant to New Orleans, where art takes the form of both curated exhibits and spontaneous performances. In either case, art remains an indication between creator and viewer, which is further shaped by environment and perception.

In New Orleans, the notion of *regional art* provides a more grounded understanding. As an article from *The Conversation* explains, regional artists are "most likely to pursue visual arts and writing, but actors, dancers, designers, musicians, and digital media artists are among many others who would self-identify as regional artists." Their work may reflect local landscapes,

community struggles, or cultural traditions—or ignore them entirely (Bennett). This pluralism is crucial to the broader understanding. It suggests that regional art is not defined by geography alone, but by the lived experience of that geography, particularly how artists interpret and express it.

Community art plays a vital role in this regional culture. The Tate Modern defines community art as artistic activity "based in a community setting. . often involving a professional artist collaborating with people who may not otherwise engage in the arts." In New Orleans community art encompasses many mediums: neighborhood murals, jazz jam sessions, parades, and krewe-based costumes. These forms of art are socially embedded in New Orleans and can be interactive with the community individual in an accessible way. These factors make art culture and its stability vulnerable to disruption like COVID-19.

Yet even during the crisis, such art forms do not disappear, they evolve. As Martha Radice documents in her ethnographic article, "Creativity, Sociability, Solidarity," New Orleans' "new-wave carnival krewes" adapted quickly to pandemic restrictions. These krewes, rooted in tradition but known for progressive politics and handmade artistry, launched digital parades, costume contests, and online fundraising efforts. In doing so, they not only preserved their creative practices but provided mutual aid and emotional support to their communities (Radice 6–8). This supports Radice's central argument: that carnival in New Orleans is not just a festival, but a mechanism for connecting the personal with the social, a means of navigating uncertainty through collective creativity.

This concept, that art can transform crisis into the community, was equally evident after Hurricane Katrina. As Isaac Kaplan writes, art in post-Katrina New Orleans became a form of "reclaiming the public sphere denied to [Black residents] by Jim Crow," while also facilitating

the physical and emotional reconstruction of neighborhoods. The experience of Katrina, he argues, instilled in artists a problem-solving ethos: “So much of living in New Orleans after the storm was critical thinking and problem-solving… and that’s how you make art.”

This messaging re-emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. As will be shown by evidence further on, artists and their practice were at risk of monetary support as well as being limited, reasonably, by public health restrictions. They were also inspired by the continued resilience of New Orleans residents and this sparked further creation at all levels of art. The pandemic highlighted a fundamental duality in New Orleans’ art scene. On one hand, traditional institutions struggled with closures and funding cuts. On the other, grassroots creativity surged often outside the bounds of the market or museum. This duality reminds us that art is not confined to galleries or GDP reports. It is born from the streets. It is shaped by struggle. Most importantly though, art is sustained by the community.

Reviewed Articles

To analyze the reflection of both sides of this significant period in time on New Orleans' art scene, I have selected three distinct sources to create a more nuanced understanding of the topic. By incorporating both scholarly articles and an accessible popular source, I aim to provide a well-rounded perspective on the resilience and challenges faced by the city’s artistic community during this period. The process of researching this topic involved the use of online databases, particularly the Tulane Library Databases, which allowed me to identify peer-reviewed articles that explored the intersection of the pandemic and the arts community in New Orleans. These sources offer valuable insights into how artists adapted, struggled, and innovated in the face of unprecedented challenges. By comparing academic research with a more

general source, The Tulane Hullabaloo, I hope to present a comprehensive view of how the city's art scene was reshaped during these turbulent times and highlight the enduring spirit of its creative community.

Meghan Ashlin Rich's article, *Cultural Survival amid Disaster: Support for Artists in New Orleans*, provides an analysis of how New Orleans' artists navigated the pandemic, with a particular focus on mutual aid and grassroots support networks. Rich examines how the pandemic exposed the inherent vulnerabilities of artists, many of whom had previously relied on the tourism industry for their livelihoods. Despite the government's heavy emphasis on protecting tourism, artists were left without adequate financial safety nets. Rich argues that the city's economic dependence on tourism not only endangered artists' livelihoods but also failed to recognize the crucial role these cultural workers play in the local economy.

One of the key insights from Rich's article is the role of mutual aid networks and nonprofit organizations in bridging the gap left by governmental inaction. These grassroots efforts—often led by artists themselves—provided immediate support through direct financial aid and community resources. Rich highlights the lessons learned from past crises, such as Hurricane Katrina, which influenced how New Orleans' artists responded to the pandemic. By emphasizing collaboration and community, artists found innovative ways to survive, demonstrating a resilience that went beyond mere survival.

Gwen Dilworth's *Echoing Abundance* explores the intersection of public art and mutual aid in pandemic-era New Orleans, using murals as a lens to examine resilience, community, and activism. The article is structured around vivid descriptions of the city's murals, embedding them within the broader social and political context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. Dilworth argues that public art serves as both a reflection and a catalyst for

community care, illustrating how mutual aid networks emerged in response to governmental neglect. The organization follows a narrative progression, beginning with the eerie silence of New Orleans at the pandemic's onset, then moving through the resurgence of activism and public art, and culminating in a vision of abundance and care as a radical political act.

Stylistically, Dilworth blends journalistic reporting with personal reflection, using sensory details to immerse the reader in New Orleans' makeup. The prose is lyrical yet urgent, with repeated motifs of sound and color reinforcing the city's vibrancy even in crisis. The rhetorical strategy is persuasive yet accessible, positioning mutual aid and public art as interconnected forms of resistance. Through imagery—such as butterflies symbolizing transformation or murals depicting healthcare workers as saints—the article conveys a sense of collective struggle and hope. The inclusion of artist names and historical references further legitimizes the argument, linking contemporary struggles to the city's long history of resilience. The article's major takeaway is that mutual aid and public art function not merely as survival mechanisms but as blueprints for a more equitable society. By documenting how murals make visible the needs and aspirations of marginalized communities, Dilworth emphasizes the power of artistic expression in shaping public consciousness.

In contrast to the scholarly articles, The Tulane Hullabaloo article focuses on how art institutions, such as museums and galleries, adapted to the pandemic. It discusses the shift to virtual exhibitions and limited in-person programming, which allowed institutions to maintain some level of engagement with the public. However, it also sheds light on the disparities between institutional responses and the struggles faced by independent artists, who lack the infrastructure and resources of larger institutions. The article mentions prominent New Orleans art institutions like the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), the Ogden Museum, and the Newcomb Art

Museum, all of which played significant roles in maintaining cultural participation despite the restrictions.

The piece highlights a key tension: while institutional responses to the pandemic allowed for continued engagement, they often failed to support independent artists who rely on live, in-person performances and interactions. This created a further divide in the art community, emphasizing the systemic inequalities that were exacerbated during the pandemic. The article provides valuable insight into the intersection between larger art institutions and grassroots, independent artists, serving as a poignant example of how the pandemic highlighted pre-existing economic and institutional disparities.

In the post-reviewing portion of this analysis, it is important to recognize the different focuses and perspectives they offer on the intersection of art and community during the pandemic. Rich's article, while emphasizing the economic vulnerabilities of artists and their reliance on grassroots mutual aid networks, presents a solution-oriented perspective, focusing on the resilience and collective action of the artistic community. Dilworth, on the other hand, expands the discussion beyond economic survival to explore the symbolic and transformative power of public art as a tool for activism and solidarity. She highlights how murals and public art helped foster a sense of unity and resistance in the face of governmental neglect.

In contrast, Bookamer's article provides a more institutional perspective, discussing the response of art museums and galleries to the pandemic. While these institutions managed to adapt through virtual exhibitions and limited in-person programming, the article emphasizes the disparity in resources and support between these larger institutions and independent artists. Together, these three sources provide complementary insights into how New Orleans' art community responded to the crisis—Rich focuses on mutual aid and community support,

Dilworth emphasizes the political and cultural power of public art, and Bookamer highlights the divide between institutional responses and the struggles of independent artists.

Case Studies

While the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted institutional spaces for art in a traditional context, initiatives in New Orleans provided essential platforms for artists to not only continue creating but to deepen the cultural relevance of their work. Two such spaces, *The Front* Gallery and the *Ogden Museum of Southern Art*, illustrate how community-led and collaborative efforts became lifelines for artistic expression, mutual aid, and cultural resilience during a time of crisis.

The Front, an artist-run collective in the St. Claude arts district, emerged as a powerful example of how local, grassroots institutions sustained creativity amid uncertainty. Between July 9 and August 7, 2022, in a volatile time for New Orleans, the gallery hosted two concurrent exhibitions—*"Past, Present, and Afro-Futurism"* and *"Collective Unconscious"*—that captured the social, political, and psychological reverberations of the pandemic through Black cultural representation, community identity, and speculative futures (The Front). *"Past, Present, and Afro-Futurism,"* featuring works by Yashi Davalos, Renee Royale, and Alex Sorapuru, exemplified what scholar Reynaldo Anderson describes as Afro-Surrealism: an aesthetic that merges history, trauma, and Black cultural idealism through fantastical and future-oriented imagery. These works explored Black identity not as fixed or defined by struggle alone, but as a timeline of transformation—spanning ancestral memory, contemporary resistance, and speculative liberation. In a city

Photo Source: NOLA *The Front*

where Black communities were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 both economically and medically, this exhibition affirmed Black life as dignified and visionary.

Concurrently, *"Collective Unconscious,"* curated by Samantha Best, provided a complementary exploration of inner psychological spaces and shared emotional currents through mixed media. Featuring artists such as Craig Auge, Cesar E. Lopez, and C.J. Charbonneau, the show invited audiences to consider how collective crises—like pandemics—leave imprints not just on physical bodies but on the emotional fabric of communities (The Front).

What makes *The Front* particularly notable is not just the content of its exhibitions, but its structural ethos. As a grassroots, artist-led nonprofit, *The Front* prioritizes opportunities for BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and women artists—groups historically marginalized within the institutional art world. In doing so, *The Front* embodies what mutual aid looks like in the art world: not just providing physical space, but fostering long-term networks of care, solidarity, and representation.

Another example of art's role in fostering resilience during a crisis is the exhibition *"Home Is... A Sense of Place, A Sense of Self"*, held at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art from March to May 2022. Unlike *The Front*, the Ogden represents a more traditional institution.

Photo Source: Ogden Museum of Southern Art

However, this particular project, developed in collaboration with KID smART classrooms across New Orleans, centered on student voices and community storytelling at a time when children were among the most disrupted by pandemic life. The student artwork on display reflected deeply personal interpretations of "home"—a concept made especially fragile by the physical and

emotional isolation of lockdowns. Some pieces depicted comforting domestic scenes, while others expressed longing, displacement, or fractured identities. Through visual storytelling, students engaged with themes of belonging, safety, and change—raising questions not just about personal identity, but about what it means to live in a community that is constantly under threat from both natural and systemic forces (The Ogden).

Importantly, this exhibition highlights the role of arts-integrated education as a mode of healing and civic engagement. By encouraging young learners to process their experiences through art, the project amplified perspectives often ignored in public discourse about the pandemic. It also demonstrated how education, when paired with creativity, can empower students to become cultural narrators in their own right.

Together, *The Front* and the Ogden Museum's exhibitions form an Interpretive dialogue about how communities respond to crises not just by surviving, but by imagining and building new cultural futures. One was led by professional and emerging artists reclaiming space through grassroots infrastructure; the other was led by children exploring identity, place, and selfhood in a moment of historic disruption.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic irrevocably altered the practice of artistic life in New Orleans. It disrupted a long-standing system within the community, and exposed inequities in how art and artists are supported. But it also illuminated something perhaps even more powerful: the remarkable adaptability and enduring creativity of New Orleans' art community. From independent artists forming mutual aid networks to grassroots collectives transforming gallery spaces into community healing zones, New Orleans art did not disappear during the crisis, it

evolved.

This period has created lasting ripple effects that will continue to shape the future of art in the city. Institutions like the Ogden Museum that embraced community collaboration and educational storytelling are now equipped with models for deeper civic engagement. Meanwhile, grassroots spaces like *The Front* have demonstrated the impact of artist-led programming that prioritizes equity. As we move into a post-pandemic era, the challenge will be how to preserve this spirit of innovation and accessibility. The risk is not that art will vanish—it's that the systems that failed artists during the pandemic might reassert themselves without learning from what this crisis revealed.

The line between "institutional" and "community" art has been redrawn, perhaps permanently. Virtual exhibitions, pop-up performances, socially distanced parades, and public murals have expanded our understanding of where art can live and who it is for. Artists, particularly in New Orleans, have reclaimed public and digital spaces not as temporary fixes but as legitimate and dynamic platforms for expression. The pandemic taught us that art is not confined to white-walled galleries or ticketed performances but rather it is fluid, collective, and born from necessity as much as from inspiration.

Art In Bloom Exhibition; New Orleans Museum of Art
Photo Source: Masquida

COVID-19 has also prompted a reimagining of what it means to be an artist. In New Orleans, being an artist no longer simply implies the production of beauty or entertainment though now it means being a cultural worker, a historian, an advocate, and often, a first responder in moments of emotional crisis. The artist

became a conduit for connection when isolation was widespread, and a builder of meaning when meaning itself felt fragmented. As Rich and Dilworth both argue, the creative act during the pandemic was not just survival—it was a radical, community-driven reassertion of identity, value, and hope. Looking ahead, the lessons learned from this period offer a blueprint for a more inclusive and resilient arts culture. Ultimately, the story of art in New Orleans during the COVID-19 pandemic is not one of silence or loss, but of resurgence and reinvention. It reaffirms the city's legacy not just as a place where art is made, but as a place where art is lived.

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