

## **Kindness in giving? Giving to and through the arts in the time of COVID-19**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article uses kindness as a lens through which to analyse examples of giving to and through the arts in Aotearoa during the first year of COVID-19. We consider whether the exceptional conditions created by COVID-19 caused reconsideration of the way the arts look after society and why and how societies need to look after the arts. We do so by critically examining state and private giving to the arts in Aotearoa New Zealand, from March 2020-March 2021, alongside large- and small-scale artistic gestures of giving. It appears that a ‘kinder’ economy for the arts emerged during this time. While this did not disrupt the established asymmetries in the arts or society, there was a glimpse of how the neoliberal ethos for giving to the arts might be decentred by an ethos of ‘social flesh’ (Beasley & Bacchi, 2012).

**Keywords:** Aotearoa New Zealand; arts; COVID-19; giving; kindness; philanthropy

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### **Introduction**

We first wrote an abstract for this paper back in March 2020. At that time, COVID-19 and the pandemic response developed by the Government of Aotearoa-New Zealand (Aotearoa/ANZ) were rapidly exposing the fragility of the global economy and, within that, the deep precarity of the economy of the arts (Harwood, 2020). Our friends and family working in the arts and creative industries in Aotearoa and overseas saw their livelihoods unravel as Alert Levels shifted and arts and cultural events became unviable or even illegal under restrictions

imposed to control the spread of COVID-19. Arts organisations, large and small, established and emerging, started to fold or contract. Despite this, the arts' role as a creative force for wellbeing became increasingly evident, as a source of joy, distraction, and diversion; a break from adversity; delivering respite to those alone and bringing people together in safe ways, mobilising and supporting acts of mutual care, generosity, and resourcefulness. Artists were also agitating for a just response to the pandemic, raising difficult questions and exposing inequities. Even during the most restrictive lockdowns, artists found ways to inspire their communities, both local and worldwide, and community arts engagement was fostered by a series of initiatives spanning the lowest of tech (e.g., chalk drawing on pavements) to the highest (e.g., virtual exhibitions and concerts streamed live). Almost all were offered freely in the spirit of 'kindness,' understood as not only the practice of reciprocal respect and regard for one another but also as reinforcing a *visceral* sense of kinship while even close family members were kept apart. In Aotearoa and elsewhere, calls were made not just to send the arts sector a financial lifeline but to entirely rethink how the arts were resourced going forward. We examine whether the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 caused reconsideration of the way the arts look after society and why and how societies need to look after the arts. We consider whether a 'kinder' economy for the arts emerged because the everyday 'essential' value of the arts was more widely demonstrated and accepted, as well as the significance of people's heightened sense of embodied interdependence on societal resources and infrastructure.

COVID-19's impacts on the arts have been felt worldwide, and many countries took extraordinary measures in response (Bailey, 2020; Guardian Writers, 2020). We have decided to focus on Aotearoa in this article in part because it allows us to write about an arts sector that we both know and from our lived experiences of how COVID-19 and the national response played out during 2020 and the first half of 2021. Aotearoa's response to COVID-19 has been praised by other governments and global health agencies. It also moved into an initial 'recovery' phase earlier than many countries. Early research into the response of arts funders internationally suggests that Aotearoa's response had some distinct features, including the provision of rapid response funding (Harwood, 2020). There was also evidence that, including emergency and recovery funding, Aotearoa ranked very highly on its spending per capita on the arts during early responses to COVID-19 (in the top 5 of 35 countries) (Bailey, 2020). Together, this means Aotearoa offers a distinct case that has global relevance.

To understand how the arts sector and arts funders responded during the first year of COVID-19, it is instructive to know how the country and Government responded overall. In response to the possibility that COVID-19 may overwhelm its health system, Aotearoa pursued an elimination strategy (Baker et al., 2020). On March 21, 2020, the Prime Minister introduced four COVID-19 Alert Levels, which we outline below, determining what activities are possible in response to community infection rates.<sup>1</sup> These have been enacted nationwide or by region since the announcement. Simultaneous with the announcement was the move straight to Level 2 restrictions nationwide, an immediate escalation from Level 1 (which now describes the situation in Aotearoa while there is community transmission beyond but not within ANZ borders). Even at Level 1 (the status at the time of our writing in June 2021), borders are closed to almost all travellers.<sup>2</sup> Face coverings must be worn on public transport, and the use of the NZ COVID Tracer app to track places and people visited is strongly encouraged. At Level 2, when there is the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the NZ community, individuals must maintain a 2-metre distance from others in public and retail stores and a 1-metre distance in workplaces, eateries, and gyms, and gatherings are restricted to 100 people. At level 3, individuals must stay within their household ‘bubble’ unless at work or school; travel between regions is restricted; gatherings are permitted only for weddings, funerals, and tangihanga and limited to ten people; public venues must close, and all business transactions must be contactless. Level 4 is an effective lockdown, enacted if it is likely COVID-19 transmission is not contained. Household bubbles must not be breached, all gatherings are cancelled, and all businesses are closed except for essential services – supermarkets, petrol stations, pharmacies, clinics, and lifeline utilities. Significant arts-based activities become untenable at all but Level 1, including large-scale gallery exhibitions and live performances. Above Level 2, many arts sector activities become illegal. Following the announcement of COVID Alert levels and immediate escalation to level 2 on March 21, NZ entered level 3 on March 23, then level 4 on March 25.

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<sup>1</sup> The specific details of these Covid Alert Levels have changed over time in response to variants of the virus and perceptions of risk. We describe the levels of restriction as first applied.

<sup>2</sup> Except New Zealand citizens and residents with ‘valid travel conditions’ from countries not deemed ‘very high risk’. All arrivals enter managed quarantine for 14 days, except those from Cook Islands, Niue and parts of Australia, with whom there is a ‘travel bubble’ in place and only when said bubble has a green light to operate.

A paper written by several of ANZ's COVID-19 pandemic response advisors (Baker et al., 2020) states that 'Elimination of community transmission [via lockdowns and Alert Level constraints] offers public health, equity, and potentially economic advantages compared with a control strategy using mitigation or suppression.' Contrasting research has determined that the economic impacts of lockdown measures imposed in pursuit of elimination have been severe and are ongoing, and their impacts on mental wellbeing, and the need for the provision of psychosocial support, deserve greater attention (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). Moreover, even during the first months of the pandemic and the Government's response, social inequalities were exacerbated. There were particular detrimental effects on those unable to safely and effectively work from home, those in frontline 'essential worker' roles, and sectors of the population more vulnerable to serious illness or death if exposed to the virus, especially Māori and Pasifika (Henrickson, 2020). Concurrently, nationally and globally, the extremely wealthy got wealthier (Taunton, 2021; *Wealth increase of ten men*, 2021; see also the article by Alan Johnson in this issue).

The COVID-19 response adopted by the NZ government and led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern included calls to action designed to foster shared purpose (Wilson, 2020). Ardern's announcement on March 23, 2020, of an immediate shift to level 3, with 48 hours to prepare for level 4, focused on uniting Aotearoa to *minimise harm to lives* and thereby *minimise harm to livelihoods* (Ardern, 2020). Ardern acknowledged, 'I am in no doubt that the measures I have announced today will cause unprecedented economic and social disruption. But they are necessary.' She then asked the country to 'Go home tonight and check on your neighbours, start a phone tree with your street, plan how you'll stay in touch with one another. We will get through this together, but only if we stick together, so please be strong and be kind.' Over four days, the Government had placed unprecedented restrictions on public freedom, and lives had been radically disrupted. Aotearoa was going 'hard' and 'early' to protect its population, seeking compliance from what came to be called 'the team of five million' to not only adhere to the restrictions in the interests of public safety but also in the spirit of 'kindness' (Cumming, 2021).

This paper takes up the lens of kindness as a way to get a critical and nuanced understanding of how this 'spirit of kindness' was manifested/enacted in the context of the arts (for a broader critique, see Alan Johnson's article in this issue). Kindness as a virtue or attribute is closely associated with giving, particularly idealised, altruistic giving. By using

critical theories of kindness, however, we go beyond this ideal to consider what different forms or conceptions of kindness can be found in discourse about giving to and through the arts at the time of COVID-19 in Aotearoa.

This article is concerned with giving *through* the arts, as well as giving *to* the arts. To clarify, we are less interested in the way the arts inspire positive attributes, like kindness, in individuals and society (Broadwood, 2012). Instead, we have considered the many ways in which art can be understood as a gesture of kindness through giving, from artists making works that involve people being given something or taking something away through to artists who place themselves and their creative resources at the service of a community (Sansi-Roca, 2015; Hyde, 2009; see also Harvey in this issue). First, we introduce and analyse concepts of kindness in association with giving and the arts. Next, we place into a narrative timeline acts of giving to the arts made by funders in Aotearoa between March 2020 and March 2021. Then, we consider the extent to which funding initiatives and messaging enact Arden's 'spirit of kindness,' finding what we consider benevolent neoliberalism (Beasley & Bacchi, 2007) and a changed public sentiment towards the arts. To explore acts of giving through the arts, we offer three discrete vignettes, covering the work of a solo artist, a collective, and communities. Finally, we explore the idea that the different gestures of giving through the arts during COVID-19 contributed to shifts in public sentiments towards the arts and offered felt experiences of other kinds of cultural and social economy. We suggest that there was a glimpse of how the neoliberal ethos for giving to the arts might be decentred by an ethos of 'social flesh,' acknowledging embodied 'interconnection and mutual reliance' (Beasley & Bacchi, 2007, p. 289).

### **Kindness and giving**

COVID-19 has made it impossible to ignore what Beasley and Bacchi (2007) call 'embodied interdependence ... shared embodied reliance, *mutual* reliance, of people across the globe on social space, infrastructure and resources' (p. 280). Beasley and Bacchi are sceptical of proposals that character attributes like kindness, trust, respect, and care can remedy the erosion of social cooperation and collectivism under neoliberalism. Their criticism is targeted at the way focusing on the political possibility of personal virtues will lead perhaps to more benevolent neoliberalism, but not necessarily to equitable social and economic relationships. This is because most of these attributes are premised on the 'hierarchical distinction' between

the vulnerable/needy/dependent receiver and the caring/ privileged/independent giver (p. 285). This is pertinent to the topic of this paper because of the strong association between kindness and altruistic/selfless acts of giving.

The idea that giving, if done without self-interest, is a practice of kindness is long-standing (Hamrick, 2002). Indeed, giving to good causes, in the form of philanthropy, has been described as the pure ‘expression of kindness,’ with the classical Greek term *philanthropia* encompassing acts of love or kindness to the human race – often, but not always, in the form of giving (Kidd, 1996). However, studies of gifting continue to highlight the difficulty of differentiating between selfless or self-interested acts of giving, the asymmetrical social relationships gifts invoke and indeed uphold, and how gift-giving serves to maintain, rather than disrupt, social hierarchies (Vallely, 2020). For example, multiple authors (Bremmer, 2017; Kidd, 1996; Vallely, 2020) highlight the double nature of philanthropy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, both providing for the poor and compelling the poor to work or improve themselves morally. Kidd (1996) proposes that this came about because of the unequal society at the time; when a gift could not be returned materially, reciprocation came to be represented affectively and morally. These practices of giving cemented the hierarchical social structure, as recipients displayed gratitude, deference, and ‘good’ behaviour, while philanthropists accrued social status, moral credit, and access to political influence (Kidd, 1996). Studies of contemporary philanthropy suggest that it has become increasingly detached from the ideal of ‘kindness in giving.’ For example, Eva Engelman’s (2002) personal reflection depicts the transformation of charitable giving into a profitable industry where kindness is commodified, commercialised, and competed for. Vallely (2020) evaluates the emerging ‘new’ philanthropy, or philanthrocapitalism explicitly organised around capitalist market principles. The considerable increase in philanthropy since the 1970s was justified, in part, by the ‘trickle-down theory’ associated with (but not limited to) neoliberalism, that policies to increase the wealth of the rich (like tax breaks) will eventually benefit the poor. However, the rise in private philanthropy has correlated with a continued rise in social inequality (Vallely, 2020). Vallely (2020) concludes that philanthrocapitalism’s development of entrepreneurial investment models and metrics to maximise value and outcomes has led to a narrow focus on giving that achieves individual outcomes and failed to address political, social, and economic factors. For this reason, Vallely

(2020) describes contemporary capitalism as ‘impoverished,’ almost entirely detached from feelings of compassion or love (p. 5).

While kindness is seen as a defining characteristic of philanthropy, the term kindness is almost absent in scholarship on the arts and giving. Giving to the arts does not seem to be as readily accepted as a selfless expression of kindness. This can be because the donors’ interests, enjoyment of the arts, or related art events, are assumed to be a key motivator (Vallely, 2020). However, patronage of and philanthropic giving to the arts has historically brought together multiple motivations, including ideas about kindness and the public good or public service. For example, Phebe Lowell Bowditch (2001) examines the Roman system of patronage, as represented in the poetry of first-century poet Horace. Horace depicts poetry as circulating in multiple economies in the Roman Era, from financial markets to gift exchange. In the latter, the relationship is one in which a generous material gift from the patron is reciprocated with gifts of poetry. This form of patronage was governed by a complex set of discursive codes, involving the cultivation of elite power and influence, the fulfilment of duty/obligation, selfless sacrifice, kindness, and voluntary public beneficence (Bowditch, 2001, p. 15). Patronising poetry served the interests of the patron, not just by bringing ‘the important boons of status and immortality’ but also by performing the civic function of cultivating the ‘ideological cohesion of a community’ (Bowditch, 2001, p. 3). Writing about the USA and UK in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, Vallely (2020) identifies a shift in philanthropy from giving to directly benefit the poor to giving in support of social goods, e.g., libraries and the arts, the aim being individual improvement or cultivation, via engagement with literacy and culture. The idea that giving to the arts is a good thing for society was reflected in the inclusion of the arts as a charitable purpose in many countries, with donations qualifying for tangible benefits, such as tax relief. Incentivising private giving to the arts means philanthropists and philanthropic organisations have tremendous power over the cultural landscape.

Vallely (2020) argues that ‘the power imbalance implicit in much philanthropy – by which a gift carries conditions requiring the recipient to adopt the values of the giver – is more explicit with philanthropy in the arts’ (p. 356). Indeed, when Lowell Bowditch (2001) interrogates the idea of reciprocation in patronage in Horace’s poetry, she finds the poet evokes the imagery of debt bondage with the poet obligated to ‘make the return gift of poetry as the embodied or ‘reified’ form of his labour’ (pp. 3–4). However, Lowell Bowditch (2001)

then considers the case of *gratia*, understood as both the act of doing a favour and the sense of gratitude. In this case, a beneficiary can never fully pay back the benefactor; there is always an affective residue or surplus. The value of the gift continues to increase even after being reciprocated and, together with the relationship between those involved, exceeds the conclusion of the gift exchange. Politically, patronage can be viewed as cultivating a kind of affective sociality, a social glue, albeit one that largely holds existing, inequitable structures in place. Critics like Jen Harvie (2013), for example, argue that the transference of responsibility for funding the arts to private philanthropy has been effective in helping neoliberalism ‘stick’ in contexts like the UK. Nevertheless, as explored below, because giving exceeds quantification, because its social and affective residue cannot be fully controlled or enclosed, forms of giving remain central to postcapitalist economic imaginaries.

It seems clear that the problematic asymmetrical relations of the gift exchange do not go away when the giver or philanthropist (in the broadest sense) is an artist. Hyde (2009) proposes that the reception of an artwork can be understood as the reception of a gift. Unpacking this proposal, Roger Sansi (2015) argues that Hyde’s ideal of the pure gift, as a spontaneous exchange free of prior/external interests, is similar to the modernist conception of aesthetic autonomy and similarly limited. The legacy of this modernist perspective, Sansi (2015) proposes, is that artists who use modes of gift-giving often wrongly assume the equality and autonomy of both the giver and recipients. Instead, like artworks, gifts can be understood as radically heteronomous, enmeshed in social, material, and affective processes, and subject to multiple, sometimes conflicting, imperatives. From this perspective, Helen Nicholson (2015) proposes the gift as an ethical guide for participatory theatre practice. She outlines how ‘positive attributes of empathy, generosity and care’ associated with gift-giving (Nicholson, 2015, p. 166) need always be viewed in relation to the Maussian association of gifts with obligation, status and coercion. Sansi (2015) finds the greatest political possibility of gifts in arts practices that focus on the chance encounters and surprising feelings that arise from gift-giving/receiving and surrender to/celebrating the pleasure of excessive giving, in ways that refuse the social and property relations of consumer capitalism. For example, the Situationists saw playful and excessive giving as the ultimate ‘detournement,’ a kind of affective transgression of capitalist social relations (p. 105; see also the article by Mark Harvey in this issue). Nicholson (2015) also turns to emotions, creativity, irrationality, and unpredictability of gifting, distinguishing it from commodity exchange. Lowell Bowditch



(2001) argues that gifts can produce aesthetic pleasure, or ‘aesthetic surplus,’ which can be the basis of resisting quid pro quo exchange relations (p. 118). When giving through the arts, a visceral aesthetic surplus amplifies the irreducibly qualitative nature of the gift and, perhaps, its transgressive potential (Sansi, 2005, p. 99).

Notably, several scholars who have tried to address the association of kindness with asymmetrical social relations have turned to the concept of solidarity (Baccolini, 2017). Concerning public health policy, Ballatt, Campling & Maloney (2020), for example, appeal to a conception of kindness rooted in solidarity, where people ‘understand and feel their interdependence, feel responsibility for their successors and express all this in attitudes and actions towards each other’ (p. 9). Solidarity is multiple. It is expressed through various forms of mutual relationships between humans and also between humans and the natural world. Solidarity can be voluntary but also coerced; it can serve inclusion and equity but also solidify homogenous, exclusive group identities (Jerne, 2021). Ballat and colleagues (2020) address these tensions by explicitly calling for species solidarity, ‘kindness being in solidarity with human need’ (p. 13). In emphasising responsibility *for* others, however, this conception of kindness continues what Bacchi and Beasley (2007) identify as an ‘asymmetrical vision of sociality’ (p. 286). In the place of normative attributes like care and kindness, Beasley and Bacchi (2007) propose the political metaphor of the social flesh, ‘the sensuous fleshliness of sociality as a means to invoke an acknowledgement of interconnection and mutual reliance and the political implications of this’ (p. 289). When people were denied close contact with all but those in their household ‘bubbles,’ tenets of ‘sensuous’ sociality usually taken for granted became notable in their absence. Did the heightened awareness of ‘social flesh’ during COVID-19 shift, if only temporarily, people’s sense of the value of the arts and what it means to give to and through the arts?

### **Giving to the arts at times of crisis: A narrative timeline**

This section critically reflects on acts of giving to the arts made by funders in Aotearoa between March 2020 and March 2021. Our focus is four key players in the arts funding landscape in Aotearoa. First, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage (MCH), which has an advisory role, engages in research, reviews legislation and policy, and has a role in looking after cultural and heritage taonga treasures. MCH administers Crown funding to 18 arts, sports, heritage, and culture agencies, including Creative New Zealand (CNZ). Second,

Creative New Zealand (Arts Council of New Zealand, Toi Aotearoa) is a Crown entity governed by the Arts Council. It aims to ‘encourage, promote and support the arts in New Zealand for the benefit of all New Zealanders. It upholds the right to artistic freedom and promotes a New Zealand identity in the arts’ (CNZ website). CNZ is government-funded via the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. Between 2016 and 2019, CNZ invested between \$40-50 million NZ dollars per year in the arts. CNZ funds individual artists and arts practitioners, informal groups/collectives, and formal arts organisations through various funding streams. A third player is the Arts Foundation. Founded in 1998, the Arts Foundation is a charitable trust that provides a range of support to artists in Aotearoa, including financial awards, funded residencies, and a specific arts crowdfunding platform. Other activities include advocacy and promoting private giving to the arts. Finally, regional councils invest in the arts locally and play a key role in regional arts ecosystems.

As limits on social gatherings were put in place in March 2020 (when gatherings of over 500 people were banned in the first response to COVID-19), the arts media immediately called for a relief package for the arts (Amery, 2020). They emphasised how the limits had immediately affected the ability of those in the arts to generate income, particularly freelance practitioners (at least a third of the creative workforce), who got paid ‘gig by gig.’ As the Government announced its initial relief package for businesses and workers, the Minister of Finance, Grant Robertson, acknowledged the arts as a sector of particular concern. CNZ committed to providing details of an emergency response package by the end of March. Artist-led mutual support and advocacy networks were quickly established, including an ‘Aotearoa Arts and Events during the COVID-19 Crisis’ Facebook page, which was heavily used as an independent space for sharing resources, strategies, and experiences, and coordinating advocacy (Powell, 2020; Forbes, 2020).

On March 19, 2020, New Zealand banned large gatherings and closed its borders to non-citizens/permanent residents. This shift was recognised immediately by CNZ’s Chief Executive Stephen Wainwright as a ‘game changer’ for the arts (Green, 2020a). He reported they were concerned about the loss of income faced by the sector and were working with MCH and the Arts Council to agree to a plan. Even at this early stage, the case was being made that ‘extraordinary circumstances’ required artists and the arts to be supported in an ‘extraordinary way’ (Green, 2020a). On March 24, CNZ announced a forthcoming \$16

million (\$4.5m of which was new funding) emergency response package for organisations, practitioners, and freelancers. CNZ suspended its usual grant schemes, cancelling applications still in the system, but introduced two new schemes, one for up to \$10k to provide relief for loss of income and one for up to \$50k to make new work or adapt existing work for the COVID-19 context. Their ongoing investment clients (organisations receiving multi-year funding from CNZ) had access to additional financial relief, also by application. The rationale for this simplified, quick-to-access, quick-turnaround funding was the need to ‘minimise harm’ to the sector and respond to the ‘urgent need’ created by the ‘unprecedented times’ (Powell, 2020) This announcement came just one day before the whole country moved to Level 4 self-isolation, within household ‘bubbles,’ as described above. The package was received positively by the sector. Claire Mabey, Director of Wellington’s Verb Festival, commented:

Their staff have been incredibly caring and responsive, and it’s interesting to see how they dovetail into other funding agencies. Creative New Zealand is helping us survive and we’re doing everything to adapt models and expectations and exploring new models to work, so it’s important that Councils and other funding agencies help that creative process – there’s got to be a sense of everybody working together. (Powell, 2020)

Scrutiny of how the \$16m compared per capita to responses in other countries was used to argue for a more substantial and long-term response (Powell, 2020). Sector spokespeople called for the arts to be recognised as an ‘essential service’ and for a more significant conversation about the future of the arts in Aotearoa.<sup>3</sup> Some arts-led advocates called for the \$16m to be doubled (Powell, 2020). Even before applications opened, several independent fundraising campaigns were launched to save iconic venues from closing forever.

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<sup>3</sup> On March 16, 2021, at the Auckland Arts Festival in cooperation with Auckland Live, six members of the arts sector considered the question ‘Are the arts essential?’ debating the role the arts play in our day-to-day lives, how we would fare without them, and the economic, social and emotional benefit to Aotearoa New Zealand of a flourishing creative sector. MC Tanea Heke, head of Toi Whakaari New Zealand Drama School, noted ‘Covid was just one more thing, in a long list of things, that try and make my job more difficult’ (*Are the arts essential?*, 2021).

On April 6, when cases of COVID-19 in the community were rising above 1,000, CNZ formally announced details of the first phase of its Emergency Response Package (as outlined above). This \$16m package was later described as a ‘career lifeline’ by the arts media (Green, 2020b). CNZ described the arts sector as having been ‘knocked to its knees’ and committed itself to ‘working alongside’ the sector at its time of need (Creative New Zealand, 2020a). Evidence indicated that the arts were being more acutely affected by COVID-19 than many other sectors. CNZ acknowledged that artists’ work had been poorly paid and unstable prior to 2020, and COVID-19 had amplified this. CNZ’s research on creative incomes and careers showed that most creative professionals either found it difficult to live on their current income or were just getting by (Creative New Zealand, 2019). The report indicated pay gaps based on gender, age/experience, artform, and ethnicity. This was the basis for CNZ offering additional relief for loss of income to artists, on top of the Government’s wage subsidy scheme, as well as resources to adapt and keep making work. They were clear that their redeployment of funds and mobilisation of new funds were in line with their four established objectives: to sustain careers in the arts, develop arts practice, encourage innovation in the arts, and provide opportunities for diverse communities to access and participate in arts experiences.

On April 14, a further 13 Million NZ Dollars of CNZ funding was announced. At this point, questions were raised by the sector about whether this new funding would be used to address inequities of funding distribution or the precarity and unsustainability of income for artists and arts organisations, both of which were long-standing issues. Sector representatives articulated their desire to build ‘a more sustainable, equitable and diverse future for the arts’ (Hoey, 2020). The possibility of a universal wage for artists was raised, for example. CNZ spokespersons were clear that their primary aim was building sector survival, resilience, and adaptation through ‘the development, distribution and presentation of New Zealand art to New Zealand audiences ... as opposed to recompensing people for perceived disadvantage’ (Hoey, 2020).

On April 17, 2020, CNZ launched a public arts advocacy campaign, Thankful For Art. The aim was to get people to celebrate and value the way the arts were making a difference to their lives while isolated in their lockdown bubbles as a way to garner greater support for artists receiving additional support at the time. The campaign featured artists and other high-profile figures and represented a broad spectrum of art practice, from internet cat

memes and dancing in the kitchen to professional dance, literature, film, and opera. People were called on to share the art they were grateful for, during the Level 4 lockdown, on social media, using the campaign hashtag. The website provided information about how the arts were important to personal wellbeing and asked people to support the arts by making sure they paid for content they consumed online, supporting NZ-made content, giving by donating to fundraising campaigns or The Arts Foundation, writing fan mail, and advocating to MPs. The campaign ran for a month and was picked up and shared by numerous arts organisations, regional arts development agencies, and some international websites.

Also, in April 2020, The Ministry of Culture and Heritage released a report, *Impact of COVID-19 on the Arts and Creative Sector*. The report predicted an 11.7% decline in employment in the sector and a 16.4% contraction in its contribution to GDP. The lower proportional decline in employment, the report proposes, was due to the high proportion of self-employed workers in the arts and creative sector (1/3 of the workforce, compared to 16% across the rest of the economy). The evidence and modelling presented in this report became the basis of most subsequent additional resourcing to the arts during and post COVID-19 (Ministry of Culture and Heritage, 2020). In retrospect, the rapidity of these responses is impressive.

Beyond the state arts funding, the Arts Foundation called on its donors and built a \$100,000 Future Fund in response to the Level 4 lockdown, which was gifted to a hundred artists and arts organisations (The Arts Foundation, 2020a). They also reported more than a million dollars being raised over three months for artists on their Boosted crowdfunding platform. This exceeded what was typically raised on the platform in an entire year. They also piloted Boosted Live, a way to charge for live-streamed performance. The Arts Foundation explicitly framed the arts as a ‘gift’ to New Zealanders, emphasising the ‘essential’ value of the arts at a time of crisis and artists’ need for an extra ‘leg up’ at a time of increased hardship. Notably, a return on the gift was expected. Echoing Horace’s imagery of debt bondage being worked off through the artist’s labour, the Foundation stated, ‘This isn’t a grant. This is a gift; a gift that artists can only receive if they make a go of it themselves’ (The Arts Foundation, 2020b).

From within arts-sector commentary, the strong economic rationale for rescuing the arts was questioned. In *The Big Idea*, Mark Amery (2020) asked whether the lockdown had caused people to ask, ‘how are we doing in valuing life beyond economic measures? As we

come back together as a society, culture is not only one of our most important glues; it's vital in empowering us, as makers and as participants, rather than consumers. Making us rethink what we want to change, exploring different histories, disciplines and perspectives ... it's a time for the arts to get busy; and, for us to commission artists at every level, to involve them in every facet of our lives so that they, in turn, encourage our own creativity' (Amery, 2020). The response to this call did not come with the Government's announcement on May 14 of the Budget for the fiscal year 2020/21, dubbed 'Rebuilding Together.' At this time, details of a package for the arts were promised in a few days.

On May 28, 2020, two weeks after the Budget announcement, the Prime Minister and Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage Jacinda Ardern announced \$95m of investment in the arts and cultural sector, proposing, 'Now more than ever we need a thriving arts and cultural sector. We saw in the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes the potential of creativity and culture to create jobs, drive economic recovery and enhance social wellbeing, and they can help us do it again' (New Zealand Government, 2020a). This funding included an additional \$25m for CNZ, \$1.4m for the Antarctic Heritage Trust, \$11.364m to Heritage New Zealand, \$18m for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, a \$2m Museum Hardship Fund, \$31.8m for Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, \$2.3m for Royal New Zealand Ballet and \$4m for the Waitangi National Trust Board. Associate Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage Carmel Sepuloni emphasised the funding for National organisations (e.g., Te Papa) would safeguard jobs, allowing staff to continue to 'care for our taonga and provide opportunities for New Zealanders to access the cultural experiences that are so important to our wellbeing' (New Zealand Government, 2020a). The importance of the arts to post-disaster recovery, wellbeing, and cultural preservation is present, but, citing the report outlined above, the announcement emphasised economic recovery and job retention and creation. The 'flow on effect' of the arts and creative industries into other areas of the economy was also stressed.

There was some disappointment and discontent from the sector, as the funding seemed to focus entirely on resourcing established institutions rather than independent artists or the entire arts ecology (Powell, 2020). The University of Auckland's Centre for Arts and Social Transformation director, Professor Peter O'Connor (*COVID-19: Arts sector funding: Academic*, 2020), identified 'no wider vision for the absolute importance that the arts have in rebuilding not just an economy but the mental health and wellbeing of a nation.' O'Connor described the funding as disappointing for its 'lack of ability to draw the dots together and to

say the arts have a vital part to play and this is how we're going to go about doing it.' He concluded that 'the government's priorities were not with the arts' and that the World Health Organisation's (WHO) report on the role of arts in improving health and wellbeing (2019) had been ignored. The report presented 'evidence from a wide variety of disciplinary approaches and methodologies for the potential value of the arts in contributing to core determinants of health' and identified 'policy considerations ... to support the development of long-term policies or strategies that will provide more synergized collaboration between health and arts sectors that could realize the potential of the arts for improving global health. As many of these priorities align with existing priorities and declarations, the development of new programmes that implement these policies should be of mutual benefit to the arts and to health and social care internationally' (WHO, 2019, p. 57).

Then, at the very end of June, a second announcement was made. Ardern announced a \$175 million Covid Relief funding package, which would involve new schemes aimed at boosting the arts and creative economies, including a Creative Jobseekers programme, Creative Arts Recovery and Employment fund, Cultural Innovation Fund, Cultural Capability Fund, new libraries funding, and New Zealand Music Recovery Fund. This package was represented as a 'once in a lifetime' investment in the arts. In a press release stating that the arts and creative sector contributes nearly \$11 billion a year to NZ's gross domestic product and employs 90,000 people, the Prime Minister said, 'Modelling based on Treasury forecasts suggests that without government intervention, the cultural sector will be hit roughly twice as hard as the rest of the economy, and 11,000 jobs could be lost within a 12-month period' (New Zealand Government, 2020b). This unprecedented investment in the arts was received very positively within the Arts. Claire Mabey, the director of Verb Wellington, again commented publicly (World spends to protect culture, 2020) that the package was 'incredibly reassuring and frankly moving,' adding: 'Artists and access to the arts will contribute hugely to the regeneration that will take place over the coming months and years as we process the events of 2020' (Guardian Writers, 2020). The package was seen as a step towards more sustainable investment in the arts and recognition of the importance of the arts to the fabric of society. Critics continued to highlight the absence of any coherent, long-term strategy for the arts that could guide the funding use (Powell, 2020, June 2).

Local authority funding and investment in the arts vary widely between the different regions of Aotearoa. There is little public commentary on whether or how most local

authorities changed their strategy during COVID-19. The exception is Wellington Council, which acknowledged the specific ways the arts and artists were being affected and adjusted their funding to maintain existing infrastructure and fund new initiatives focused on ‘resilience, sustainability and recovery’ in the COVID-19 environment (Harwood 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Local authority budgets were adversely impacted by COVID-19, by drops in tourism, for example. In response, Auckland Council proposed significant cuts to events, facilities, programming, grants for events, and public arts spending. Sector organisations and advocacy focused on making submissions in response to these proposals. A submission template, developed by a grassroots arts advocacy network, called on individuals and organisations to let the council know about the role of the arts and ngā toi in the wake of COVID-19 and a more comprehensive regional recovery. This advocacy emphasised the inherent value of ngā toi, arts and culture in the region, as taonga, and the importance of the arts to wellbeing, social connection, and inclusion. It called for cultural inequities to be addressed through increased visibility and celebration of ngā toi Māori, the arts of Moana Oceania, and the arts of Asian and other communities. It then mentioned the employment and other economic contribution of the arts to the region. Ultimately, some concessions were made in the emergency budget, but events provision and programming were reduced, as was funding for some arts and culture institutions.

In July 2020, having thanked the arts sector earlier for their ‘kindness and patience’ while processing applications, CNZ reported its need to make changes due to a massive surge in applications. It was going to change the format of its Arts Grants, introducing eight quick-turn-around rounds per year, with a limit of 200 applications for each round. They also reported a 55% increase in spending, expecting to fund 200 more Arts Grants projects than previous years. There would also be an annual Arts Grant for applicants with a track record with CNZ to get funding for larger, longer projects. Ngā toi rohe Arts in the Regions fund was intended to incentivise arts investment beyond Aotearoa’s urban centres (Powell, 2020). As discussed further below, this change turned out to adversely affect individual and collective wellbeing across the arts.

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<sup>4</sup> A year later, in April 2021, a proposal to restructure Wellington’s City Gallery which included the loss of several key staff was described as ‘ruinous’ (Campbell, 2021).



In September 2020, in the run-up to the 2020 election, Aotearoa's conservative Taxpayers Alliance released a mocking critique of projects funded by Creative New Zealand's Arts Continuity Grants. Creative New Zealand responded with an unusually emotive statement of solidarity with the sector. Departing from the standard rationale for the changes to arts funding in 2020, this statement highlighted the importance of the arts and ngā toi to people's wellbeing, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, and the ways artists were often amongst the first responders in a crisis, even when their livelihoods and wellbeing were impacted (Creative New Zealand, 2020b).

In Sept/Oct 2020, over 6000 people watched an online debate between representatives from the Labour, Green, and National parties discussing their arts policies and plans for the sector's development. The forum was one outcome of Auckland-based Ngā Toi arts advocacy. It revealed the lack of policy and strategy guiding Labour's investment in the arts. In a subsequent document, *Ngā toi in Aotearoa: 2020 and beyond*, this network called on the Government to think more long-term about its investment in the arts, given the vulnerability of the sector that COVID-19 had exposed (Te Taumata Toi-a-iwi, 2020). It also called for a more connected approach to funding the arts in a way that explicitly recognised its contribution to wellbeing, honoured treaty obligations to Māori, and improved funding equity. There continued to be calls from the sector advocates for long term strategy and sustainable funding for the arts (Biggs, 2020)

In December 2020, following a period of sector consultation, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage launched the first of the funding streams created with the Government's investment in Covid Recovery for the Arts Sector. This and subsequent announcements about this funding emphasised the sector amongst the worst hit by COVID-19 needed investment across the whole ecosystem to better enable the arts to adapt long-term to a changing environment. The focus was on sustainability, resilience, 'recovery, regeneration and revitalisation.' Arts commentators took up this idea of the funds strengthening the sector, '2020 was the year we vowed to be kind to each other. 2021 is shaping as the year we make each other stronger' (The Big Idea Editor, 2021). The theme of arts contributing to wellbeing became most attached to a significant strand of funding targeted at organisations providing access to the arts for people experiencing barriers due to disability or mental health, indicating a relatively narrow conception of the ways the arts contribute to wellbeing. The idea of some of the inequities around access to the arts and arts funding being 'levelled up'

was also present in discussion about another fund for cultural events which prioritised Māori and Pacific cultural organisations and a fund aimed at activating the arts in Aotearoa's more rural regions.

It is worth noting that by the end of March 2021, a year into the pandemic during which the national arts sector was reported as being in crisis, the secondary art market appeared to be doing incredibly well, with local coverage reporting, 'Art market skyrocketing' (Schaufeld, 2021). When a Banksy artwork sold locally for \$1.45 million, it was described by International Art Centre director Richard Thomson as 'a career highlight for me and for the art gallery and for the New Zealand art scene.' Further, 'Charlie Ninow, the head of art at Webb's auction house in Aotearoa, said the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 has led to a shift in people's thinking about what is valuable.' Reflecting the uptake of online modes of business and creative arts, Ninow added that 'People are looking for new ways to store wealth. NFT (non-fungible tokens) is digital artwork, and it has gone crazy since the first lockdown. People are spending millions for computer files.' Notably, both experts focussed on COVID-19 driven investment in artworks made by overseas artists as mechanisms for wealth management rather than philanthropic support of local artists. The 'New Zealand art scene' delineated here is remarkably international in its focus and rarefied in its scope.

### **A kinder economy for the arts?**

So, to what extent do the funding initiatives and messaging about the arts during COVID-19 enact the 'spirit of kindness' called for by Ardern? On an initial reading, the rapid move by CNZ to protect the livelihoods and creative practice of artists and arts organisations in March and April and subsequent direction of new funds to the sector by MCH and CNZ for COVID-19 recovery seem to represent increased generosity and benevolence to the arts and artists. That this response provided a lifeline for many artists and arts organisations seems clear. However, MCH, CNZ, and the other funders discussed above rarely broke away from reproducing their asymmetrical relationship with artists and the arts sector. This is evident in the rationales for new forms of funding, or increased funding, for artists and arts organisations. Only a small proportion of the messaging around this new funding offered a different rationale for what arts should be funded, why, and how. The contribution of the arts to individual and collective wellbeing was given as a reason for additional resourcing for the

arts. Nevertheless, ultimately, one strand of the new funding was administered with wellbeing as the primary rationale. It focused mainly on providing access to the arts to the most ‘vulnerable’ or ‘disadvantaged’ rather than shifting the rationale for funding the arts overall. By far, the leading case made for additional funding for the arts was a financial one, that funding the arts would protect creative jobs and, therefore, keep creatives contributing to GDP. The spirit of kindness that was enacted, then, seems to be that of the benevolent neoliberalism defined by Beasley and Bacchi (2007) because, as argued further below, the opportunity to address inequities within the arts sustainably was not obviously acted on.

New, different, or increased funding for the arts was frequently justified by referencing evidence that artists themselves were particularly vulnerable, in need of a lifeline at a time of crisis. It was recognised as a caring response. However, this response deals with artists as economically atomised individuals, not as bodies nor as a collective. We are not questioning the prevalence of low, underpaid, and precarious work in the arts in Aotearoa, nor the ambition to create more and better-paid jobs for artists. We are questioning whether there was any change to the underlying logic and structures for how artistic work is resourced and valued (as argued in more detail by Mullen and Harvey, in press). To some extent, Engelman’s commodified kindness was evident, as all funders were clear that a return of some kind was expected for their ‘investment’ in artists or the arts sector. For example, in almost all of the funding initiatives outlined above, there was an explicit or implicit expectation that the artists or organisations funded needed to return the ‘gift’ by becoming more economically self-sustaining. For example, the Arts Foundation very much presents their giving as ‘not a hand-out, but a hand up’; by staying productive, contributing to a stable or growing economy; or contributing to wellbeing. This expectation of an economic or social return means the relationship between the donor-artist-society/community/audience remains hierarchical, with the arts at the service of the state and society, with donors (public and private) making decisions about what and who the arts are good for.

In most instances, funding was administered in the same ways as before COVID-19, through competitive, contestable grants, individual artist awards, and crowdfunding (although, early on, barriers, such as length and complexity of applications, supporting evidence, and eligibility criteria, were kept very minimal). Critiques made from within the arts sector in mid-2021 suggest that while funders’ aims to protect employment and maintain creative production were realised, the funding structures and processes reproduced previously

established hierarchies and inequalities in the arts sector and, in some cases, even generated new adversities. An example of this is the new Arts Grants process outlined above. With the 200 application limit, this quick response mode was an understandable reaction to the rise in demand for funding and the need for faster decision-making within such a rapidly changing environment. However, adverse consequences for the wellbeing of artists and the sector soon emerged. Once the 200 application limit is reached, the system closes for that round. The CNZ webpage shows how many submissions have been received towards the 200 limit, acting like a countdown clock. This, together with the 20-30% success rate, creates intense pressure on applicants. As the limit approaches, applicants for the round panic and rush to get an application in before the round closes, scrambling to complete the form and get the supporting evidence. The first time one of this paper's authors was involved in an application, the number of submissions reached 130 just over a week before the final deadline. There were panicked phone calls late into the night about what to do, but the 200 limit was reached the next morning before anything could be done. Another contributor to this special issue submitted the 201<sup>st</sup> application to one funding round. For both projects and teams, this meant delaying their work, with all the associated stress. No one has yet spoken on the record about the emotional toll of this model. This funding stream plays an integral part in supporting the practice development and livelihoods of many artists; critiquing it publicly is a considerable risk.

In March 2021, a news article featuring interviews with a series of arts practitioners reported that it was still overwhelmingly challenging to make a sustainable living as an artist (Chumko, 2021). Little seemed to have changed regarding the precarity, low pay, and pay inequities reported by CNZ in 2019 (Creative New Zealand, 2019). A producer reported having to end her popular Wellington cabaret show because of the difficulty of getting funding. She describes the hefty workload involved, the high level of competition, and the difficulty of challenging decisions. The artist notes that it was a system that favoured those with the most resources to put into a grant application. In the same report, a Wellington performance maker suggested the system needed to be redesigned by artists to meet their needs better. The idea of a universal wage for artists is proposed again here. Other critics observed that the new funding had not significantly redrawn the asymmetries created by the established arts funding system, with established organisations, including those like NZSO

and RNZB, who have relatively secure direct funding from the Government, appearing to benefit most.

Responses from the sector to the changing funding landscape consistently called for greater solidarity between arts funders, artists/arts organisations, and society. Funders and society were invited to recognise the diverse nature and multiple values of the arts. The contributions made by the arts to society, aesthetically, critically, and in terms of multiple wellbeings were emphasised more frequently than the economic contribution to employment, GDP, or flow-on benefits to other sectors. The sector presented the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 as an opportunity to imagine and create a more humanised, dignified, connected, and sustainable funding system. This included proposing a universal wage for artists be considered and existing funding systems be redesigned to address inequities. This sense of solidarity and mutuality was missing in most communications from CNZ and MCH about the COVID-19 funding and the dispassionate (or, in Vallely's [2020] terms, 'impoverished' [p. 5]) policy priorities. However, there were some critical gestures of solidarity from funders. These included momentary expressions of compassion and love, as in the response to the Taxpayers Alliance. Moreover, we propose the continued public messaging from CNZ, MCH, and other funders from March 2020 onwards, the advocacy initiative of CNZ, sector-led advocacy, and the distinct context of people's heightened sense of embodied interdependence in relation to COVID-19 and the lockdown, contributed to a changed public sentiment to the arts. As proposed by one commentator,

A friend once described the feeling of living with her family as being as if they were all one body. I thought at the time that being present with good art might be similar. The intermingling of self with work in space can set alight neural pathways that we're not consciously aware of. [...] Then there's the smell. One thing I have noticed now the streets are busier in level three is that I smell people. I have never consciously noticed this before.

I miss my friends' bodies; their deodorants, perfumes, body odours, and hair products mixed with beer. A friend's nervous way of standing. Or the way a colleague has made a special effort with their outfit. [...] I'm looking forward to

the first exhibition after lockdown; the excitement of art, bodies and all that accompanying non-verbal communication in a visceral mix. (Donaldson, 2020)

In May 2021, the Minister for Culture and Heritage, Carmel Sepuloni, reported that the arts sector was ‘performing better than forecast,’ with a much smaller decrease in jobs than predicted. Then, in June 2021, CNZ released its *New Zealanders and the Arts* research report (triennial research into attitudes towards and engagement with the arts). With data gathered in 2020, the report indicates ‘the arts are making a powerful contribution to our wellbeing and are helping us get through COVID-19’ (Creative New Zealand, 2021). Overall the public attitude towards the arts was higher than ever, and there was increased support for public funding of the arts. The report indicates that the New Zealand public’s appreciation of what the arts give to them and society had increased in 2020. Below, we consider whether this changing sentiment, and public support for increased funding for the arts, relate less to a feeling of kindness towards artists, and more to a wider awareness of social flesh, of mutual reliance on social spaces and resources (Beasley & Bacchi, 2007, p. 280) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the acts of artists and arts organisations may have contributed to this.

### **Giving through the arts at times of crisis**

Globally, COVID-19 pushed an increasing number of artists, arts organisations, and cultural institutions to produce and share content online. Jeannottee (2021) noted some examples of the move to digital/social media as a way to monetise the arts, but in most instances, creative and cultural works were made available for free on an unprecedented scale. This was also the case in Aotearoa. From March 25, 2020, onwards, for example, the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra (NZSO), Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra (APO), Royal New Zealand Ballet (RNZB), and NZ Opera offered free-to-view live-streamed or pre-recorded performances. NZSO and APO also offered smaller-scale performances by players at home during lockdowns. Audience numbers were significant at times, and individuals sent positive feedback, such as this from an NZSO viewer ‘You will have no idea how much more connected that makes me feel to the NZSO now ... I really think these performances helped me get through the period of social isolation on my own’ (Biggs, 2020). The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Art Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand

Maritime Museum, Auckland War Memorial Museum, Canterbury Museum, and Otago Museum offered online talks, immersive interactive tours, and produced educational resources, including online workshops and Kapa Haka Māori performing arts. In May 2020, The Auckland Theatre Company created a free-to-view online version of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, comprising weekly 30-minute episodes, each produced weekly over four weeks. The characters were all performing in their individual 'bubbles' and Zoom windows. In August 2020, they produced a hybrid online-onstage version of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. Many smaller-scale and community-based arts organisations and individual artists also made works and workshops free to access online, often with little or no additional funding.

As well as making arts engagement freely available, some individual artists and independent arts organisations produced new works that directly responded to the needs and concerns of communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Here are examples presented as three discrete vignettes, spanning contributions made by a sole artist, a collective, and communities.

### **Michel Tuffery, *Handle with Care***

Just before the nationwide lockdown of March 2020, artist Michel Tuffery had only recently returned from China. His 'Handle with Care' project began as the lockdown was imposed, in consultation with Pacific Health Plus (PHP), Porirua (PHP Porirua Teams Up With NZ Artist, 2020). In conversation with one of this paper's authors,<sup>5</sup> Tuffery recalled being in Samoa during the 2019 measles epidemic and the tragic loss of many young lives there. As COVID-19 ravaged Italy's elders, Tuffery considered who would be most vulnerable if and when the virus arrived in Aotearoa. He conceived the 'Handle with Care' poster campaign to convey simple messaging directly to Māori and Pasifika communities and frontline and 'essential' workers – often from these very communities – disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Tuffery stated, 'It is hard to know how you can help from isolation but as an artist, creating art to spread important messages, is how I can do my bit for my communities in this tough time' ('PHP Porirua Teams up with NZ Artist,' 2020). The series adapts vintage postage stamps from Aotearoa and other Pacific Islands and adopts the familiar caution

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<sup>5</sup> Lythberg collaborates regularly with Tuffery, and this text reflects what they wrote together to explicate this series for galleries and websites.

written on posted packages: FRAGILE, Handle with Care. The images were initially displayed in public spaces as posters printed by PHP on their in-house printer – the only printing available during Level 4 restrictions, PHP being an essential business and therefore still allowed to operate.

Health Stamps, combining postage with a donation to charity in their purchase price, have a long history in Aotearoa. First appearing in December 1929, featuring a nurse and the inscription ‘Help stamp out tuberculosis,’ they were issued annually until 2016 in support of charitable causes, and many have become collectible. While encouraging community members to ‘stamp out’ coronavirus by staying home, washing hands, and wearing masks, Tuffery’s ‘Handle with Care’ series also emphasises ties to ancestry and culture as part of a holistic approach to healthcare. Mask- and glove-wearing ancestors urge their descendants to ‘protect all of our communities,’ while the nostalgia of historical images conveys the need for particular care of elders and their wisdom. Like mini-passports for travel, stamps underpin (with a bit of irony) the need to stay home for the collective good. There is an additional irony, or poignancy, in the use of the health stamp format in the persistence of many of the inequities they raised funds to address.

### **Te Pou, *Front Yard Festival*, May-June 2020.**

Te Pou is a kaupapa Māori performing arts venue in Waitakere, the western region of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Māori tikanga customs and protocols lead everything they do to support performing artists, the arts sector, communities, and audiences.<sup>6</sup> Te Pou had to put its programme of shows and festivals on hold due to COVID-19 in 2020. So, in May of that year, during alert-level 2, Te Pou launched *Front Yard Festival*, free-to-book short music and physical theatre performances for koroua and kuia elders, directed by Tainui Tukiwaho and Jarod Rawiri. Elders have always been viewed as an essential part of Te Pou’s community; koroua and kuia are invited to all shows at the venue and special events like morning teas and storytelling sessions. Realising many older people would not feel safe attending live performances during COVID-19 (even when permitted under levels 1 and 2), the *Front Yard Festival* performances were designed to be safe for people who needed to stay more isolated for longer than the general population. The ten-minute performances were staged on

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tepoutheatre.nz/>



driveways, front gardens, grass verges, and for private homes and rest/residential homes anywhere in Tāmaki Makaurau.

The Front Yard Festival directly responded to the realisation that isolation and loneliness were affecting some community members more than others. Crucially, making these live performance events for this specific audience was not about helping the needy but affirming elders' esteemed and essential place in the community/society. The project also demonstrates how the arts are an essential resource, a basic need, generating joy, fun, a visceral connection to culture and community, bridging physical distance through a shared experience of music and story. Front Yard Festivals was supported by Creative New Zealand, Foundation North, Auckland Council, Creative Henderson-Massey, and the Whau Local Board.

### **Everyday creative gestures**

During the lockdowns of 2020, multiple, informal creative actions quickly emerged on the streets of Aotearoa, fostering very local expressions of kindness. One of the first to receive national attention was the 'We're Not Scared: NZ Bear Hunt' begun via a Facebook page of the same name and reported by Radio NZ on March 25, the first day of the Level 4 lockdown.<sup>7</sup> Participants were encouraged to install teddy bears in their windows, and change them about from day to day wherever possible, so that children and their caregivers could 'hunt' for them during their permitted daily walks. One of this article's authors took daily stock of a small hatchback car on a neighbouring street, with rear seats folded down to permit a changing teddy bear tableau installed in its boot – one week a doctors' surgery, the next week a cafe, and so on. On March 31, *The Guardian* (Roy, 2020) reported 'a distinctly Kiwi feel, with farmers building behemoth teddy bears out of straw bales, and forestry workers constructing them out of tree stumps.' More than mere whimsy, the care shown by people displaying bears and other stuffed toys to entertain the nation's children also conveyed the kindness in unity promoted by the Government's response. Moreover, for the many people in Lockdown alone, or needing to self-isolate, the creation of displays offered not only something to do but also a way to continue to engage with their community. The Bear Hunt inspired a 'Teddy Bear Hunt' song and book and 4-part activity series produced by the Auckland Philharmonia

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/412602/teddy-bears-in-windows-to-cheer-up-kids-during-lockdown>

Orchestra in partnership with producer and singer/songwriter Chris Sanders of Angel Star Publishing to teach young children the basics of writing their own song.<sup>8</sup>

Commentators noticed how these small creative gestures and resulting shifts in the ways people felt as they moved around familiar areas had a heightened significance during the Level 4 lockdown, ‘Using the small socialities and physicalities available to us ... feels politically important right now. That’s why, of all the content that has come out of lockdown in New Zealand, I think the best has been teddy bears in windows’ (Donaldson, 2020). Chalk drawings on pavements carried messages of encouragement and resilience and further brightened outings curtailed by proximity to home (close) and one another (socially distanced); rocks were painted in a ‘kindness project’ and readied for release into public spaces when appropriate; fairy houses appeared in parks, and yarn bombing adorned trees and fences. On May 14, 1 News (Kindness Project, 2020) reported the release of approximately 15,000 painted rocks, with one Auckland organiser explaining, ‘It’s about the wonder of finding something hidden.’

### **Getting the feel of a kinder economy through the arts**

In this section, we explore the idea that the different gestures of giving through the arts during COVID-19, outlined above, not only contributed to shifts in public sentiments towards the arts but also offered felt experiences of other kinds of cultural and social economy. So, for example, it is easy to be sceptical about the widespread release of free-to-view arts and cultural content as being based at least to some extent on self-interest, ultimately strengthening the market position and influence of certain producers in the cultural landscape. This kind of free programme is undoubtedly strategic, a proven marketing strategy that helps with audience growth and loyalty and helps justify the ongoing public funding of larger arts institutions. Simultaneously, this sharing economy and creation of cultural commons is a kind of refusal of capitalist consumer relations (Sansi, 2005), displacing a cultural economy norm of elite, private access, and entrepreneurial drivers. The widespread free sharing of arts and culture online during Levels 3 and 4 also produced a widespread affective residue or surplus, which may well have contributed to perceptions of the arts and creative expression as an essential resource, something that helped people get through a time of significant adversity,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.apo.co.nz/community-education/schools/teddy-bear-hunt-videos-and-activity-sheets/>

providing entertainment, distraction, escapism, connection, humour, education, a way to vent, a way to make sense of it all. Beasley and Bacchi (2012) use the concept of the social flesh to rethink the delineation of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ in politics. People’s engagement with free-to-view arts during lockdown might seem like the epitome of private cultural consumption. However, advocacy from the arts and arts funders emphasised that there was also a shared visceral experience of being supported by the arts. We propose that, albeit in a small way, this contributed to a public realisation of the implications of the arts infrastructure to social, bodily, and community wellbeing. So, there is a subtle shift here beyond a rational acceptance of the arts as essential to the economy, to a felt understanding of the arts as ‘vital,’ in the way that a body’s organs are ‘indispensable to the maintenance of life’ (OED, 2021).

Local, small-scale, creative gestures, like the chalk drawings and teddy bears, might be easily dismissed as nothing more than symbolic but powerless gestures of kindness lacking radical political potential. They perhaps generated momentary delight or made people feel a bit better about their neighbours and neighbourhood. They may also have made some people guilty for not participating. Nevertheless, taken cumulatively, this proliferation of playful creativity, of chance encounters with art, of ‘small socialities,’ of consideration for the social space, of thought put into what might cause pleasure or joy to others, is a remarkable departure from the established norms for engagement in streets and other public spaces (Sansi, 2015). Beasley and Bacchi (2012) see political potential in the sensuality of fleshiness. What would happen if we re-considered the political nature of the visceral pleasures (and displeasures) involved in even such small instances of creating and engaging with the arts? The arts, perhaps, could then be reimagined as small but vital organs in the sensual, fleshy society proposed by Bacchi and Beasley (2007, 2012).

In Aotearoa, as with elsewhere globally, COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated the existing social asymmetries (Hendricks, 2020; Ratuva et al., 2021). Those who were already disproportionately affected by barriers and inequities in housing, health, education, and employment were then disproportionately affected by COVID-19, both the disease and the social impacts. Arts projects, such as those by Tuffery and Te Pou, respond to these inequities by drawing attention to bodily interdependence and co-responsibilities during the pandemic. They both advocate for additional care and protection of particular groups. In both projects, these groups, who are often portrayed as ‘dependents’ and a drain on societal resources, are represented as themselves valuable resources on whom others bodily, emotionally, culturally,

and socially depend. Significant to the argument of this paper, both projects centralise bodies, bodies that may become even less visible due to isolation requirements, bodies that, for structural reasons, are more vulnerable but which are treated by the artists as inherently valuable. By creatively incorporating the limitations on actual bodily contact necessitated by COVID-19, each piece depicts, or makes evident, the co-dependency of bodies and presents alternative ‘forms of sociality’ (Beasley & Bacchi, 2012, p. 103).

The concepts of aesthetic surplus and social flesh allow for an understanding of how an alternative economy might be *felt* in and through these very different examples of giving through the arts during COVID-19. This economy transgresses benevolent neoliberalism in specific ways, as proposed above. In contrast to most of the examples of giving to the arts in Aotearoa during COVID-19, these artistic acts of giving could be understood as eroding the ‘glue’ of commodified kindness that holds benevolent neoliberalism’s social relations in place. The concept of the social flesh can also inform a rethinking of why society might give to the arts. For example, if people’s/society’s relationship with the arts is understood as fleshy, embodied, sensuous, and involving social interdependency, the nature or value of this relationship is irrefutably ‘vital,’ so cannot be reduced to a quantified, commensurable strategic exchange or investment.

## **Conclusions**

Between March 2020 and March 2021, many invisible and taken-for-granted aspects of the arts economy were brought to the public attention. Very soon after COVID-19 reached Aotearoa, media coverage and other advocacy alerted the public to the likely prospect of a far-reaching loss of arts and cultural access/provision. This, together with people’s re-appreciation of the arts in their everyday lives and re-engagement with personal creative and cultural expression during the level-4 lockdown, allowed, we argue, for a more open and expansive debate about the value of artists, arts organisations, and access to creative expression in Aotearoa. In turn, this allowed for more radical questions to be considered regarding how artists and the arts are resourced. It appears that both private and state arts funders quickly leveraged off this moment to further contribute to public awareness/appreciation and to make a case for significant public and private giving to protect the livelihoods of artists, fuel creativity, and sustain access to the arts throughout COVID-19.

While the various actions of artists, arts organisations, and arts funders during COVID-19 have not led to a societal consensus on public funding for the arts, it has shifted the discourse in new directions and made critique and debate of this topic more relevant beyond the arts sector itself. However, giving to or through the arts in a ‘spirit of kindness’ that reproduces asymmetrical social relations are, we suggest, unlikely to lead to a radical reimagining of the value of the arts. Instead, we propose an ethos of the social flesh as a promising basis for rethinking how and why the arts are resourced during and after COVID-19 and understanding the arts as providing a visceral vital (social) service.

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