Digital arts and culture in Australia: Promissory discourses and uncertain realities in pandemic times

Indigo Holcombe-James (iD)
RMIT, Australia

Jacinthe Flore (iD)
RMIT, Australia

Natalie Ann Hendry (iD)
The University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

This article critically interrogates the promissory discourse underpinning the cultural sectors' 'digital pivot' in the wake of COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021; namely, that artistic and creative work could be done lucratively online, offer equal opportunities for all, and assure ongoing audience consumption. Drawing on empirical data from two research projects with arts and culture workers in Australia during COVID-19 restrictions, we investigate the intersection of this promissory discourse with individual and institutional practices of digital disengagement. We contend that, rather than a panacea to lost work and income and the assurance of continued cultural consumption, digital disengagement meant that the pivot prohibited, multiplied, and negated artistic and cultural labour. By considering disengagement that was imposed upon, resourcing contingent, and that actively pushed back, this article complicates our understanding of digitalised arts and cultural labour.

Keywords

arts, COVID-19, culture, digital pivot, work

Introduction

Arts and culture in Australia and internationally have radically transformed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Flew and Kirkwood, 2020). Over 2020 and 2021, as studios and venues

Corresponding Author:
Indigo Holcombe-James, Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, School of Media and Communication, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia.
Email: indigo.holcombe-james@rmit.edu.au

closed due to 'lockdowns', arts and culture workers and institutions were instructed to *pivot* by transitioning their practices and services to digital platforms (e.g., Miller, 2021). The 'digital pivot', as connected to the pandemic by arts news media and the industry (Lei, 2021), conveys how people endeavoured (and struggled) to shift their work online, and technological companies sought to design and promote platforms to facilitate and maximise remote online work (see MIT Technology Review Insights, 2020; Sayed, 2021), with uneven results (e.g., Kidd et al., 2021). This pivot is underpinned by a promissory discourse; one that bundled the digitalisation of arts and culture in expectation and anticipation that work could continue to be done lucratively online and offer equal opportunities for all (e.g., Holcombe-James, 2022). On this view, a promissory discourse delineated in the popular press (e.g., Lei, 2021; May, 2021) and funding programs (e.g., Arts Queensland, n.d.; British Council, 2020; Creative Victoria, 2020a) positioned the digital pivot as a generally positive turn that might afford art production and consumption, for the benefit of workers and the public. Many governments and arts funders around the world appeared to assume that by moving arts and culture online, arts and culture workers and institutions would be able to maintain relevance and sustain already precarious incomes. Simultaneously, audiences could continue their cultural consumption from home.

Drawing on empirical data from two projects that engaged with arts and culture workers during Australia's COVID-19 restrictions (Flore et al., 2021; Holcombe-James, 2021), we interrogate this promissory discourse by highlighting its intersection with individual and institutional practices of digital *dis*engagement. First, we demonstrate how digital disengagement deriving from digital exclusion prohibited artistic and cultural labour. Second, we show that although the digital pivot has been lauded for improving the accessibility of arts and culture for audiences, disengagement from the structures required to support it effectively multiplied artistic and cultural labour. Finally, we reveal how practices of digital disengagement negated this labour. In reaction to the digital pivots' pressure to produce, our participants responded by redirecting their practices or opting out entirely.

Interrogating the digital pivots' promissory discourse and its intersection with these three individual and institutional modes of digital disengagement complicates our approaches to digitalised cultural labour, and our understanding of digital disengagement as it pertains to the creative and cultural industries. As we write this article in mid-2022, the third calendar year of the pandemic, it is important to remember that the impacts of COVID-19 continue to be felt by arts and culture workers differently, at different times, and in different locations. For instance, although much of Australia experienced relaxed pandemic restrictions from May 2020, those based in Victoria (and particularly those in metropolitan Melbourne) were subjected to extensive restrictions between July and September. Residents of metropolitan Melbourne and Sydney again experienced similar restrictions for much of 2021. Today, almost all such 'lockdown' restrictions have been abandoned due to high vaccination rates among the populace. Despite this, the pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the arts and culture sectors (Brunt and Nelligan, 2020). For example, some venues have been unable to reopen due to staff shortage, because of contracting COVID-19, or because workers have moved to different jobs, and others indefinitely shut down during lockdowns. Considering the digital pivot's promissory discourses thus remains critical. We seek to emphasise how these practices of disengagement rendered the digital pivots' promises equivocal and uncertain and offer a contribution that expands existing discussions of disengagement 'beyond social networking' (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 904) into the arts and culture sector.

Background

Australian arts and culture in pandemic times

While a fulsome discussion of the Australian arts and culture sector is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to stress that even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector was

characterised by funding cuts and precarious employment (Richards and Pacella, 2022). This is not to say that the pandemic, associated restrictions, and consequences (e.g., further funding cuts through the loss of ticketed physical events and physical closures) were not impactful. Indeed, the arts and creative industries were arguably among the most affected (Banks and O'Connor, 2020; Flore et al., 2021; Richards and Pacella, 2022). As of April 2020, just 47% of what the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) describes as the 'arts and recreation' sector remained functioning, with this figure declining as the pandemic wore on (Anatolitis, 2020). It is important to remember, however, that these pandemic-induced consequences represent an intensification of existing dynamics, rather than an entirely novel situation (Banks and O'Connor, 2020; Flore et al., 2021). As Richards and Pacella (2022) note, precarity 'for those employed within creative and cultural work sectors […] is nothing new' (np).

The proportion of arts and culture workers this precarity impacts varies according to the source. The ABS (2020), for instance, draws on Characteristics of Employment data to suggest that slightly less than a quarter (23.4%) of arts and culture workers can be considered casually employed. Throsby and Petetskaya (2017) argue that over 80% of all artists can be considered unsalaried employees. Precarity is an underpinning and enduring factor of this sector and for this workforce, with this informing the structural composition of the sector, and resulting in racialised and gendered experiences of inequality (Comunian and England, 2020; Pacella et al., 2021). These dynamics directly impacted how arts and culture workers were (or, in many cases, were not) able to access governmental support during lockdowns, with Australian funding sources tied to eligibility criteria that required applicants to demonstrate at least a year of uninterrupted employment with one employer. This was impossible for more than 193,000 Australian creative arts workers (see also Pacella et al., 2021; Smith, 2020) due to histories of 'juggl[ing] multiple forms of work outside of their primary artistic occupation in order to make ends meet' (Richards and Pacella, 2022: np). Further, this funding (or lack thereof) was highly politicised despite clear evidence the sector was struggling (Pacella et al., 2021).

Digital pivoting and promissory discourses

Moving individual and institutional practices online thus became a critical lifeline for many arts and culture workers. Internationally, it seems that governments and arts funders assumed that by moving arts and culture online, workers and institutions could continue to labour, sustain already precarious incomes, and facilitate audiences in continuing their cultural consumption whilst at home. This 'digital pivot' was evidenced in popular commentary (e.g., Lei, 2021), and the widespread take-up of 'pivoting' as a practice borne out in surveys conducted by peak bodies such as the Network of European Museums Organisation (NEMO) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) which set out to document the sector's pandemic experience. According to these surveys, 80% of European museums increased their use of digital platforms and technologies in the early months of 2020 (NEMO, 2020), and more than half the world's museums increased their social media activities (ICOM, 2020). This increase in digital activities continued into 2021, with just under 80% of European museums continuing to increase their 'digital services and strategies' (NEMO, 2021: 5).

Much of the public and industry circulation of the 'digital pivot' was a promise that a new market was viable, necessary and potentially innovative for artists, institutions, and audiences (e.g., May, 2021). This is what, for Petersen (2018), comprises a promissory discourse. Promissory discourses assure groups or communities that 'something (e.g., an event, experience, change) *will* occur in the future' (192, emphasis in original) and operate to establish or sustain economic markets. These

discourses are thus performative and produce material effects that hype or champion 'quick' research translation to drive market offerings or, in our focus, influence values and ideas in arts policy and funding, and creative work and practices. What is sold, as Petersen (2018) suggests, is not merely a successful material product, but rather a *vision* of an innovative future, even if it never eventuates (MacKenzie et al., 2007). Hopes of improved socio-economic conditions are central here. Indeed, promissory discourses operate as marketing tactics, while also working across blurred economic, political, and social relationships and locations between artists, creative workers, activists, galleries, venues, platforms, institutions, governments, and audiences that encompass and exceed marketing concerns, and produce material and symbolic effects. We also argue that these promissory discourses incorporate regimes as infrastructural arrangements. This involves the material guidelines, as one example, offered by institutions and governments to and between workers that act as agents to influence practices and potential outcomes and imagined futures.

Arts and culture workers were promised that digital production and engagement would reinstate and generate lost work and income. The digital pivot also promised continued access to and consumption of cultural content for audiences. These promises, made on the part of governments and arts funders around the world, are evidenced by the proliferation of funding opportunities throughout 2020, with many requiring the creation of new digital work or the translation of existing works into digital contexts. The Victorian state government alone provided over AUD7 million dollars in funding for the digital adaption of art projects (Creative Victoria, 2020b). In terms of assuring ongoing audience consumption, the digital pivot promised the removal of previously restrictive non-digital access requirements, such as physical attendance and burdensome financial outlays (e.g., Australia Council for the Arts, 2021; Main, 2021).

The digital pivots' promissory discourses were thus predicated on the assumption that digital engagement within the arts and cultural sectors was unproblematic—unequivocal and certain— and the digitisation of arts and cultural labour assumed to be a frictionless possibility that existing individual and institutional practices would enable. In encouraging arts and culture workers and institutions to 'pivot' their practices and services to digital platforms, governments and arts funders assumed not only that digital engagement would allow individuals and institutions to maintain relevance and sustain already precarious incomes while physical venues were closed, but also that capacities to execute this pivot were universally available. This assumption, however, does not materialise everywhere and for everyone. Indeed, the financial figures just cited arguably elide the unevenness of the sector's capacity to undergo this rapid digital transformation of their individual and institutional practices (Finnis and Kennedy, 2020; Holcombe-James, 2021, 2022; Radermecker, 2020).

Digital inclusion—understood as the capacity to access, afford, and use digital devices and technologies to meaningfully take part in contemporary life (Thomas et al., 2021)—remains unevenly distributed. Around half the global population is disconnected (International Telecommunication | Union, 2021a, 2021b), and while these disconnected populations are most heavily concentrated in the Global South, significant digital divides endure in high-income Western nations such as Australia. According to the most recent Australian Digital Inclusion Index (Thomas et al., 2021), 11% of the national population is considered highly digitally excluded, lagging behind the national average on measures of digital access, affordability, and ability or skills. Arts and culture workers and their institutions are not exempt from the impacts of digital exclusion (see Holcombe-James, 2022). Access to connectivity and devices (Finnis and Kennedy, 2020; Network of European Museums Organisation, 2021), digitally skilled workers (Barnes et al., 2018; Edson and Visser, 2020; Kidd, 2014; Parry et al., 2018), and the capacity to resource these (Australian Museums and Galleries Association, 2020; Kidd, 2014) are all influential, determining whether digital

engagement is possible, and to what extent. At the individual level, digital inclusion enables digitally engaged work: artists and creative practitioners are equipped with the means to develop and maintain digital practices. At the institutional level, digital inclusion facilitates the exhibition and distribution of such work.

Identifying the digital pivot's promissory discourses—and attending to their intersection with practices of *dis*engagement—offers the potential to move beyond techno-solutionism, and to reveal the complex realities of pandemic digitalities in the arts and culture industries.

The lens of digital disengagement

Although there is a broad body of knowledge about digital labour, in this paper we are particularly interested in the redirection of existing, often non-digital, practices at both the individual and institutional level towards digital devices, platforms and technologies, and the intersection of these practices with the promissory discourse of the digital pivot. We examine this intersection through a sustained focus on individual and institutional practices of digital disengagement. This, as Fast (2021) notes, is a relatively novel approach to take. While a focus on 'work' or 'labour' is not entirely 'absent from digital disconnection studies', it is often 'more peripheral than focused' (1616). Research focussed on digital work, in contrast, 'still seem more inclined to use connectivity rather than dis-connectivity as a point of entry' (Fast, 2021: 1616). By using digital disengagement as an analytic lens for approaching our data, we seek to make practices of disconnection the focus of our argument.

Digital disengagement is often framed as 'an act of resistance and mindful media use' (Bucher, 2020: 615) that can be involuntary or voluntary. Involuntary disengagement is typically considered in research engaging with digital divides and inequalities. Voluntary disengagement is more typically seen in work that uses conceptual framings such as refusal (Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Ribak and Rosenthal, 2015), resistance (Kline, 2003; Krcmar, 2009; Syvertsen, 2017), detox (Sutton, 2017), and disconnection (Brubaker et al., 2016; Light, 2014). In such studies, disengagement is often considered as 'an active choice of resistance and empowerment' (Bucher, 2020: 611).

For Treré and colleagues (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shift of 'most activities that were performed offline to the online world' (606) has only served to intensify the need for scholars to take practices of disconnection seriously. Our collective reliance on digital connections and devices for most of our daily practices—inclusive but not exclusive of arts and culture production and consumption—has rendered it critical that we identify where and how disconnection is wilfully practised, and when it is imposed upon and to what consequence. This is vital as we cannot assume that 'stable connectivity' is default (Treré et al., 2020: 607).

This article builds on Kuntsman and Miyake (2019), who conceptualise digital disengagement as a continuum that is influenced by, and fluctuates through, individuals, institutions, and infrastructures. They note that engagement and disengagement ought not to be overdetermined by technology. Rather, 'the continuum of digital disengagement is multidimensional […] located at various points of the spatiotemporal continuum' (908; Treré, 2021). Disengagement, then, does not invoke a mere switching off from, for example, social media platforms. Instead, it is a form of complex relationality that 'links our off- and on-line everyday practices as structured and orchestrated by socio-technological environment' (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 908). Disconnection is, as Treré (2021) notes, 'a multifaceted and contradictory phenomenon' (1666). The role of neoliberal, capitalist infrastructures cannot be overstated as digital withdrawal is a notable market for technological platforms aiming to facilitate disconnection (see also Hesselberth, 2018; Jorge, 2019; Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019). Thus, Kuntsman and Miyake (2019: 910) encourage us to view digital disengagement not as finale,

aberration, or paradox, but rather as a fruitful 'political and empirical anchor' that actively (re)shapes norms and possibilities.

Taking this approach enables a shift from binaries such as on/off, engaged/disengaged, and included/exclusded and towards identifying and analysing a relational and contextual set of practices (Moe and Madsen, 2021). We concentrate here on those individual and institutional practices enacted by arts and culture workers and associated institutions during COVID-19 restrictions. We evidence the uneven realities of digitalised artistic and cultural labour and show how the digital pivot operates in a restricted space. Rather than a panacea to lost work and income, and an assurance of continued cultural consumption and audience participation, we show how arts and cultural labour were *prohibited, multiplied,* and *negated*.

Methods

This article draws on data from two qualitative research projects engaging with arts and culture workers in Australia during COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021 (Flore et al., 2021; Holcomeb-James, 2021). Although Project 2 recruited workers who lived in Victoria only, many were engaged with arts and creative institutions across Australia and internationally. While these findings are not representative of all Australian artists and institutions, they demonstrate key challenges experienced through the first year of the pandemic. Importantly, both Projects 1 and 2 were qualitative in their investigations, seeking to understand the detail of complex dynamics as they were playing out during a specific period, and experienced by a specific set of actors and institutions. Both projects foregrounded the experiences of people working in arts and culture and added nuance to claims of artistic and cultural techno-solutionism (see Morozov, 2014) to reduce or lost work and social connections. In doing so, we do not aim to provide a representative analysis or seek to draw universalised narratives. Indeed, in setting out to understand the pandemic experience of artists and cultural workers, we engaged with a highly specific group of practitioners who are themselves not representative of the national population. As noted in research conducted by the Australia Council for the Arts, 'Australia's arts and culture do not yet reflect the diversity of our people' (2020: 6). Rather, we understand qualitative research to centre the 'small-scale and situated samples' (Braun et al., 2017: 642) to tease out the dynamics of disengagement and disconnection that characterised the pandemic experiences of a significant portion of our participants.

Project 1: institutional practices

The first project investigated how digital inclusion and exclusion were impacting cultural institutions and their ability to make the move online. The study received ethics approval from RMIT University. Between August and September 2020, institutional representatives were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews and brief qualitative surveys (Braun et al., 2017). Interviews were conducted online, via Microsoft Teams. With participant consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In both interviews and surveys, participants were invited to consider, through open questions, how their institution had used digital technologies prior to 2020, what had changed in the wake of COVID-19 restrictions, and how that use had been enabled or inhibited. Representatives of 73 Australian cultural institutions took part, ranging from artist-run initiatives[1], public, state and/or national, and university museums and galleries. In 2020, 39 participated in a semi-structured interview, 29 provided a survey response, and five completed both. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 15 participants in 2021, in which participants were invited to discuss whether and/or how COVID-19 restrictions had changed their institution's approach to digital activities, any investments made and how sustainable these were considered, and what their institution's digital future looked

like. Again, with participant consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. To enable participants to speak openly about the potential barriers their institution confronted, participants were pseudonymised, and their institutions anonymised.

Project 2: individual practices

The second project invited arts workers to share their experiences of the pandemic via an online qualitative survey (Braun et al., 2017) from August to October 2020. Ethics approval for the study was received from RMIT University. The study was hosted on the platform Qualtrics. It consisted of 18 questions, and was open to people aged 18 and over, living in the Australian state of Victoria, and identifying as being in an arts or creative role (either currently working or without work/income due to the pandemic). In open-ended questions, participants were asked to describe their work and creative practices before and during the COVID-19 restrictions, the income support they had applied for and/or accessed, reflect on their digital work practices (whether new or existing prior), and share their experiences of mental wellbeing during restrictions. Forty people participated in the study and their responses were anonymised during the analysis. Demographic information about participants was collected via quantitative and qualitative questions, including gender, age, ethnicity, and employment context (see Flore et al., 2021 for a longer discussion). Many participants described holding multiple roles or contracts within and outside of arts and culture (see Flore et al., 2021), with these ranging from performance, to technical and managerial. Several also named concurrent roles in universities and hospitality. In our discussion, other background information is not provided to preserve participants' confidentiality. Names were not collected via the anonymous survey, and we have chosen not to use pseudonyms when reporting responses from this project.

After data from both projects were coded and analysed separately, the authors conducted several collaborative workshops during which data were shared, compared, and mapped to foreground commonalities and variations across experiences. These sessions helped preserve the depth of the data, identify, and deploy the analytical framework, and enabled productive collaboration. The first author then drafted an outline of the article, and the second and third contributed to the development of the argument. Subsequent drafts were refined collaboratively.

Findings—discussing digital disengagement that…

…Prohibits artistic and cultural labour

For digitally included individuals and institutions, digital engagement—and thus digital disengagement—is a *choice* in a field of technological options. However, as Helsper (2021: 1) writes: '[i]n one reality, the social and digital seamlessly merge. In another reality, the digital is a hard-to-reach, inhospitable land'. The conditions of this digitally excluded, 'inhospitable land'—the 'sociotechnological environment' in which digital dis/engagement is 'structured and orchestrated' (Kuntsman and Miyake, 2019: 908)—render digital disengagement as less of a choice, and more of an imposition. Disconnection under these circumstances then, is 'nothing akin to a matter of choice, one that can be indulged in every now and then' (Treré et al., 2020: 607). This imposition, in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, prohibited artistic and cultural labour.

For arts and culture workers and institutions experiencing digital exclusion, artistic and cultural labour could not be digitalised—whether at all or to the degree possible for and by their digitally included counterparts. This imposed digital disengagement was a key theme in

Project 1 (P1). For Julian, the 'lack of skills and funding' available to their council-run gallery were 'a disincentive to doing more online'. And, as Jane explained, while their council-run gallery had increased their digital engagement in the early weeks of pandemic restrictions, they were unable to continue them—and thus digitally disengaged—because their 'staff didn't have the skills […] to do those recordings and editing to a professional standard'. Digital disengagement derived from digital exclusion that prohibited artistic and cultural labour was not only tied to access of digital devices, software, infrastructure, or equipment, but also skills, capacity, and support.

For some, the capacity other creatives had to pivot—that is, their digital inclusion—prohibited their own labour, revealing the countervailing dimensions of the pivot and dis/engagement. As a theatre worker noted in Project 2 (P2), 'because self-sustaining artists are adept enough to use their own resources at home to create content, thus theatre support jobs are next to non-existent'. This prohibition of labour was exacerbated for those workers whose practice had previously relied on other people and physical venues. One lighting technician (P2), who was 'terrified to see the industry shut down in one weekend', reflected that their role was 'not a thing you can do on your own, remotely […] my work is otherwise very dependent on being physically at an event'. In these instances, digital disengagement that prohibited artistic and cultural labour were not only determined by digital inclusion/exclusion at the level of the individual or institution, but by considerations of logistics and their interaction with lockdown restrictions. The digital pivots' promissory discourse failed to accommodate those arts and culture workers who made their living 'behind the scenes'.

Disengagement that was imposed upon also emerged from partial digital exclusion resulting from managing other demands. A fiction writer (P2) who also typically juggled multiple casual academic roles, for instance, was unable to pivot to a new digital writing practice as she was exhausted from caring for three small children alone and taking on small copyediting jobs. She shared that 'I have not worked (written) for months. I'm still paying rent for workspace I have used a handful of times […] I have lost the creative life I have fought so hard to get'. Disengagement in each of these instances was not a welcome choice, but rather imposed upon, the result of limited digital and non-digital resources. These examples remind us, as Treré (2021) notes, that disengagement is continually and 'contextually situated and defined by the specific social circumstances' (1674) that the individual faces. Without the assurance of 'access to reliable technological infrastructure and stable connectivity' (Treré 2021: 1674), we cannot conceive of the disengagements from the digital pivot just described as a choice.

…Multiplies artistic and cultural labour

Where the digital pivot promised artists and institutions could maintain their relevance and sustain incomes despite lockdown restrictions, it also promised continued access and consumption for audiences. Indeed, the digital pivot has been lauded for improving the accessibility of arts and culture, with previously restrictive access requirements—such as having to physically attend a venue, or purchase often expensive tickets—removed (e.g., Australia Council for the Arts, 2021; Main, 2021), albeit to varying degrees and for variable durations.

But the requirements for facilitating such digital engagement for audiences on the part of arts and culture workers and institutions were not necessarily understood. Where the pandemic pivots' promissory discourse assumed widespread digital access and distribution of skills, with disengagement from these negating artistic and cultural labour, it also underestimated the resourcing that successful and meaningful digital engagement requires. The individual and institutional practices of digital disengagement discussed here, then, were not derived from restricted access or skills, but the structures

(or lack thereof) required to sustain digital engagement. Negotiating limited resources was familiar to many creative workers prior to the pandemic (Flore et al., 2021; Richards and Pacella, 2022), but wholly pivoting required significantly more or different resources for artists to transform and sustain their work, thereby multiplying the labour required.

The assumption that digital service delivery was simple, and required minimal resourcing, was promoted not only by governments and funders—the 'art of adaptation' (e.g., Creative Victoria, 2020b)—but within institutions. As Kylie (P1) explained, for 'folk of a certain generation' on their university gallery's board, the costs associated with digital work were not entirely comprehended. She continued, 'there is this kind of expectation that you can do these [digital] things really quickly and they just appear', but even a simple interview with an artist needs to be '[filmed], edited, captioned, and slotted into a schedule', and this required resourcing. As Roger (P1) explained, because their council-run gallery had not invested in developing digital skills prior to the pandemic—that is, the institution was digitally disengaged—their labour had multiplied. As they were discovering, distributing, and exhibiting digital work required significant labour. Roger explained that reducing the time spent digitally engaged resulted in a '30-second, shaky, handheld phone[-filmed] talk which is just crap'. The alternative, however, was also problematic, generating 'these 25-min epic things [that] take a week to script'. Similar dynamics were described by individuals in P2. A technician and stage manager, for instance, noted that although working with digital technology was 'a great opportunity', they were exhausted given this required 'most of the fundamentals of live technical theatre [to be] thrown out the window'.

Institutions such as Kylie's and Roger's (P1) were able to pivot during restrictions by repurposing resourcing that would ordinarily be allocated to physical services. Participants expressed concern about how this digital engagement would be maintained as restrictions eased, and physical venues re-opened. Rosie's (P1) role at a council-run gallery, for example, had expanded during the pandemic restrictions in a way that was 'quite overwhelming'. As they described, 'the worry is in six months if we're [… physically open] and I have to be doing both [digital and non-digital practices], I think that's when the pressure will come in'. And, as Maria (P1) explained of their university gallery, 'I really don't know how sustainable it [digital work] is going to be in the long term because I'm one of two full timers here and we can't [do it all]. We're going to need more resources'. This multiplication of labour, without the commensurate multiplication of material resourcing, will be a critical consideration for future cultural policy if the accessibility benefits realised during COVID-19 restrictions are to be maintained.

For those who embraced 'pivoting', the technical demands of transforming practices were accompanied by the additional labour needed to encourage or convince others to also pivot. A technician and stage manager (P2) described that some performers were 'reluctant to engage in a digital format […because of] general burnout or [how] performers perceive the lack of connection or validity of a digital performance'. It was also difficult, they explained, 'convincing clients that a digital offering was worthwhile and building their excitement for the projects', further multiplying this labour.

The disengagement from the structures required to undertake and sustain digital engagement described here meant that artistic and cultural labour was multiplied to meet the needs of the digital pivot. This labour threatens to multiply yet further as restrictions ease, and physical venues re-open. The expectation that digital accessibility is retained requires a multiplying of artistic and cultural labour that is compounded by the disengagement from the resourcing required to undertake and sustain digital work. Similarly, in Treré's (2021) study of digital connection and disconnection during COVID-19 lockdowns across the world, our participants' use of media technologies intensified so they could maintain connections that temporarily shifted from the physical to the digital. This intensification was welcomed as grateful participants adopted new apps and platforms

for communication, even as these channels ushered in new stressors and challenges. In the next section, we turn to those challenges and new expectations of work.

…Negates artistic and cultural labour

In contrast to the digital disengagement that multiplied artistic and cultural labour described above, in this section, we discuss digital disengagement that *negated* artistic and cultural labour. Participants that pushed back against the pressure to produce generated by the digital pivot by reorienting their practices, or opting out entirely, effectively negated their labour. Disengagement in this instance became a mechanism for resisting the neoliberal push towards productivity that characterised pandemic digitalities.

For some, digitalised labour was incompatible with their creative practice, disrupting and disconnecting their collaborative, embodied and creative interactions with other artists, audiences, and spaces. Participants in P2 often wrote that 'translating' their work was not viable, not only because of disengagement from skills or resources but because doing so would require changing the nature of their work. For example, a theatre producer argued that theatre itself was 'not transferable to a filmic environment' and a lighting technician and visual artist identified that their installation work 'wouldn't translate as well to an online exhibition'.

Translating the 'liveness' of a particular practice such as theatre to digital contexts was often constraining. This was attributed not only to the embodied nature of these practices, but also because the existing (and especially the affordable) digital platforms available for live performances were inflexible or limited creative interaction. A participant in P2 who held multiple roles including part-time worker in an arts organisation exemplifies this limitation. Having worked on Zoom, Instagram and recorded and live performances, she shared that poor sound and lighting quality made it 'hard to read the room and audience', where 'social media flattens and homogenises the performance experiences, all performances kind of appear the same, framed by the specific application's design, interface and audience response modes (hearts, smiley faces, thumbs up)'. 'Increasingly', she wrote, 'I do not want to perform online'. Performing through her computer strained her body physically and lowered her mood. Working digitally limited her embodied practice and negated her experience as a performer and her interactions with audiences.

Other individuals disengaged from paid arts and cultural labour (whether digital or in-person) because of limited opportunities and instead turned to building community through their digital engagement. A sound engineer (P2) who could not work during COVID-19 restrictions explained they instead connected to their creative community through online courses and articles. Even though they were unsure if they would stay in the industry following the pandemic, they explained that sharing resources with other 'technicians and artists has been a way to exercise my skills, keep a foot in the door' and kept them socially connected.

Although some participants reported individual practices of disengagement that negated their labour, at the institutional level, the broad consensus was that digital engagement remained critical. George (P1), for instance, who found social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram 'horrible place[s] to be', nevertheless maintained a social media presence for their council-run gallery. But for digital programming—that is to say, digital work that went beyond the relatively low-cost, light-touch engagement required of the institutional social media presence—digital disengagement became a way to push back against the pivots' pressure to produce, emphasising the costs associated with digital activities, and highlighting where they might be more meaningfully allocated. As George continued, describing why their institution had chosen to disengage from the pressure to produce, had they decided to produce a virtual tour of their most recent physical exhibition the 'money would be going to one person for this digital tour of a gallery, one person who's [probably] not

an artist'. Related to our discussion of digital disengagement imposed through digital exclusion, George articulated suspicion that even if they had pursued this form of digital engagement, it would likely be unsuccessful, as their virtual tour would have to 'go up against […] the world's best galleries'. They asked, 'What's the user going to pick?'. Disengagement is thus not straightforward 'severing' from technology, it remains relational and interconnected with individuals and institutions' relationships with other artists and, importantly, other digital creators, whose advanced capacities may diminish the feasibility for other artists to viably 'compete' with them.

For Luke and Dominic (P1), who both worked at artist-run initiatives, digital disengagement was a political statement that resisted the imperative that artistic labour is free. As Luke explained, 'there's no scope to do more digital programming because I don't want to do any […] unless there's at least artist fees attached'. And, as Dominic stated, 'we made the very deliberate decision to [exhibit existing work, rather than commissioning new work] because we feel like the way the art world […] was reacting to COVID meant that all they were doing was increasing the workload and expectations of artists'. Again, this stresses that disengagement is a continuum that is in dynamic relation to other artists, workers, institutions, how participants perceive the 'art world' and its values, or how artists' work was not seen as labour and therefore worth funding. As Kuntsman and Miyake (2019) tell us, disengagement should not evoke closure; it is not a neat finale nor is it a paradox. It is a countervailing force that pushes and pulls.

Concluding discussion

Why do promissory discourses—and their failure to materialise—matter? A 'digital pivot' was a hopeful rationale that artistic and creative work could move online with few constraints on people and institution's creative practices, work, and income. While we might read this pivot as simply aspirational or inspirational, our findings suggest that the promise of a 'digital pivot' ignores the material, social and political conditions for the creative arts, before and beyond the pandemic.

The promissory discourse underpinning the 'digital pivot' materially and symbolically shapes what people can do or what they may be pushed into doing; it transforms work practices and amplifies certain expectations (e.g., artists as always—and often freely—available, that 'liveness' can be directly translated to broadcast). Pivoting reshapes demands for work and creative practice that exclude others. In this way, promissory discourses materially shape what people can do, and what they are pushed into doing. In the context of pandemic digitalities, these promises are changing the nature of arts and cultural labour, demanding wholesale digital transformation. This seemingly unquestioned (at least on the part of governments and arts funders) move towards digital as an unequivocal and certain saviour for an already precarious sector comprised of already vulnerable workers is troubling. Not only because some may not have secure access to digital resources or even digital skills, further segregating an already highly stratified sector, but because disengagement and exclusion operate on a continuum and emerge in relationship with others (e.g., site-based technicians and theatre performers). Far from resolving lost work, generating income, and assuring continued cultural consumption, the pivot prohibited, multiplied, and negated artistic and cultural labour.

Our article raises critical questions about how the continued (and long-awaited) digital transformation of the sector is realised. The digital pivots' promissory discourse drives arts policy and funding and redirects attention from long-standing and emerging challenges in arts funding. It shapes possibilities and mediates funding structures on which workers depend (in the context of ever-limited funding) and produces hierarchies that attribute value based on 'innovative' technological capacities and constraints rather than other artistic, creative,

community-led or socially just orientations such as those articulated by Luke and Dominic (P1). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these promises reinforce uneven effects that multiply pre-existing inequities in a tight funding environment with limited supplementary income options (e.g., increasing precarity in hospitality, events, university, and 'gig' or seasonal economies). As noted above, our research engaged with a highly specific group of practitioners that are themselves not representative of the national population (Australia Council for the Arts 2020). Future research could build on the findings presented here by further exploring their dynamics in multi-cultural and non-institutional contexts.

In detailing how digital disengagement prohibited, multiplied, and negated digitalised artistic and cultural labour, we evidence the complex realities of pandemic digitalities in the arts and culture industries and show the promises of a digital pivot to be equivocal and uncertain. Approaching these pandemic digitalities through the conceptual lens of digital disengagement moves beyond a framing that positions disengagement as inherently negative and at the behest of the individual. Rather, our approach considers digital disengagement that is imposed upon, resourcing contingent, and that actively reorients labour. The promise of a digital pivot to rescue and sustain the arts through and beyond the pandemic never eventuates, instead, disengagement is inequitable and inevitable.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Indigo Holcombe-James ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0564-6340
Jacinthe Flore ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3136-9236
Natalie Ann Hendry ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2591-420X

Note

1. Artist-run initiatives (or ARIs) are galleries run by artists, for artists (Eltham and Ryan, 2019).

References

Anatolitis E (2020) As we crave the return of our cultural life, arts workers and organisations are being left behind. The Guardian, 8 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/as-we-crave-the-return-of-our-cultural-life-arts-workers-and-organisations-are-being-left-behind (accessed 20 May 2022).

Arts Queensland (n.d.) Digital adaptation – funding outcomes. Available at: https://www.arts.qld.gov.au/aq-funding/funding-historical/digital-adaptation (accessed 30 June 2022).

Australia Council for the Arts (2020) Towards equity: A research overview of diversity in Australia's arts and cultural sector. Available at: https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/towards-equity-a-research-overview-of-diversity-in-australias-arts-and-cultural-sector/ (accessed 26 September 2022).

Australia Council for the Arts (2021) In real life: Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century. Available at: https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/in-real-life/ (accessed 1 February 2022).

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) COVID-19: impacts on casual workers in Australia – a statistical snapshot. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/ Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1920/StatisticalSnapshotCasualWorkersAustralia (accessed 30 June 2022).

Australian Museums and Galleries Association (2020) Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts Inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions Commonwealth Government's Digital Transformation Strategy. Available at: https://www.amaga.org. au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/SubmissionsPolicies/amaga_submission_to_ house_of_reps_committee_inquiry_into_   creative_and_cultural_industries_institutions_22_oct_2020. pdf (accessed 30 March 2022).

Banks M and O'Connor J (2020) 'A plague upon your howling': art and culture in the viral emergency. *Cultural Trends* 30(1): 3–18.

Barnes S-A, Eikhof D, Kispeter E, et al. (2018) Mapping the museum digital skills ecosystem: Phase one report. University of Leicester.

Braun V, Clarke V and Gray D (2017) Innovations in qualitative methods. In: B Gough (ed) *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Social Psychology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.243–266.

British Council (2020) Our response to COVID-19: What you can expect from British Council Arts. Available at: https://creativeconomy.britishcouncil.org/blog/20/03/21/our-response-covid-19/ (accessed 30 June 2022).

Brubaker JR, Ananny M and Crawford K (2016) Departing glances: a sociotechnical account of 'leaving' Grindr. *New Media & Society* 18(11): 373–390.

Brunt S and Nelligan K (2020) The Australian music industry's mental health crisis: media narratives during the coronavirus pandemic. *Media International Australia* 178(1): 42–46.

Bucher T (2020) Nothing to disconnect from? Being singular plural in an age of machine learning. *Media. Culture & Society* 42(4): 610–617.

Comunian R and England L (2020) Creative and cultural work without filters: COVID-19 and exposed precarity in the creative economy. *Cultural Trends* 29(2): 112–128.

Creative Victoria (2020a) Supporting creatives to work, build capacity and adapt. Available at: https://creative. vic.gov.au/news/2020/supporting-creatives-to-work (accessed 30 June 2022).

Creative Victoria (2020b) $7.85 million in grants to showcase the art of adaption. Available at: https://creative.vic. gov.au/news/2020/$7.85-million-in-grants-to-showcase-the-art-of-adaption (accessed 20 September 2021).

Edson MP and Visser J (2020) Digital transformation in the time of COVID-19. Available at: https://pro. europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Publications/Digital%20transformation%20reports/Digital% 20transformation%20in%20the%20time%20of%20COVID-19%20-%20sense-making%20workshops,% 20findings%20and%20outcomes.pdf.pdf (accessed 4 March 2021).

Eltham B and Ryan C (2019) The All Conference Artist-Run Initiatives Sub-sector: A Commissioned Report by Ben Eltham and Catherine Ryan. All Conference. Available at: https://allconference.org.au/library/the-all-conference-artist-run-initiatives-sub-sector (accessed 23 March 2021).

Fast K (2021) The disconnection turn: three facets of disconnective work in post-digital capitalism. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 27(6): 1615–1630.

Finnis J and Kennedy A (2020) The digital transformation agenda and GLAMs: A quick scan report for Europeana. Available at: https://pro.europeana.eu/files/Europeana_Professional/Publications/Digital% 20transformation%20reports/The%20digital%20transformation%20agenda%20and%20GLAMs%20-% 20Culture24,%20findings%20and%20outcomes.pdf (accessed 4 March 2021).

Flew T and Kirkwood K (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on cultural tourism: art, culture and communication in four regional sites of Queensland, Australia. *Media International Australia* 178(1): 16–20.

Flore J, Hendry NA and Gaylor A (2021) Creative arts workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: social imaginaries in lockdown. *Journal of Sociology* online first: 1–18.

Helsper EJ (2021) *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*. London: Sage.

Hesselberth P (2018) Discourses on disconnectivity and the right to disconnect. *New Media & Society* 20(5): 1994–2010.

Holcombe-James I (2021) *COVID-19, Digital Inclusion and the Australian Cultural Sector: A Research Snapshot*. Melbourne: Digital Ethnography Research Centre, RMIT University. DOI: 10.25916/java-wk29.

Holcombe-James I (2022) Digital access, skills, and dollars: applying a framework to digital exclusion in cultural institutions. *Cultural Trends* 31(3): 240–256.

International Council of Museums (2020) Report: Museums, museum professionals and COVID-19. Available at: https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-Museums-and-COVID-19.pdf (accessed 16 April 2021).

International Telecommunication Union (2021a) Individuals Using Internet (2005–2019). Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx (accessed 16 April 2022).

International Telecommunication Union (2021b) Statistics. Available at: https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx (accessed 16 April 2022).

Jorge A (2019) Social media, interrupted: users recounting temporary disconnection on Instagram. *Social Media + Society* 5(4): 1–19.

Kidd J (2014) *Museums in the New Mediascape: Transmedia, Participation, Ethics*. Surrey: Ashgate.

Kidd J, Nieto McAvoy E and Ostrowska A (2021) Implications of the COVID-19 digital 'pivot' in museums and galleries: Lessons from practitioners. Available from: https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/145540/1/Implications-of-the-COVID-19-digital-pivot-PEC-Discussion-Paper-November-2021-FINAL.pdf (accessed 30 June 2022).

Kline R (2003) Resisting consumer technology in rural America: The telephone and electrification. In: N Oudshoorn and T Pinch (eds) *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp.51–63.

Krcmar M (2009) *Living without the Screen: Causes and Consequences of Life without Television*. New York: Routledge.

Kuntsman A and Miyake E (2019) The paradox and continuum of digital disengagement: denaturalising digital sociality and technological connectivity. *Media, Culture & Society* 41(6): 901–913.

Lei C (2021, December 22) Celebrating the digital pivots of 2021. Available at: https://www.artshub.com.au/news/features/celebrating-the-digital-pivots-of-2021-2520758/ (accessed 30 June 2022).

Light B (2014) *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

MacKenzie D, Muniesa F and Siu L (2007) *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Main J (2021, October 22) Why we need online theater after lockdown. Available at: https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/schrodingers-precipice-online-theatre-after-lockdown-2508752/ (accessed 30 October 2021).

May N (2021, January 20) Pandemic's digital pivot a boon for creative storytellers. Sydney Morning Herald. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/culture/theatre/pandemic-s-digital-pivot-a-boon-for-creative-storytellers-20210110-p56sz3.html (accessed 28 February 2021).

Miller N (2021, August 15) 'I was on the kitchen floor crying too often': a year of despair for performers. Sydney Morning Herald. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/i-was-on-the-kitchen-floor-crying-too-often-a-year-of-despair-for-performers-20210812-p58i5c.html (accessed August 30 2021).

MIT Technology Review Insights (2020) Succeed in tough times: Make a digital pivot. Available at: https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/08/1009618/succeed-in-tough-times-make-a-digital-pivot/ (accessed 30 October 2021).

Moe H and Madsen OJ (2021) Understanding digital disconnection beyond media studies. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 27(6): 1584–1598.

Morozov E (2014) *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism, and the Urge to Fix Problems that don't Exist*. London: Penguin.

Network of European Museum Organisations (2020) Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe: Final report. Available at: https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf (accessed 14 March 2021).

Network of European Museum Organisations (2021, January) Follow-up survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums in Europe: Final report. Available at: https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_FollowUpReport_11.1.2021.pdf (accessed 20 March 2021).

Pacella J, Luckman S and O'Connor J (2021) Keeping creative: assessing the impact of the COVID-19 emergency on the art and cultural sector and responses to it by governments, cultural agencies and the sector. Creative People, Products and Places (CP3), University of South Australia.

Parry R, Eikhof DR, Barnes SA, et al. (2018) Development, supply, deployment, demand: Balancing the museum digital skills ecosystem: First findings of the 'One by One' national digital literacy project. In Proceedings MW18: Museums and the Web 2018. Museums and the Web. Available at: https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/development-supply-deployment-demand-balancing-the-museum-digital-skills-ecosystem-first-findings-of-the-one-by-one-national-digital-literacy-project/ (accessed 17 September 2019).

Petersen A (2018) Capitalising on ageing anxieties: promissory discourse and the creation of an 'anti-ageing treatment' market. *Journal of Sociology* 54(2): 191–202.

Portwood-Stacer L (2013) Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: the performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society* 15(7): 1041–1057.

Radermecker A-SV (2020) Art and culture in the COVID-19 era: for a consumer-oriented approach. *SN Business & Economics* 1(4): 1–14.

Ribak R and Rosenthal M (2015) Smartphone resistance as media ambivalence. *First Monday* 20(11), Available at: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6307/5136.

Richards S and Pacella J (2022) 'We need to keep making stuff, regardless of what the situation is': Creativity and the film festival sector during COVID-19. *Arts and the Market*. Online first DOI: 10.1108/AAM-11-2021-0061.

Sayed A (2021) COVID has revealed the essential value of the digital 'pivot'. Available at: https://fortune.com/2021/04/27/covid-digital-transformation-pivot-bmc-software-automation-ai/ (accessed 20 May 2021).

Smith M (2020, 25 April) Australian Arts Sector Left in the Cold by Federal Government, Claims Prominent Theatre Director, ABC News. Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-25/thousands-in-arts-sector-jobless-amid-coronavirus/12177250 (accessed 8 February 2021).

Sutton T (2017) Disconnect to reconnect: The food/technology metaphor in digital detoxing. *First Monday* 22(6), Available at: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7561.

Syvertsen T (2017) *Media Resistance. Protest, Dislike, Abstention*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas J, Barraket J, Parkinson S, et al. (2021) *Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*. Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. DOI: 10.25916/phgw-b725.

Throsby D and Petetskaya K (2017) *Making art work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*. Strawberry Hills: Australia Council for the Arts.

Treré E (2021) Intensification, discovery and abandonment: unearthing global ecologies of dis/connection in pandemic times. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 27(6): 1663–1677.

Treré E, Natale S, Keightley E, et al. (2020) The limits and boundaries of digital disconnection. *Media, Culture & Society* 42(4): 605–609.