



# **We can build a new utopia**

Reimagining the post-Covid ngā toi  
arts and culture sector in Aotearoa

The end of the COVID-19 pandemic is in sight. As vaccination programmes are rolled out around the world, a return to pre-pandemic life is being eagerly anticipated.

For our sector, however, a return to ‘normal’ life is not a given. The Covid crisis has both revealed the underlying vulnerabilities in the ngā toi arts and culture sector and created space for a creative conversation about the sector’s future. This historic pause has allowed time for reflection about what we do, how our work is funded, whose voices we bring forward, and who we are making for. As a contribution to this process, Te Taumata Toi-A-Iwi commissioned **Rosabel Tan** to talk to some of “our architects of imagination, map-makers to the unknown” about the questions they are asking and the opportunities they are seeing to reimagine and reshape the post-Covid ngā toi arts and culture sector in Aotearoa.

Rosabel concludes that while the questions and issues raised by her interviewees are not easy, “it’s essential we keep making space — not only for these conversations, but for one another. A bolder, better arts sector will involve radical change. That’s confronting and uncomfortable, but it’s spine-tinglingly thrilling too.

**“As we stand at this precipice, let’s choose to stand tall and proud, and as we start to plant these first seeds, let’s choose to lead the way.”**

Our thanks go out to all those who made time available to take part in this research. Rosabel’s interviewees included:

**Pelenakeke Brown**, interim Artistic Director of Touch Compass; **Courtney Johnston**, CEO of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; **Jeremy Hansen**, Manager of Arts, Culture and Community at Britomart; **Johnny Hui**, Education & Community Manager for Auckland Arts Festival; **Karl Johnstone**, Māori cultural development specialist; **Ahi Karunaharan**, theatre-maker and 2020 Arts Foundation Laureate; **Kee Hong Low**, Director of Programs (Theatre) at West Kowloon Cultural District Hong Kong; **Toluma’anave Barbara Makuati-Afitu**, co-founder of Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy; **Paula Morris** (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Manuhiri, Ngāti Whatua), novelist and founder of the Academy of New Zealand Literature; **Joe Pihema**, historian (Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei); **Jo Randerson**, writer and Artistic Director of Barbarian Productions; **Cat Ruka** (Ngāpuhi, Waitaha), outgoing Artistic Director of Tempo Dance Festival and incoming Executive Director of Basement Theatre; **Elise Sterback**, outgoing Executive Director of Basement Theatre; **Ema Tavola**, curator of contemporary Pacific art gallery, Vunilagi Vou; **Graham Tipene**, Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei artist; **Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai**, curator and co-founder of Lagi-Maama Academy & Consultancy; **Steph Walker**, Head of Programming at Auckland Arts Festival; and **Dolina Wehipeihana** (Ngāti Tukorehe, Ngāti Raukawa), General Manager and Director of Strategy for Kia Mau Festival and Kaiārahi Māori for PANNZ.

**When the world went into lockdown, some of our quietest voices were those of our artists. Around Aotearoa, our visionaries watched as their workplaces shut down. Theatres, museums and galleries sat empty. Roads were quiet. Retail and hospitality spaces — traditionally a supplementary source of income — closed their doors. And while the rest of us turned to our screens, our shelves, and our headphones, a fog of uncertainty settled over the year. How would art survive?**

We know the refrain: the pandemic has been a chance to reset, to rediscover what matters, and to rethink how we want to live our lives. It's also been an opportunity to see the world in sharper detail than ever before, and to trace the fractures in our foundation.

In the first six months of the pandemic in Aotearoa, more than 1.6 million people lost a significant part of their income and more than 11,000 people lost their jobs — at least 10,000 of whom were women, many of whom were young, many of whom were Māori. We saw the number of people struggling to put food on the table double to one in every five people. The housing crisis intensified to a state of emergency. Mental health issues spiked. We witnessed an increase in racism towards our many Asian communities, towards our Moana Oceania communities, towards tangata whenua. We stood in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, and we started asking ourselves how we let any of this happen.

In times like these, we need hope. And we found it: in a leader who guided us to become one of the safest countries in the world. Bloomberg's Oct 2020 Market Crisis Management Index ranked New Zealand top in the world on political stability, economic recovery, virus control and social resilience. We're right to feel lucky.

But we're also right to want more. Our duty to one another has never felt more profound, and this is a rare moment. With many of our essential industries in turmoil, the question is not simply one of survival and recovery. It's understanding that now is the time to be bold. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to critically examine the systems that no longer serve us and to radically reimagine our individual and collective futures for the better.

As we emerge from the pandemic, the temptation will be to claw back to how things were before. It's human instinct: we're reassured by the familiar. But returning to the status quo is the worst thing we could possibly do. Historically, the arts have acted as a portal to alternative futures, the soil from which imagination blooms, the catalyst that nourishes relationships, sparks ideas, fuels our evolution. But if we don't act now? We're delivering an unintentional death sentence, in which the arts become a nice-to-have — ornamental and necessary to only a few, instead of the beating heart we know it to be. We're committing to a future that denies people hope.

So where to? And what can we learn from our leaders — our architects of imagination, map-makers to the unknown? We asked some of the most inspiring voices in our sector to share the questions they've been asking as they imagine a new utopia.

## Seven actions for a post-pandemic sector

1. Examine the values we have built our sector on — are they guiding us towards the future we want?
2. Understand who we want art to serve (hint: it's everybody) and act like it
3. Create and strengthen the pathways that actually unlock and sustain truly excellent work
4. Care for our people
5. Care for our environment
6. Ensure these values are reflected in the ways we measure success
7. Use that feedback to keep iterating, keep evolving

## 1. What does privileging Indigenous knowledge actually look like?

From 2021, lip service will no longer be an acceptable form of currency. While we've all had a nice time bandying about phrases like 'diversity' and 'decolonisation', we're often deploying them within structures that have asbestos in the walls. We paint over them, we decorate them, but that doesn't change the DNA. So how do we go deeper?

### Let's flip the values that no longer spark joy

It's a big one, but questioning the worldview that underpins our sector is utterly crucial to thoughtful change. These values are so often invisible, but they shape our entire world. They determine which art forms are considered more valuable, for example, or how our limited resources are distributed, or how we even conceive of leadership and hierarchy.

"We've imported our culture, mostly from Britain," laments Elise Sterback, outgoing Executive Director of Basement Theatre. "We've imported the funding structures, what's considered high art. Wouldn't it be great to let go?"

Let's look at our policies. We don't actually have a national arts strategy, so what better place to start? Although the arts have consistently been underfunded — an issue that needs to be seriously addressed — the values we've inherited from our colonial foundation have led to a number of damaging practices, from the way our bureaucratic structures intrinsically entrench racism and classism to the strategic priorities that influence who gets funded and who gets forgotten.

Ema Tavola — curator at contemporary Pacific art gallery Vunilagi Vou — recalls a series of interviews she held with Pacific creative entrepreneurs for The British Council. “One of the sentiments was that the further from Aotearoa you go, the more you’re valued. The least valued they felt was here. And someone said on Twitter a while ago that the worst place to be Māori is in Aotearoa.” Why is that the culture we’ve created?

Jo Randerson, writer and Artistic Director of Barbarian Productions, adds: “Why does the Royal New Zealand Ballet — with all aroha to that institution and those who work there — receive such a disparately high amount of funding directly from the Ministry of Culture and Heritage when it is an extremely culturally specific form, a form of dance originating from Italian royal courts in the 1500s? Is this really such an essential spend for Aotearoa that it should be separated out in this way, or just an old colonial hangover?”

“You’ve got, in simple terms, a clashing of knowledge systems,” says Māori cultural development specialist Karl Johnstone, who’s been working on the New Zealand Pavilion for Expo 2020 in Dubai. “Even in the terminologies there are vast divides between concepts like ‘art’ in Western practice versus toi Māori — and where it becomes an issue is in the way that we value and delineate those differences.”

Let’s commit to understanding and embedding our many ‘ways of knowing’ in Aotearoa — and to let that shape the way we do.

We’re talking about shifting our whole value system, so let’s not underestimate the task we have ahead, but let’s recognise that there are easy and immediate actions we can be taking. Let’s commit, for example, to developing a nuanced understanding of te ao Māori: going beyond simply adopting a handful of te reo phrases and reconsidering the way we think about and see the world. “Many people just want the fineries of culture,” comments Karl. “But the nice bits are only as good as the bits that aren’t quite so nice. You’ve got to get that stuff right before you get to the nice stuff.”

“Let’s make depth of knowledge the norm,” says Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei artist Graham Tipene. “When it comes to our mahi, let’s start with kōrero about mana, whakapapa — the reasons why.”

“Often, there’s too much emphasis on the tangible,” adds Karl. “The intention, the influence, the values, the power sitting behind it. For me, that’s where the real energy is.”

**“Knowledge needs to be embedded into the infrastructure, because otherwise when people leave, the relationships — everything — go.”**

— Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai, curator and co-founder of Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy

It’s also about understanding the many other unique identities and knowledge systems that make up Aotearoa, and thinking about how we can honour and strengthen these too. It’s not even that the knowledge isn’t there, it’s that many of our institutions aren’t prioritising it.

“That knowledge gap,” says curator and co-founder of Lagi-Maama Academy and Consultancy Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai, “that’s why we see things resorting back to the dominant way of knowing or seeing or doing.” It’s exactly what we saw happen during the pandemic, when it seemed that so many years of work was undone in the flick of a budget cut or a restructure request. So often, what happens is that the quick fix is favoured over the necessary fix. “Knowledge needs to be embedded into the infrastructure, because otherwise when people leave, the relationships — everything — go.”

One project that Lagi-Maama are working on involves looking at tools like the Vernon Collection Management Software, a database used in galleries and museums like Toi o Tāmaki and Tāmaki Paenga Hira. “That’s an Aotearoa-made software,” says Kolokesa, “but it’s very much Western in terms of how it classifies and categorises the collection, and that’s where you update any work that comes in. All the information. So we’re like, how do you impose an Indigenous lens on that? We’re talking with the CEO [at Vernon] and you can tell how ingrained it is. They’re going, ‘Oh you just need to bring in the Indigenous languages.’ It’s like, no. No. Imagine if you press ‘Tonga’, and then boom, you’ve got the entire Tongan way of seeing the world.”

So many of the changes we’ve seen in the past decade have been clumsy band-aids. “Mana whenua artists are often responding to a vicious cycle of Council-inspired projects,” observes historian Joe Pihema (Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei). But rather than being invited to be part of the conversation from the beginning — to help shape the foundational knowledge and overall direction of a project — involvement becomes an afterthought, tacked on at the end, a last-minute form of decoration. It doesn’t have to be that way, and a big part of that is recalibrating our values.

## How much power are we willing to relinquish?

Meaningful change is always messy, and it so rarely happens because of the way the status quo serves those in power. Here are some hard questions: In what ways have you benefited from the status quo? In what ways are you unknowingly reinforcing a future you don’t believe in, simply because it makes your life easier or better?

For organisations: Who sits on your board? Who’s in your office? Now look at your stage, your walls, your audience. If they don’t look the same, somebody’s being exploited. What actions can you take to change that? Think of the voices we need to be listening to, and who shouldn’t need a loudspeaker in order to be heard. Pay the people on your boards. If you don’t, you’re erasing the perspectives of those who cannot afford to work for free.

“I hope that arts organisations are looking around at who is at their table,” says Steph Walker, Head of Programming at Auckland Arts Festival. “And I hope they’re thinking about whether that reflects the future that New Zealand should have, and the population that New Zealand has at present.”

“You have to diversify your communities and relationships,” says Pelenakeke Brown, Interim Artistic Director of Touch Compass, “and develop authentic relationships with Deaf folks, blind or visually-impaired folks, wheelchair users. You need to have different people in leadership positions, because then the conversations and the communities that they’re thinking about — and are accountable to — change. We don’t remember that we have to be accessible for blind or visually impaired folks all the time. But if you have a friend who’s visually impaired, and you know that those needs exist, you’re probably more likely to think about it.”

She also adds that this needs to be approached with nuance and care. “Most of the time, the disabled folks that have agency in speaking are white because their medical experience has been less traumatic and they have had better care, so there are all these other factors that might give them this kind of privilege that a disabled person of colour might not have.”

“As one of the mana whenua artists constantly called on to help with Council projects,” adds Graham, “it’s one thing to go out and make our city more Māori, but what we should be doing is making our rohe more Whātua, and that’s hard given the legislation that Council are following. And people are so unaware of ahi kā, and so unaware of what it actually means to be a hapū / iwi member. They just think that if they’ve got the brown people in the room, they’re doing well. And that’s where we get into trouble.”

“My big question,” says Pelenakeke, “is how institutions actually share power. We love to put whakataukī in our policies but, like... what’s that? How does that do anything? How does that support tangata whenua? How does that give any sovereignty back? We’re basically just colonising whakataukī and feeling good.”

“Invest in iwi enabling their own strategy, their own decision-making, their own infrastructure,” says Karl. “Until we empower and build our cultural equity through the establishment of our own systems, I think we’re going to keep falling short because we keep having to compromise. I’d love to be able to sit here and say, Here’s a great example of a structure like Council making it work. But honestly, I’ve always come out the other end feeling disenfranchised.”

“There will be an unbundling of the legislation regarding mana whenua,” adds Joe. “Because it’s ridiculous. It’s untenable.” We need to ensure, for example, that when we are working in Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, when we are in their rohe, they are at the table from the beginning. And we need to keep maintaining this dialogue, and to keep discussing how we can build towards this change.

In the meantime, “I think a band-aid is a translator role,” says Karl. Someone who can understand the distribution of mana, and how to provide support to iwi, to artists. “Often the divide between artists and bureaucracies is so vast it requires someone in the middle to help translate.”

## Let’s get uncomfortable

It’s going to get hard before it gets easy. Are we ready to share that? “The discomfort that Pākehā can sometimes feel,” observes Ema. “That discomfort is every time we engage in those spaces. Every time we go to an event, or I log into a Zoom hui and I’m the only Pacific person. This is the experience every time we engage with Pākehā-dominant cultural institutions. This isn’t an ‘unfair’ thing. This is like... let’s share the discomfort, because our histories aren’t comfortable, you know? So it’s an equity thing.”

## 2. Who are we actually making art for?

“There’s a whole chunk of people who live in a city, who don’t come to any of the things we do,” says Kee Hong Low, Director of Programs (Theatre) at West Kowloon Cultural District Hong Kong. Kee Hong recently spent some time in Aotearoa as part of a partnership with Basement Theatre. “Now is the time to seriously not just ask why, but what kind of relationships we want to build.”

## Why should people care?

Kee Hong has a question for anyone working in the arts: “Why should people think we are relevant in their lives? It’s not just about attracting people to come into our theatres, it’s about what kinds of sustainable relationships we want to have with them. They are part of our society, they are part of our city.”

We've known this for a while: art can feel like it's for somebody else. "There's still a significant proportion of the population that feels intimidated by art," says Jeremy Hansen, head of Arts, Culture and Community at Britomart. You could call it a breakdown in communication. We know the value of art, the way it feels magic, the way it nourishes us, the way it saves lives. Do others? "How do we learn from the position sport has for itself, as a key cultural activity?" asks Jo Randerson.

"How do we get ourselves on the news in the way that the All Blacks getting home in time for Christmas is a mainstream news topic?"

Do we even know who our audience might be? "The day has come when it's not acceptable for people to claim to be making art for a national audience if they're just looking out the window and not thinking about the whole country," says novelist and founder of the Academy of New Zealand Literature Paula Morris (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Manuhiri, Ngāti Whātua).

How well, for example, are we catering to those who live outside of the city centres? How well do we understand Gen Z — the first generation to have grown up surrounded by tech, who have an unparalleled fluidity when it comes to creative expression and consumption, a generation of social activists who don't see borders between forms in the same way older generations do?

Now that we've emerged from lockdown, many organisations are returning to programming as normal, without any real understanding of where their audience's heads are at. "Will we be ready to jam pack our calendars with Fringe or Pride or the Arts Festival?" muses Steph Walker. "How do we convince people, if they only want to go out once or twice a week — how do we convince them that this show is worth it, that it won't be a waste of their time and money?"

The pandemic has changed us: we've entered an era of radical transparency and, for many, the values behind a company are just as important as their work, particularly for younger generations. That's going to influence not just where we spend our money, but the entire future of subscription and patronage. People are slowing down and focusing on their wellbeing, and that has clear implications on how often they'll be going out, but also what they're looking for. With travel limited, people are also seeking creative ways to feel transported. Why not cater to that?

Besides actually understanding our communities, an essential first step is to address our connectivity issue. The slow death of arts journalism has contributed to this gap, but our efforts have only made it larger. We operate on a model of scarcity, and most of our resources get channelled into making the work itself. And then? The wider ecology gets forgotten and defunded: the critics, the educators, the public programmers, the marketers — everyone whose role it is to create and maintain connections between art and its audience. It's time to turn our attention back to creating a healthy ecology, where everyone can thrive, where everyone belongs.

"That's what success looks like," says Kee Hong. "People feeling that what we do feels like home."

### Be real: who do we actually care about?

The easiest trap we fall into is privileging audiences who have more disposable income. That's how we survive. But it's also how we become a reflection, rather than a rejection, of society's inequalities.

"In the work around diversity and social inclusion, for Pākehā and Palagī organisations, this is a risk space," says Ema Tavola. "Particularly when you talk about Māori and Pacific audiences. They don't come with any money. So you need a certain kind of leadership, and I don't see that leadership in a lot of organisations."



There's often a transactional attitude underlying the relationship between institutions and an audience, too, rather than consideration about how we might nourish the relationships we all have with one another. Cat Ruka (Ngāpuhi, Waitaha), Artistic Director of Tempo Dance Festival, describes one way she's considered this, through an intersectional approach to programming. "Not just about 'diversity' programming," she clarifies, "but actually trying to create moments of togetherness with multiple communities coming together to have a shared experience."

In attempts to broaden their audience base, larger institutions often create community engagement roles, but this feels like another cheap band-aid. Here's what we forget: it's a monumental weight to place that responsibility on a person, because those roles are never just a job — it's tapping into somebody's whole life: their knowledge, their experience, and their relationships with their parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, friends. "It's not safe anymore," comments Johnny Hui, Education and Community Manager for Auckland Arts Festival. "More and more — we're at a point where a lot of communities have been hurt. They will never set foot in certain spaces again. And that's a real shame, and it will take years and a lot of honest leadership to acknowledge what they did wrong, to actually repair some of those relationships."

This sense of disappointment has led to a number of independent initiatives and projects that seek to foster the space that others have failed to create. For Ema Tavola, this is Vunilagi Vou, the second iteration of which was built in the garage of her Papatoetoe family home during lockdown. "The pandemic has, for me, really been an opportunity to get back to why I do what I do. It's been a good opportunity to kind of strip away the capitalism of it, and get back to the ritual, which I'm really interested in. This is an opportunity for my Pacific arts community, and Indigenous arts community, to break bread together and honour each other." Openings at Vunilagi Vou feature a new fire and are like a private party.

"You can BYO a drink or you can BYO a piece of firewood. It's just about making people understand that their presence is important. Those are the sort of rituals I want to really embed with the space."

"The main beneficiary of Pacific arts should be Pacific peoples," she says, "because it speaks to Pacific experience. And we need as many tools as possible to build ourselves up in a world that breaks us down all the time."

### **3. We let our funders define our work — but should they?**

An ongoing tension in the arts sector is its dependency on funding agencies, which makes it beholden to the values and priorities of those funders. "Funding determines practice in terms of shape and form of art," says Karl Johnstone, "and that's a kind of a cancer for me. It shouldn't be driven through funding."

This dependency also means organisations are pitted against one another for inadequate sums of money, despite the popular rhetoric that we need partnerships to thrive. "The reality is that organisations and artists are often fighting for their own survival, so their defence barriers are up," observes Steph Walker. How do we change that?

#### **Why have we let other people determine what makes art magic?**

Very often, success is defined by commercial metrics like audience numbers and return on investment. But the reasons we need art aren't solely commercial: art makes us laugh, it comforts us, it challenges us. It's a portal to other perspectives and to experiences we may never have.

“We’re trying to get better at describing our impact,” says Courtney Johnston, CEO of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. “Especially the wellbeing outcomes that we contribute to, rather than the sheer numbers.” It’s not an easy exercise. “It doesn’t graph nicely. It requires a lot more explanation and understanding.” But it’s richer to look beyond superficial measures, to understand the value of working on a marae with iwi or hapū to take care of their taonga — or to be able to open the collections to queer storytelling, to provide space for those who haven’t traditionally felt safe in a museum.

Down at Britomart, Jeremy Hansen reflects on how lucky he is to work for an organisation that doesn’t look at short-term impact like numbers, and that instead understands the power of arts and culture to make a space feel like home. “Their long-term focus means we’re building a neighbourhood that makes people feel proud to be in Auckland and offers them opportunities of deeper connection with a sense of place.”

“I’m lucky that I’m supported in my belief that a large part of the sense of quality of urban space comes from the richness that arts and culture projects can give it. I hope there’s also a sense of generosity, surprise and delight, and also opportunities for civic connectivity in the public art projects that we’re able to create.”

### Let’s diversify and grow our funding — and travel the roads less taken

“This is a time for reworking our funding models and how we think about revenue streams,” says Cat Ruka, whose new initiative Heart Party uses the profits from artist-designed merch to create an alternative artist fund.

What else would our leaders like to see? “Arts funding that is no longer reliant on lotteries money,” says Jo Randerson. “And a Creative New Zealand arts spend that is closer to or equal to the Sport New Zealand spend — this disparity is present throughout the funding levels, from community gaming grants to direct government funding.”

Jeremy Hansen wonders why there aren’t more roles like his. “I think a lot of property groups, for example, see art as enormous expensive stuff you stick in lobbies on a permanent basis. And that’s great, but it’s also really hard work and it only gives a few artists a good commission once. I’d love to see this idea of using temporary works to perpetually refresh and stimulate people taken up on a wider scale through our cities.”

He chalks this up to the consultancy market that has developed around selling big artworks for lobbies, usually by the same handful of artists. “There’s a gap there,” he says. “It could be interesting to see the services that advise companies on lobby art applied at different scales, to connect creatives with companies who are cashed up but may not have the confidence or knowledge to commission artists for smaller-scale projects.”

“What if businesses commissioned artists or photographers or poets to create Christmas cards, for example, instead of buying generic ones in bulk? What if they had walls in their conference rooms that could be changed out with new temporary artworks each year? People might not know how to begin a process like that, or might feel they don’t know what good poetry or good art is, or what an artist’s expectations of such a process might be.”

“It would be interesting to trial a service that connects people and helps demystify the art world and make commissioning decisions without fear of failure or embarrassment. A person you can call who can say: ‘What are you thinking of doing? Here’s my advice on how to do it, think this over and give me a call back.’ There could be some opportunities there that provide a more regular income for a broader range of artists.”

## 4. Why are we comfortable with artists living in poverty?

The pandemic well and truly highlighted the precariousness of the independent arts sector, an issue we’ve tried to ignore for far too long. Last year, the median annual income for creative work was only \$15,000. Many arts careers will not survive this pandemic, and many of our freelance artists have been forced to leave the industry. It’s unlikely they’ll return, and that’s a massive blow for our future. So how did we get here?

Part of it is the way we’ve sacrificed long-term sustainability for short-term gain. “We are a reflection of Creative New Zealand’s strategies and beliefs and principles,” says Elise Sterback, “which for a long time have been to spread the resource as far and wide as possible. There’s nothing wrong with that. The intention is good. But the result is total scarcity and burnout and undervaluing everything.”

**“I refuse to be on any more projects where we pay a projector more to be in the room than a live person.”**

— Jo Randerson, writer and Artistic Director of Barbarian Productions

“Art should not be a vocation that is only available to those who have families wealthy enough to back them, or enough systemic privilege to access opportunities,” comments Jo Randerson. “We need to work collectively to disrupt the hierarchical pay scales. We want to be remunerated fairly, and we want teachers, cleaners, caregivers and nurses to be paid fairly too. We need to work collectively for equity in our societies, and the arts are just one part of that.”

“There also needs to be equity and transparency in pay rates across arts organisations,” she adds, referring to a number of major arts organisations who are currently asking experienced practitioners to work either below the living wage, or voluntarily. “I refuse to be on any more projects where we pay a projector more to be in the room than a live person.”

## 5. What are we willing to sacrifice in order to become sustainable?

Ensuring the financial sustainability of our sector is important, but so is our environmental sustainability. “We have this culture where we just keep manufacturing and moving on,” says Ahi Karunaharan. “It took a virus to literally stop us,” laughs Kee Hong Low.

With borders closed, many have been talking about the rise of a slow art movement, similar to the slow food movement — a chance to consider our curatorial responsibilities and to shift towards fostering relationships rather than creating transactions, and to acting in a more purposeful, meaningful and ethical manner.

This doesn't happen in a vacuum. One of the greatest barriers is the fact that so many organisations are already operating on limited capacity and, in some situations, without the environmental literacy to implement innovative green projects that work towards a carbon-positive future. While there are simple initiatives already in place — from paper-use reduction to power-management strategies to travel guidelines — there are larger projects that need to be prioritised and incentivised, including making environmental considerations a non-negotiable part of funding processes (such as including a carbon offset where travel is involved), the development of a cross-sector shared library of reusable and recyclable materials, guidelines around online carbon emissions and the creation of opportunities to develop alternative ways to tour.

**“A lot of our artists and companies still need to look overseas to create a sustainable career. But it's about what that looks like now.”**

— Steph Walker, Head of Programming, Auckland Arts Festival

Reducing our carbon footprint is a big one. “We're still a small country,” Steph Walker acknowledges. “A lot of our artists and companies still need to look overseas to create a sustainable career. But it's about what that looks like now. Is it licensing your work to a local company to make, or is it finding a way to co-create work with an international company that has been done with the use of Zoom or whatever?” Could we learn from technological advances in retail and incorporate haptic technology — to create a sense of touch and motion, such as the texture of a particular fabric — to create multi-sensory digital offerings?

Kee Hong is interested in how we might be able to train our audiences to lucid-dream their way into an environment or performance created by an artist. “These things excite me because they don't just bypass the limitations of the physical,” he explains. “They open up new questions about what live performance could be like in the future. It supersedes a lot of the problems we're all facing now, whether financial, social, political or medical.

Crucially, the pandemic has forced us to consider the ways technology might enable a mobility of ideas rather than bodies (Travis Scott's Fortnite performance, which drew 28 million people, is an extreme testament to this). Excitingly, these conversations are happening more frequently and imaginatively, blurring the false digital-physical binary that has previously existed — but it's important each decision is purposeful. “The technology needs to serve the work,” warns Steph, “rather than work being made to serve technology.”

## **6. What pathways do we need to sustain truly brave, ambitious, electric work?**

**We need to be able to keep our leadership fresh — and we need to do it with care**

Because our country is so small — and because our sector has evolved relatively organically — we've now reached an impasse. We've never developed a regenerative life cycle. Leaders reach the top, and then they have nowhere to go. We end up with generational bottlenecks, with some of our brightest practitioners leaving the sector because they can't move forward.

We need to reconsider the pathways we've created — for emerging artists and senior practitioners alike. "Lots of people work so hard to get where they are," says Dolina Wehipeihana (Ngāti Tukorehe, Ngāti Raukawa) General Manager and Director of Strategy for Kia Mau Festival and Kaiārahi Māori for PANNZ. "And then... where do they go? Where are the opportunities for our senior artists? Our administrators?"

We need limited terms on artistic director roles. We need development to support movement across industries. "Paid apprenticeships to upskill new grads into the industry," says Jo Randerson, emphasis on the paid. We need mentorship. Could we learn from initiatives like Regenerative Futures, a four-year social change initiative that pairs 100 young pioneers from around the world with leaders, recognising that each will learn from the other?

The pandemic has forced out a huge chunk of our sector. We've seen countless restructures, budget freezes, and lost contracts, and we need to be acting now. "In the same way as tourism," Courtney Johnston observes, "we may never be able to recover enough. We might make so many cuts that you can't rebuild."

Eventually, that will become a workforce problem as well. You won't have the talent. Talent is trapped in New Zealand at the moment, but that's not always going to be the case."

### Let's harness our regional centres...

We need to be paying attention to our regional areas. "In New Zealand, access to the arts and culture depends on where you live," observes Courtney, "and some councils are well funded and others aren't." There's an opportunity right now to strengthen our regional character, and it's a move that will benefit us all.

There's also an opportunity to think of our regional centres as development hotspots, where work is created before touring nationally, and then internationally. "One of the things we've lacked in Aotearoa is the chance for work to really get bedded in," observes Steph Walker. "You think about festivals, where you've got international works touring — they've been going for years and they finally make it to New Zealand, and they're sitting alongside works that have been newly commissioned and it's their world premiere. They've never been anywhere. And people wonder why things get panned compared to other shows in the Festival."

### ... and let's truly recognise our power

Through a cursed combination of our colonial history, geographic remoteness, anti-intellectualism and tall-poppy syndrome, we've made ourselves unnecessary victims of an unwarranted cultural cringe. Recognising our power — and using that to rebuild our foundations — is central to unshackling ourselves from that, and so too is recognising that so many around the world already see us as the centre, particularly when we use an Indigenous lens.

That's not to say we shouldn't keep looking outward. Historically we've been great exporters of some phenomenal talent. It's just that we shouldn't feel the need to appoint overseas practitioners into leadership positions, or require international success to validate an artist's career. Why not prizes based here, biennales based here, festivals that international artists are desperate to be programmed into?

Our privileging of certain international pathways has also meant we've ignored others. Paula Morris suggests it's time to look elsewhere. "Maybe the currents can flow in a different direction, and we can stop putting all our focus on spending loads of money taking three writers to the Edinburgh Festival where hardly anyone shows up to hear them."

“How can we form new partnerships? How can we stop looking — in the case of English language literature — to London and New York all the time, who are not interested in us? How can we look sideways to Australia, to South America, to Southern Africa, to Asia? “I want us both to stop looking north, and to stop navel-gazing.”

### Let's invest in the future, not in temporary tokenism

While we've seen an increase in so-called 'diversity' expenditure, much of this has been in pop-up programming. The real power? Permanent infrastructure. “Diversity doesn't happen in programming,” says Ema Tavola. “Social inclusion is structural.”

## “Diversity doesn't happen in programming. Social inclusion is structural.”

— Ema Tavola, curator at Vunilagi Vou

“As practitioners from the 'diverse space', there's been a lot more opportunities that have come our way in the last three, four, five years. But they can be even more harmful when you know that you're being used to tick boxes.”

This is particularly true when we consider the kinds of stories minority communities are often encouraged to tell: stories of pain and trauma rather than the rich range of joy to mundane silliness, bad behaviour to deep fantasy.

“I think of the language weeks and how problematic they are, because they are only a week,” adds Toluma'anave Barbara Makuati-Afitu. “You think of all the investment with these festivals, and that is highly problematic as well. How do you reinvest that into the structure to ensure other things can be better built and better made? Imagine if that investment got put into creating spaces that enable our community to curate works that represent them, and to be the ones that continue doing it? Change has to be structural, because if the policy doesn't change then we're going to be doing the same.”

### Let's work together, and let's do that properly

We need to work together to do this. The pandemic has forced us physically apart, but in other ways it has brought us closer together. Steph Walker reflects on this in comparison to the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, in which, as Assistant Director at Christchurch Arts Festival, she witnessed how simple changes had unexpected impact. “A lot of us lost our offices, and Ara [Institute of Canterbury] offered a space to all these different organisations. Suddenly we were working with the dance festival, we were working with SCAPE, with the orchestra. It really fostered a sense of collegiality and collaboration that we didn't have before. You could walk into someone's office and be like, ‘Hey, I've been thinking about this’, or ‘Who would you use to do this thing?’ We need to get better at having open conversations in terms of: what do you need, how could we work together?”

The notion of co-working spaces are not new, but what would it look like to share human resources too, or to co-fund performing arts residencies?

“We need to, as a sector, figure out how we align with each other and where we sit in relation to each other, where we are similar, where we are different,” says Jo Randerson. “Often our sector is pitted against each other in competitive funding models, which doesn’t encourage us to share knowledge and resources. I have experienced this in other sectors too and in my opinion, this is not a pathway to healthy organisations.”

We also need to recognise the breadth of this sector: the pandemic has illustrated the knock-on effects of our industry being in crisis, with suppliers and small businesses who supply the industry in crisis too. We need to be working with media, and with educators: we need to be fighting for the continuation of arts education in schools and at tertiary level.

Most importantly, we also need artists in the room when we’re making these decisions. “There is a community organising principle that states: Nothing about us, without us. It means that communities who are affected by policies should be at the forefront of discussions and decision-making of those policies. It seems like an obvious way to work,” says Jo, “but in practice it’s surprisingly rare.”

## 7. How do we keep evolving?

Art is not simply a reflection of the present, it’s a call for a better future. Aotearoa is in a unique position: we are one of the first countries out of lockdown, and one of the least impacted by the pandemic. Elsewhere, case rates are the highest they’ve ever been. Theatres and galleries remain empty. Artists are trying to operate while the virus is still very much a threat. The world is looking to us now, and it’s vital we hold on to the ambitious conversations we were having through 2020 — and that the rest of the world is still having — rather than scramble to return to the status quo.

Maintaining this momentum means continuing to ask tough questions, even (and especially) during the hard moments as we re-imagine and rebuild. Dolina Wehipeihana suggests a few more: “Am I relevant? Does this organisation have to last forever? Who else could be in my shoes? What else could I do?”

**“Am I relevant? Does this organisation have to last forever? Who else could be in my shoes? What else could I do?”**

— Dolina Wehipeihana (Ngāti Tukorehe, Ngāti Raukawa) General Manager and Director of Strategy for Kia Mau Festival and Kaiārahi Māori for PANNZ

Zooming out, Jo Randerson has a question for the sector at large: “How do we lead and advocate for our sector positively and collectively, recognising and valuing our differences but working together where possible to push for change?” It’s worth returning to the fundamentals, too, as we start to create new work. Cat Ruka suggests: “Who are we making for? Why are we doing it? What are we valuing?”

These aren’t easy questions, but it’s essential we keep making space not only for these conversations, but for one another. A bolder, better arts sector will involve radical change. That’s confronting and uncomfortable, but it’s spine-tinglingly thrilling too. What if we acted now, without compromise? Imagine an arts sector that feels electrified: with leaders that make our jaws drop; with artists that sear themselves into our flesh; with work that completely rewires how we see the world, that makes our hearts pound so hard it hurts. Imagine a sector where our artists choose to stay here, because there’s nowhere else they’d rather be. A place where others try to tour, to build relationships, to learn. As we stand at this precipice, let’s choose to stand tall and proud, and as we start to plant these first seeds, let’s choose to lead the way.



## If you'd like to continue supporting the arts in Aotearoa, here are some things you could do:

- Understand your legislative power. Engage with your government. Engage with your council as they develop their long-term plans. Advocate for the continued nourishment of the arts. For Tāmaki Makaurau, submissions are now being accepted on the 10-year budget 2021-2031.
- Help each other shape the future. Hold one another accountable. Encourage yourself to have uncomfortable conversations, especially with your loved ones. Don't rely on the energy of those who these conversations most directly disadvantage. Think of the words of Aboriginal elder Lilla Watson: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."
- While this isn't a long-term solution, donate (if you can) to any arts organisations whose work and kaupapa you believe in. Regular (monthly or yearly) donations are even better, as they help the organisation with planning into the future. Show up. Buy books. Go to films in their opening weekend. See shows. Go to the theatre.
- Think about this conversation. Return to it. Reflect on the different types of power you might have. Everybody has power. Are you responsible for financial decisions? Are you a voice that people in your community listen to? Do you have seniority at work? Your sector? What future do you want to see, and how can you contribute to creating that?



*About the writer: Rosabel Tan is a writer, strategist, and producer of Peranakan Chinese descent. She is the Director of Satellites (a series of events, exhibitions, and encounters exploring the contemporary experience of the Asian diaspora in Aotearoa) and the founding editor of arts-and-culture publication The Pantograph Punch.*

*Rosabel currently serves on the board of Silo Theatre, The Pantograph Punch and Auckland Council's Public Art Advisory Panel. She is also a member of the Asian Aotearoa Arts Hui (AAAH), the Asian Producers' Platform (APP) and Te Rōpū Mana Toi, Creative New Zealand's external advocacy advisory group.*



Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi is Auckland's arts regional trust. Its Ngā Toi Advocacy Network is a collective movement advocating for a stronger arts and culture ecosystem in Tāmaki Makaurau.

[www.tetaumatatoiaiwi.org.nz](http://www.tetaumatatoiaiwi.org.nz)

