Executive summary

Rethinking relevance,
rebuilding engagement

Findings from the second wave of a national survey about culture, creativity, community and the arts

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AUDIENCE RESEARCH

**CULTURE +
COMMUNITY**

IN A TIME OF
TRANSFORMATION
A SPECIAL EDITION OF
CULTURE TRACK.

a collaboration with

**LaPlaca
Cohen**

Yancey Consulting

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Introduction & methodology

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The Culture & Community research series launched with a first wave survey in May of 2020 designed to provide actionable information about changing community needs, contexts, and behaviors to arts and culture organizations during a time of rapid change and uncertainty. This report shares findings from a second wave of the Culture & Community research, collected in May 2021, over a year into the pandemic, and at a point when cases were falling before new variants emerged. This Wave 2 survey tracked changes in key questions from Wave 1 and explored new lines of inquiry. We developed a new series of questions to explore the dynamics of race and identity in cultural engagement, perceptions of systemic racism across the cultural sector, and the roles that Americans want arts and culture organizations to play in addressing social issues. Along with our partners at LaPlaca Cohen and Yancey Consulting, we named the second wave of this initiative Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation to reflect our hope that this difficult period — one in which the country has faced not just a pandemic but also a long-overdue racial reckoning and intense political polarization — would be an opportunity for genuine, system-level change.

This document is a brief summary of the full report, which offers in-depth analysis and reflections for changemakers across the arts, culture & community field. Click here to view or download:
sloverlinett.com/CCTT/reports-and-tools/

The backbone of this Wave 2 data is the representative panel of the U.S. population, which provides a reliable estimate of public opinion in the United States. We supplemented these panel responses with a survey of the arts and culture participants of more than 500 cultural organizations across the country. We added the supplementary list sample for three reasons: first, a larger sample allows us to have enough responses to accurately investigate proportionally small sub-groups of respondents; second, we can be more confident in findings drawn from larger sample size because they reduce the margin of error in our estimates; and third, so that we could provide relevant data back to organizations about how their audiences fit into the regional, genre-specific, and national landscape. Using cutting-edge statistical techniques, we weighted the combined sample of panel and list responses to ensure that the "deeper bench" of respondents located through institutional lists were balanced to reflect their actual proportions in the panel sample benchmark. While we made some changes to the research design (detailed in the methodology) to improve quality between the waves, the weighting applied in each wave provides a strong estimate for national public opinion at each point in time. An overview of the top takeaways from the data was shared in a Key Findings Report from Culture Track in November; readers may want to begin with that document before turning to this deeper analysis.

Findings

A. Evolving relationships with arts & culture

A strong initial impulse behind this research was to ask Americans how arts and culture organizations could support their communities in the face of a global pandemic. As it became clear that the pandemic was not going to be brief, and that other ongoing and emerging crises were intersecting with it and amplifying its challenges, we also became interested in how Americans' relationships with arts, culture, and creativity were evolving.

- One of the most intriguing findings of this wave of research has been the **sizeable jump in the importance of arts and culture organizations** to Americans over the past year. Over a year into the pandemic, more than half (56%) of Americans view arts and culture organizations as important to them. This finding represents a substantial increase over what we saw in the early days of the pandemic; in our Wave 1 survey, conducted during the spring of 2020, just 40% of Americans stated that arts and culture organizations were important to them during the pandemic, while even fewer (37%) rated them as having been important before the pandemic. In addition, we learned that **those who value arts and culture organizations highly are the most likely to support organizational evolution** toward greater community relevance and more diverse cultural representation.

- When thinking about the values of organizations, most Americans believe that arts and culture organizations **should first and foremost be welcoming to all kinds of people** (58% of Americans, and the most-frequently selected value).

- Having a local venue that is reflective of one's own cultural identity was important or highly important to a majority of Black/African Americans (57%) as well as many other BIPOC groups (37%–53%). Fewer White Americans rated this highly (25%); they may not value it because most of the largest and most visible arts and culture organizations in their communities are already predominantly reflective of Anglo-European identities.

- Most Americans still think that **arts and culture organizations can play a critical role in helping their communities** during times like this, with three themes emerging: organizations can serve as an emotional outlet (83%), provide connection and learning (77%), and give practical help (54%). Desires for emotional outlet were particularly high among Americans who have become more worried, afraid, sad, or depressed during Covid-19. However, over a year into the pandemic, **few Americans (27%) had seen or heard about arts and culture organizations in their area helping their community during the crisis** – a finding also echoed in the qualitative research. Furthermore, a comparison of our Wave 1 and Wave 2 findings shows that this number trended downward as the pandemic continued.

B. An Invitation to Change

Looking across the findings, the significant – and increasing – desire for change among arts & culture organizations is a core theme connecting much of this data.

- When randomly shown four genres of arts and culture, an average of **45% of Americans believed that systemic racism is present in at least one of those genres**. Among Black or African Americans, perceptions of the presence of systemic racism were significantly higher, particularly in comparison to White Americans (77% of Black/ African Americans & 35% of White Americans believed that systemic racism is present in at least one of the four genres they were shown).

- The majority of Americans want arts and culture organizations to be **active in addressing social issues in their communities (76%)**. Systemic racial injustice was the top issue at 42%, followed by income inequality/the wealth gap and climate change, both at 31%.

- Fifty-three percent of Americans believed that the **arts world needs to change so it has 'more relevance for more people.'** Notably, the hope for this kind of change has nearly doubled since the early days of the pandemic with an increase from 30% in Wave 1 to 53% in Wave 2. And in Wave 2, BIPOC Americans (with the exception of multiracial Americans) were also significantly more likely to want change in arts and culture organizations towards relevance for more people than the overall population (60%–70% across BIPOC categories, vs. 53% overall).

- Eighty-nine percent of respondents found ways they'd **like for arts and culture organizations to be 'better for them' in the future** when provided with a list of possibilities. There are four types of change that Americans want to see in arts and culture organizations to make them "better for them": increasing accessibility & new works (70%), embracing equity and inclusion (56%), becoming places of belonging and welcome (53%), and deepening community rootedness (46%).

- The majority of people in the United States (61%) also want to see arts and culture organizations **collaborating on programming with their communities**.

C. Creative practice, community participation, and in-person attendance

To contextualize Americans' desire for change in the arts and culture arena, we also explored how arts and culture activities have been fitting into people's lives. We explored four different types of connections to arts and culture: personal creative practices, community-based or participatory experiences, in-person attendance (before the pandemic), and digital engagement (which we discuss separately below).

- Over the past year, **nearly all Americans (96%) have engaged in some sort of personal creative activity** (e.g., painting, baking, dancing, singing, etc.) – a finding that is echoed in the qualitative Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation interviews with Black or African Americans.

- **In-person attendance at one or more arts and culture activities over the past few years was nearly universal** at 96%, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or geography. We included a broad set of in-person arts & culture activities in this question with a wide range of museums, performing arts, parks and gardens, libraries, and religious organizations.

- Almost half (45%) of Americans had participated in at least one of the community-based or participatory activities connected to arts or culture over the past few years, with little variation by race and ethnicity. Response patterns revealed three main categories of participatory

engagement: financial support of artists or organizations (31%); direct participation in community arts (19%); and activism — which could include protest with or against an arts and culture organization (17%).

- For many BIPOC groups, the ability to participate in arts and culture activities was limited by a lack of affordable transportation, which disproportionately affects American Indians/Alaska Natives, Black/African Americans, and Hispanics/Latinxs (33%, 27%, and 26% vs. 14% overall).

D. Broadening reach through digital offerings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many arts and culture organizations quickly shifted to online programming in order to maintain relationships with their communities and audiences. In the Wave 1 study, conducted during the early days of the pandemic, we saw remarkable rates of participation in digital arts and culture activities as well as evidence that online participation was more demographically diverse than in-person attendance had been before Covid. Over the past year, we found that the ways that digital offerings can serve as bridges towards a broader and more diverse audiences.

- A year into the pandemic, **most Americans (86%) were aware of online arts and culture activities and over half (64%) have participated** in one or more of those activities. While that online participation figure increased from the first wave to the second, the increase was relatively modest.

- We were fascinated to discover that a **history of personal creative activities was the strongest predictor of online engagement** with arts organizations — and this finding holds regardless of income, geography, and race or ethnicity. Perhaps this correlation is grounded in the fact that both personal creative practices and online engagement are often done at home, on an individual basis, and provide a way to maintain human connection on a flexible schedule.

- Digital offerings provided **notable opportunities for arts and culture organizations to reach new audiences who haven't attended in-person** in that cultural genre or category in the past few years. World music organizations were most successful in reaching new audiences, with 81% of these digital participants saying they hadn't attended in-person world music performances in recent years. Religious organizations were least successful in this regard; just 14% of their digital audiences said they hadn't attended in person in a while. In the other genres we measured, that proportion ranged from 29% to 68%, indicating a sizeable broadening in the digital realm. Since many arts and culture organizations had already been struggling to grow participation before the pandemic, this analysis provides important evidence that online engagement can be a pathway to reaching new audiences/visitors/participants.

- And in many of the genres and categories we asked about, those "**digital only" users were much more likely to be Black/African American or Hispanic/Latinx** than those who had engaged both online and in-person. For organizations looking to deepen engagement with Black/African Americans or Hispanic/Latinx people in their communities, digital offerings may be an important mode of engagement.

- A year into the pandemic, **just 26% of Americans using online arts and culture content had paid** for any of those activities over the past year. This Wave 2 finding is still a little low, given that it covers twelve months of engagement; it is almost double the 13% of online arts and culture users who reported paying for any type of content over the past month in Wave 1.

- Once it is possible to safely attend in-person programming, **most Americans (65%) expect to choose in-person events rather than online activities**; only 9% said the reverse. People with disabilities, those with children, and those who are Hispanic/Latinx were all more likely than the overall population to prefer online activities.

Summary of reflections

The promise of social research in the arts and culture sector lies in the conversations it sparks, the priorities it helps shift, and the experiments it leads to in practice, funding, and policy. We recognize that arts and culture organizations will vary deeply with respect to how embedded these themes already are within their work, and we aren't trying to make blanket recommendations for the field. Instead, we hope these findings provide some readers with a more rigorous empirical foundation for their work or a stronger case for support, and *all* readers with inspiration and evidence to explore new possibilities for service, equity, and sustainability. We've grouped the findings into five themes:

1. Making arts and culture experiences more welcoming

As the value Americans most want to see embedded in cultural institutions, being welcoming for all is a quality that many cultural institutions could strive to deepen. *What would it look like for your organization (or art-form or cultural practice-area) to become more welcoming, not just to current participants but also to other people in your community who may not feel that the experience is intended for them?*

2. Addressing social issues

As with other kinds of change discussed here, some arts and culture organizations are already tackling social issues in various ways and others have resisted taking on this role, preferring neutrality over position-taking or activism. It's clear that most Americans want to see arts and culture organizations actively addressing social issues, but how? One size will not fill all organizations or all communities, and the specific issues that survey respondents want cultural organizations to address (see Figure 8 on page 27) are probably just as important as the general desire for change. *What connections do (or could) exist between your artform or cultural category and the kinds of social issues that matter to your community?*

3. Combatting systemic racism

Systemic racism was the most frequently-selected social issue that Americans want arts and culture organizations to address, and a majority of Black/African Americans and Asian American/Pacific Islanders chose it. It may be helpful to think about change toward combatting systemic racism (as well as other types of change) at multiple levels: internal, programmatic, and external. A case could be made that each is a precondition for the next (i.e., internal change may sometimes be necessary before authentic, sustainable programmatic change can take place, and programmatic change may be necessary for a genuine contribution to real-world impact beyond the organization or art-form). *How do (or would) efforts to dismantle systemic racism align with your organization's mission, values, and role in*

the local ecosystem or national field? Who are the stakeholders, internal and external, who would need to be (or already are) involved in this work?

4.   Taking community collaboration seriously

One theme that unites the preceding priority-areas is *rootedness*: the idea that arts and culture organizations and experiences are (or should be, according to many Americans) deeply connected to their communities and to the challenges those communities face. These findings suggest that rootedness is relational and collaborative: Americans may view arts and culture organizations not as standalone or isolated actors in the community system, but as partners that can and should work substantively and creatively with other entities to generate public value. More specifically, the public's desire for community collaborations could take many forms, such as: collaborative decision-making or planning about who should perform or what material should be presented, community consultation about formats and co-creation of experiences, mixtures or juxtapositions of professionally-produced and community-created content, etc. The desire for more community collaboration may evoke a shift in the role of some cultural organizations from unilateral "producer" to shared "platform" – a shift that museum innovator Nina Simon has described, and one that challenges the tradition at many American arts and culture institutions of "top down," highly centralized and professionalized control over arts and culture experiences. *Do you honor equity in your collaborations through shared decision-making, respect, and reflection of ground-level community priorities?*

5.   Considering both the benefits and costs of digital engagement

While many arts and culture organizations shifted to online programming to maintain their relationships with audiences and supporters during Covid, those digital offerings also offer important opportunities to lower barriers and reach new audiences or users. Digital technologies appear to hold some promise in introducing people to different types of art, but there is more to learn about whether and how organizations could use these technologies to draw new audiences and supporters. When making decisions about the future of digital offerings, many arts and culture organizations will be balancing the value of broadening reach and diversifying engagement with hard questions about short-term financial sustainability. The long-term viability of digital engagement for many organizations will likely be constrained by the low proportion of paid users and the preference held by most Americans towards in-person arts and culture experiences in the future. It seems likely that the support of foundations and major donors will be critical to maintaining online offerings of arts, culture, and creativity – offerings that help attract and serve new, more racially diverse audiences and thereby advance both sustainability and equity around the field. *Have you charged users/audiences for online content? Why or why not? Do you believe it can become a revenue stream?*

We'd love to hear your reflections, questions, critiques, aspirations, and actions in connection with this study. Please email the authors at **CCTT@sloverlinett.com**.