

Written evidence submitted by XTRAX Arts

Background

XTRAX has over 17 years of experience of programming, managing, and delivering outdoor arts festivals and events in the UK and internationally. We have delivered over 25 international performance showcase events, in partnership with UK and international festivals and Arts Council England, as well as extensive experience of consultancy, festival and event management, programming, producer support to artists, international tour management and strategic support to arts organisations.

XTRAX is recognised as one of the UK's leading specialists in international outdoor arts development. With a vast network of industry contacts across the UK and internationally (including festival directors, event promoters, professional institutes and artists) XTRAX has broad experience in the strategic development and distribution of outdoor arts internationally. Alongside its international showcases, XTRAX is the management company for Without Walls, a Consortium of 35 outdoor arts festivals and arts organisations.

Without Walls is a consortium of festivals and organisations dedicated to raising the profile of the UK Outdoor Arts sector, promoting artistic excellence and supporting innovative new work for the benefit of artists and audiences. Without Walls brings together artists, promoters and commissioners to make high-quality outdoor shows - from the intimate to the epic - that tour to festivals across the UK and beyond. The Consortium nurtures talent and skills by researching, developing, commissioning and touring new work, enhancing the growth of the sector, and reaching large audiences; many new to the arts.

Introduction

The Outdoor Arts sector has been hit hard by the impact of COVID-19, with the main lockdown restrictions starting in March, just ahead of the main outdoor arts season (May – September). Festivals, arts organisations and artists were left with little time to adapt to new circumstances and many had to completely cancel their work for 2020. The following aims to summarise the impact that we have already perceived as well as projections of what is yet to come.

We regularly discuss with festival partners, artists and international colleagues as well as sector organisations such as Outdoor Arts UK and those from other arts sectors to keep an overview of what the main challenges are facing the sector and what its stakeholders need to navigate the uncertain times during and after the pandemic. In the coming months, the Outdoor Arts sector will need to address a variety of new challenges relating to COVID-19 and its wider impact, the overall extent of which is yet unknown.

Artists

Many outdoor artists rely on the summer season to earn money, which then allows them to bridge the quieter autumn and winter months. The majority of this work has been cancelled

for 2020. Further, artists are unclear how they can adapt their work, which often relies on audience interaction, as well as either intimate interactions or large audiences, to the new COVID-19 regulations. The Outdoor Arts sector is made up by a large variety of artists, from sole traders to large scale companies, all with different needs and resources. There has been frustration around the lack of guidelines and support.

The quick shift of funding bodies to invest in emergency response initiatives has supported artists and organisations in the short term but has also caused a risk for artists who usually rely on public funds to create their work, which is mostly presented in contexts that are free to attend. There is a serious worry about the possibilities for artists to create work in future, funds available reducing and smaller, emerging companies not being able to survive in an even more competitive post-COVID environment.

Further challenges facing artists include navigating safe rehearsal and performance practices once shows may be able to go ahead again. Future touring is another challenge, with many artists relying on a summer tour with one off weekend gigs, to make a living. This will be challenging within the UK, as well as internationally. 2020 was earmarked as a year for major international tours for many artists, ahead of the UK fully leaving the EU in 2021.

Festivals

The close relationship we have with the 35 Without Walls partner festivals, as well information fed back from other festivals across the UK, have made the impact of the pandemic on the outdoor arts festival sector clearly visible. The majority of our partners' events have been cancelled or postponed in 2020, with only two of the nine commissioning festivals hoping to go ahead, and all the smaller festivals and events being cancelled until at least late August.

Consequently, many festivals have suffered from non-refundable expenditure, and loss of income from ticket sales because of the pandemic. The outdoor arts festival sector is made up of a large variety of different organisations, all facing their own individual challenges. Uncertainty of guidelines and regulations are making it hard for many to plan ahead, with lead in times for events usually being between a minimum of six and twelve months.

Many festivals are reliant on income from Local Authorities, grant-giving organisations or sponsorship. Much of this has dried up, making the financial position of the festival organisers extremely critical.

Insurance issues, as well as wider logistics of making festivals 'covid-safe' (ie use of toilets, queuing) have been cited as challenges that festivals are trying to navigate.

Audiences

Outdoor arts festivals have proven to be more democratic than other art forms, reaching non-traditional arts audiences, often more diverse than those of any other artform. There is a wider risk that these audiences may be left out. Many organisations have adapted digital channels to showcase their work. Although this is working well, this excludes communities that may not have access to the internet or are not as digitally savvy as others. It is important to consider how these audiences will be reached and integrated in the longer

term strategy as well. If festivals are no longer able to go ahead, or only in strongly modified ways (ie charging ticket costs, booking for events in advance, attending in smaller groups), there is a risk that the sector loses its diversity of audiences as well as artists and other professionals.

International Work

XTRAX strongly relies on international collaborations, with our showcasing events, as well as supporting artists to tour internationally. Many of the festivals we work with in the UK also programme international work.

COVID-19 has already led to the majority of all international bookings for artists to be cancelled in 2020, with an uncertainty when travel can safely resume in future. In addition to travel and quarantine restrictions, artists are facing challenges around transporting set and adhering to local Covid restrictions. Festival promoters in the UK and abroad alike are unwilling to take cancellation risks if new waves of the virus occur in any given country.

Opportunities for artists to collaborate with international colleagues and create work in other countries have decreased.

The same challenges apply for XTRAX working with international partners on hosting international showcases in the UK or abroad – all events have been cancelled or moved online, and delegates are unable to travel.

Without clear guidelines it is impossible to plan for when this activity can continue, as well as knowing when international delegates would feel safe to travel again.

Uncertainty around Brexit restrictions for the coming year increases the fear for the future of UK international work.

Wider Sector

Compared to other art forms, outdoor arts are relatively ‘new’ and still establishing their role within the wider arts economy. It is important that the role that they have played in reaching audiences, animating places and democratising the arts have played over the past decades is not forgotten, when looking at supporting the recovery of the sector.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges Outdoor Arts sector is in a unique position to lead the Post Lockdown recovery.

Experienced practitioners such as ourselves and many others are already planning how to deliver events safely in a socially distanced way. There is a wide range of high quality work that already exists that could be suitable for outdoor presentation safely – and we are in the process of supporting the development of more work that responds to the pandemic thematically, as well as being thrilling and entertaining for audiences.

As many theatres and venues face long term closure, the expertise of the outdoor arts sector, can be used to lead the way in demonstrating how exciting events can be presented safely – in parks, town centres, unusual spaces up and down the country.