

## Keeping it together ... and going to pieces

Creative Recovery and Resilience Forum writer-in-residence Simone Penkethman reflects on the solo experience of a virtual gathering.

Inertia, a languishing ennui, brain-fog, and fatigue are some of the side effects that Canberra artists are feeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. Procrastination and putting off decisions about the future are sometimes the best available responses to two years of disruption, uncertainty, and endless postponing of public gatherings.

In the early evening of 2 December 2021, over 30 Canberra creatives gathered online to participate in 'Keeping it Together', the first of nine activities in the ACT's Creative Recovery and Resilience Forum (the Forum) between now and May 2022. Luckily for me, [Vessel Collective and DJ Maleika](#) curated a [sweet Spotify playlist](#) for the event that helped to get me in the mood for people.

Part performance, part workshop, and plenty of fun, 'Keeping it Together' was a gentle way for people from our local arts industries to reconnect. The program included two facilitated discussions led by artists, interspersed with DJ sets and warmly MC'd by comedian [Laura Campbell](#).

The Forum team from the University of Canberra (UC) are endeavouring to make their events accessible, inclusive, and culturally safe for all. Two Auslan Interpreters took turns at interpreting the proceedings. Closed captioning was also available.

For the benefit of vision-impaired people, presenters described themselves. For the benefit of the reader, I will describe myself in a similar style: I am a small woman with a big smile. I am middle-aged with fair skin, brown eyes and long blonde hair that is loosely tied back. I'm wearing a light blue jumper.

There's an intimacy in listening to someone describe themselves. This gesture toward accessibility was to everyone's benefit.

An important cultural aspect was a Welcome to Country by Ngunnawal elder Wally Bell with Auslan interpretation by Brett Olzen. From his home, Wally told

us of the physical and spiritual protection that he offered in his welcome. He called to the spirits of his Ngunnawal ancestors using clapping sticks and chanting. The full commitment and volume of the chant distorted the digital signal but, rather than detracting from the experience, this added a sense of something coming from another time or dimension. Sitting alone at home, I felt the same warmth and feeling of connection that I've felt when being welcomed in by Wally at live, pre-pandemic events. When MC Laura Campbell thanked Wally, she was clearly moved too. The Zoom chat soon filled with people echoing the same sense of spiritual presence.

[Home Economix](#), a collection of artists and researchers, facilitated the first discussion. Their work centres around the question: How do we build creative peri-pandemic communities? The word 'peri' acknowledges that the pandemic is not over.

The [Home Economix](#) webpage describes their project as a “decentralized digital arts lab that conducts experiments in new forms of public/community engaged art in physically distanced contexts”. Such a lab could itself be described as a peri-pandemic community. Could we have imagined the usefulness and viability of such enquiry two years ago?

Accessibility and the experience of disability emerged as key themes in the discussion. The experience of the pandemic in the mainstream community has mirrored some of the experience of living with disability. Examples of this were a sense of grieving for hypothetical lives, and the heightened stress and anxiety of living in a state of perpetual uncertainty.

Governments and funding bodies are also dealing with uncertainty. Funding for creative development without mandatory public outcomes has been one way that governments and other organisations have supported artists through the pandemic. People saw this as a positive change in priorities, enabling playful artistic experimentation in dark times.

Another short but uplifting set from DJ Malika highlighted commonalities throughout African diaspora music and again the cultural experience was enriched by mesmerising Auslan interpretation from Deb Hayes.

The second facilitated conversation was led by multi-disciplinary artist and lecturer at the ANU School of Art, [Ellis Hutch](#). She spoke about her extreme anxiety in early 2021 and how she found playful ways to make friends with the future. She moved away from the binary utopian/dystopian vision of the future and toward the unknown quantity of multiple possibilities. Hutch wisely said:

“I’m totally up for going to pieces being a very valid part of the whole experience of the pandemic. It’s not always about keeping it together; sometimes it’s about how do we cope with going to pieces.”

She introduced two alter-ego characters that she developed as helpful friends along her journey. Hutch’s characters (comically played by fellow artists) were an “efficiency expert” who resembled a typist from the late 1970s, and an “oracle” who first reached us as a disembodied voice (as have so many Zoom meeting participants over the past two years), before appearing on screen as the kind of person you might meet around a 1980s ouija board.

Hutch encouraged participants to draw, discuss or write about their own alter egos. The many contributions included an inner snail, a Buddhist monk, and a black bloc anarchist.

Playfulness and new understandings around empathy and inclusion are emerging as key positive effects of these unprecedented times for our arts community. Feedback from ‘Keeping it Together’ will inform the development of up-coming Forum events.

The final note that I scrawled at the end of the event is this: “When we’re alone, we think that we’re the only one. We get together and realise everyone else is feeling the same.”