

Cultural tourism in extraordinary times: Hobart's 2021 Dark Mofo festival, COVID-19, and Australia's state human bio-security regimes

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a marked impact on cultural festivals that employ international artists to perform at events catering for domestic and international visitors. Air transit routes have been severely disrupted across the globe and border security measures have severely restricted international arrivals. In nations such as Australia, where there have been further sets of restrictions on movements between states, the logistics of running major arts events have been highly onerous. This short case study profiles a range of logistical issues faced by the organisers of the annual Dark Mofo festival, held in Hobart, Tasmania. These issues were particularly significant since the festival plays a key role in the winter economy of the island and threats to its operation had multiple ramifications for a range of related tourism activities. The case study thereby highlights the precarity of reliance on major 'big ticket' events and the adept nature of organisational responses to such challenges.

Keywords

COVID
Border restrictions
Hobart
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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had multiple repercussions for the global tourism sector that have begun to receive scholarly attention, see, for instance, the respective theme issues of the journal *Tourism Geographies* (edited by Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder and Salazar, 2020) and *Annals of Tourism Research* (Yang, Zhang & Rickly, 2021). International bodies such as the United Nations World Trade Organisation have also provided detailed impact reports (UNTWO, 2021). More specific studies of effects and consequences are also emerging but, to date, scholarly analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on arts events, such as festivals, has been limited. Davies (2020) is significant in this regard by virtue of addressing what festivals and festival administration and regulation will be like in an immediate future in which COVID-19 will still be present. This short communication contributes to discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on festivals and festival tourism regarding a single example, the annual Dark Mofo event, held in Hobart (Australia). More particularly, it examines the complexities of running such an event at a time when Australia was restricting movement into the country and when individual Australian states were independently restricting movements between states in a highly fluid and unpredictable manner. The article identifies the extraordinary circumstances and flexibility required of event organisers, the very complexity of COVID-19 responses at national, state, and institutional levels and the disruption of cultural life and cultural tourism involved. The topic is presented to provide insight into practical factors and local responses that are relevant for future planning.

Tasmanian tourism and the 'MONA Effect'

Australia is a federation of six states, one emergent state (Northern Territory) and several small territories including

Australian Capital Territory, centred on the national capital, Canberra. All the states are located on continental Australia except for Tasmania, an island with a total land area of 68,400 square kilometres, located off the south-eastern tip of the mainland. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries Tasmania was commonly regarded as a picturesque but highly conservative location whose culture, accommodation and culinary options held little interest for urban populations on mainland Australia. This reputation has undergone a major shift in the intervening years with the capital city, Hobart, in particular, now being seen as a 'must-visit' location for sophisticated continental Australians. The central factor in the reimagination — and subsequent re-branding — of the city was the establishment of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in 2011. The museum is particularly notable (in the Australian context at least) by virtue of being a private enterprise, originally intended to house the art collection of David Walsh, a highly successful professional gambler. Its construction involved the excavation of a substantial area on the western bank of the River Derwent and with gallery spaces being mainly constructed below ground and with above ground buildings having a strikingly modernist appearance (Figure 1). MONA's acquisition and exhibition policy has been equally bold, frequently featuring large scale and provocative works of types that other Australian museums and galleries have been more reticent to embrace. Since its opening, the museum has been recognised as a tourist attraction in its own right and as one that has brought new kinds of tourists to the city and the state. These, in turn, have inspired more diverse culinary and beverage production and different types of accommodation facilities. In 2016 MONA's Digital Manager Eleanor Robb went so far as to characterise mainlanders' visits to MONA, Hobart, and Tasmania in general as "almost like a pilgrimage, travelling to this tiny island at the bottom of Australia" (Majumdar, 2016). This has led several observers to refer to the 'MONA Effect' (McGarry, 2018), echoing the better-known

'Bilbao Effect', which journalist Rowan Moore has aptly summarised as "a phenomenon whereby cultural investment plus showy architecture is supposed to equal economic uplift for cities down on their luck" (2017). As Franklin (2016) detailed, the problem with this model is that the Basque region also had several other significant tourist attractors that the Guggenheim Museum and the cultural neighbourhoods it generated could 'plug into' and gain traction from. Without such a context, various Bilbao-inspired projects (such as the Public Gallery in West Bromwich, in the UK Midlands) have been notably problematic (Norris Martin & Gallagher, 2012). In Tasmania's case, wild coastlines, forests, wineries, and premium agricultural product provided a supportive context for MONA related tourism. As a result of such integrated attractions, tourism has been estimated to inject 3.2 billion Australian dollars annually (261 billion yen) into the Tasmanian economy (Tourism Tasmania, 2021).



Figure 1. Museum of Old and New Art, riverside entrance view.
Source: MONA (promotional image)

Dark Mofo

As an outgrowth of the Museum's activities, MONA organised the first in a series of annual summer festivals of music and art (FOMAs) in 2008 that have been notable for prioritising avant garde performers and performances. This aspect has been even more marked in the festival's wintertime twin, Dark Mofo, held in June, around the winter solstice, at a time when tourist visitation to Hobart (Australia's most southerly and, consequently, coldest city) has traditionally been minimal. First held in 2013, Dark Mofo embraces the cold and dark, holding most events at night. Like MONA itself, the festival has courted controversy since its inception with a series of confrontational performances and with a visual logo of a modified (and often inverted) red crucifix (Figures 2 and 3) that continues to alienate the city's more conservative Christian establishment. Prominent international artists headlining the event have included Laurie Andersen, Autechre, John Cale and Einsturzende Neubauten.

The festival has become a major feature in Hobart's cultural and tourism calendar involving a significant visual branding of the city's waterfront area (Figure 3). The 2019 event (the last pre-COVID iteration) produced the biggest boost to tourism to the city and state to date, with interstate/overseas visitors purchasing approximately 65% of the 100,000 festival event tickets sold (Ausleisure, 2019). Regional Tasmania also recorded an increase in winter visitation over pre-Dark Mofo numbers with Destination South Tasmania chief executive describing the festival as a "game changer" in giving southern Tasmania a "winter peak season" and with Tasmanian premier

Will Hardman identifying the government's \$10.5 million subsidy of it in 2019 as a sound investment (Ausleisure, 2019). Given this considerable boost for the Tasmanian economy, the cancellation of the 2020 festival due to COVID-19 outbreaks in mainland Australia was markedly detrimental to the state's wintertime economy and the announcement of its reinstatement in 2021 — albeit in a slightly reduced form - provided grounds for optimism in an otherwise highly uncertain economic period. As a result of the pandemic, the event proved highly problematic, and often fraught, for its organisers, participants and for many intending and actual interstate tourists.



Figure 2. Winter Feast food and beverage arena at Dark Mofo, June 2021
Source: Author



Figure 3. Visual branding of Dark Mofo at Hobart waterfront, June 2021
Source: Author

Australia and COVID-19

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia occurred in January 2020 and, in the face of a limited spread of local cases and growing concern about the international situation, national borders were closed, with only Australian citizens (and a small number of special case international applicants) allowed entry, on condition of undergoing two weeks monitored hotel quarantine. Additional restrictions were placed on movements of people within and between states, as states with zero-low cases sought to prevent incomers spreading the disease. In this situation travel restrictions changed from week to week and with individuals often finding themselves stranded by shifting restrictions. As a result of this situation, many cultural and sporting events were variously cancelled, postponed and/or relocated (often repeatedly) as the year proceeded. Two notable cancellations were Byron Bay's Bluesfest and the subject of this article, Hobart's Dark Mofo.

Due to fortuity, and the dispersed nature of Australia's population and careful management of border access by state

governments, the pandemic spread very differently in Australia. Victoria was the worst affected state until late 2021, with its capital, Melbourne, suffering a series of lockdowns in response to local outbreaks. Until a severe flare-up in June-July 2021 (that shows no abatement at time of writing), New South Wales and its capital, Sydney, was relatively COVID-19 free. Other areas, most notably the island-state of Tasmania, with its limited entry points and strict restriction on entrants from COVID-19 affected states, had very few cases of COVID-19 and did not see the social distancing and mask-wearing measures that Victoria and NSW imposed until the end of 2021. The decision to cancel the 2020 iteration of Dark Mofo reflected the highly uncertain nature of mobility and human bio-security provisions at an early stage in general socio-governmental management of the pandemic. Similarly, the decision to proceed with the 2021 iteration reflected factors such as an optimism about the extent to which national and international governments and health organisations could get on top of the pandemic by mid 2021, an optimism and degree of confidence about Tasmania's ability to keep the pandemic out and what be regarded as 'blind faith' that the event could and should happen. This situation presented festival organisers with what might both be considered as the novel opportunity of organising and managing a festival in a time of COVID-19 and, as pertinently, a highly stressful, logistical mire.

Festivals, particularly major ones, combine both a degree of long-term planning and scheduling — particularly for international and/or well-known acts — and more flexible, shorter-term planning for lesser known and/or local acts. Similarly, major venues must be booked in advance while smaller ones may be arranged at later stages, as line-ups are confirmed and clarified. As anyone who has worked on organising a festival will attest, even the best planning cannot militate against unforeseen logistical issues and the somewhat unpredictable nature of creative artists and their managers. Indeed, there's a standing joke in the industry that if you ask a festival organiser to recall the year a particular festival ran smoothly, they will be unable to produce an answer. Events such as Dark Mofo are therefore ones that are run with a mixture of planning, flexibility and, often, last-minute frantic fixing up of line-ups and organisational problems. As will be apparent, the introduction of COVID-19 into this situation and, particularly, the highly volatile and idiosyncratic nature of Australian states' management of it, created a highly pressured situation for festival organisers. If this 'double whammy' was not bad enough, a third factor caused logistical headaches, artist withdrawals, bad publicity, and a temporary crisis of morale for Dark Mofo's team. This arose from the highly negative reaction to the festival's commissioning of a work by Spanish conceptual artist Santiago Sierra. The work required indigenous people to donate blood, which a British flag would then be dipped in to visualise the trauma of European invasion. Despite the anti-colonial purpose of the work, the expectation and requirement of indigenous blood donation was widely seen as insensitive and several indigenous artists, organisations and spokespeople campaigned against it and called for boycotts of the festival, with press coverage tending to support the critique. Despite Dark Mofo's creative director Leigh Carmichael initially standing by the work, it was subsequently withdrawn. While institutional morale recovered after adverse publicity and boycott calls dissipated, the situation added to the stress of the organising team and illustrated the limited capacity of personnel coping mechanisms

in a COVID-19 environment.

As with any festival, several national and international artists were considered before offers were made to specific individuals and ensembles to participate. One of the standard aspects of any such negotiations is remuneration and expenses, and these costs were increased by the requirement of two-weeks hotel quarantine for international arrivals, to be undertaken in the city of disembarkation (Sydney, in all cases). After negotiations with artists, some of whom were initially interested but unwilling to undertake such quarantine, a final line-up was fixed. The music program, scaled down from the festival's 2019 iteration, brought over eight international performers and one manager from Europe and the United States. These comprised the festival headlining duo of (ex-Sonic Youth) guitarist Thurston Moore and his regular synthesiser collaborator Jon Leidecker (aka 'Wobbly'); the drone metal trio Om; composer-conductor Gavin Bryars and viola soloist Morgan Goff (who performed with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra); and Haley Fohr (performing as Circuit des Yeux). In addition to the usual Australian category 408 (temporary activity entertainment) visas required for musicians, special applications had to be made for them to enter as part of the Australian Government's tight cap on international entrants during the pandemic (in which they were competing with Australians trying to return home). Additional permission had to be sought from the New South Wales Government since NSW was the state in which the artists' inter-continental flights arrived and from which they were able to travel on to Tasmania after quarantine (given that Melbourne was in lockdown for much of the immediate pre-festival period). The issue of the willingness of high-profile international artists to participate — given the extended duration of travel and quarantine (amounting to around 28 days in all cases) — to perform one or two concerts in a small Australian city on the opposite side of the world from their current domiciles merits comment. During their period in Hobart, Moore, Fohr and Bryars all publicly stated their gratitude at simply being able to perform again (in *any* context), given the health crises and public assembly restrictions in their countries of residence. The situation was very different for several Victorian artists scheduled to perform, as the state went into lockdown in the two weeks immediately preceding the festival, and with the organisers having to cancel for logistical reasons. A range of shows had to be rescheduled, replacements booked etc. The lockdown also resulted in Victorians being unable to attend a festival located a short air flight from Melbourne at which attendance has been a standard fixture for a coterie of attendees.

Despite the intense nature of last-minute arrangements and glitches of various kinds, the festival was adjudged to have been a success in both box office and artistic terms. The former factor was enabled by the overdemand for event tickets that has marked iterations since the mid-2010s (even with a drop-out in Victorian attendance, almost all events were sell-outs). The artistic success of the festival was secured by the quality of the roster of artists selected, the quality of sound and visual design at their shows and the aforementioned happiness of artists at having the opportunity to perform. The festival's headline show, a performance by Thurston Moore and Wobbly (Figure 4), exemplified this, being rapturously received, and being preceded by Moore's public acknowledgement of the organisers' Herculean efforts in bringing the event together.



Figure 4. Wobbly (left) and Thurston Moore (right) performing at Dark Mofo, June 2021

Source: Author

Conclusion

The lesson to be learned from Dark Mofo 2021 is that traditional, large-scale festival organisation is possible even during a time of peak contagion spread such as COVID-19 *if* it occurs in an area where the pandemic is not present (and/or once high vaccination levels are achieved) and *if* the organisers and necessary critical mass of performers are highly flexible and inventive in reacting to restrictions and a variety of exigencies. As this short communication should have established however, such a situation is only tenable as an extraordinary measure (and effort) during extraordinary times. If the COVID-19 virus establishes itself in mutating forms that require new infection controls, vaccines, and treatments on even a short-term basis, cultural tourism, particularly to festivals, is likely to be either unviable or else to require a radical rethink of the sources of creative personnel. In the case of an island with a small pool of available local talent, such as Tasmania, a lack of high-profile headliners might well deter visitors from making highly risky travel arrangements. an issue that the organisers are grappling with at present as they attempt to plan and schedule the 2022 event.

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