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**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of World Art Day**

15 April 2020

Bringing people together, inspiring, soothing and sharing: these are the powers of art, the importance of which has been made emphatically obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. With hundreds of thousands of people directly affected by the virus and billions more either in lockdown or battling the pandemic on the front lines, this first celebration of World Art Day is a timely reminder that art has the power to unite and connect in times of crisis.

Art-related initiatives have been flourishing for several months. Amateur and professional artists are tapping into the infinite resource of creativity to relay health guidelines and share messages of hope. The most famous work of Leonardo da Vinci, whose birth anniversary of 15 April has been chosen for this World Day, has thus been revisited in a great variety of ways: the Mona Lisa self-isolating in the Louvre Museum, or covering her enigmatic smile with a surgical mask.

This is how, despite the crisis, art is demonstrating its resilience today. Ideas are popping up everywhere: neighbours are gathering at their windows to sing or project a film; many artists are imagining innovative and creative solutions to continue communicating with their audiences; and orchestras are working together remotely. For example, on 21 March, in Mexico City, a UNESCO Creative City, musicians and artists gave an online "Spring Night" concert which attracted no less than 1.5 million online spectators, spreading the success of the event across the country. More generally, through the hashtag #ShareCulture, UNESCO invites everyone to communicate their love of art and share it with as many people as possible.

Hence, these times of confinement can also be a period of openness to others and to culture, to strengthen the links between artistic creation and society. Just as there is a need for educational continuity, there is also a need for cultural continuity.

Our Organization would thus like to pay tribute to the solidarity shown by artists and institutions at a time when art is suffering the full force of the effects of a global health, economic and social crisis.

Indeed, the closure of museums, theatres and concert halls, as well as the cancellation of concerts and festivals, have plunged many institutions into uncertainty. In addition to the immediate financial losses, the interruption of preparations, rehearsals and filming is compounded by the risk that the arts sector will be affected in the long term.

Furthermore, for the public, this period threatens to increase inequalities with respect to access to culture and the diversity of cultural expressions. Indeed, the current measures severely limit the public's ability to enjoy cultural goods and services in their diversity. These inequalities are all the more acute for vulnerable groups, who are ordinarily affected by the digital divide – such as millions of women and indigenous peoples – and who are therefore likely to have even greater difficulty in gaining access to culture.

The challenge of keeping art alive, now and in the future, is therefore twofold: to support culture professionals and cultural institutions, and to promote access to art for all.

These challenges can only be met through far-reaching cultural policies aimed at helping creative communities overcome this crisis and protecting and improving the status of artists. In this challenge to justice and equality, and in order to better identify priority needs, it will be necessary to listen to all the voices of the artistic world in their globality and diversity.

It is with the aim of affirming the resilience of art in this period and preparing for the future that UNESCO is launching, on this World Day, the “ResiliArt” movement. It will consist of a series of global virtual debates, which will bring together renowned artists and professionals in the sector, mobilizing collective intelligence for the resilience of art and drawing attention to the need to support the cultural world in

this time of crisis. In addition, in a more forward-looking perspective, guidelines will be drawn up on improving the protection of artists in order to face future crises.

“Just as man needs oxygen to survive, he needs art and poetry.” This crisis reminds us, as emphasized by Aimé Césaire,¹ how much art and culture are vital needs for humanity, how much they are the ferment of our unity and resilience. By participating in this strong impetus for culture, let us all prove that in this period of social distancing, art brings us closer together than ever before.

¹ Speech delivered by Aimé Césaire in Dakar on 6 April 1966.