

QUESTIONS FOR JENNIFER WEN MA

In 2013, Hurricane Sandy affected numerous artists and arts organizations. We interviewed an artist and an arts organization on the impact of the hurricane on their studios, staff and operations. They share their challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned.

1. Briefly describe your career/work as an artist and how you support your practice.

I am a cross-disciplinary artist and I support my practice through commissions.



2. How were you affected by Hurricane Sandy and what people, groups or agencies did you turn to for assistance?

My power and water were cut for a week, so I could not work at my studio. There were residual effects that lingered on for some time as a result. At that time, I was in the middle of a big commission, which was delayed as I missed a major contract milestone.

For my studio, cash flow can be a problem. If one contract payment is missed from a commissioner, it could mean a chain of effects on my other projects, payouts, and studio expenses. So this put me in an uncomfortable situation.

3. How did you end up working with the Small Business Administration? What were some of the challenges of working with the agency as an artist?

I saw an ad from the Small Business Administration (SBA) offering Sandy relief assistance. I realized that I could really use the money to help cash flow, and train my employee on valuable professional skills. I called and asked about the programs and was pleasantly surprised that I could be eligible.

It was challenging in several ways. The challenges were a result of our inexperience with loans and the paperwork involved and interview process. I had never taken out a bank loan before and was unfamiliar with the process. Another challenge was to think of my studio as a business rather than an artist support system. I had to make projections of future business growth, and consider its longer-term development path. This was a new way of thinking.

For the training program, we had to learn how to look at the financials of the studio to project how it would grow in the upcoming years. These processes were not extraneous, and ended

up being helpful. I have always thought of my studio as having more organic growth that supports an art practice, so it was interesting to think of it as a business and estimate the growth more concretely. Someone from SBA came to the studio to explain how to calculate our projected growth. As a result, we have a better idea of what to expect as a business in the next 5 years.

4. What were some other learning opportunities during the post-Sandy recovery that you can share with other artists?

Be open to the opportunities that can help you better your practice. There are surprising resources that we often don't realize are there. If you see something interesting, inquire about it. You never know where it can lead.

5. How did this affect your business practices as well as your work?

I take the business end of the studio practice with more conscious seriousness, and with a stricter and more methodical approach. Having more of a business system in place has helped me stay focused on the artistic portion of my work and plan for the future, while feeling more assured that I don't need to worry as much about the financial state of the studio.

An added psychological benefit is knowing that there is help out there when you need it -and that New York, my home city, wants me to thrive as an artist! It's a great feeling.

6. Given your experience, what advice would you give to other artists?

Think of your studio as a business too! It's an important and valuable tool for every artist who must build a financially sustainable practice.

Jennifer Wen Ma was born in Beijing. She currently works and lives between New York and Beijing. Ma's interdisciplinary practice bridges media as varied as installation, video, drawing, fashion design, performance, and public art, often bringing together unlikely elements in a single piece, creating sensitive, poetic, and poignant works. Ma's solo exhibitions include *Jennifer Wen Ma*, Hanart Gallery, Hong Kong, China (2013) and *Tide-Inked Spring*, Art Space Niji, Kyoto, Japan (2011). Her group exhibitions include *In Search of the Garden of Eden*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, Netherlands (2013) and *Cambio Cultural*, Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2013), among others. Public art projects include *Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light at the Water Cube*, National Aquatic Center, Beijing, China (2013). She was awarded an Emmy Award for Associate Producer of Outstanding Live Event Turnaround at the "Games of the XXIX Olympiad." Ma received an M.F.A. from Pratt Institute.

Most recently, Ma was one of five artists and designers engaged in *Paths to Pier 42*, a series of temporary art/educational/design installations and public events along the East River Waterfront. *Paths to Pier 42* is a collaboration between Lower East Side Waterfront Alliance and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. <http://www.littlemeat.net>