



**Lower  
Manhattan  
Cultural  
Council**

EMPOWERING ARTISTS,  
INVESTED IN COMMUNITY

## ART & RESILIENCE

*Emergency Planning & Preparedness – March 2015*

### QUESTIONS FOR SMACK MELLON

*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 organization's works and mission**

Smack Mellon is a nonprofit arts organization located in DUMBO, Brooklyn. Smack Mellon's mission is to nurture and support emerging, under-recognized mid-career and women artists in the creation and exhibition of new work, by providing exhibition opportunities, studio workspace, and access to equipment and technical assistance for the realization of ambitious projects. We see ourselves as a vehicle whereby under-represented artists can create, explore and exhibit their creative ideas outside the concerns of the commercial art world, offering many artists the exposure and recognition they deserve.

#### **2. How did Hurricane Sandy affect your organization?**

We had seven accomplished artists in residence at Smack Mellon's prestigious Artist Studio Program when the storm hit. Their studios were flooded with six feet of water, destroying all contents, including their artwork. The studio program's media lab, kitchen, and wood shop also sustained severe damage.

Our lower level space, which housed our artist studios, media lab, shop and kitchen, was decimated. Our entire electrical system had to be overhauled and our ADA lift had to be refurbished. We lost tens of thousands of dollars of equipment used by our studio artists -two editing stations, a large format printer and scanner, all of our fabrication shop equipment and much, much more. Our estimated loss stands at approximately \$360,000.

Fortunately, the flood did not damage the gallery, and we were able to reopen to the public in January. The owner of our building, Two Trees Management, also generously donated temporary studio spaces for our seven artists-in-residence nearby and gave us temporary office space in one of their office buildings in DUMBO. We completed the renovation of the basement studios on June 1, 2013, in time for a new group of Studio Artists to move in.

**3. What people, groups or agencies did you turn for assistance? In what way were they helpful? What resources were you able to access?**

Our community of artists were the first responders. Past studio artists, artists we exhibited, and even artists we never met before, either emailed us or just showed up in the first few days after the flood to help us clean up. They helped us salvage and clean items that could be saved. They also helped us haul out two dumpsters worth of ruined artwork, supplies, and equipment. We also had some folks who had expertise in specific fields who contacted us to donate their time and knowledge. For example, we had a person who had a day-job restoring and cleaning computer equipment and data files. Then there was Integrative Sustainability & Environmental Solutions (ISES), an environmental consulting company that specializes in occupational safety training including indoor air quality, environmental investigation, asbestos, lead abatement and microbial remediation, that emailed us to offer their help. They came to our space and consulted with us about how best to clean up the space to prevent mold.

Our landlord, Two Trees Management, found us a temporary office in one of their buildings. Our building had no power, even after the rest of the neighborhood had regained it. We had trouble getting Con Edison to come out to fix the lines in the street, which had come disconnected during the storm. Belinda Cape from Senator Squadron's office was on the phone several times a week and finally was able to get Con Edison to come out to fix our power just before Christmas.

Our entire staff focused on fundraising to clean up and rebuild. Many individuals, companies and foundations came to our aid. We simultaneously launched an e-blast plea for help, promoted our need for funding on our website and applied to every emergency grant we heard about. There is a full list of our rebuilding after Sandy supporters on our website. Some of them include The Andy Warhol Foundation, Lambent, and NYFA.

As for government help and funding, we initially applied for an SBA small business loan. As we are a nonprofit organization, we were denied because, in order to get a loan, you have to make a profit. Based on our financials, SBA determined that we would not have been able to pay back a loan. However, this allowed us to apply to FEMA. Initially, we were told that we wouldn't be able to get FEMA assistance because we are a non-profit. After some time, the rules were changed and FEMA funding became available to non-profits. The New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) held a very helpful informational meeting. We were the first of the cultural organizations to complete our application and have a visit from the FEMA team. They said that of all the locations they had seen impacted by Sandy, the condition of our building and the amount of destruction was the worst they had seen. Our local DUMBO Improvement District held a fundraiser for the DUMBO businesses affected by Sandy and gave us a grant from that fund.

**4. What were the greatest challenges you faced in working to return to normal operations?**

Smack Mellon is a small team that was already spread pretty thin, so to add a natural disaster to everybody's plate was definitely challenging in the beginning. Some staff have resumed their normal workload, but some are still directly dealing with Sandy-related work. Kathleen Gilrain, the Executive Director, is still finalizing details with FEMA and DCA for the replacement of some equipment which the DCA owned that was destroyed during the flood and will be replaced by FEMA.

**5. How did this experience change your operations as an organization? Do you now have a disaster plan?**

Before Sandy, our "flood plan" was to keep everything elevated to at least 3'. Since Sandy floodwaters reached 6', our new flood plan is to bring everything upstairs. In the past, when we expected any type of major flooding, we moved equipment upstairs. Now when artists are selected for the studios, they accept the studios knowing that we are in a flood zone and that they will be expected to move the contents of their entire studio to the gallery level during a hurricane warning. The artists also are required to have a back up emergency list of people that we can call on if the artist is out of town.

We did have insurance. However, since it was not flood insurance, our insurance company decided that they would not cover any of our costs to rebuild or to replace destroyed equipment and lost materials. In order to be eligible to receive FEMA funds, we had to purchase a flood insurance plan that we have to carry into the future. This plan, the National Flood Insurance Plan, costs us \$9000 a year. The premium will probably go up once they revise the flood maps.

**6. What advice would you give to other artists and art groups about preparing themselves for the future in their business practices as well as artistic development?**

Don't move into a flood zone. If you do, have emergency funds ready along with a list of people you can call on for help.

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*Smack Mellon's Exhibition Program is at the center of the organization. Designed to advance public interest in the visual arts, the program focuses on providing opportunities for artists to create site-specific works that creatively respond to our space, and work that explores innovative uses of both new technologies and traditional materials. The gallery space provides for large, ambitious shows that allow our artists ample room to explore and present their work.*

*The Artist Studio Program was launched in 2000 in response to the crisis in availability of affordable workspace for artists living and working in New York City. This program provides free studio space, access to a workshop for metal, wood and general fabrication, a common area equipped with the latest technology, and a fellowship to six artists for an eleven-month period.*