

COVID-19's devastating impact on artists

By Clare Hurley
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The coronavirus pandemic is having a devastating impact on every section of the working population.

According to a recently published survey by Americans for the Arts, fully *95 percent* of arts workers in the US have lost income due to the current crisis—with 62 percent now out of work. Sixty-seven percent of those polled reported unanticipated expenses related to COVID-19 which, taken together with lost income, have resulted in an average loss per arts worker of \$21,000 over the past three months.

The arts workers surveyed included visual artists (51 percent), musicians (22 percent), theater and performance artists (17.5 percent), writers and media artists (15 percent each), as well as community-based artists (27 percent), and a variety of other artistic disciplines. A significant proportion (30.5 percent) work as teaching artists and/or teachers in elementary through graduate level education.

The impact of the pandemic has laid bare the already precarious economic conditions in which most artists live, as well as the inequality that exists between a handful of top-tier artists with gallery connections and wealthy collectors versus the majority who cobble together a living from multiple “gigs.” The latter include working in arts-related jobs that may or may not involve their own creative work (i.e., working in a gallery, museum or other arts organization, etc.) or in non-arts jobs (servers in restaurants, Uber drivers, etc.).

Before the pandemic, almost 40 percent of arts workers earned \$35,000 or less a year, while another 37 percent made between \$35,000 and \$75,000. Given that more than half live in urban areas such as New York City or Los Angeles where the cost of living is extremely high, this means three-quarters of artists face significant financial challenges at the best of times.

Since the shutdown in the US beginning in March, most art workers' jobs have been suspended or terminated. Every museum and gallery from major

institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, and the National Gallery in London to thousands of small non-profit art spaces, theaters from Broadway to Lincoln Center, and hosts of prestigious art fairs and festivals like Art Basel and Cannes have either closed, postponed or cancelled their programs for the foreseeable future, many through the end of the 2020 season. This will continue to have a direct impact not only on the artists whose income and employment depends directly on these institutions for sales and commissions, but on a far larger number of related jobs, from museum staff to art-handlers, program designers to custodians for months if not longer.

Katie Schuessler, a visual artist in Brooklyn, New York spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Prior to the pandemic her entire income came from work as a teaching artist with two different non-profit arts organizations in four different middle and elementary schools. Before the New York City public school system was closed in mid-March, she worked with more than 300 students, putting both her and her students at risk of contracting or spreading the virus, she felt. One of her jobs paid her for an additional two weeks' remote work in March, but she has not been paid since April.

“Because of budget cuts on the city and state level, everything is on hold, no arts partnerships are able to continue for the foreseeable future because there is no funding,” she said. While she was lucky to get onto unemployment before the system started to be overloaded, she has gotten by only paying half her rent in April and May, hoping her landlord won't take action because, “I don't have thousands of dollars to repay with.” Like the 52 percent of arts workers in the Americans for the Arts survey, she has no savings.

While lucky not to have student loans to repay, Schuessler does have significant credit card debt. She had just gotten health insurance in February through

Obamacare, but says it is more like catastrophic coverage, with a \$6,000 deductible and \$50 copay. “We should have socialized medicine!” she said.

If schools reopen in the fall, she anticipates that her teaching residencies will resume since the organizations were able to get funding through the small business loans program. Like many artists surveyed, Schuessler has used the period of unemployment to develop online means of disseminating and selling work, though whether this will translate to a significant revenue source remains an open question. She got one commission for \$200, but after shipping and cost of materials that doesn't amount to much.

The pandemic has influenced her work in other ways. Right at the beginning of the pandemic she was seriously ill, ironically not with COVID-19, “but that led to a lot of epiphanies. The pandemic is pushing me to foster deeper connections with my collectors and followers on social media trying to bring some measure of possibility and sense of community.”

“Basically, the pandemic has revealed that the arts are incredibly undervalued in society, as per usual—as per education, we're pushed to the back. Right now, artists are doing what they can to cope with the pandemic, but I hope this will push artists to demand more and for that more people become aware of how arts and artists are treated in society.”

Azikiwe, another Brooklyn artist has been “nickel-and-dime” since his restaurant job as a server ended in March. Though qualified, he was unable to enroll in unemployment because the system kept freezing; after waiting on the phone for hours, he got disconnected and doesn't know who else to call. He also hasn't received any stimulus check because he hasn't been able to file his taxes. “At the beginning it was better, I was able to sell some small pieces for \$100-\$200 that I could ship. That allowed me to eat and pay small bills. But I'm running out of resources. I didn't pay rent for April and don't have it for May. It's kind of a scary situation. If I get behind and have to catch up, that's a huge debt.”

He doesn't feel that the pandemic has influenced his work except insofar as he now is just painting pieces he thinks will sell. And he can't sell them for too much, because “other people are struggling too, they don't have \$300-\$400 for a painting, they need to buy food.”

Although Azikiwe needs to get back to work to earn money, he does not think opening businesses back up without the government taking proper measures to sanitized workplaces is wise. “The virus is still out there, it's a gamble. People aren't necessarily going to go back, they're afraid. It's kind of scary.”

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