

Editorial COMMENTARY

by Tom Starland, Editor and Publisher

The Elephant in the Room

The question is, how much the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) will affect the visual art community in the Carolinas? It's not a question of will it, it will, it has, but by how much and for how long?

There is always a good side and a bad side to all issues. What could be good about the Coronavirus? Well, maybe some art dealers selling cheap rip-off art from China will find it harder to find customers who don't care where that art comes from just to save some money. People might just stop buying art online from unknown sources, as they don't know where it's coming from and who has handled it. That could be good for gallery owners and individual artists.

Unfortunately, there is a big list of down-sides due to the Coronavirus. People might stop going to the ever popular artwalks, art strolls, or art receptions. They might stop going to art museums and art galleries.

They may be shut down for a while anyway. Organizers might start canceling art fairs, art festivals, and all things dealing with the arts and crowds of people. A lot has already been cancelled or postponed. Decisions about all of that is above my pay grade. It's not for me to say if things should go on as usual or not. I'd expect organizers, owners, and state arts agencies to be making recommendations about how the art community should handle these things and in the end, it's up to the public and how they decide to deal with all this.

I myself would have no problem visiting art museums and art galleries during regular hours as they are usually not that crowded and hand sanitizer can deal with opening a door or closing one. People visiting such places are usually fairly educated so I don't expect someone who is infected to be getting out and getting their art fix. I would expect them to take normal precautions. But until testing is more a normal thing - who's to know if they are infected? They say you

don't start showing symptoms until well after you are infected.

Most galleries have websites and maybe more artwork or whole exhibits will be posted online where you can buy art and have it shipped to you. You know your local galleries, you know your local artists, and you probably know the person who delivers packages to your house or apartment. And artists who are represented by galleries - don't screw them out of their share of profits - most artists were unknown until a gallery gave them a show or carried their work. It's not a time for every person for themselves - it's time to stick together.

For artists, this could be a good thing being stuck in their studios working instead of hanging out with other artists at coffee shops, restaurants, and bars, talking the talk. It won't be so good for all the people who work in coffee shops, restaurants, and bars, but things can't go on normally. Maybe it will give them a new perspective on what they're missing with their lack of freedom. And, remember artists, your local art supply store can ship you items as well as anyone can. And, remember you count on them to be there when you forgot to order something and need it right away.

And, like after all disasters, when it's over and people have endured, they'll look to the arts for inspiration to lift them up and recharge their spirits. That's what art does.

I know *Carolina Arts* is going to take a financial hit as things go downhill, but then more people might look for online opportunities to get their art fix. Maybe we'll just go in our archives and present art that we have offered in our issues so people don't forget what art was like.

Who knows what life will be like, we may all be living through the internet. I don't think that's going to be much of a change for some folks, but it would for me. I already spend more time than I like on my computer

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and online.

But then, what if the internet goes down? Well, that's the day I tell my son that I'm not so crazy now for buying old VCR's and CD players at goodwill and all the DVD's of movies and TV shows I have. And, we have lots of books. And, we have lots of art.

But, just because that elephant is in the room, it doesn't mean it has to dump on our rug. Like someone said, "Maybe it will all go away when it gets hot". And, we all know it's about to get real hot in the Carolinas. But, that's too simplistic.

What About An Economic Helping Hand From Uncle Sam?

Well, we all know the government moves slower than a disaster does. There may eventually be some kind of Federal and State assistance that will trickle down to the art community, but as usual it will go to those with all the connections before it reaches the little people - the people in real need. And, helping the arts isn't a priority for this administration, which has been trying to cut funding for the arts or eliminate it all together. That's why I always laugh when someone tells me to stick to the arts and stay out of politics. The arts like everything else, is all about politics. The people saying stay out of it don't want you demanding your fair share so they can keep more for themselves.

Will we all get \$1,000 checks for a couple of months? Will there be some funding for the arts like after Hurricane Hugo, or the Stock Market crash in 2007? I never saw any - how about you? Just think about all the non-profits in the arts that get funding on a regular basis that will be screaming loud and constantly until they are made whole. I remember after Hugo in Charleston the Charleston Symphony claimed to be the heart and soul of the cultural makeup of Charleston - just them. They claimed if they went under, the arts and Charleston would shrivel up and die. According to them, no one else in the arts community mattered. When there is extra or special arts funding, that's when it gets to be dog eat dog time in the art community.

And, those who are in the commercial side of the arts - they will be left out of the funding picture all together. If they need help

they can try and get help from FEMA or the SBA - the Small Business Administration, you know the people who deal with small businesses with under 500 employees. Does that describe your business - your art gallery, frame shop or art supply store? My question is, when is the government going to establish the TBA - Tiny Business Administration to help the Mom & Pop businesses.

Individual artists can get local, state, and federal funding, but then who decides if you're an artist or not or just a person with an arty looking hobby? If that's up to your local arts council or state arts agency - good luck with that. There is never enough funding to go to everyone in need so they have to make, what they call hard choices. But are they hard choices or favorite ones - political ones?

I'd love to give you a rosy picture of the future, but after 32 years of watching what really happens in these situations in the Carolinas I can tell you - many of us are on our own. And, by now many of us are used to that.

But, we can always count on the public to come through for us. If we offer them a good product or service they will come back when they can. Many of us never expected a helping hand - sure there have been times when we wish we could get one, but it usually never comes. We earn our support the old fashioned way.

Sure it's OK for all these non-profits in the arts to come to you - the artist, the art gallery, the art framer, or the art supply store to ask for a donation for their fundraiser, but why should you get public funding? Hey, it won't be long before the SC Arts Commission will be asking you to offer your art (at a reduced price) to sell to all those who can go to their fancy awards ceremony where they give awards to other people in the arts.

If this stay at home and social distancing thing goes on much longer, artists and art galleries are going to have to just come up with creative ways to show the art they have to offer. Virtual art exhibits may become the thing of the times. With artists giving virtual art talks and lectures. Who knows what we'll come up with, but one thing is for sure, the minute people get to a place where they feel like they've reached a place beyond survival, they'll be in the market for art again. All we have to do is be ready for that day.

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