

## **FAIC Responds to Cultural Disasters**

Founded in 2007, the AIC Collections Emergency Response Team (AIC-CERT) is comprised of conservators and other museum professionals trained to respond to disasters affecting cultural institutions. Managed by the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC), AIC-CERT volunteers have provided assistance and advice to dozens of museums, libraries, and archives in the wake of natural disasters including tropical storms, floods, hurricanes, and even the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. In 2007 and again in 2010, FAIC received funding from the Institute of Museum & Library Services to support an advanced training program that resulted in a force of 107 "rapid responders" adept at assessing damage and initiating salvage of cultural collections after a disaster has occurred.

## **AIC-CERT: the SWAT Team for Art**

Hurricane Sandy caused an enormous amount of damage and loss of life. The storm was equally disastrous for the arts and culture community. It struck the Northeast at the end of October,

2012 and combined with other weather patterns and high tides to form a "Super Storm."

Requests for assistance quickly came in through the AIC-CERT hotline and from Alliance for Response New York City (AFRNYC). Many collecting institutions throughout the region were

affected, but small galleries and individual artists were especially hard hit in the low-lying neighborhoods of New York City. By March 1, 23 AIC-CERT members will have contributed 125 days of professional services in New York and New Jersey.



*"If the cultural industry has a SWAT team for visual art, it is the AIC's Collections Emergency Response Team (AIC-CERT)"*

*- Pia Catton, Wall Street Journal, November 18, 2012*

Before the storm hit AIC-CERT had already begun preparations. Media releases on October 26 encouraged emergency preparedness and provided institutions with the AIC-CERT hotline number (202-661-8068).

As of December 4, 2012, FAIC's Collections Emergency Response Team (AIC-CERT) hotline had received over 120 requests for assistance, and all have been followed up with appropriate phone, email, and in-person visits by volunteers. Fourteen AIC-CERT members from across the country responded to the initial calls, organized by Beth

Antoine (the AIC-CERT Coordinator), who was working overtime to meet the demand. In addition, FAIC contracted with Cynthia Albertson, a conservator at MOMA, to coordinate the many professionals in the New York area who wished to assist. The New York Regional Association for Conservation (NYRAC) helped to mobilize twenty-eight local volunteers to work with AIC-CERT in the initial response. Some of the larger projects included the Martha Graham collection; individual artists at the Westbeth Artists Residence; and various artists and galleries in Chelsea and Brooklyn. Multi-day power outages in lower Manhattan and other neighborhoods, subway line closures, and area gas rationing complicated the response.



In addition to direct assistance, FAIC also coordinated a briefing for artists, gallery owners, and managers of collections at MOMA on November 4 (the response was so great that two sessions had to be conducted); supported three workshops conducted by conservator Rustin Levenson for individuals cleaning mold from artwork; provided written advice for salvage and cleaning of artworks for the MOMA website; supported an online form for those wishing to volunteer; and created an online discussion page for questions and answers related to recovery.

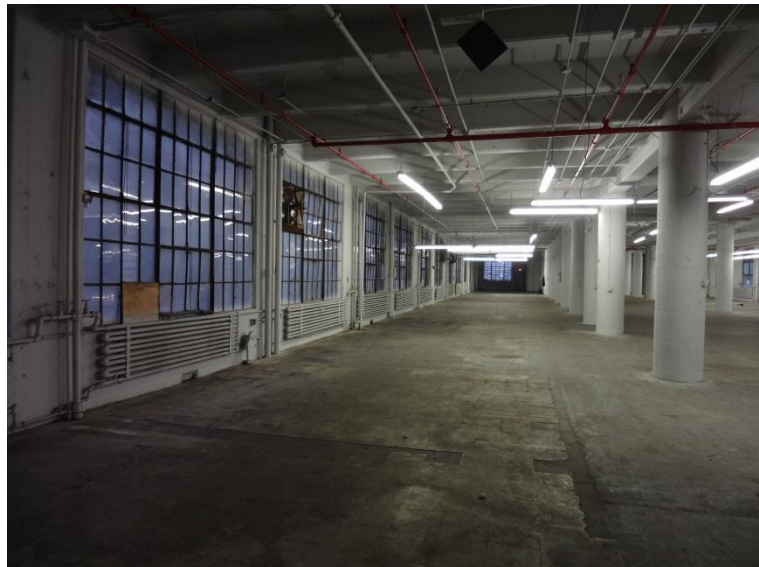
*"Thank you all for your posts; at this time it's really great to know that there is a community of knowledgeable, caring professionals out there!"*  
- Peggy from New Jersey, on the online discussion page

Because of the physical, cultural, and economic geography of the New York region, a disproportionate number of artists and private galleries were the hardest hit by the storm. Four to six feet of surging water caused physical damage as well as water damage. Although volunteers were able to help move and dry materials in the first weeks, it became clear that artists would need a great deal of space, guidance, and equipment in order to remove toxic coatings and prevent mold from destroying works that seemed to be "saved." A review of the services provided through early December showed that at least 24 collections were in need of further work, and that space, equipment, and expert advice would be needed.

### **The Cultural Recovery Center**

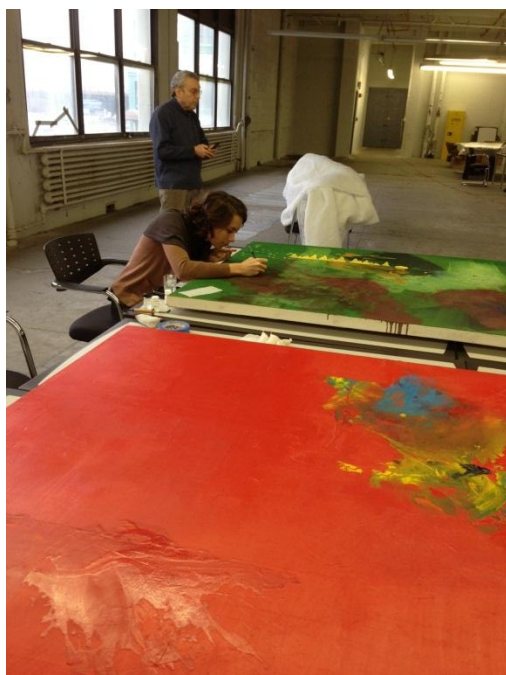
To address the need for further assistance, FAIC opened the Cultural Recovery Center (CRC), an 18,000 square foot space in Brooklyn, to provide space, equipment, supplies, and volunteer expertise to assist artists and owners of damaged works to clean, decontaminate, and stabilize their paintings, works on paper, sculpture, textiles, photographs, and other objects. FAIC took possession of the space on December 10, and began providing services to its first artist on December 13. Industry City at Bush Terminal has provided the space rent-free, but furniture, utilities, staffing, equipment, and supplies have been needed to support the work.

Rapid Refile set up containment tents and air scrubbers to prevent the spread of mold from incoming objects to cleaned objects. Furniture and equipment was obtained at no charge from Materials for the Arts. Collector Systems has donated full access to its' cloud-based collection management system to track and record all work completed. Much of the equipment and supply costs have been supported by a grant from the New York Community Trust to Heritage Preservation, along with funds from the Smithsonian Institution.



Opening the facility not only required physical preparation, but administrative support as well. Policies and procedures for the facility were developed; a job description for the studio manager position was created; phone numbers and email addresses organized, and so on. The Studio Manager, Anna Studebaker, formerly manager of the objects conservation lab at the Metropolitan Museum, began work on December 18. She coordinates the work at the CRC, including scheduling artists, signing volunteers in and out, making sure volunteers are working safely, maintaining records of the work, ensuring supplies are in stock, and keeping in communication with the volunteer coordinators and FAIC staff. The overall project is managed by Eric Pourchot, FAIC Institutional Advancement Director.

In the first month of operations, the CRC worked with seven artists on 555 works, including paintings, works on papers, photographs, textiles, and multi-media works. Twelve conservators volunteered 22 days of time working with artists at the Center.



Several artists are still in the queue to bring their works to the Center, including a painter who has had many of his paintings and works on paper worked on at the Center already, but has more in storage still to be assessed and cleaned; a photographer who is seeking space to rinse and dry approximately 40,000 images; textile artists; sculptors; electronic media creators; and many others whose works are at risk because of toxic deposits and potential mold growth. It is anticipated that the Cultural Recovery Center will need to remain open through the end of February in order to handle the requests for services.

**This would not have been possible without...** Initial funding for the response and recovery efforts, including initial costs for the Center, was provided by a leadership gift to FAIC from



Sotheby's. The Smithsonian Institution and a grant to Heritage Preservation from the New York Community Trust, as well as support from TALAS, have enabled purchase of supplies. The Center has also been outfitted with supplies from Materials for the Arts, a creative reuse program managed by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Rapid Refile has provided air filtration equipment. Collector Systems has provided free use of its web-based collection management system. Additional donations to FAIC have come from PINTA, The Modern & Contemporary Latin American Art Show; Tru Vue; Aon Huntington Block Insurance; Aon Foundation; members of the American Institute for Conservation; and others. The American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Modern Art have also provided key in-kind support for recovery efforts and establishment of the CRC.

### **AIC-CERT Remains on Alert**

Even though the response for SuperStorm Sandy was unprecedented for FAIC, AIC-CERT members continued to be ready to respond to other emergency situations. During December and January, even while staffing the CRC in New York City, AIC-CERT members assisted the Osage Historical Society in Oklahoma, which suffered from soot damage after a fire, and responded to soot damage from a furnace puff-back at the Oakham Historical Museum in Massachusetts.

More information about FAIC, AIC-CERT, and the Cultural Recovery Center can be found at [www.conservation-us.org/disaster](http://www.conservation-us.org/disaster) or by sending an email to [info@conservation-us.org](mailto:info@conservation-us.org)



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