

# Local Arts Organizations Rise to Digitally Meet the Demands of an At-Home Public

*And they're seeing increased engagement.*

BY JENNIFER ANNE MITCHELL — MAR 26, 2020 9 AM



**March Touchstone Gallery exhibitions, which can now be seen online**

*KSENIA GHRISHKOVA*

The community at U Street NW's Smith Center for Healing and the Arts is familiar with addressing disease and death: They support approximately 800 adults living with cancer and their caregivers with programs like art-making groups and classes that offer comic relief through stand-up. In light

of the novel coronavirus and ongoing crisis, the close-knit center closed its doors on Thursday, March 12, as a precautionary measure. Many of the people they serve are in the high-risk category—with compromised immune systems, they are more susceptible to illness.

Though Smith Center's programs are geared toward a specific group, its philosophy offers insight for anyone confronted with sickness and mortality, like our society is experiencing with the spread of this virus. Their services are rooted in the healing power of the arts.

“There is more to you than just what's happened to you physically,” Smith Center's executive director **Lisa Simms Booth** says, noting that they emphasize a holistic approach to wellbeing that includes mental, emotional, and spiritual health. “Because all of it as a whole together is going to help you walk through whatever you're walking through and heal. And heal doesn't have to necessarily mean you're cured, but heal means you can walk through it with grace.”

To continue to serve their mission, Smith Center is bringing a portion of its programming to the digital space. Its plans are still evolving, but the center says that digital opportunities like a virtual healing circle, in which participants connect to share their experiences, and an art class called Outside the Lines will be limited to its regular participants, but the intention is to open some of these to the public as social distancing continues.

“We really do want to be responsive in this unprecedented time where you're being asked to disconnect when I think what most of us want most is community,” says Simms Booth.

A phenomenal number of local cultural organizations are also connecting with audiences digitally. The Kennedy Center is hosting an interactive video series called “Lunchtime Doodles” with their artist-in-residence **Mo Willems**. Politics and Prose is streaming author talks on Crowdcast. Washington Studio School is encouraging its students to use the hashtag #WSSstayconnected to share their art on social media. Zenith Gallery is sending out daily e-blasts with art related to themes, current events, or “just to make you laugh.” The Library of Congress points to its digital resources, like an online library featuring more than one million prints and photographs. International Arts & Artists notes its online Hechinger Collection database, where visitors can look through some of the 400 artworks, and its contemporary space IA&A at Hillyer is hosting digital artist talks. Dumbarton Oaks highlights virtual tours of its gardens. Transformer art space is hosting a series of artist-led projects on its digital platforms and urging those with the means to buy art from its online FlatFile store, which includes more than 200 2D artworks—priced at under \$500—that were made by more than 40 local emerging artists. The National Museum of Women in the Arts lists digital resources, like its arts integration curriculum Arts, Books, and Creativity, and has made the winter/spring 2020 edition of its typically members-only magazine *Women in the Arts* available to the public online (this current issue features a write-up about *DMV Color*, a recent exhibition at the museum that showcased books created by women of color who have all lived in D.C., Maryland, or Virginia).

DC Public Library started a virtual version of its DC Reads book club last week. They are providing unlimited e-book copies of local author **Elizabeth Acevedo**'s novel *With the Fire on High* and temporary library cards that are available online. Virtual storytimes led by a DCPL librarian will take place on Facebook Live with literary discussions on Twitter.

The Smithsonian is directing the public to its rich repository of online content with options such as [distance learning tools](#), their podcast Sidedoor, and more than 2.8 million digital assets that were recently released to the public domain. The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery spotlights its online exhibition of *The Outwin 2019: American Portraiture Today*, and voting polls are open for the Outwin People's Choice Award. Plus they'll have virtual ASL tours of gallery installations on Facebook. You can even test out flying with the Smithsonian through the National Air and Space Museum's [virtual flight simulator](#), part of the museum's K–12 learning resources to engage youth while they are at home.

And those are just some examples. Amid all the chaos of a global health crisis that has relegated many to staying home, these cultural institutions are seeing increased digital visitors.

The National Gallery of Art has mobilized a #MuseumFromHome initiative. The web team acted fast to redesign the [website](#) so it is geared toward people and families who are staying at home. After they announced they were closing, the museum staff reports they had a 200 percent increase in website traffic compared to the previous 10 days—about 40 percent of it was from Italy and Spain—and thousands of new social media followers. They've also seen more than a 400 percent increase in the number of 45 to 54-year-old virtual visitors and more than a 370 percent increase of 55 to 64-year-olds.

The NGA's digital offerings include using the hashtag #MuseumMomentofZen to showcase their art on social media and virtual tours of the museum with commentary from curators. Since launching these tours, the museum says its tweets have seen 2,150,357 impressions; Instagram has seen 1,825,425.

The D.C.-based organization Americans for the Arts advocates for arts across the country and is providing resources for the national arts community to come together and navigate this new reality. They are hosting [virtual briefings](#) in lieu of their 2020 National Arts Action Summit, which draws participants from around the country, and published a [COVID-19 resource page](#) on March 13. As of Tuesday morning, the organization reported that the page had nearly 15,000 unique views. One of the resources is an impact survey to assess how this situation is affecting arts and culture. Americans for the Arts' senior director of local arts advancement **Ruby Lopez Harper** explains that the data gathered from this assessment will help artists and arts organizations apply for assistance.

"Nobody really knows the scope of what we're going to be recovering from," Harper says. "So getting that early data is really important just in giving us a snapshot of what's happening."

Within D.C., 33 organizations responded to the survey. Some reported financial data, adding up to an estimated total loss of \$282,500 (an average of \$8,561 per organization).

Disaster response is part of what Americans for the Arts does. For example, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, they established a hotline for the arts community and collected more than a thousand art projects and creative tributes.

"The thing that has set this apart from all of our other disaster experiences is that it isn't isolated," says Harper. "Right now it's just about helping people get through."

Some arts organizations are already making drastic changes. The D.C. Environmental Film Festival moved its annual, multi-venue festival—now in its 28th year—to a virtual festival that began last Tuesday and will run to the end of March. It features more than 60 films from this year’s official selections.

“There is a lot of hope present in the films that we’re screening,” DCEFF’s director of online communications **Jacob Crawford** says, putting the festival in context with the current state of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. “[It’s] a lot of people working together to find solutions to complicated problems, and I think that’s something that could help people be hopeful.”

When the virtual fest launched, DCEFF’s website experienced the largest single-day traffic in its history. By mid-afternoon, that morning’s announcement about its start had been shared on Facebook nearly 200 times. By evening, the [webpage](#) hosting the virtual festival had 5,630 visitors, most of which came from North America, along with some from every continent aside from Antarctica. By this Monday afternoon, the online environmental film fest had more than 58,000 visitors, with Friday, Saturday, and Sunday drawing more than 10,000 each.

About 80 percent of the films are free to view, Crawford explains, with others on platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu requiring that audience members have an account or pay for streaming.

DCEFF has seen a rise of a few hundred followers across their social media accounts since they announced the cancelation of the festival and the move to digital.

The National Academy of Sciences, a venue partner for DCEFF, is on board with creating a virtual experience—it hosted an online discussion on March 22 following a digital watch party featuring the film *The Plastic Problem: PBS Newshour Presents*, which they had planned to screen at their site.

DCEFF is planning to have an abridged version of its typical festival in the fall.

Touchstone Gallery also made an about-face. The staff usually conducts business downtown on New York Ave. NW, but has managed to sell nine pieces of art since closing their doors on March 12 in response to the spread of the novel coronavirus. They experienced a rise in website traffic after announcing the closure, and the number of views on their Instagram stories doubled. “I find that in times of stress and distress, and when you feel like you need to calm down and feel better, art spaces are the ones you go to,” says Touchstone’s director **Ksenia Grishkova**.

Within a day and a half of closing, she and her staff took pictures of their [current exhibitions](#) and put them online. Grishkova recounts the passersby who visited during those final days of operations. “We kept the door open and people would come in one after another,” she says. “All these people kept walking in. And you could tell there was such a relief that we were still open.”

Grishkova is trying to recreate that experience of visiting the gallery digitally. A videographer came by to shoot video of the space. But Grishkova notes that the videos are still shots for viewers to see at home, not interactive virtual reality tours where visitors can move through the space. “We’re really not prepared for a complete virtual reality here,” she says. “Hopefully we’ll get back to normal.”

**Want recommendations for how to stay occupied while social distancing?**