

## artist interview

### ALYSON POU



Alyson Pou is program/services director for Creative Capital Foundation, a grant and artist support agency. She is an artist who produces her own installations and performances in major venues in New York City and other U.S. cities. She has taught at several colleges and universities and has worked as an arts administrator for more than twenty years.

#### *What are the most important things for artists to know when applying for grants?*

Grants are only one piece of the pie for artists. They are just one part of a whole strategy that you come up with for yourself.

Before you begin looking anywhere for funding, spend time to find your own objective. Always stick to it. That's the first step. Artists sometimes make the mistake of wanting to mold themselves to what they think the needs of the grantor are. But it's actually just the reverse! You need to know your objective first.

The second step is doing research and identifying resources that match your objective. Sometimes, grants are the answers to that and sometimes they're not.

The third key step is follow-up. In some cases, you may have to ask over and over again for funding. One piece of advice I give artists is not to take rejection personally. You cannot ever really know what people's motivations are for supporting a certain project. They have their own reasons. And sometimes it's really not about you at all.



### ***What should artists ask for?***

Identify your objective. Then figure out what your needs are and how to ask someone so that they can give you a "yes." Or so they can give you a "yes" or "no" to let you move on to your next step. The corporate world knows how to do this. But in a lot of art-related conversations, artists talk around the subject. Potential supporters might come to the table wanting to help you, but they get confused because they don't know what you're saying to them or what you're asking.

### ***So the delivery just isn't there.***

Yes. Maybe because art sometimes seems to have so little value in the eyes of the culture that we are almost apologetic.

### ***Should artists look at both grants and other funding sources if they have a project they want to fund?***

Yes. Not every successful artist is going to get a grant. If you look at just our statistics, Creative Capital received almost three thousand applications this year, and we're maybe going to give fifty grants. That's less than two percent. Artists need to look at things like corporate giving programs and in-kind donations as sources of funding, too.

Nevertheless, I say it's always worth it to write a grant application if it fits your objectives.

### ***Why?***

Because it helps you hone your objectives and your writing skills. I might complain about having to write an application, but once I've done it, I am usually several steps forward in my own thinking about my work.

While we're on the topic of writing about your work, I think that every artist needs to learn to do this—even if they feel it's hard and even if they can afford to hire someone else! Grant panelists can immediately recognize something that a second party has written, or a grant writer who knows "grantese" has written, or whether it's really coming from the heart of the artist. So, I always emphasize to artists that it is to their advantage to write about their work. It's not a waste of time.

### ***How can artists build on the grants they have received? You mentioned corporate giving programs and in-kind donations before.***

People will often be interested in a project if they see that someone else is already signed on and has put the money on the line for it. If you receive a grant, you can use that to approach other grant agencies for more funding. If you don't need to raise more money, you can still use that as leverage for your career.





Performance title, "Black Rocks, Pearl Buttons" at Performance Space 122, New York City

But I think that most artists don't focus enough attention on donations of in-kind goods and services. For example, if you're doing a big public art project at the local school, you can ask the local scaffolding company to donate the scaffolding you need. This is where you can really get creative in your thinking as an individual artist and also build a great constituency and audience for yourself. There are a lot of businesses and individuals out there who would really love to have contact with artists and what they're doing.

I met an incredible husband and wife theatrical team, whose productions were related to specific issues, like women aging, and they were booked solid all year round touring their pieces. They would target a particular region or constituency as the audience of this piece, and then they would methodically get in touch with all the organizations that were associated with that topic. It goes back to the objective. They set their objective and they found the resources for it—totally outside of the art community. They reach their audience so that they don't have this false removal from the public.



Every commission, every residency, every exhibition is based on relationships. Someone, a real human being, wanted to help you. So, a lot of it is about how you build relationships with people.

***You've talked a lot about setting objectives. How do artists do that?***

Artists need to do strategic planning. It makes a huge difference, but it's not something that we're ever trained to do. You can hire someone to help you make a strategic plan.

***What would be in it?***

We all know the standard preparatory questions: What do you want to accomplish in one year? Name one or two goals in relationship to a project. What do you want to accomplish in five years? These questions begin the process of very specific time management and financial planning.

We have been doing strategic planning with our funded artists, and it's just unbelievable what it's doing in their lives. It gets them out of the negative realm ("I can't do this" or "Everything is impossible") and into the realm of concrete actionable steps—"I have a plan here." You can continuously change and modify the plan, but you're working with a structure.

***I guess strategic planning could really change an artist's career.***

You don't lose your creativity. You're gaining perspective and gaining ways of getting help. It really makes people get focused and bring all the parts of their life into the picture.

Some artists live by crisis management. Like, "OK, I just got this commission to do this project. Now I'm going to throw everything I have into it. I'll put whatever I need to on my credit card; I'll stay up until three o'clock in the morning, just to get this to happen." You can survive that way. But you can't project out a whole life of that and see yourself moving from point A to B to C with any control.

It also helps artists to recognize where they are, too. In the United States, we live in a market economy that is driven by the conventions of capitalism. If you want to enter the gallery system, then you have to acknowledge that it's based on producing and selling products. It has its limitations and advantages. Do they match your objectives? Base your decision on that. But if you're the kind of artist who has a strong social conscience or doesn't want their works in the marketplace or wants total control, then don't even enter the gallery system. It's a waste of your time to say the system is a mess, or the system abuses me, or I don't get what I want out of the system. The system just is what it is. You're either going to choose to function in it or you're going to choose to be outside of it and do something else.



***And planning can also influence the course of a single project?***

We funded one artist who had an incredible, interesting, community-based project. She was gung-ho to finish it within four months. But we could see that if she gave it a couple more years to develop, she could have this project go to a much bigger scale than she ever considered! By working with us on strategic planning, she extended the project two or three more years, got more contacts in the community to fundraise for it, found a good producer, got the backing it deserved. It was a great retraining, reeducation process for her.

***What are some other Creative Capital programs?***

We are really trying to think creatively about money. One arm of the organization is the traditional grant-giving arm. We accept and process proposals, a panel reviews them, and we award money.

After this process, the funded artists work with the Artist Services arm of the organization. They meet with Creative Capital staff to talk and strategize about their project. Where are they with the project? Do they need fundraising or PR assistance? How can we help them find the help that they need? We have an annual retreat for all funded artists, with workshops on such topics as fundraising, strategic planning, and legal issues for artists. Additionally, we invite arts professionals to act as consultants. This helps to open doors of communication and opportunity for our funded artists. After the initial grant and meetings, artists can apply for supplemental support, up to \$5,000 for strategic needs related to the project such as purchasing equipment, hiring consultants, or developing promotional materials. The positive effect of this targeted money has been exponential.

And finally, funded artists can come back and request up to \$20,000 related to their project. This time, the key word is impact. If you get this money, what kind of impact will this money have, not just on the project but on the community at large?

***Your agency really provides some great opportunities and services!***

Yes. We have very hands-on contact with our artists. They have a lot of access to us as a resource.