Secrets of the Grant

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Three Things That Aren't True

1) If another artist gets the grant, it means the world thinks s/he is a better artist than me.

2) There is a conspiracy in the art world an on panels against my type of art. My work is too strange/raw/honest/political for panels to handle.

3) I am a genius and should get every grant/I am a charity case and lucky to get anything.

Overview

Separate yourself from the grant. You are not the grant, you are not your video, you are not your resume. Your proposal will be approved or denied for a complex set of reasons, never because you are not a good artist. Depersonalize the task of grant writing. Be strategic. It makes your writing better and eases the (inevitable) heartbreak of rejection.

Try to inform, not seduce. A plainly spoken articulation of what you actually want to do is better than puffed-up look-at-how-amazing-I-am bragging.

Lead with your most visionary, distinctive work. Don't imagine that you need to make yourself and your work look "normal" or traditional.

Don't try to second-guess a panel by pandering to funding priorities. Going on about how your work could have community impact and solve poverty and cure AIDS only helps if it's at the center of your project. If it's about making art, just say so.

Funders are partners (not parents). When you read the guidelines (twice), imagine the strongest partnership: where do your interests overlap? How can you help them reach their goals while they help you reach yours?

Have someone read your proposal. HAVE SOMEONE READ YOUR PROPOSAL, preferably someone who writes grants successfully or who has sat on panels. This is essential.

If you ever have the opportunity to sit on a panel, do it. It is by far the best education in grant writing. Also, read the grants that your friends and fellow artists write. You will learn a lot.

Grant panels are filled with master artists, presenters, funders, and critics. Putting your work in front of thought leaders in your field has huge career benefits, even if you don't get the grant.

How Your Work is Seen

Knowing how your work is discussed by thought leaders in your field is power. This is gigantically gigantic: there is a conversation about your work. You can learn about that conversation, affect it, and address it in your writing. If you understand how your work is actually seen in your field, you will be much, much better at writing applications and getting resources. Get panel feedback whenever possible. It can hurt, but it's gold. It allows you to write to the concerns and questions that a panel has. Years ago, the NEA dance director told me the two worst arguments she'd ever witnessed on the NEA dance panel were about my company's work. The arguments were: is this really dance?

Hearing that hurt a lot. But I got over it, and I wrote to that question in my applications, talking about movement invention and choreographic structure. And that question never came up on the panel again.

Have candid conversations about your work with presenters, funders, thinkers, and artists. Ask people who get what you are doing and have some perspective on the national conversation. Again, this is intense, and maybe not for everyone. But knowing where your work actually lives, how it is actually received, will help you write better and get more resources.

Get thought leaders to see your work. As you can imagine, it's hugely helpful if someone on the panel has seen an artist's work live. There is not a conspiracy in the art world, but there is a group of thought leaders who serve on a lot of panels. I strongly recommend making a gentle, ongoing plan to get prominent artists, curators, and leaders to see your work in person. In Headlong, the company I worked with for 20 years, there were maybe five important curators/programmers/funders who advocated strongly for our work. More than half of our gigs and opportunities came from these five champions. This doesn't require cheesy, schmoozy careerism; just give people a chance to see your work. And if they connect with it, give them more chances to get close to it.

Invite people to your work. Ask people who are already supporters: who else might be interested? Make a special effort to connect with national leaders. Look for conventions and convenings. Make a short list of thought leaders to invite to your openings and premiers. When you hear someone is going to be in town, consider having a studio visit or showing. Sometimes a presenter or funder will help invite people or even buy a plane ticket if asked.

Today's emerging leaders will be running things in five years. Build relationships with younger folks, people starting out, and they will champion your work as they move up.

Yes votes mean more than No votes. Some people won't champion your work, or even like it. Doesn't matter too much. A champion or two, a few supporters, make a huge difference. I find that to be true in general and definitely on panels: champions outweigh detractors.

Proposal

Make a "legal" argument, a case. Tie together the many threads of the application (resume, video, proposal, work sample description) into one coherent, irrefutable argument:

1) This is who I am and what I have done.
2) This is what I want to do next.
3) This is (precisely, specifically) how this project will get me there. Number three is where the grant/award/fellowship/festival comes in.

Keep it short. Never use the entire space or word count. It shouldn't be that hard to describe. Start with a quick, pithy sentence (you need to be able to say it one sentence), and then fill in the details. A reader should be able to grasp your entire project by looking only at your first paragraph, your timetable, and your budget.

Specifics are key. Make a timetable, even if the grant doesn't require it. This communicates responsibility and planning.

Give ammunition to your allies and take it away from your detractors. Be transparent about questions and challenges. If a work is site-specific, discuss how you will secure and work in the site. It is good to have questions, good to have new challenges in the project. Let the panel know that you are thinking about these challenges and how you might address them.

Documentation

Get good documentation of all your work. There is no longer any excuse for low quality work samples. Twenty years ago, it was cumbersome and expensive to document work well. It's not anymore. Build documentation into your budget and your schedule. Low-quality work samples don't convey the strength of your work and suggest carelessness and lack of follow-through, not things you want associated with your application.

Don't submit slick promo videos or images. They are useless. Panels want to see your actual work. Let them. In my experience on panels, we are looking for two things: is something real and vivid happening? And then, does it develop?

Have someone look at your work samples. Get together a trusted artist and someone on the decision side (presenter, funder, panelist), give them several options, get their honest feedback. It's not a question of whether the work is good. It's a question of what reads well in a photo/video, which is totally different. It is impossible to assess clearly one's own work samples. Resubmit work samples that get grants.

In the "Work Sample Information Sheet," tell the panel exactly what to look for and how it ties into your current work and your proposed project. Imagine that they will completely misunderstand your work and guide them explicitly to what you want the to see. This is a part of the application that many artists neglect, and it can completely change the panel's view of your work.

Resume

Calibrate your resume. Make the smallest unit big. People who actually think they are unimportant brag. Create an air of importance and clarity. “Selected Performances” or “Selected Work.” Let the reader wonder about what you left off. Never mention college work or college awards. One page is best. Two is the maximum, unless it’s a C.V.

Budget

Pay yourself for your time. All of your time, including “creative time.” Pay your collaborators. Real budgets that account for all expenses at professional level fees will actually help your proposal. Underfunded or unthoughtful budgets will make you less likely to be funded.

If the grant is for a $10,000 proposal, don’t propose an underfunded $40,000 project. Panels, especially those that include artists, will immediately sense that. Limit your proposal to what you can do excellently and thoroughly. If necessary, break out a “phase” of the project that can be done for the grant amount.