How to Apply for Art and Artist Grants, Residencies, Funding, Aid and Other Opportunities for Assistance

Generating income from art in the form of either cash or cash equivalents is always challenging, especially for artists with unconventional ideas or for those who create art that may not be commercially viable. The good news is that the art world is one place where anyone who shows talent and promise, marketable or otherwise, can get help in a variety of ways including cash grants, residencies, employment or internships, allowances, free or low-cost studio space, art supplies, exhibition space, and so on. Receiving these types of assistance is not easy; application processes can be rigorous and competition is often intense. So in the interest of giving you a bit of an edge in situations where you're contending for a bequest, here's a brief tutorial on procedural matters.

To begin with, be clear and directed about your intentions and goals, not only in terms of where you want to go with your art, but how you propose to get there, and know what you're trying to accomplish. Having a plan as to how you want your artistic life, career, and objectives to play out enables you to clarify exactly what's required to materialize that vision. If you need time to work, you might apply for a residency. If you need cash for living expenses while you're making art, an unrestricted grant may be the best way to go. Perhaps you require studio space, or maybe travel is involved. In other words, quantifying your needs enables you to focus more precisely on which opportunities to pursue, which to avoid (those that may sound good but don't really serve your purposes), and to target organizations, nonprofits, and foundations whose missions match with your art and intentions (See the list of resources for locating opportunities at the end of the article).

Assuming you've got your agenda in order and have identified potential opportunities, the most important aspect of any request for assistance is the application process. For starters, read the instructions thoroughly. Not only is it critical to understand and complete all forms according to instructions, but just as essential is knowing how that application will be assessed once the person, persons, or panel who reviews it has it in their hands. Whenever possible-- in addition to reading instructions and before filling anything out-- speak with someone at the organization and ask a few basic questions about their decision-making process. For example, find out how they'll be looking at your art. Will your images be projected onto a large screen, viewed on a computer, studied one-by-one, or will they be seen in groups. Knowing this, you can test-view your images according to what they tell you and make sure they look their best. In general, the more procedural specifics you're aware of in advance, the better you can maximize the effectiveness of your presentation, the point here being that not every application and

review process is identical, and being able to customize your approach to the organization offering the assistance is always advantageous to a favorable outcome.

Returning to the subject of images for a moment, make sure you can fill an application's slide requirement with strong professional looking work. If for example you have one painting and the application asks for eight, hold off until you paint the other seven. In fact, before applying for anything at all, you should have at least one strong cohesive completed body of work (preferably more) that you can clearly explain and tie in to whatever form of assistance you're looking for. This work should demonstrate your focus, your intentions, and show where you're going. Simply put, a completed body of work demonstrates that you're capable of materializing an idea and accomplishing a task. Good visual documentation, written descriptions, and other relevant details concerning all significant works of your art are equally important to have on hand. Video is also good if, for example, there's a participatory or moving element to your art. Generally, you should have whatever ancillary materials best represent and clarify the nature of your work. Again, every application requires different information about your art and the more you've taken the time to prepare in advance, the better.

Be aware that you can sometimes apply for a grant or other form of assistance based only on an idea. In fact, certain organizations prefer funding innovative concepts for producing art that does not yet exist rather than supporting art that already exists, but at the same time, they still require that whatever you propose to do be either based on or supported by the merits of previous work. In general, an organization financing an idea has to have trust in the artist based on some sort of track record, which in addition to completed work, may include a resume, list of shows or exhibitions, previous awards or grants, and so on-- assuming they're relevant to whatever is being applied for.

As for filling out the application itself, spelling, neatness, good grammar, and thoroughness all count and all demonstrate the seriousness with which you're taking the opportunity. Be aware that you're likely one of hundreds or even thousands of applicants and that at the very least, you want to appear professional. Reviewers are typically inundated with applications and use the smallest mistakes to eliminate potential candidates from contention. You're being assessed in terms of whether someone wants to invest in you and your talents-- in your career and your future-- according to whether they think these investments will pay off. And nobody invests in carelessness or slop.

Of course we all know that art is a visual medium so please oh please make sure your photographs look professional. If you're shooting your paintings against a concrete surface, for example, don't include the concrete. Avoid glare or reflection from flash bulbs or daylight, nuance your lighting to eliminate uneven dark or light areas, and make sure everything's in focus, colors are accurate, nothing's crooked, and so on. In short, your photographs should look as finished as your art. You might also shoot your work in a gallery setting, not only for purposes of scaling it against an interior, but more importantly, because art just plain looks better in a gallery. You see, sometimes reviewers look at your art first without even reading the application, and in some cases that decides

whether the application ever gets read at all or who advances to the second round of consideration. So stack the odds in your favor and make sure your art looks its best. Another important point is to always customize your application to the requirements of the organization, nonprofit, or foundation. All application processes are different; never assume otherwise. If they want eight copies, submit eight copies. If they want no name on your statement, have no name on your statement. Minor details are so basic but so important; these little things are often what trip artists up. So double-check and proofread everything before you send it on, and be sure to include whatever additional materials they ask for. Better yet, have friends or acquaintances review your application as well, not only in terms of mechanics, but also to see whether your answers make sense and whether you successfully get your main points across.

Additional pointers:

* You should have some sort of track record or exhibition history before applying for grants or assistance. If you're just starting out, hold off on the application process for now. In the meantime, get involved in the local community, help out at an arts organization, nonprofit or gallery, and get some experience showing art, even if only with your friends. You'll eventually meet people sympathetic to your art or projects, build a fan base, and become more knowledgeable about what opportunities make sense and are within your reach.

* Apply for as many opportunities as you're eligible for every year. Don't get discouraged. Be aware that the people or panels who review applications change, and what gets turned down one year may well be accepted the next. Plus the more you apply for, the better you get at applying.

* If you've never applied for anything like this before, attend grant-writing workshops. Read other artists' proposals, preferably winning ones, to see what good applications look like. Ask artists you know who have gotten assistance whether you can see their applications or offer pointers on how best to proceed.

* Be clear and concise in all your answers. Avoid density-- arcane convoluted artspeak. The quicker and cleaner you get your points across, the greater your chances for success. Reviewers don't like getting bogged down in jargon.

* Don't include information about every piece of art you've ever produced or are currently working on. If you're involved in multiple projects, narrow your focus to the one or two most relevant to the application, and keep the look uniform. Think of this process as branding yourself, as becoming the artist who all the reviewers identify as "the figurative painter," for example.

* Make sure whatever you're applying for is a fit, and that you have a good well-thought-out justification for applying. For instance, if you're a painter, then it's probably not a good idea to apply for an architecture grant-- even though your work might be influenced by architecture.

* Thoroughly research your project in advance and know what's required to complete it. Reviewers can tell when you don't know what you're talking about-- especially with

respect to details like how much will things cost, how you'll account for your time, or what you'll need in terms of supplies, equipment, or studio space. In other words, be able to say, "Here is exactly what I need to make this happen."

* References are important-- particularly ones you can rely on, particularly people who have some sort of profile in the art community and who are solidly behind you and your work. Make sure you talk to whomever you list as references before you list them though to be sure they genuinely support you.

A few don'ts:

* "I need money" or "I need studio space" are not good reasons to apply for assistance.

* Don't write one paragraph when the application provides two pages. Skimping on information makes you look lazy.

* Avoid discussing or showing random work samples that don't relate to your project or proposal.

* Avoid vague descriptions of what you need to accomplish your goals. For example, "I need $10,000 because that's how much I think this will cost" is not adequate.

* Do not submit template applications. Reviewers can tell when you're sending out the same answers or packet of information over and over again. Always customize to the specifics of the organization.

* Don't list people as references unless they know you're listing them.

* Don't add superfluous materials that are outside the parameters of the instructions. Include only what you're asked to include. Reviewers are overwhelmed enough already without having to sift through irrelevancies.

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Resources for locating and applying for grants and other forms of assistance:

NYFA Source (New York Foundation for the Arts)
Creative Capital
Alliance of Artists Communities
Res Artis Network
Foundation Center

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