



**STANFORD**  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

**STANFORD** SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

## **A Spark for Good Art**

By Suzie Boss

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Winter 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Leland Stanford Jr. University  
All Rights Reserved



**STANFORD**  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

**Stanford Social Innovation Review**  
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015  
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516  
Email: [info@ssireview.com](mailto:info@ssireview.com), [www.ssireview.com](http://www.ssireview.com)

## A Spark for Good Art

Creative Capital doesn't just fund projects, it builds careers **BY SUZIE BOSS**

BACK IN 1999, playwright Lisa Kron applied for a grant from a new arts organization called Creative Capital. She had no idea what she was getting herself into. When Kron learned that she would be receiving a few thousand dollars, her initial reaction was, “Great!”

And then Creative Capital staff kept asking her, “When are you coming in to talk with us?” Kron demurred, saying: “I’m fine. Really.” Privately, she fretted about wasting her time “on help I didn’t need,” she says. When she heard that the organization was planning a retreat for its artists, all Kron could think was, “Leave me alone.”

The plot changed when Kron discovered that there was more money in the pipeline—up to \$50,000, available at milestones in the life of her project. This unusual cash flow wasn’t the whole story. As her three-year fellowship unfolded, Creative Capital offered Kron a range of career-boosting benefits, including help with marketing her work and practical advice about budgeting.

Kron went on to earn a Tony Award nomination for *Well*, the autobiographical play produced while she was a grantee, and today credits Creative Capital with taking the “beggar mentality” out of arts philanthropy. Instead of offering her a handout, she says, “they put real capital into my career.”

During its first 10 years, Creative Capital has pumped \$14 million into 324 projects from a range of artistic disciplines. Grantees have gone on to earn prestigious awards, from Academy Award nominations to Guggenheim Fellowships, and have exhibited their work in the most selective venues. Joel Wachs, president of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, considers Creative Capital “the premier artist support organization in the country,” and has pledged \$15 million from his foundation to underwrite the organization’s next decade.

Just as important as Creative Capital’s grantmaking is its willingness to bust myths. From the organization’s perspective, there’s nothing noble about starving artists. Nor is creativity harmed when artists get more businesslike about financial planning, marketing, and strategic goal setting. Longtime CEO Ruby Lerner says her organization works with artists at “catalytic moments,” helping to spark ambitious, provocative projects and build sustainable careers. “We want our artists to leave us stronger than when they came in,” she says.

### BEST AND WORST OF TIMES

Two seemingly unrelated circumstances set the stage for Creative Capital. First came the culture wars of the 1990s, with conserva-

tives up in arms over federal support of controversial artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Barbara DeGenevieve. In response, Congress slashed the National Endowment for the Arts’ budget. “That left a huge vacuum,” Lerner says, for funding for what she describes as “adventurous projects.”

At the same time, new money was bubbling up from the dot-com boom. “With extra cash sitting around,” Lerner recalls, foundations could take new risks. Meanwhile, newly minted millionaires wanted to have greater impact than the usual philanthropists. “The venture philanthropy movement was just burgeoning,” Lerner says, “but nobody was taking those concepts into the cultural arena. So this would be our experiment.”

*Creative Capital funded Chris Doyle’s Leap, whose projections flew up the side of a Manhattan skyscraper in 2000.*



Start-up funding for Creative Capital came from the Warhol Foundation. Crossing the country, then-president Archibald Gillies convinced other foundations and “a handful of brave and curious individuals” to join the cause, Lerner says. In 1999, Lerner signed on as Creative Capital’s president and CEO, and got busy building a better model for supporting American artists.

### JUST-IN-TIME HELP

Lerner started by questioning the value of “just churning out money to people. What are we doing by putting more projects out into the world without the resources to maximize their potential? It’s easy to give away money,” she concluded, “but hard to give it away well.”

Lerner and colleagues set out to craft a new approach—starting with the application process. Creative Capital favors open applications instead of the more exclusive nomination process that many funders use. Artists apply with a specific project in mind rather than asking for general support. Unlike most grant processes, Creative Capital’s expert reviewers offer constructive feedback even to those who are not selected. And there’s no shame in trying again. Lerner estimates that 40 percent of successful grantees “are people who have applied to us before.”

Indeed, selection panels have learned to look for what Lerner sums up as “readiness.” Along with possessing talent and a strong portfolio, qualified applicants “must be at the point where they are able to take advantage of all the other things that we offer. And if we miss the moment, even slightly,” Lerner adds, “we can see the difference.”

Creative Capital’s approach has four parts, reflecting the organization’s systems thinking: (1) support for the project, totaling up to \$50,000 over three years; (2) support for the person, with consulting to build skills for managing finances, speaking in public, and handling myriad other aspects of an arts career; (3) support for the community of artists, with retreats to bring together grantees from diverse disciplines; and (4) engagement with the public. Exactly how the model plays out, however, varies from one artist to the next.

### A LEAP AHEAD

In hindsight, multidisciplinary artist Chris Doyle can see that he was poised for growth when he entered the Creative Capital fold. The organization decided to fund the Brooklyn artist’s project called *Leap*: videos of New Yorkers projected on the facade of a Manhattan skyscraper so that the larger-than-life images seemed to jump into the night sky. Creating the installation involved photographing and interviewing more than 400 people.

“This was a big step forward for me in scale,” Doyle says. “I was having growing pains. I needed help thinking about strategic planning, budgeting, all these things that Creative Capital offers help with.” He adds “I wasn’t particularly comfortable speaking to people,” a disadvantage when dealing with the press and public.

Once Creative Capital selects an artist, the organization finds out exactly what kind of support he or she needs. It gets personal. The organization doesn’t hesitate to ask how much artists pay for

### FEED CREATIVITY

Allow everyone to apply for support

Teach grantees self-management skills

Build supportive communities

Create ways for grantees to give back to the funder

rent or if they have retirement plans or health insurance. “These things are all related to productivity,” Lerner says. “We want people to have long and productive careers.”

Kron admits that the conversation can be uncomfortable. “A lot of artists don’t have the stability that is normally labeled as ‘mature adult life,’” she says. Creative Capital consultants guide artists through budgeting, long-range planning, marketing, and other career-building processes. “There’s no shame if you don’t move through the world like an investment banker,” she says. “Here

are people who can sit down and talk with you about these things and not think you’re stupid or irresponsible.”

This straight talk encourages artists “to lose the mythology” about the business of art, Lerner says. But the organization leaves artistic decisions to grantees.

To fine-tune its artist support services, Creative Capital has listened closely to grantees’ concerns. Many artists, it turns out, get nervous about premieres, which can be a triumph or a moment of missed opportunity. To tilt circumstances toward success, Creative Capital arranges stakeholder meetings with artist, producer, publicist, “and anyone else responsible for the success of the project,” Lerner says. Artists come to the table with cash, courtesy of Creative Capital, to buy ads, suggest promotional events, or make other strategic decisions that are usually out of the artist’s hands. “This is really new,” Kron says, “and almost unbelievable.”

### SHARING THE WEALTH

Along with thoughtfully investing in individuals, Creative Capital has also built a stronger arts community. Retreats bring together artists from diverse disciplines, and they have become “the biggest information swap meet in the cultural sector,” Lerner says. Doyle says he has gotten to know artists he otherwise would not have met, setting the stage for future collaborations. “I can draw a tree of all the projects I’ve done [since *Leap*],” he says, “and they all connect back to Creative Capital.” Retreats are also a hot ticket for producers, gallery owners, and others in the field.

As the organization has matured, it has looked for ways to reach artists outside the elite circle of grantees. Professional development workshops, typically led by Creative Capital artists and emphasizing the self-management message, have reached an additional 2,200 artists across the country. Doyle says leading the workshops gives him a way “to give something back,” both to the larger community and to the organization that has shaped his career.

The handful of Creative Capital artists who have made significant amounts of money from their projects, including Kron, share the wealth by returning a small percentage of their profits to the granting organization. Payback is part of the Creative Capital deal, although only a few projects ever reach this stage. Nonetheless, Lerner says, “I’m proud that payback is in our design. People often say it’s great because it makes the artist accountable. But the arrangement also makes Creative Capital accountable to the artist,” she says, “and that’s truly radical.” ■