

Grant Writing De-mystified

BY BETTE LEVY

It often appears as if grant writing is one of the most dreaded of all activities for artists. The idea of willingly plunging into this seemingly uncreative process can be off-putting. But grant writing is an avenue that can provide many welcome benefits and opportunities to those who are successful. I strongly encourage SDA members to apply for one of the several types of grants we offer, and also to call me beforehand for guidance in tailoring your grant for success.

I've written previously about grant writing, offering suggestions and warning about some of the common pitfalls (*SDA Newsletter*, Winter 2006, "Speaking of Fund Raising"). In this article, I'd like to focus on the personal development grant. As you prepare to write your grant, carefully read the guidelines on the SDA web site to be sure that your project is appropriate and that you're applying for the correct grant. The personal development grant is designed to enable you as an artist to grow and develop creatively and intellectually. By promoting your personal growth, SDA hopes also to achieve a broader goal: expanding the whole field of surface design.

Specifically, the personal development grant is designed to support studio projects, travel to conduct original research, or work on essays and publications. Within this spectrum of projects, there is a "hierarchy of fundability." Projects with the broadest scope or level of innovation are most likely to be funded. Therefore, work that is new to the field, groundbreaking, and far-reaching, particularly if it involves techniques that you've developed yourself, is more likely to be supported than work that repeats what has already been done. In addition, projects that expand your own knowledge, technical ability, and expertise are more desirable than those which involve continuation of your current line of work. So, a studio project resulting in novel work or a research project involving travel abroad to study or teach are more likely to be funded than the installation of an exhibit or attendance at a conference—even though all might help you grow as an artist. If you do decide to apply for funds to attend a conference or take workshops, focus on one area rather than disparate techniques to reflect genuine interest rather than random experimentation. Work that has already been completed is ineligible, so a retrospective show of already-produced work is unlikely to be supported.

If you are a "mature" or established artist, it may be especially difficult to demonstrate your potential for creative development since it is often perceived

that you already have attained your artistic "voice." Be sure to demonstrate how your project will take you to new places or in new directions. Do not assume that the committee already knows who you are. Be sure to include your CV, articles, images, and all requested documentation.

Regardless of the project, if you can state and make your case well, your application will be strengthened. If you're looking for support for a project that may rank low on the hierarchy, you'll have to work especially hard to convince the reviewers that your project furthers you as an artist, that you will learn from it, and that it will contribute significantly to the field. Explain how your project will contribute to your development and expertise as an artist and to the realm of surface design. Be professional, realistic, specific, and concrete. If the project you are proposing is arcane, be sure to describe it in terms that the lay person can understand. Avoid jargon, "art speak," or unnecessary additions like poetry, pink paper, or green ink.

What you ask for is also important. Primary expenses, such as supplies or costs directly related to the creation of the art, are more appropriate and therefore more likely to be funded than subsidiary expenses such as food, music, PR, or travel. Expenses that you've already incurred for activities that have already taken place are not allowable. If you're seeking funds for what appears to be the continuation of a project, you must show how it is substantially different than the original project. If you're seeking support for an exhibition, it's better to ask for funds that will assist in the creation of the work. Be sure expenses are those that benefit you directly—don't ask for display cases for the gallery that is housing the show or fees for hiring assistants.

Remember, this is a competitive endeavor—you are competing with all the others who are submitting applications at the same time, so your success will often be determined by how many others have applied during the same grant cycle and what types of projects they're asking us to support. Knowing ahead of time what is most likely to be funded can go a long way in helping you shape your request.

Don't be scared off—please do try! We want to fund interesting, innovative projects and you could be the recipient. Even if you are denied, you will learn from the experience, and you can always re-apply—even for the same project.

—*Bette Levy is SDA's Director of Fund Raising.*