

## Interview

### Charlotte Dion from the Foundation Center New York interviews Creative Capital Executive Director Ruby Lerner and Program Officer Ken Chu

June 2002

*Earlier this month, Charlotte Dion, director of the Foundation Center's New York library, interviewed Creative Capital Foundation's Executive Director Ruby Lerner and Program Officer Ken Chu.*

**CD:** Ruby, Creative Capital is an unusual funder in that it focuses exclusively on support for individual artists. Can you give us some background on how the foundation got started, why it has this focus, and how it assists artists?

**RL:** Creative Capital grew out of conversations that began when the National Endowment for the Arts was no longer able to fund most individual artists' projects. When we launched in 1999, 22 funders had come together to create a new national entity with support for innovative individual artists as its mission. It was also very influenced, by its moment, the dot com boom era. Ideas from the financial sector, particularly the venture capital community, were very influential. The core concept was to not just provide monetary awards, but a range of other programs and services as well. The idea was that artists would come out of this with skills, relationships and information they might not otherwise have had.

Over the past three years, we have evolved a four-part system that includes support for the project, support for the person, nurturing the community of funded artists and engaging the public. We make additional financial support available beyond the initial grant; we hold an artists' retreat to bring together the grantees; and we provide skills-building workshops in fundraising, public relations and marketing, and planning. We promote funded artists on the Creative Capital website and send out quarterly e-mail releases to a list of 10,000 people. For next year, we are planning more extensive promotional activities in support of the 158 funded projects.

**CD:** Ken, as Creative Capital's program officer for Visual Arts and Emerging Fields, can you tell us what the foundation sees as "Emerging Fields"? And what your typical day is like?

**KC:** Creative Capital basically funds all forms of contemporary art, and Emerging Fields is where we look at forms that don't fit neatly in our other discipline areas. If you check our guidelines, you will see that digital arts, robotics, experimental literature, sound art, and multidisciplinary works are some of the genres that have been folded into this field.

My daily chores are not all that exciting. It is heavily administrative: correspondence, meetings, strategizing, etc.

**CD:** Could one of you briefly describe what Creative Capital does in the performing arts area?

**RL:** Performing arts is one of our four funding areas, along with visual arts, film and video, and emerging fields. We don't really do anything different in performing arts than the other disciplines.

**CD:** What does Creative Capital look for in a potential grantee? At what stage in an artist's professional development would he or she apply for a grant?

**KC:** If you check our Web site ([www.creative-capital.org](http://www.creative-capital.org)), a sample of our guidelines is still available. The criteria are pretty simple: we fund only U.S. artists with a minimum of five years of professional practice, and who are at least 23 years of age. Ideally we are looking for artists who are realistic about what it takes to actualize their ideas and are committed in building their careers. They know what is needed to move forward but don't have the finances or resources to take that risk, and that's when we would like to catch them.

**CD:** How does the selection process work?

**KC:** We have a very baroque process. It has two phases. The artists fill out a simple application form and return that with a three-page resume. Each application is read by two evaluators from around the country as well as the appropriate program director. It is scored, tallied, and approximately 100 of the high scorers are invited back for the second round. This is when we ask for work samples, a full project description and budget. The material is presented to the discipline specific panels whose members then recommend up to 20 projects each to our board. All grants are subject to board approval. The full process takes about six months.  
**CD:** What do the two of you see as the most common misperception about the grantseeking process?

**RL:** I think people who sit on panels for the first time are always shocked at how fair and scrupulous the decision-making process actually is. I'm not sure applicants always realize how important a good work sample is—a poor quality work sample can sabotage an otherwise strong proposal, as it tends to undermine confidence. I also think many people feel they should "neuter" their proposal in some way. In our case, we're looking for singular visions; we expect to see a specific personality shine through the language of the proposal. We are funding serious artists, but panels also respond to humor. I think that might surprise people.

**KC:** Many artists coming from the visual arts don't see grantseeking as part of the arts landscape. The basic concepts of building a career are not introduced in their education and once they graduate there is no infrastructure for artists to pick up the skills needed to navigate through the field. These skills include portfolio development and presentation; preparing press packets; understanding the relationship between the artist and the gallery; having a career development plan; etc. Grantseeking is a viable option for artists. Their colleagues in the media and performance fields include it in their practice.

I highly recommend that artists serve on panels whenever possible. You can gain invaluable insight to the presentation and evaluation process.

It is helpful to be able to compose a strong visual presentation and build the argument that supports the work sample. Artists should be articulate about their work not just for grant writing, but also to maintain control on the eventual interpretation of the work by cultural critics, marketers, academics, and historians. We can control our own myths.

Specific to Creative Capital, artists should read the guidelines before filling out the application. (This is a good general policy.) It is a thoughtfully and beautifully crafted document that explains what we do and look for. We love it when people do their homework (another good practice). See if the grant is a good match for you. When available, review the work funded to get a sense if your work will be competitive. For instance, some funders have an archaic interpretation of art and makes grants to artists working in traditional formats. Be honest. Don't try to write an application you think we want to read. We are interested in the human behind the thoughts.

**CD:** How have the events of September 11, and the downturn in the economy affected the artists which whom you work directly, and the demand on your own funding and services? Do you have a sense of which has had the greater impact?

**RL:** It's hard to know which has had the greater impact, because the economic downturn had already begun to slow things down. 9/11 was an exclamation point on an already bad year. But I think it's important to point out that as far as support for individual artists goes, it's almost always in an economic downturn! Support for individual artists creating new work is completely inadequate, period.

**CD:** How do you perceive the funding climate for individual artists over the next year or two, both in terms of your own grantmaking and from what you hear from colleagues?

For example, what changes do you anticipate in Creative Capital's priorities or in the ways you work with current and potential grantees? Do you expect your grants budget to grow, to decrease or to be stable? Do you plan to accept the same number of new artists, or to focus on continued support for current grantees?

**RL:** We just don't know any of the answers yet. I don't see the funding climate for individuals improving in the near term. We are beginning the process of going back to our current funders for renewed support and many of them have seen a significant loss in their portfolios. So, we're definitely not expecting any major growth. Our hope is to stay as close to where we are now as possible. At this point we plan to have a new grant deadline in fall 2003, for visual arts and film/video. If funds permit, we will support about 40 artists in that round, consistent with what we are currently do. But there are certainly no guarantees.

**CD:** If you had one message or word of advice to send to individual artists right now, what would each of you say?

**RL:** I recently heard (conceptual/performance artist) Suzanne Lacy speak to a group of art school graduates, and she said that her best advice would be to create your own reward

system, and not to be dependent on external sources for your own sense of self-esteem. I think that is perhaps the most important advice I have heard.

**KC:** There are over one million self-identified artists in this country, and 20,000 coming out of MFA programs annually. Flip through the annual Art in America guide that lists all arts organizations, galleries, and museums in the U.S. Do the math. It's sobering. As individual artists, we need to think about expanding our options to make all this work for us. It's important for us to recognize that we are each a potential small business that can spawn an industry. The creation of art takes money, sustaining ourselves in the field takes capital, and grantseeking is one option we have towards career stabilization.**CD:** You've both touched on many aspects of our own theme month, particularly the need for artists to understand the grantseeking process and to think about earned income and careers in the arts as ways of supporting themselves.

Thank you both so much for sharing your expertise with our audience, and for Creative Capital's much-appreciated support of our Funding for Arts Month. I'm sure that many individual artists will be participating in other activities during Funding for Arts Month [www.fdncenter.org/newyork](http://www.fdncenter.org/newyork) and taking advantage of Creative Capital's excellent online resources as well.