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ARTS FUNDING

An invaluable hand for experimenters

Alternative Exposure serves crucial role in S.F. by funding work that pushes the envelope

By Christian L. Frock

Southern Exposure's Alternative Exposure grant is considered a success by any measure. We can trace this success to the ingenuity of Southern Exposure's longtime Executive Director Courtney Fink, but we really owe it all to Andy Warhol.

Years ago, Fink began talking with Pamela Clapp, then program director for the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, about new ways to support artists. The Warhol Foundation was created following the artist's death in 1987 to advance the visual arts by supporting art "of a challenging and often experimental nature." Today it is

AltEx continues on E3



Photos by Mike Kepka / The Chronicle

Courtney Fink distributes AltEx grants to independent art initiatives as the executive director of Southern Exposure.

AltEx grants provide invaluable help for experimenters

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one of the most important arts funders in the United States.

Over the past seven years, Southern Exposure, a nonprofit organization focused on visual artists, has become a major arts funder in the Bay Area. Since the inception of its Alternative Exposure grant, Southern Exposure has awarded more than \$420,000 in grants to 120 independent artist initiatives, including alternative spaces, galleries, public art, educational programs, websites, publications and events. AltEx, as it is known, is also a model for other communities around the country.

"At the time, we began talking about new models of support," Fink recalled. "Southern Exposure was about to temporarily become a nomadic program. We were trying to develop new ideas during a three-year experiment to explore what it meant to be a nonprofit without a gallery. Simultaneously, there were many artists in the Bay Area running spaces and alternative projects that were an important part of the arts ecosystem."

Aiding experimentation

From these conversations and with backing from the Warhol Foundation, AltEx grant was born. Designed to provide capital for experimental collaborations and new modes of public engagement, the grant aimed to support and recognize under-the-radar projects and artistic experimentation. Suddenly do-it-yourself platforms at the grassroots level were eligible for much needed cash infusions.

At the same time, AltEx formally recognized the Bay Area's wealth of al-

ternative practices and the work of artist-run apartment galleries, street performances, indie social justice projects and up-and-coming art publications, among other experiments. The Warhol Foundation's involvement gave art world credibility to artists on the fringe — for many recipients, myself included, AltEx was the first professional recognition of their work. (Full disclosure: I received a grant in 2008 and was a juror for the program last year.)

"It was so clear that San Francisco was the perfect place to pilot this program because of its critical mass of artist-driven activity. It had always been a part of the city's defining character," said foundation Program Director Rachel Bers. "We consider this activity to be a vital part of life and living in cities."

There were 150 applicants in Round One in 2007. Fifteen recipients, including Clarion Alley Mural Project and apartment gallery 2nd Floor Projects, received a total of \$45,000. Shotgun Review, an experimental self-publishing site for exhibition reviews, was also among the first round of recipients; it later evolved into Art Practical, a professional online journal of Bay Area art and culture and an important resource for contemporary art writing, exhibition listings and reviews, in addition to public programs.

Many of the recipients said that the AltEx grant meant the difference between stopping and continuing. Looking at its history, one can see how a modest boost has sustained some small projects at critical points of development. This is how the history of art is told in

many instances, with countless artists developing longer careers from early low-budget experimental projects.

One example arose during photographer Cindy Sherman's retrospective at SFMOMA in 2012: In 1974, she and other artists established Hallwalls, an alternative space that began in the halls of a converted ice-packing warehouse in Buffalo, N.Y. Sherman was lauded by the museum as "one of the most influential artists of our time," even as her exhibition catalog cited an early history showing in an alternative space of her own devising. Larger ideas — and sometimes

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Rachel Bers, program director, Warhol Foundation

MacArthur "genius" fellowships, apparently — can arise from experiments and alternative spaces. AltEx grants demonstrate a belief in this kind of expansive potential.

Over the years, AltEx has expanded its outreach, thanks in part to additional backing from the city's Grants for the Arts program. Last year, \$70,000 was split among 16 projects. Saverneck Street, a peephole gallery in the Mission; Queens of the Castro, an after-school workshop organized by drag performers to create safe spaces for LGBTQ youths; and the Mandala Project, a drawing program for inmates at San Quentin Prison, were among this year's recipi-

ents.

"The AltEx grant has literally been the only reason I could keep this project going," said Carrie Katz, the creator of Saverneck Street, in an e-mail. "I do everything on my own. Installation supplies, refreshments for the openings and the stipend I give my intern all came from the grant."

Since she opened, Katz has provided opportunities for artists to exhibit their work and hosted 11 exhibitions and public events. These types of creative junctures stimulate and strengthen the art community at the grassroots level by providing space for experimentation, public engagement and social gathering.

Warhol would be proud. Since 2007, the Warhol Foundation has committed more than \$3 million to its larger regional regrants program and has funded some 300 alternative artists' projects across the country, with plans for a total of 10 regional programs by 2016. "As we've developed the program, we have looked at SoEx as a model, because it has become an integral part of the Bay Area landscape," said Bers.

Immediate impact

None of the usual business model indicators of success apply — grant recipients probably won't launch a nonprofit, sell artwork or even last, for that matter. "The premise of the program is that you can do something brief and provide something in a given moment that is really necessary," Fink said. "Some of the shorter projects initiate conversations that are picked up later and have lasting cultural legacies."

But how does an experimental project provide

something "really necessary" in a given moment? Often by creating opportunities from limited resources to explore salient issues: Alternative gallery spaces provide expanded exhibition opportunities for underrepresented artists, just as experimental publications offer platforms for underrepresented writers. Both also provide space to test out new ideas.

Immediacy is often intrinsic to grassroots projects, which are typically nimble enough to respond to current issues in ways that larger organizations can't because of logistics or won't because it isn't their mission. In many ways, grassroots artists keep cities honest because they respond to issues that larger institutions won't touch.

Much has changed since AltEx's inception. As a result of the latest tech boom and escalating rents in the city, a lot of artist-driven activity has moved elsewhere. AltEx has only become more relevant as funding sources for the arts have diminished and the cost of living has increased, factors that tend to restrict artistic experimentation. Add to it that many nonprofits and small businesses that support the arts — including galleries, bookstores and art supply stores — have also been displaced or closed altogether due to the shifting real estate market, challenging the cohesion of San Francisco's larger art community. Still, many artists see this time as a heightened opportunity for ingenuity.

"There tend to be trends and themes that emerge in the AltEx applications, depending on the social climate. The changes in the city are reflected in the types of proposals

that are submitted," says Fink. More recent projects are centered on access to practical resources. Real, Time and Space, a 2012 recipient, offers studio work spaces for artists in a former print shop in Oakland's Chinatown. Bay Area Public School, a 2013 recipient, presents a free educational program in downtown Oakland based on skill-sharing and self-directed learning.

Warhol's legacy

Warhol couldn't have known how much impact his foundation would have or what it would do exactly, but he believed deeply in the importance of artists' radical ideas — so much so that he bet his entire estate on a commitment to support them. It has undoubtedly been the most widely impactful gift of his legacy, the spirit of which is exemplified in Southern Exposure's Alternative Exposure program and in its proliferation of new models.

AltEx was also an experiment that challenged convention; in this regard, it embodies Warhol's ideals at the grassroots level. Here is a risk that panned out — an initiative to support artists that has yielded wide-ranging community benefits, within and beyond the Bay Area, and is continuing to ensure that artists' ideas are given the opportunity to flourish.

Challenging and experimental ideas advance the visual arts, Warhol believed — what he didn't say, but must have known, is that they also advance the people and cities engaged with them.

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Carrie Katz received a grant last year for her Saverneck Street peephole gallery. "The AltEx grant has literally been the only reason I could keep this project going," she says.