

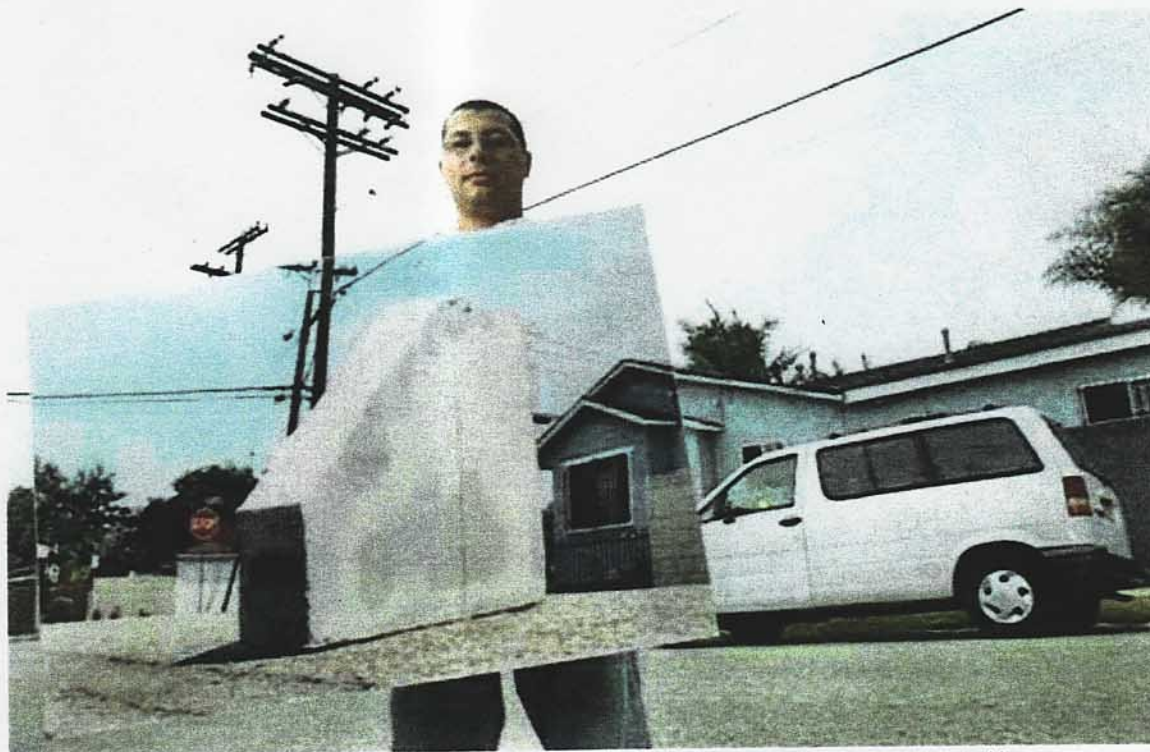
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## Creative types get a bit of business schooling

**\*As it distributes grants to artists, the Creative Capital Foundation also tries to teach them how to succeed in the wider world.**

By Scott Martelle, Times Staff Writer



Ruben Ochoa displays a photograph from his "Freeway Wall Intrusions" project, meant to suggest Los Angeles' class divides. A related endeavor has received a grant from Creative Capital Foundation, as have the ventures pictured below. (Myung J. Chun / LAT)

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SAM EASTERSON was beginning to think his idea for depicting the world from unexpected perspectives — by strapping mini video

cameras to animals and plants — had about run its course. He wasn't even sure the concept worked that well.

But just as his confidence was flagging, the New York City-based Creative Capital Foundation e-mailed that it liked what he was doing and kicked in \$5,000 in 2001 to help with the next phase — a buffalo cam to go along with his frog cam, tarantula cam, tumbleweed cam and the ever-popular armadillo cam.

"I don't know if I would have continued after that project, quite frankly," said Easterson, of Studio City. "It meant a lot that there were people across the country who were thinking about this, understanding what you're trying to do. It wasn't just me in a room in an apartment, which is so defeating."

Since its founding in 1999, Creative Capital has delivered \$5 million in similar shots of adrenaline to nearly 250 artists, and in the process is creating a new template for private arts funding, using a mix of old-style grant-making and post-dot-com venture capitalism to re-imagine the relationships among artists, funders and markets.

The program has helped fill a void created when the Clinton administration ended the National Endowment for the Arts' grants programs for artists, leaving private groups, such as the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, as the main sources of such grants.

"We basically were looking to find a way to bring new support for artists in America," said Joel Wachs, the former Los Angeles City Council member who in 2001 was named president of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which helped launch Creative Capital.

Rather than drop a check on a project and wait for a year-end report, Creative Capital targets "catalytic" moments in artists' careers, then signs on as a combination guidance counselor and business partner.

"They don't just give them a fish, but they teach them to fish," said Mark Murphy, executive director of the REDCAT performance space at Walt Disney Concert Hall. "Sometimes people consider the



business of art to be an oxymoron, but the artists, with rare exceptions, would love to have a chance to build a bit of infrastructure."

Creative Capital has helped filmmakers, performers and cutting-edge experimenters refocus their work, propelling some down new avenues of creativity that have slowly begun to seep into the central currents of American art.

Scores of its artists have gone on to place projects in galleries and museums small and large, little known and famous, including L.A.'s Mark Moore Gallery and Telic Arts Exchange, New York's Whitney Museum of American Art and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

Musical pieces have premiered in noted venues, including at Disney Hall in the "Minimalist Jukebox" festival. Films, such as Sam Green's "The Weather Underground," have screened at Sundance and other festivals. Lisa Kron's play "Well" debuted at New York's Public Theater two years ago. But it's the less visible elements that have fed Creative Capital's success. The organization acts as a professional network host, drawing together artists from disparate disciplines in retreats with gallery owners, museum curators and consultants. And it holds clinics across the country for non-grantees that have drawn more than 1,000 artists, said Alyson Pou, who runs the professional development program.

All of Creative Capital's efforts are directed at one goal: helping artists become self-sufficient.

"Businesses are not built overnight or within a calendar year," said Ruby Lerner, founding director of Creative Capital. "To make something successful, you have to be willing to make a long-term commitment. We expect a three- to five-year relationship with a project."

Lerner describes herself as an evangelist spreading the concept of investing grant money in projects, and Creative Capital's internal reports are filled with such lingo as establishing a "cohesive system of support" that creates a "chain of opportunity for the artists," which has "helped people with project planning as well as career and life planning."

"That's the whole thing about going public," Lerner said. "You get a business to a certain point and then you want to take it public where other people will invest in it."

In the case of artists, Creative Capital uses its contacts to help artists gain other grants to augment its funding, and to entice galleries and museums to consider displaying the projects.

The program is not for everyone. Early-career artists whose vision has yet to gel aren't ready for the professional guidance. Established artists often have already navigated the business part of the arts and don't need career guidance, contacts or help developing their artistic infrastructure — conceiving, executing and presenting their works.

Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa is just at the beginning of the cycle. He received a \$5,000 grant last year for his still-developing project "Freeway Extractions," an act of optical illusion in which he hopes to cover a portion of an Interstate 10 retaining wall with photographic wallpaper of the green space on the other side. It's part of a three-stage project that includes erecting a billboard of a photograph he took of a fake chunk of freeway retaining wall posed in a suburban neighborhood, and constructing another chunk of retaining wall this September at LAXART, a nonprofit gallery on La Cienega Boulevard.

The point: to use the freeway retaining walls as cultural artifacts to draw attention to Los Angeles' class divides, Ochoa said. But to paper over the freeway wall he needs permission from both the city of Los Angeles and Caltrans, which he is in the process of obtaining.

Ochoa believes the grant gave his project enough credibility to gain the attention of public officials whose blessing he needs, and the Creative Capital retreat he participated in helped him in his discussions. "As cheesy as it sounds, it gave me a sense of empowerment that I came back with that, as an artist, I could negotiate," Ochoa said.



That bureaucratic tone obscures the cutting-edge nature of much of the work, such as Marie Sester's "Access," an interactive installation that explores the effect of surveillance by using Web-based controls to capture unsuspecting pedestrians in a cone of light and sound, and Amelia Rudolph's Bay-area Project Bandaloop troupe, which in 2001 performed its west-to-east "Crossing" dance over the Sierra Nevada in what was likely the world's first alpine aerial dance hike.

For artists, the grants are akin to accepting a not-so-silent limited partner. If a project makes money — so far, few have — the artists pay dividends back to Creative Capital. But making money is far down the organization's priority list. The focus is on nurturing talent and trying to create a community of creative minds across disciplines.

#### **\*C'mon, let's see some courage**

THERE have been stumbles. A mentoring program got off to an uneven start when demand far outpaced the supply of mentors; a promotional campaign took longer to launch than anticipated, frustrating many of the artists; and deadlines for follow-up grants had to be retooled when it became clear that each artist's project was evolving at a different pace.

For those involved, though, the stumbles are just the growing pains of innovation.

The program's biggest strength lies in instilling courage to push further along artistic roads, said Maya Churi, 35, of South Pasadena.

Churi received \$10,000 in Creative Capital's inaugural year for her interactive [www.lettersfromhomeroom.com](http://www.lettersfromhomeroom.com) project, using fictional classroom notes to trace the lives of two teenage girl characters. The project, still online but no longer updated, was so realistic that Churi's characters had e-mail dialogues with real teens who posted comments and questions.

Churi said the grant — \$5,000 for the project and \$5,000 for publicity — affirmed her transition from film to interactive media, and emboldened her to create [www.forestgroveestates.com](http://www.forestgroveestates.com), an

interactive novel about a nonexistent suburban development, told as a virtual slide show.

"I was still on the fence between film and the Web," said Churi, who will begin a master's degree program at USC this fall. "Creative Capital definitely helped in that sense, by their acknowledgment that this is a form of art and that it was a legitimate creative outlet."

Creative Capital does its work in shared space with the Warhol Foundation on the seventh floor of a staid-looking building on Manhattan's Bleecker Street, at the edge of Greenwich Village and the art-heavy SoHo neighborhood.

Creative Capital was born as something of a dodge around the proscriptions of Warhol's will. The Warhol Foundation gets most of its revenue from the sale and licensing of Andy Warhol's art, and under his will it can donate money only to organizations that support the visual arts, foundation president Wachs says.

In the late 1990s, after the federal NEA scrapped nearly all its grants for individual artists (it continues to issue grants to organizations), Archibald L. Giddies, then the Warhol president, helped launch Creative Capital to fill some of the gap, Wachs said.

Because Creative Capital focuses heavily on visual arts, the foundation can — and does — funnel about \$2 million a year, accounting for nearly half of Creative Capital's annual budget.

A key component of Creative Capital's program is teaching artists the sorts of things they didn't learn in art school — in essence, the business model for being an artist, including introducing them to such concepts as "capacity building." "Just because you have a great idea doesn't necessarily mean that you would have the skills to do all phases, to achieve all phases of the idea," Lerner said. "You might have a great idea, but you might not know anything about marketing."

Another key element is using the Creative Capital grant as seed money to attract other grants — what Lerner sees as a version of an IPO.