

**A Blade of Grass
Lay of the Land
What Made a Proposal Uncompetitive?**

This material is adapted from “ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art: Feedback for Applicants,” published in ABOG’s Lay of the Land forum in January 2014. To see the unedited version, please visit: www.abladeofgrass.org/ablog/sea-fellowship-feedback-for-applicants

We can’t tell you in advance what will happen this year. These trends will surely shift as social practice evolves. That said, we believe that part of nurturing the wider field of practice is sharing the valuable lessons we learn from open calls with practitioners.

Last year, we found a number of common trends among the applications that were not competitive. Most of the proposals that did not make it to the next round showed one or more of the trends outlined below in either the writing used in the letter of intent, or in the framework of the project itself.

Trend: Is an organization/is structured too much like an organization.

We used the following questions to eliminate proposals that already have significant institutional structure:

- Does the applicant have 501c3 status?
- Does the applicant have a mission statement on their website?
- Does the applicant have an organizational title, such as Director, or Development Director?
- Are other staff members listed on their website?
- Is there a Board of Directors or Advisors on the website?

These criteria eliminated some applicants that behave like organizations but are working with fiscal sponsorship rather than independent 501c3 status. We made this decision because the ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art is designed specifically to support individual artists. The Fellowship involves active participation and consulting services that may not be relevant if you already have a board, the credibility that comes from an organizational title, or other organizational supports and routines.

Trend: Didn’t read as art. Aesthetic impact or artistic gesture didn’t come through in the letter of intent.

Trend: Lack of formal or conceptual innovation.

Many proposals sounded credible and effective in terms of enacting social change, but presented themselves so clearly and one-dimensionally as community development, organizing, activism, or teaching that they weren’t competitive. Similarly, many proposals for workshops, classes, community theater, storytelling, and other known forms didn’t innovate beyond this existing form in a compelling way.

We believe that art and everyday life are and should be increasingly integrated, and are not suggesting that the forms of daily life cannot be art. But we are choosing to support projects that have a rigorous aesthetic component, and that are formally and conceptually ambitious and innovative enough to be compelling as art projects. As an arts organization, we have a unique opportunity to enable work that is valuable for aesthetic or formal reasons, without holding artists to the same metrics for success as other social workers. To take full advantage of this opportunity, we need to evaluate the aesthetic, formal and conceptual value of each proposal.

Trend: Representing a social issue or community, rather than enacting social change or meaningfully engaging the community.

Many projects clearly defined important social issues, and worked to represent the issue or make it visible in a public fashion, rather than enact a solution. These projects often took the form of a documentary or oral history project, and were often very compelling aesthetically, but did not involve a community beyond the role of being a subject.

While we understand that raising awareness is an important component of social change, we are choosing to fund projects that are innovating beyond art's representational role, pushing more aggressively into the forms of everyday life, and positioning artists as leaders and problem solvers.

Finalists' letters of intent portrayed credible and compelling problem-finding and problem-solving, rather than problem-representing.

Trend: Prescriptive or poorly defined community engagement.

Trend: Straightforward education or outreach programs framed as art projects.

Many unsuccessful proposals did not clearly articulate who the artist would be working with, how this working relationship would evolve, and why the working relationship was relevant to the meaning of the project. Other projects had relationships with community that were prescriptive, rather than co-creative or cooperative. For example, this type of "top-down" relationship might look like a fully conceptualized project that involves the community only by using them as volunteers or producers. This was common in proposals occurring in schools, nursing homes, or prisons—settings in which the community might have little choice about their involvement.

We think that sharing the creative process and expanding authorship are the most powerful and innovative things an artist can do. We are specifically interested in artists' ability to work with other people to create cooperative, collaborative outcomes that clearly transmit an artistic vision, while also sharing the creative process or distributing authorship in an innovative way.

Finalists' proposals clearly demonstrated that the project will occur in active cooperation with other people, and that the final outcomes are dependent on the relationships the artist is building, and the contributions these other people are making.