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## Launch pad: Lawrence artists use Rocket Grants to fuel creativity



Photo by Terry Rombeck.

Leralee Whittle performs a scene from "WorkArtOut," a performance art/dance/video event that explores art and athletics. Accompanying Whittle is guitarist Paul Sprawl. The pair will perform Saturday at the Community Building, 115 W. 11th St.

By Terry Rombeck  
November 10, 2010

Leralee Whittle found herself in Glendale, Ariz., in high heels, dancing with a friend among a row of lockers in a community workout facility.

With a video camera rolling, the dancers ran up and down the bleacher-lined hallway, hopping in and out of the lockers. A few feet away, several men were taking out their aggression on a punching bag.

"They didn't even look up," Whittle recalls.

In some ways, that moment encapsulates the difficult-to-categorize WorkArtOut, which debuts this weekend with performances Friday in Kansas City and Saturday in Lawrence.

The dance/video/music collaboration is one of two Lawrence-based, Rocket Grants-funded projects that debuts this weekend. The other is an issue release party Saturday for Johnny America, a Lawrence-based 'zine that is gaining an international following.

The Rocket Grants, in their first year, are funded through the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and administered by Kansas City's Charlotte Street Foundation and Kansas University's Spencer Museum of Art. This is the first year of the grants, which provided up to \$4,000 each to 12 projects within an 80-mile radius of Kansas City.

"The grants are targeted to encourage experimental work that has a public component to it, especially if it does not happen in a traditional or established arts venue," says Julia Cole, who oversees the grants for the Charlotte Street Foundation. "We're looking for things that are lively, innovative, surprising or unfold in places where people might not expect it."

### **WorkArtOut**

That certainly is the case for Whittle's WorkArtOut, which focuses on a mix of performance art and dance at sports venues.

She filmed herself and other performers in workout venues, tracks, racketball courts and gymnasiums. The resulting videos will be played during the weekend's events alongside live dancing and music provided by collaborator Paul Sprawl. Much of the narrative follows a woman who is torn between her roles as an artist and as CEO of a line of women's sportswear.

Whittle says WorkArtOut explores several issues, including:

- Repetitive motions representing the repetitive nature of our lives.
- The relationship between art and sports, especially when it comes to funding.
- The competitive nature of our society.

"I think this project is an exemplary project for the Rocket Grant project in many ways," Cole says. "It's extremely compelling to watch. It's not work that is

familiar, but you can't take your eyes off what she's doing."

Whittle, who grew up playing soccer in California and moved to Lawrence last winter, is quick to note she's not against athletics. She just thinks the issues are worth exploring, especially in a city known for both KU athletics and its arts scene.

"In a way," she says, "it's the perfect town to do this in."

### **Johnny America**

Johnny America started with a game between Jonathan Holley and Emily Lawton.

"We gave each other little writing challenges," Holley recalls.

One of those challenges was to write a 'zine based on a rabbit named Johnny America who lived on the moon. They never got around to writing that story, but there was something that resonated about the name, the concept and the rabbit logo Holley drew.

In 2004, Holley and Lawton decided to start a website to post some of their writing challenges, naming it Johnny America. A few months later, they started a print 'zine with the help of designer and Lawrence artist Patrick Giroux.

At first, Holley and Lawton sought submissions from friends. And then, through the magic of the Internet, their writing base expanded. A store in Melbourne, Australia, read a review of "Johnny America" and started selling the 'zine.

"Most of our submissions now are from people we don't know," says Holley, an architectural designer who co-edits "Johnny America" from Lawrence with Lawton, who now lives in Japan.

The publication is celebrating its eighth issue. Holley says the common bond among all the printed stories is their length, though many of them employ humor.

"We're looking for things that can be read quickly — the short, very short and

very, very short,” he says. “Unofficially, Johnny America is the perfect water-closet reading.”

Cole says Johnny America received its Rocket Grant because of the number of writers and artists involved.

“We really wanted to focus on artist collectives and groups, and to help those grow,” she says. “It helps them establish a stronger base in the community. We really believe those kinds of groups have a ripple effect.”

Holley says the grant will help his team complete an additional two issues of Johnny America in the next eight months. And he has big goals for issue 10: a scratch-and-sniff, choose-your-own adventure story.

“The goal is to be bigger than we are now, but we’re not looking to be picked up by Conde Nast,” he says. “It would be nice to hit issue 100 and be an institution.”

## **Other 2010-2011 Rocket Grant Recipients**

- “Point of Interest,” a 10-foot interpretive exhibit resembling a National Parks information booth in the Brookside neighborhood of Kansas City.
- Prop 8 on Trial, a multimedia performance examining the constitutionality of California’s Proposition 8 that banned same-sex marriage.
- The S’mores Grant Project, a fundraising effort that sells s’mores from a street vending cart.
- WE!, a collaborative dance performance.
- Endless Boundless, a program that immerses children in interactive, interdisciplinary art workshops.
- Center for the Advancement of Transmodern Awareness, a multi-use space dedicated to promoting the evolution of culture by creating new systems of

social exchange.

- Deep Ecology 1, a functional beehive sculpture.
- ASP/SPA/PAS, a publication designed to engage members of the art, philosophy and scientific communities in dialogue.
- Product Placement, a series of site-specific, sculptural, public art interventions/happenings.
- Kansas City Christmas Special, a video project involving Kansas City artists and artists from other parts of the country.



Photo by [Terry Rombeck](#)

Guitarist Paul Sprawl and dancer Leralee Whittle collaborate in *WorkArtOut*, a performance art/dance/video piece that will debut Saturday in Lawrence.



Photo by [Terry Rombeck](#)

Leralee Whittle performs a scene from "WorkArtOut," a performance art/dance/video event that explores art and athletics. Accompanying Whittle is guitarist Paul Sprawl. The pair will perform Saturday at the Community Building, 115 W. 11th St



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Chief designer Patrick Giroux, left, and co-editor Jonathan Holley will be among those unveiling issue 8 of "Johnny America," a 'zine that received a Rocket Grant this year. The issue will be distributed during a party Saturday at the Bourgeois Pig, 6 E. Ninth St.