

# Rocket Grants propel artistic innovation

By THERESA BEMBNISTER

Special to The Star

*Posted on Sat, Jan. 01, 2011 10:15 PM*

Leralee Whittle mimicked the motion of cardio exercise, jerking her arms and torso back and forth. Dumbbells hanging in a sling formed by her stretchy workout clothing echoed her body's movements.

Whittle was in a gym, but she was not exercising. She was performing in front of an audience, moving her body in an exaggerated way to satirize our culture's obsession with sports. Whittle and her collaborator, musician and composer Paul Sprawl, chose an unexpected venue — the gym of the Westport-Roanoke Community Center — for the November premiere of their performance, "WorkArtOut."



The Rocket Grants program also funded "WorkArtOut," a performance by Leralee Whittle and collaborators satirizing our culture's obsession with sports. The piece was presented in November at the Roanoke Community Center, in keeping with the program's aim to fund projects outside traditional arts institutions.

Integrating live dance and video projections, WorkArtOut critiqued sports culture through movement, music, costume and a healthy sense of the absurd.

Performers donned clown wigs, batting helmets and protective padding. Dancers posed and gyrated on yoga mats, breathing heavily while making come-hither glances toward the audience, calling attention to the conflation of fitness and sexuality.

A \$4,000 Rocket Grant helped Whittle realize "WorkArtOut." Funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the program aims to boost artistic innovation by awarding small grants to artist-driven projects.

Viewers are more likely to encounter Rocket Grant-funded work in a gym, bar or store than in an art gallery. The program exclusively funds projects outside traditional institutions such as galleries and museums.

Kansas City's Charlotte Street Foundation and the Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence administer the grants locally.

Last spring, a panel of artists and curators with local ties selected proposals for awards totaling \$40,000. Twenty-eight area artists received funds for projects including installations, publications, performances and educational programming for children and adults.

"Collaboration, connection and exchange help to build the kind of 'hybrid vigor' that fuels innovation, and this is an important focus of the Rocket Grants," Julia Cole, program coordinator, said.

Collaboration was key to the innovation of "WorkArtOut." Whittle recruited performers with little experience in contemporary dance, introducing a new audience to the genre and encouraging others to think — and move — creatively.

"It was a big challenge for me to draw the performer out of each of them and to convince them to think like an artist who communicates many states of mind, each translated in the body," she said.

Grant winner May Tveit said her goal is to integrate art into everyday life.

In her 2002 exhibition, "Retail Therapy," at the Epsten Gallery at Village Shalom, Tveit filled the high-ceilinged room with industrial shelving units stocked with red, white and blue balloons printed with words such as "security," "normalcy" and "duty." The piece explored the psychology of consumption following the Sept. 11 attacks.

For her Rocket Grant project, Tveit will take her work out of the gallery and into retail environments. With her new series, "Product Placement," she plans to install 8-foot diameter balloons imprinted with words such as "happiness," "relief" and "life" in big box stores, parking lots and empty fields and on vehicles and shopping carts.

"The surprise encounter with something you normally wouldn't see provokes thought and delight," Tveit said.

The funds enabled her to visit a factory in El Dorado, Kan., to study the manufacturing and behavioral characteristics of balloons. Tveit hopes to install her work in January or February.

As part of the grant application process, artists were asked to consider the community impact of their projects.

For the past year, Kurt Flecksing has sold s'mores from a street cart with a temporary vending license. He plans to award micro-grants to local artists with the proceeds.

Rocket Grant funds enabled Flecksing to pay for an improved cart that qualified for a regular street vending permit. The new cart will allow for increased s'more production and accommodate other food. It also will allow Flecksing to sell in a wider variety of settings, reaching a wider audience.

"This cart can operate in different locations, shifting public space by creating a conversation — not just selling a product to raise money to support artists, but informing and educating and maybe getting more people interested in new ways of looking at public art," he said.

Flecksing plans to debut the new cart in January and to announce the winner of the first s'mores grant in late February.

Grant winners Emily Lawton, Patrick Giroux and Jonathan Holley held release parties in November for the latest issue of Johnny America, a short fiction and humor 'zine with a handmade look.

Holley called the Rocket Grant award a real boon. The money allowed the group to pay illustrator John Lee for drawings for the latest issue.

"Patrick and I usually handle all visual aspects of the 'zine ourselves, and it was refreshing to bring someone new into the mix and to compensate them with actual money instead of high fives and thank-you e-mails," Holley said.

The Johnny America staff members plan to work with local illustrators for the next two issues. They are also putting Rocket Grant funds toward research on scratch-and-sniff inks.

Cover of “Johnny America,” a new zine put out by Emily Lawton, Patrick Giroux and Jonathan Holley. The publication was made possible by the Andy Warhol Foundation’s Rocket Grants program, administered locally by the Charlotte Street Foundation and the Spencer Museum of Art.



Rocket Grant funds helped artists Ashley Miller and Seth Johnson launch their collaborative venture, the Center for the Advancement of Transmodern Awareness, or CATA, which opened Dec. 21 in a new dedicated space in Columbus Park.

Miller and Johnson want to facilitate collective creative action outside art museums and other institutions traditionally charged with cultural exchange.

CATA’s inaugural event, “Solstice Manafest” provided an open platform for celebration, including food, video art, music and an exchange of gifts.

Miller, who uses words such as “fun,” “play” and “discovery” when talking about CATA, described the Manafest as “lots of participants simultaneously doing creative action synchronized around a ritual scene, but not following any traditional structures.”

But more than anything, Johnson added, “We are interested in trying to generate questions and curiosity.”

CATA’s space will provide a venue for performances, lectures and workshops designed to provoke dialogues.

The project has already triggered conversations online through comments on the Rocketblog, which presents content generated by grant awardees and information on Rocket Grant projects and events.

Cole said the Rocketblog is a way to spur creativity and nurture an interactive arts community, an important goal of the grant program.

“Risk, failure, uncertainty, nonrational knowledge and so on,” Cole said, “are materials that artists embrace and that are not generally part of daily discourse. It’s good to have a platform that opens up that kind of dialogue.”

In a region already noted for its lively, do-it-yourself art scene, the Rocket Grant program demonstrates that a little bit of money can help artists push the envelope.

*For more information on upcoming Rocket Grant-supported events, see <http://rocketgrants.wordpress.com>.*