

Why arts funding matters to us

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Art for art's sake is a phrase that sounds curiously old-fashioned and, dare I say it, somewhat un-English. After all, it was coined in 19th century France as 'l'art pour l'art'. As such, it retains an air of frivolity and audacity, but also something that is dispensable, especially in straitened times. In its true sense, however, the term simply captures the notion that there is intrinsic value to the arts, distinct from any educational, moral or societal benefits.

It is this underlying conviction that attracted me, with my continental roots and life-long passion for arts and culture, to John Ellerman Foundation. When I joined the team towards the end of 2015, having honed my grantmaking skills at the Rothschild Foundation Europe and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, working on funding streams supporting arts, heritage, museums and galleries, I was thrilled by the prospect of overseeing a grantmaking engine that values excellence and national significance across different sectors. In our performing arts strand and our Museums and Galleries Fund this translates into a recognition of the need to support the creative and curatorial process itself.

It is this long-held belief in the inherent potential of high-quality art to enrich and transform the lives of all of us that underpins the Foundation's arts funding. Many other funders understandably choose to take a more instrumental approach and focus on the education and outreach functions of arts organisations. We recognise the value of arts engagement in terms of its potential impact on personal wellbeing, educational outcomes, community cohesion and other social benefits, but we have taken a conscious decision to focus on the creation of new work to complement the funding provided by our peers. Most arts organisations create new work, including reimaginings of existing work, that are of outstanding quality. However, in harsher economic times many find it increasingly difficult to have the capacity to commission and pay for this. There are also risks in funding new work, which it can be argued that independent funders are well placed to take. We have made funding commitments to organisations which found themselves in fragile circumstances, e.g. on the verge of leaving the safety net of NPO status or about to enter the uncharted territory of digital production. Incidentally, we often find that those organisations that are very good at creating great art or curating wonderful collections also excel in their educational or participatory work, proof we feel of a mutually beneficial relationship between the various aspects of their activities.

Most of our performing arts grantees are working in dance, music, opera and theatre. In order to be eligible, we expect them to be directly involved in the delivery of the work created, rather than working solely through partner venues, festivals or other organisations. In our Museums and Galleries Fund, which operates with an annual deadline and is currently open for applications, we take a very open approach in terms of collection type, as long as it has national significance. In both our arts

funding streams we are particularly keen to support organisations that are based outside of London or who work closely with others in different parts of the country. This is based on our understanding of the funding imbalance between the regions, where the economic and societal impacts of local authority cuts over many years have been especially harsh.

Our first stage application process has been designed to be quite open and flexible, with applicants asked to answer four questions in two pages, as well as providing some supplementary information. We want applicants to highlight elements that are most meaningful to them and paint a true picture of themselves and their funding needs and opportunities. We know that it can be a challenge to know what to include, which is why we review and update our funding guidelines annually, including our frequently asked questions, and we are happy to give advice to prospective applicants and address any queries around fit with guidelines or discuss the most useful bits of information to include in a proposal. These exchanges can take many forms; sometimes a brief email does the job, whereas in other cases a phone call or meeting may be useful to go a bit deeper. Either way, they also provide an opportunity for us to learn more about organisations, including those we have not funded before, or new ways of working.

One of the joys of being part of our grants team is that there is always something new to discover, whether that is a type of collection we are not familiar with, or a creative process that we have not heard about before. As a relatively small team, and with a portfolio that is hugely varied and reaches into all corners of the UK, we certainly don't claim to know everything.