

A Regional Lens on a Utopian Ideal for the Arts

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Charlotte Street Foundation's residency programs, grants, awards, and public programs have long been a community and regional resource. Over time, it has built a substantive generative multidisciplinary hub for art and artists unique among regional and national arts organizations.

Aileen June Wang, Curator at the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art at Kansas State University notes, "Since its founding in 1997, Charlotte Street has been an important driving force in the Midwestern art world, nurturing and developing regional arts through its multifaceted support of local artists working in various disciplines. Charlotte Street attracts talent to and energizes a much-needed arts hub serving Midwest communities, helping it to establish a distinct identity out of the shadow of mega art cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. As curator of an art museum dedicated to regional art, I appreciate Charlotte Street as a cultural catalyst and look to it to learn about contemporary artists and the innovative ideas incubating here."

Charlotte Street's Rocket Grants program is one example of this regional commitment, distributing awards of up to \$6,000 for artists living within an 80-mile radius of metropolitan Kansas City "for projects that exist outside of established institutions." The program, funded by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and implemented through a partnership between Charlotte Street and Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, intends to "encourage and support inventive, under-the-radar, and public-facing work in non-traditional spaces."

Full disclosure; This writer was part of a team that received a \$3,000 Rocket Grant in 2016 for expanding our critical art writing website *Informality Blog*. We used this funding to explore new media to create critical art content and programming alongside our traditional writing platform. With help from other community artists and the support of then-Rocket Grants Coordinator Julia Cole, we implemented a series of public interventions designed to grow a more engaged audience employing public programs like *Guerrilla Docents* and a new video criticism series called *Roof Chill*. *The Floor*, *50/50*, *Black & Blue*, and *Transfiguration* are just a few of the dozens of funded projects over the past decade-plus supporting this commitment.



Fundraiser for Stray Cat Film Center in 2018.
(Photo by Liz Mather)

In speaking with past and present recipients of Charlotte Street's granting, their responses confirm the work Charlotte Street funds and hosts at its new campus in Kansas City's Volker neighborhood bears a strong cultural influence on the region. These awardees all share the commonality of having a touchstone like Charlotte Street to turn to for supporting the exploration of new ideas. Total mastery is not the point; trying, succeeding, or failing and learning from the experience needs support. The availability of Charlotte Street is a powerful dynamic of how the organization continues to grow with the community they serve.

MG Salazar, the creator of *La Resistencia Press*, was awarded a Cultural Producers Grant in 2021 for \$5,000. Salazar shares, "This is my very first Charlotte Street Foundation grant, but I've worked with Charlotte Street in the past as a performer at a couple of their events. I had never applied for Charlotte Street before (being told) it was the be-all-end-all event of a Kansas City career artist. Everyone I know that has achieved great success in their career has received some funding from Charlotte Street, and they've made many opportunities possible. They've been very supportive throughout the entire process of applying for a grant, which I appreciate very much. I've worked almost entirely on my funding for my entire career and was pleasantly surprised at how accessible it was. They're very connected and have helped spread the word about our events. I'm looking forward to exploring the different opportunities that Charlotte Street has to offer."

The Stray Cat Film Center describes itself as "an artist-run, non-profit microcinema (...) that supports Kansas City's cinematic communities and celebrates the diversity of expression, fun, and radical art." Upon receiving a Cultural Producer Grant for \$10,000, Stray Cat's Cassandra Gillig says, "Charlotte Street encouraged us to do (the work) we want. Getting a grant with no restrictions means operating with our true mission at the helm. We (weren't) coaxed toward professionalism or a certain aesthetic that doesn't serve our audience. It's beautiful and rare to have an organization that says we believe in your art and truthfully sustains it."

Artist, educator, and activist Nedra Bonds received a \$6,000 Rocket Grant award in 2013 for her collaboration with Dr. Nancy Dawson. Together, they celebrated the historic Quindaro neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas. Both women wanted to celebrate the history and introduce knowledge to where each grew up. Bonds wanted to show kids who live there about their primarily black part of

town while countering some of the negativity touted in the press.

She states, "I organized a list of prominent former residents and arranged for elementary school students to research the people and their historic deeds. The students drew pictures that told the stories. I then copied the images onto fabric and made them into quilts. The public library displayed the quilts for kids and their families."

Addressing the unique positioning of Charlotte Street, Bonds says, "[This] kind of project would never have been understood, as educational or artistic, by any group, other than Charlotte Street. We could touch hundreds of local people with true local history in non-academic settings."

In 2019, artist Benjamin Wills was a two-year Charlotte Street Studio Resident. He also received a \$2,000 Research & Development Rocket Grant in 2019 for *The Airplane Project*. Wills describes this project as "a collection of paper airplanes that I've received via my correspondence with inmates of the US Penal System." Wills shares, "I have long made art working with the incarcerated populace. Airplanes had been a project for years before I received the Rocket Grant. It was receiving that grant that allowed me to start exploring ways to make the collection accessible to people when the collection is between shows. [...] Anyone who has spent time in the arts knows how challenging it can be to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of the art world. More important than the financial or structural support, Charlotte Street consists of a community of people who give constructive feedback, guidance, and inspiration."

Over the past decades, Charlotte Street has firmly created an actional roadmap promoting the Midwest region's academic mission, research, cultural leadership, and artistic and intellectual enrichment as a hub for creatives of all disciplines.

Says Stray Cat's Gillig, "Charlotte Street's malleable definition of "creatives" is something that gives a lot more people room to support and learn from one another."

