



Aaron Landsman
Performance still from
Desk, 2002
Photo Credit: Matthias Geiger

I have had the privilege of working with Aaron Landsman on developing the workshops presented through the Creative Capital Foundation. Aaron is a writer and an actor with a wealth of experience in fundraising. He currently provides his fundraising skills to Elevator Repair Service Theatre, where he is a member of the company, as well as for his own productions in intimate spaces such as homes, offices, and bars. In this interview, Aaron discusses his experiences observing and serving on awards and grant panels. Being aware of how the panel process works can help you fine tune your work samples and language to make your presentation more competitive. This is an interview with Aaron Landsman on November 13, 2007.

JACKIE: Aaron, you have had this amazing opportunity to be a behind-the-scenes person in the granting process in a number of organizations and most recently with Creative Capital. What are your initial thoughts about how the panel process works?

AARON: Sure. Creative Capital starts out with an open submission process that's national and online. You have to submit a bio, a description of you , and answer a few questions about how it fits in a context so people can understand your work. You talk about your influences, you talk about whether the project is a catalytic one for you, how it will move your whole career forward and then they ask you what kind of services you might need beyond just a cash award because Creative Capital has an artist services program too. And that submission process usually nets 1500 applicants or so in visual arts--everything from painting and sculpture to photography to video installations, multi-media work and new media. Of those 1500 applications, about 350 or so are asked to then submit a full proposal, which means a longer description and a small budget (which is not that important to their process) and work samples. You have to submit two work samples--two time-based work samples or up to ten still images. Each step along the way the application is read by a Creative Capital staff person as well as an outside evaluator. Those individuals change with each step so that if you make it past the first round, you've been read by an outside evaluator who reads about 300 or 400 proposals and then the program officer who reads them all. The applications are scored, the highest are automatically moved to the next round.

In the second round, the staff person again looks at all the work samples and reads all the proposals and sends out about thirty to forty proposals to about eleven regional advisors, so your work is being seen by someone from your region as well as a Creative Capital staff person. About 125 applicants from that pool are moved forward to panel. The panel is usually comprised of seven people. They are individual artists, two or three curators, museum directors, or gallery owners, plus a Creative Capital grantee, a Creative Capital Staff person, and the Program officer herself who has looked at all the proposals at every step along the way. Those panelists sit in a room that is very dark for about three days looking at about fifty or so proposals a day and then at the end of the second day, beginning of the third day, they start figuring out who they are going to give grants to. Each proposal gets about eight to ten minutes max and that includes looking at work samples and discussing the work. So that means each slide or each still image, gets seen for about forty seconds to a minute and then sometimes just a tiny bit longer or a tiny bit shorter if you're submitting ten still images.

JACKIE: So, the organization itself, Creative Capital, only has one vote in the panel process.

AARON: Technically, they have two—

JACKIE: But they don't have a majority. The majority is really an outside pool of art professionals that come from around the country.

AARON: And even the Creative Capital voting panelists are usually not advocating incredibly strongly until the very end for one or the other application. They try to be fair and balanced to everybody. The program officer who knows all the work that's before the panel can usually speak positively about everything even if it's not to her taste. They could also talk about how an artist might take advantage of the services Creative Capital has. But in many ways Creative Capital staff tries not to impose an opinion too strongly until maybe at the end when they have a passion vote. And there are a couple of very small steps along the way, like in the first round of looking at proposals, they go in or out for further consideration and the ones that are voted out then usually come back, but at the end, if they are looking at the diversity of the roster of artists that they are going to fund and they see that for instance there is no one from a certain ethnic background or there is no one from a certain region of the country, they might go back and take a look at the people that they have knocked out and that might play a small role or a panelist may say, "hey, you know, I didn't vote for this proposal, but looking back, I see there's nothing like it and I really loved it, I just think it's a wild card let's put it back in." People have made it to get grants from that, from being in that position. So, you may not have a lot of popular support at the beginning, but you may serve a need for the panel at the end.

JACKIE: So, it's like an ongoing dialog. What kind of information is given to the panelists before they start looking at the applicants? Are they given any instructions?

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AARON: They are. They have hopefully read all of the applications. Certainly, each panelist has read the applications that they are responsible to introduce to the rest of the panel and then they have probably skimmed at least all of the other ones. The Director of Creative Capital is the panel moderator. She does not have a vote but spends about forty-five minutes at the beginning of each panel process reiterating what the guidelines are for a Creative Capital Grant. She asks the panel to look for artists who are ready to take a real step forward with their work and/or career, so they are not looking to fund artists who are doing exactly the same thing that they have been doing for twenty years in exactly the same way. At the same time, I think they are interested in calculated leaps. They want to make sure that the artist has submitted a proposal that speaks to their ability to take the big step forward that they are talking about. So it can't be completely out of the blue, like someone has made a five minute animated movie and now they are going to make a feature narrative film. You know, that's going to be hard to pull off.

JACKIE: Or a visual artist, switching to new media with no prior experience.

AARON: Exactly. Having done paintings and now they are going to do a giant three room installation somewhere. Or, if you are going to do that, then to be able to talk about collaborators that you are working with, I mean there are ways to argue just about any case.

I think that other project funders vary in terms of whether they are looking for something that clear in terms of a step forward. Some funders will be happy if you want to do basically what you have been doing because that means you are reliable. Especially public funders, they may want you to get a little bit bigger or grow a little bit, but the larger leaps are less easy to put forward to some like the New York State Council on the Arts.

The other thing that they stress is rigorous form and content and then also innovation in terms of content or form. That's a specific Creative Capital thing. You have to address directly in the application--how do you take an innovative approach to form and/or content--and they are looking for that in the projects that they fund. They have a really broad definition about what that can be. You can talk about technique or content or almost anything you want, but you need to make a strong case for it. And one other thing that they talk a lot about is work that makes you swoon. Work that really affects you profoundly, that's not just an academic exercise.

JACKIE: You recently worked for Creative Capital during their panel process. What are some of the tips you have for visual artists based on your watching the proceedings? How can artists improve their applications?

AARON: Well, I have to say one of the biggest comments I heard from panelists were, "I'm not sure exactly what this is." Answering the question of what your project is, is still very difficult for artists to do especially when they are writing about something in the future.

JACKIE: Describe that a little bit more because I don't think artists understand what that means.

AARON: Well, literally, there are artists that will leap right into what the content is without talking about the form or vice versa. Creative Capital asks for a one sentence description of the project you are proposing. And there are plenty of artists who will talk about how it deals with gender and economics and third world growth markets in the stock market, but they won't talk about whether it's a sculpture or a series of paintings. I think that's the number one thing in terms of writing that people leave out. It's just my project is _____ (blank). Fill in the blank with "a series of paintings," or "a video installation."

JACKIE: That sounds so boring Aaron.

AARON: It's terribly boring. It's not supposed to be exciting necessarily. I think that in the same way that when you write a news article, you are not doing creative writing, when you write a grant proposal. You are not being creative necessarily, you are being expressive, specific and clear, and that is actually more important. I always tell people in our workshops that if you can write clearly and passionately about what you are working on, that sounds more expressive than you might think. [For example] when I talk about [one of] my projects and I say I'm doing a theatre piece that gets performed in a different apartment each night -- that automatically starts to orient people in a very specific way.

JACKIE: I see what you mean. Your words help people imagine the setting, and the fact that this is an unusual location for a theatre piece.

AARON: And not only that. There have been a lot of types of different performances in houses, but usually it is just one house. The fact is my project is in a different place each night and the host plays a role. The specifics about a project often speak in a more interesting way than you think. I think that's something artists forget.

The other thing that artists often don't do [in their application] is submit good work samples. There's no way around the need to invest heavily in work samples. I was reminded of this watching the panels where artists whom I knew made great work were submitting work samples that were really sub par or didn't draw a connection between the work they were submitting and the project that they were proposing.

JACKIE: What do you mean by that?

AARON: Well, when you submit a still image, at least to Creative Capital, you can put a one sentence description in there and it's often good to talk about how it relates to the proposed project. Somewhere in your application talk about how your previous work relates to what you are hoping to do in the future. That is a way for panelists to know why they are looking at what they are looking at. Another thing you can do with a work sample is to use some writing to draw attention to a particular aspect of the work. So you can talk about the scale of a certain series of works. You can talk about how you use color or the way you investigate a certain issue. Those are things that artists often forget to do. They think the work will

speak for itself and it doesn't always do so. Especially given the amount of time panelists have to consider it.

JACKIE: How do you know whether you have a good work sample or not? I think that is another aspect puzzling for artists. We talk about how the artists haven't provided good work samples, but I keep wondering, maybe they don't know what a good work sample looks like.

AARON: Well, to get really basic it has to function properly. I know this may seem unbelievable, but many of the DVDs we received, in both visual arts and film/video, just didn't work. They didn't play in our decks, and we had two or three different kinds of computers and video decks to watch them in. Or the artists had put paper labels, you know sticky labels, on their DVD which is absolutely going to crash every computer that you can think of and won't work in a DVD deck.

JACKIE: So, no stick on labels, just print your name on the DVD with a Sharpie.

AARON: Other things that make a good work sample, you know well lit, not shadowy. Usually, if you are doing work that involves depth, then you need to be able to somehow light the work so that the depth is clear or the way you are using shadow has to be clear. Anything large scale needs a detail to go with it. Large sculptures, large paintings, anything that has texture to it, where you can't see it if you are looking at the whole thing, you need to show a detail to go with it.

JACKIE: What kind of shots do you need for an installation?

AARON: Ideally, if it's something like a room installation that you can get the whole thing in one picture and then several details or sections—

JACKIE: Walk us around it a little bit—

AARON: Yeah. And then I also think that a time based walk-through, like a video walk through an installation, can often be really helpful.

JACKIE: What kind of descriptions come along with the work samples? How are they helpful?

AARON: You don't want to over do it, but for instance, if you are doing very small paintings, you need to write the scale in your description and the materials that you are using no matter what kind of work you are making. Even if it looks obvious, writing down what your materials are in a description is really helpful. The title is always helpful. And then if it is a part of a series you can put that in, if it relates to the work you are proposing that's also helpful. But materials and size are really, really important.

JACKIE: Many people ask me about Photoshopping an image to include several views all at once. You know, an overall image of the piece with some smaller details to go along with it. For some artists, it's a way to get around being able to submit only eight images of their work. This way they encompass the piece and all the details at once

AARON: I've never seen that work successfully. I think that panelists do have a good enough memory that they understand, if you help lead them through with separate detail images following the whole installation shot. It is important to relate the detail to the larger shot such as one that looks like it is coming from the same angle for instance. That seems to be something successful, like I'm going to show this corner of this painting from the same perspective that I showed the whole thing, because that leads the panelists' eye in the same way that actually looking at a work would lead their eye.

The last thing is, read the guidelines and address them up front [in your project description] with what is it and why it is important.

JACKIE: These tips are good for any application, such as project proposals to a nonprofit space, curatorial projects, anything that an artist is proposing. The major points that they need to make are first...

AARON: What is it? What's the project? or What's the work? And that is in the most nuts and bolts specific way. [Second] Why is it important? And that means, why is it important to you? Why are you doing this work now? Why should I be looking at this work now?

JACKIE: Why should I care?

AARON: Yeah. Why should I care? And that can be for very personal reasons, it doesn't have to be a sort of global, political thing but still you need to address it somehow.

JACKIE: So it can be your own personal reason why you are doing it.

AARON: Absolutely.

JACKIE: I think many artists don't think that they have a right to be personal.

AARON: Right. And I think on a certain level, it's a tricky balance because you don't want to sound like you are sharing too much.

JACKIE: What do you mean by that?

AARON: There is a tone you can strike when you are writing a personal reason for doing something that can sound like you need therapy. You know what I mean. "I am doing this because I come from an abusive family and I want people to heal the way I have never been able to heal." You know.

JACKIE: So there is a line drawn before being too personal.

AARON: Right. So, the "why" is important and then so is addressing the [funder's] guidelines. You can regurgitate guideline language in your proposal writing and that is fine because panelists are often looking for a way to advocate for your work with the other panelists. If you have addressed the grant guidelines, then they have an easier time advocating for you because they can look at your application and say, "See, this is a catalytic moment for this artist."

JACKIE: They are using your own words to say that.

AARON: Exactly. And that way anybody who is on that panel or anybody who works for the foundation can then say, "Oh I see why they are applying for this grant." It lends validity to the argument that you should be given a grant.

JACKIE: Does that even help with a panelist who may not be super wild about the work that you are doing but begins to understand that even if they don't love the work they see how this grant is a good match for the kind of artist or the kind of project proposed.

AARON: Absolutely. At the very least, if someone is not a fan of your work, but you have really addressed the guidelines, then the whole rest of the panel will chime in and say wait, this is doing exactly what is asked for. And one of the conversations that comes up a lot on panels, or at least on the Creative Capital panels, is, "this isn't my favorite kind of work, but it is occupying a very important place in the community right now either because of its region, or the style, or the artist's track record, or subject matter, so I think we need to move it forward and talk about it further."

JACKIE: You know this conversation is so insightful, it brings me back to a lot of the mistakes I have made on grant applications. It wasn't until I actually ran panels for The Rotunda Gallery that I began to understand that they are just a bunch of people who are diligently trying to do their best to help an organization find what they need within their criteria.

AARON: Right. It's one of the reasons I think that curators often make good panelists because they are coming to it with an understanding that they have certain work that they love, but they also tend to be very fair in terms of what how they are looking at everyone's work.

JACKIE: I was talking to a panelist on a NYFA (New York Foundation for the Arts) panel and they were upset by the process. They felt that the NYFA panel had gone to such great effort to have a diverse panel in terms of ethnicity, taste, and background that in the end only the middle of the road artists got awards. The best and the worst were knocked out and that the only people the panel could actually agree on were these kind of middle line applicants and in the end no one was really very happy with the choices. I realize it is only one panelists' opinion, but have you ever experienced that with a panel?

AARON: I feel that I have. I have to say that I think that that is one of the consequences of the scarcity of grant funding today. Panelists, organizations, foundations, whatever, are more risk averse now in terms of who they are going to fund. So, I think that that is a problem and I think that it comes up on certain panels. It sometimes depends on how many people are on a panel. It depends on how the panel is run and I am sure NYFA did a great job to assemble a diverse panel but they have such an incredibly large volume of proposals to go through that it must be difficult to give any in depth reading of anything, plus they don't ask for that much descriptive information.

With Creative Capital, they will spend ten minutes and sometimes more discussing each proposal. That is a fair amount of time and that allows people who can advocate strongly to really make a clear case.

JACKIE: NYFA also doesn't include many curators in their panel process. It tends to be artists, which speaks a little to what you were mentioning in terms of the professional curator actually sometimes being a little bit more open.

AARON: My experience of being a panelist for a couple of smaller grants is that it's agonizing work, because there are always great projects that don't get funded. At Creative Capital if they give out twenty grants out of 125 that have made it to panel, they could easily have funded fifty artists and would love to if they had the resources. I can't stress that enough; that there are another ten at the very least and probably twenty or thirty who haven't gotten funded whose work the panel feels is just as good. But for some, they don't quite have the popular support. And in the end there are these hair-splitting decisions that happen and that often it just comes down to a vote, well is it this one or that one?

JACKIE: Yeah, but it never makes the artist feel any better knowing they were the last one cut.

AARON: Believe me; I've talked friends of mine down off the ledge who found that out.

JACKIE: So, what are some tips for artists getting the kind of help that they need before they submit a grant application?

AARON: Have someone look at the application before it goes out. And I've utilized this as an artist in several ways. I've had a couple of people look at my work sample. I'll send it to them and say, "here's what I'm thinking about for my five minute excerpts. What do you think?" And then often they will adjust where I am cueing my work by even as little as fifteen or twenty seconds and that will allow another kind of trajectory to happen within the work sample. They will find a much better starting place and they will remind me that panels in my discipline tend to look at about a minute or two maybe of work sample and so that first minute is more important than what happens three minutes later.

JACKIE: You can't identify that yourself?

AARON: I have a really hard time identifying in my own work, what is going to play the strongest as a work sample.

JACKIE: Why do you think that?

AARON: I think I am just too close to it and there are certain parts of a show that for me are my absolute favorites that don't always come off well on video. In my work, which are live performances, the silences carry a lot of weight, but you can't feel them on a video excerpt.

JACKIE: Right, nor would you want to use up any of your time with the wonderful silences.

AARON: Right, unless it is really well contextualized and it is really charged. So, I often start right at the end of a scene change or a break because often what happens is you can hear a laugh from the last joke or from the effect of the silence that sometimes produces a laugh. So, you hear that laugh, and as a panelist you go, oh it's a funny piece, and then you watch something else happen.

JACKIE: I see. So, you prime them.

AARON: Yeah. And I've learned about that from a friend of mine who watched the video and said of an old piece, "well you know, if you'd started at the laugh and then moved to this next moment what they see in the first minute is X, Y, and Z." For visual artists, I think you can have friends look at how you are ordering your still images.

JACKIE: I know, because it's really like a mini exhibition of your work.

AARON: Absolutely. I think also having someone read the proposal who maybe doesn't know your work as well as you do, or doesn't know your work as well as your best friend. I sometimes show my wife my proposals when she is in a real hurry because she is not a huge reader. She doesn't enjoy reading the same way I do and doesn't sit on panels and read a lot of proposals like I do. So if she can read something in a couple of minutes and say here, here, and here are the problems or here's where I am really engaged, that helps me a lot.

JACKIE: So, it doesn't even need to be a professional writer.

AARON: No way, no. In fact, it's quite helpful not to be.

It's sometimes helpful to show someone who knows the work well a proposal because they will say, "Wait, you aren't talking about these important parts of the project." That's also a result of you being too close to it as the artist.

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JACKIE: So when you are applying for a grant, you need to give yourself some time to put all the elements together and to get that kind of feedback. It's not something you can do at eleven o'clock at night to meet a midnight deadline.

AARON: Exactly, I tend to start earlier and earlier, even just the reviewing of proposals. So I am spending up to three months at least with the proposal in my mind and probably five or ten minutes a week making notes for a couple of weeks and then doing some more major writing and assembling of stuff a month in advance.

JACKIE: Wow, and you are an experienced grant writer.

JACKIE: Something I have always appreciated about the Creative Capital applications are those questions they ask you to answer for the first step of the process. Questions that have you address context such as influences and how you take an original approach to form and content. Then there are those questions concerning the impact you hope your project will achieve and the audience you want to reach.

When I teach grant writing, I always bring in those questions because they really get to the heart of what you are proposing. I tell my students that those are the questions that every funder really wants the answers to, but nobody really lays it out in as clearly as Creative Capital.

AARON: I think having a writing buddy is also great—a proposal buddy.

JACKIE: What's a proposal buddy?

AARON: Someone you can work together with on proposals, especially if they are applying for some of the same things.

JACKIE: Aren't they your competition?

AARON: Yeah, but I am a huge fan of people openly sharing information because I think if you both write your best proposal, the project that is most appropriate will get funded. I think generosity just yields more success than competition.

JACKIE: Took the words right out of my mouth. That's great. I love that.

AARON: The funny thing about whenever I say it, I take a little bit of a pause because I don't know if I have proof of that, but at the same time, I do think it just has to be true because if we are all walking around trying to hoard opportunities from each other it just doesn't seem right. And sharing opportunities might do some good.

JACKIE: Aaron, this has been excellent. Thanks so much for your insights into what happens during the panel process.

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Aaron Landsman is a writer and actor. His plays, often presented in quotidian locations like homes, offices and bars, have been produced in New York, Houston and Minneapolis, and internationally in Sweden and Belarus. He is a member of Elevator Repair Service Theater, with whom he has performed all over the U.S., Europe and Australia. Aaron has taught at The Juilliard School and New York University and guest lectured at many universities. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife Johanna S. Meyer.