



3.10 / Kansas City

Breaking Bread: BREAD! KC as a Model for Community-sourced Arts Funding

by **Blair Schulman**

Making a pitch for a micro-grant at one of BREAD! KC's monthly dinners can be a scary proposition. The project idea that made such sense in the studio is now a PowerPoint presentation for a group of relative strangers from the Kansas City area, who assess its worthiness for funding.

Begun by two art-school friends, Sean Starowitz and Andy Erdrich, BREAD! KC has held fourteen dinners and distributed more than \$5,000 since its first event in October 2010, averaging about \$400 in donations per dinner (although the past few dinners have each raised much more). The program is one of fifty-six independent global affiliates of Sunday Soup—a food-based micro-funding network initiated by the Chicago-based arts funding research group InCubate—which was founded on the idea that communities needn't rely upon governmental support where funding has diminished. While Sunday Soup is not without precedent (the San Francisco artist Josh Greene, for example, used tips from his job as a server at an upscale restaurant to fund projects), it has been a particularly effective fundraising model, having raised more than \$55,000 for projects, as of this writing.¹ This has been especially true in the case of art communities like Kansas City that are far from major urban centers; the majority of Sunday Soup grant recipients are concentrated in the Midwest.

Sunday Soup's model encourages keeping operations inexpensive and simple, allowing for the widest possible participation of both artists and diners. In the case of BREAD! KC, donations produce all aspects of the meals. The ten-dollar entrance fee for a ballot and dinner encourages demographic diversity and draws new participants each month. RSVPs are required to ensure that the monthly average attendance of forty to seventy participants remains steady. Each event takes place in a new location, which allows shifts in design, concept, and presentation of the meals. Small local businesses have donated wine, artisanal bread, and organic produce; for BREAD! KC's first event, Julia Cole, the program coordinator of the Rocket Grants program and a friend of the project, donated vessels and dinnerware. BREAD! KC even collaborated with the ceramicist Roberto Lugo to make an edition of bowls and cups especially for one meal.²

In its most organic form, micro-funding stems from the needs of the community it serves. As Starowitz notes, "I think now, more than ever, is the time to look at more models and approaches and reevaluate what works and what doesn't. BREAD! KC is a great micro-example of the whole arts issue in KC.... Maybe we should fund the art we want to see, with our own efforts."³



BREAD! KC co-founder Andy Erdrich (lower right) serves diners and potential funders at a BREAD! KC dinner at Rieger Hotel Grill & Exchange, January 2012. Courtesy of BREAD! KC. Photo: Paul M. Ingold.



Tables set for a BREAD! KC brown bag dinner held at the Kansas City Art Institute on October 16, 2011. Courtesy of BREAD! KC. Photo: Paul M. Ingold.

BREAD! KC is one of many granting options in the Kansas City area. Others include Inspiration Grants from the Arts Council, Money for Artists Promotion (M.A.P.) and Lighton grants from the Kansas City Artists Coalition, and Charlotte Street Foundation's Rocket Grants and awards for visual and generative performing artists. With all these options, there are many artists in the area who still need funding. BREAD! KC does not appear to present a conflict of interest with these other funders and its portable and flexible model speaks to the need for smaller instant grants that are easily accessed by the public. Diane Scott, program manager for Artist INC, a collaborative partnership of the Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City, Charlotte Street Foundation, and the University of Missouri–Kansas City Innovation Center, says: "I feel as though BREAD! KC is filling a hole in the grants market in Kansas City and that [it is] indicative of the DIY and collaborative attitudes among artists [here]."

BREAD! KC plays an important role as an initial funder for many Kansas City artists: it provides them the opportunity to see firsthand their projects' impressions on potential funders and to subsequently enhance their projects' attractiveness to larger future grantors. Erdrich likens the dinners to "a very real competition." "With BREAD! KC" he says, "you are actually in the ring." The dinner guests expect the applicants to be prepared to discuss their intentions and to have a clear understanding of their proposed projects.

Nicholas Naughton, co-owner and operator of La Cucaracha Press in Kansas City, is one example of an artist who jump-started a project with a small amount of money. He received \$360 from BREAD! KC in the spring of 2011 to begin a letterpress venture with a couple of partners. In an email message, Naughton wrote: "The print studio has quickly become my whole life.... We've already begun planning the next three years." For the most part, recipients like Naughton have been transparent with how the funds are used. BREAD! KC asks previous recipients to share their progress at each event, which offers accountability and reassurance about the process to donors.

BREAD! KC's challenge for the future is to appeal to a broader swath of applicants and donors by seeking and highlighting projects that represent the city's racial and socioeconomic diversity. Part of the issue lies in Kansas City's sprawling geography, its corresponding lack of reliable public transportation, and the limited coverage of art-related events in local online and print media. Despite these factors, and even though the actual sum of money distributed by BREAD! KC appears small, the organization's social and cultural impact has already proven to be significant. BREAD! KC provides a unique opportunity for the community to directly fund artists, especially those in the beginning stages of their careers and for projects that don't fit neatly into the existing granting stream. In return, the community learns about great ideas and can experience local art as something social, reciprocal, and convivial.

NOTES:

1. Statistics from the Sunday Soup website, <http://www.sundaysoup.org>.
2. In a further act of generosity, Lugo, after receiving \$1065 in May 2011 (the largest amount given to an individual in BREAD! KC's history) returned half of the money to the organization.
3. Blair Schulman, *Art Notes* interview, April 2011, <http://www.artistinckc.com/artist-inc-community/meet-artist-inc-artists/sean-starowitz>.

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