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Patron and founder of award program Anonymous Was A Woman reveals her identity

Artist Susan Unterberg, who has anonymously given over $5.5 million in unrestricted grants to 220 women artists over the age of 40 through Anonymous Was A Woman, introduces a new chapter for the program

July 20, 2018—Today, Susan Unterberg, a New York-based artist, revealed her identity as the founder and sole patron of the grant program Anonymous Was A Woman. Each year for the past 22 years, Anonymous Was A Woman has awarded unrestricted grants of $25,000 to ten under-recognized women artists over the age of 40, distributing over $5.5 million to 220 artists to date. Unterberg chose to come forward after over two decades of anonymity in order to serve as a more vocal advocate for women artists, to underscore the urgency for women to support women in the art world and beyond, and to provide a model for other philanthropists. The revelation ushers in a more public chapter for Anonymous Was A Woman.

Unterberg founded Anonymous Was A Woman in 1996 in response to the National Endowment for the Arts’ decision to cease support for individual artists and in recognition of the challenges faced by women artists, particularly those in the middle stages of their careers. Each year, a group of distinguished women—curators from institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, and New Museum; art writers; and previous winners—serve as anonymous nominators and panelists. The Award has often had a transformative impact on the lives and work of the recipients, many of whom received the grant at critical junctures in their careers or before they had received wider recognition. Award winners have gone on to present solo exhibitions at institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Museum of Modern Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Venice Biennale, among many others; to create important public art projects, performances, and installations; and to receive significant critical acclaim.

Most recently, the 2017 Award was given to ten artists, ranging in age from 40 to 84, working in painting, sculpture, film/video/digital media, photography, drawing, installation, and performance. Last year’s recipients included painter Amy Sherald, 43, who received the Award before she was announced as the painter of Michelle Obama’s official portrait, and Michelle Stuart, 84, whose work is now on long-term view at Dia:Beacon. A complete list of past award winners follows on the next page.

The “no-strings-attached” grant is intended to provide recipients with the freedom to continue development of their creative visions. Award winners have used the grant to buy materials or invest in new technology in order to move into a new artistic form; travel for a specific project; pay for childcare or studio space; or simply take a breath after teaching or an exhibition. The award allowed for other recipients to give up their day jobs for a time in order to devote themselves fully to their art.

The name of the program, Anonymous Was A Woman, refers to a line in Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” and nods to the women artists who, centuries ago, signed their paintings ‘Anonymous’, thereby denying them professional recognition. Nominators, panelists, and, until now, the patron have been unnamed. In accordance with the values of the program, nominators and panelists will continue to remain anonymous.
Unterberg, 76, is a photographer living and working in New York City. She has had numerous solo shows in New York and across the United States, including a career retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Her work is included in major museum collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, and the Jewish Museum. She has had numerous artist residencies and is currently finishing a five-year tenure as co-chair of Yaddo’s board.

“I founded Anonymous Was A Woman to fill a void that I witnessed personally: support for women artists in the middle stages of their careers,” said Unterberg. “I remained anonymous until now to keep the focus on the artists, their work, and the continued need for support of creativity, especially for women. However, I am eager to further expand the impact of Anonymous Was A Woman by advocating more vocally for our mission at a moment when there is heightened discussion about the vitality of women’s voices, as well as to share insight about what I have learned over the past two decades. I am immensely grateful to the past recipients and to our many notable nominators and panelists, and I am energized to continue our work in the coming years.”

Lauren Katzowitz Shenfield, the director of the program since its inception, spoke to the impact of the Award: “Over the past 22 years, we have seen the grants fuel both personal and artistic development for under-recognized artists—both ‘emerging’ and ‘established.’ The financial gift has allowed them to buy time, space, materials, and equipment, as well as provided important emotional support. Most significantly, recognition by other women in the arts provides an immeasurable ‘boost,’ they say, as well as greater recognition.”

**Anonymous Was A Woman**

Anonymous Was A Woman is an unrestricted grant of $25,000 that enables women artists over 40 years of age and at a significant juncture in their lives or careers, to continue to grow and pursue their work. The Award is given to ten artists a year in recognition of an artist’s accomplishments, artistic growth, originality, and potential. It is not need-based. The Award is by nomination only. The name of the grant program, Anonymous Was A Woman, refers to a line in Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”. As the name implies, nominators and those associated with the program have, until this point, been unnamed.

Artist Susan Unterberg created the Award in 1996, partly in response to the decision of the National Endowment for the Arts to cease support of individual artists. Each year, an outstanding group of distinguished women—art historians, curators, writers, and previous winners from across the country—serve as nominators. To date, over 600 notable women have participated as nominators and panelists, and the Award has been given to 220 artists.

For more information on Anonymous Was A Woman, please visit [anonymouswasawoman.org](http://anonymouswasawoman.org).

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**Anonymous Was A Woman – Past Award Winners**

_In alphabetical order_

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Elizabeth LeCompte, 2010
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Martha Rosler, 2006
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Christy Rupp, 2008
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Connie Samaras, 2002
Victoria Sambunaris, 2010
Lisa Sanditz, 2015
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Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 2001
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