



Assessing the Impact of Artistic Activism

The Problem

Several years ago we had the good fortune to ask the renowned activist artist Hans Haacke a question:

How can you know when what you've done works?

He thought for a moment, and then replied,

I've been asked that question many times, and that question requires one to go around it before one really avoids it.

Haacke's response was meant to be humorous, but beneath it lay a serious problem: a general aversion to conceptualizing the relationship between art, activism and social change. To be fair, on the spectrum of artistic activism Haacke's place is more toward the pole of the artist, and thus his refusal to be pinned down by such a question merely conforms to the modern tradition that valorizes art's autonomy from society. Yet, even as we slide down the scale from expressive artist to the more instrumental activist, the answer to the questions of how artistic activism works to bring about social change and how to assess that impact remains elusive.¹

This is a shaky foundation upon which to construct a rapidly growing field. Art schools have devoted whole programs to the practice of arts and activism. Since Portland State University launched the first of such programs, Art & Social Practice in 2007, the School of Visual Arts in New York has added a department of Art Practice; CalArts: Social Practice & Public Forms; and Queens College: Art & Social Action. New York University has *two* graduate programs devoted to the intersection of arts and activism: Arts Politics in its performing arts school, and Art, Education and Community Practice in its school of education and fine arts. Regardless of program and department, university courses on arts and politics abound. In the Fall of 2010 alone, NYU offered over *twenty* courses, across four schools and colleges, exploring the interconnections between arts, politics and social activism. This academic interest has prompted a slew of recent books on arts and activism, with a cursory search on Amazon.com under "art and activism" returning a staggering 1,345 results.

Museums curate entire exhibitions around the practice. In recent years, in New York City alone, the Brooklyn Museum staged their monumental *AgitProp* show, the Whitney Museum, offered up *An Incomplete History Of Protest*, and the Museum of the City of New York hosted *AIDS at Home, Art and Everyday Activism*. Over the past decade, the Queens Museum has centered their curatorial and educational mission around socially engaged arts, while Creative Time, the

¹ "Artistic Activism," a term first popularized in scholarship by Chantal Mouffe and in the field by the Center for Artistic Activism, goes by many names: political art, creative activism, activist art, activism socially engaged arts, social practice arts, community based arts, artivism, arte útil, etc., each with slightly different emphases, and a different place on the art/activism spectrum. What unites them all is the mobilization of both affect and effect.

ambitious NYC-based arts institution, organizes yearly “summits” which bring together artistic activists from around the world. Around the world, from the *Disobedient Objects* show at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to *The Art of Disruptions* at Iziko South African National Gallery, arts and activism has become an integral part of the arts scene. No global Biennale is complete these days without its “social interventions” and the requisite controversy surrounding the place of activism in the art world.

More important than academic and artistic institutions, however, is the attention turned to the artistic activism by NGOs and philanthropic funders. Large organizations like the Open Society Foundations have created new programs like the Arts Exchange to integrate arts into all levels of their social programming, and smaller foundations like A Blade of Grass, Compton, Rauschenberg, Surdna, et al. have made the support of arts and activism central to their mission. Research groups like Americans for the Art’s Animating Democracy, and The Culture Group produce reports and user guides for a range of actors in the field. Training institutes like the Center for Artistic Activism, Beautiful Trouble, The Yes Labs, Intelligent Mischief, Center for Story-Based Strategies, Backbone Campaign, to list just a few US examples, work with activists who aspire to create more like artists and artists who would like to strategize more like activists. But probably most critical of all is the attention paid to the practice by activists themselves. It is now common in global activist NGOs like Greenpeace to local grassroots groups working on immigration reform such as the New Sanctuary Coalition in NYC to develop “creative strategies” alongside more traditional legal, electoral and mobilization approaches.

This recent surge in interest in artistic activism makes sense. Today, we live in a highly mediated world where the political topography is characterized by signs and symbols, stories and spectacles. If the first rule of guerilla warfare is to “know your terrain and use it to your advantage,” the savvy activist has learned that drawing from the arts is an effective way to wage successful battles on this cultural landscape. Our current “post-truth” environment also provides fertile ground for artistic activism. Even for those committed to telling the truth, it has become clear that the simple presentation of facts falls upon deaf ears, and if facts are to be heard and heeded they need to be made into engaging stories and compelling images that capture attention and resonate with ways people make sense of their world.

For all its current relevance, even a cursory look back into history reminds us that activism has always employed “creative strategies.” In the US, we might think of the Boston Tea Party as a performative spectacle used to draw attention to the unfair taxes levied by the British colonial power. Or consider the staged bus boycotts, sit-ins, and desegregation protests of the Civil Rights Movement that were used to expose the brutality and violence of white supremacy and compose into a capturable, replicable and memorable images. Or the AIDS action group ACT-UP who “queered” the visual language of the dominant commercial culture through their flamboyant uses of graphics and images. Reaching even further back, and casting our gaze wider, we might imagine the spectacles of Moses, the prefigurative performances of Jesus, or the poetry of the Prophet Mohammed as artistic activist strategies to capture attention and change hearts and minds. One might plausibly argue that all successful activism has included artistic activism.

The rich history and contemporary importance of arts and activism, makes it all the more important to address the issue of the impact of this practice. The aim of artistic activism is,

simply stated, social change. There may be many definitions of what constitutes social change, and rightly so, but if the goal of artistic activism is not social change then it loses its *raison d'être*. Without a serious consideration of impact, artistic activism is a practice in bad faith, and “activism” is reduced to an empty label. Worse, it is a lost opportunity. Creative tactics and strategies can, and do, work to bring about social change. Asking how this is done and assessing its impact so that it can be done better is merely taking the promise of artistic activism seriously.

Important steps have already been made. As mentioned above, there has been an outpouring of interest in, and writing on, arts and activism in recent years. A great deal of it, however, has been focussed either on the *theoretical*: a broad view of how artistic activism might, or should, work, or on the *tactical*: a narrow focus on the individual artwork created or the action taken. What seems to be largely missing is a vital discussion of actual outcomes of the practice. This is a critical omission, for as long as artistic activism remains a theoretical abstraction, and the relationship between tactics and outcomes are not understood, our conception of artistic activism will be akin to the practice of magic.

We mean this literally. Magical thinking is characterized by a lack of knowledge, or even concern, of the relationship between cause and effect. One casts a spell and, poof, something happens: an unfaithful lover falls horribly ill, or a new one is found. Science, on the other hand, demands causality: a link between the action and the effect. (It's true that magic sometimes *appears* to work: spells make lovers appear, or fall ill, but they work only because people believe they will – belief being the causal link.) In order for artistic activism to be anything more than magical thinking, we need to explore *how it works* and then come up with some criteria for assessment, that is: *how do we know it has worked?*

None of this is to say that we can, or should, create a science of artistic activism. The questions of “how it works” and “how do we know” immediately brings up the thornier question of: *what do we even mean by “working” in the context of the marriage of arts and activism?* There will always be magic in the practice. There will always be unintended consequences and unexplainable results, and actions guided by more feeling and hunch, than rational considerations and reasoned plans. This is often the case in even the the most rigorous of scientific endeavors, and it is essential to any artistic practice. Understanding the forces at play may not allow us to predict exactly what will happen, but it helps us make sure that *something* happens, and then, once we've determined what has happened, *refocus* our efforts. Without some basic understanding of impact and criteria of assessment there is little reason for funders to fund this work and for political actors to take it seriously.

At the heart of this exploration are three sets of concerns. The first is a Theory of Change. Upon what theory, or theories, of change is artistic activism based? The second set of concerns have to do with Intention and Expectation. How do practitioners think their practice works? And what do artistic activists hope to have happen once they've done their intervention? The final concern has to do with Assessment, that is, what actually does happen as the result of an artistic activist intervention, how do we know, and can it be measured?

We will be approaching these questions from two perspectives: top-down and bottom-up. From “the top” we will be surveying several sets of literature: critical theories on the relationship between arts and social change, studies on assessment from other fields concerned with creative

impact such as social marketing and documentary film, and reports produced by or for arts and activist organizations. Yet as important as such theories and studies are, we believe strongly that critical knowledge is also generated from the bottom up. Artistic activists, themselves, act upon implicit and explicit ideas of what works and what doesn't. In this way they are constantly creating, and reflecting upon, theories of change and methodologies of assessment. There is a great deal to learn here.

From "the bottom" we will be drawing on primary research we have undertaken ourselves: fifty-four in-depth interviews conducted with fifty-seven experienced artistic activists over the course of eight years. Of these, ten individuals interviewed are "field leaders," people who, in addition to being practitioners, have some institutional standing, such as running centers and training institutes devoted explicitly to artistic activism. The remaining practitioners run the gamut from the more expressive to the more instrumental, from those who identify primarily as artists, to those who see themselves as activist, to the majority who see themselves somewhere in between and feel uncomfortable with any labels at all. Most of the individuals we have interviewed are from the United States, with a smattering from Canada and Europe: Germany, Spain, and Ireland. Some of the artistic activists we have interviewed are world famous, others are less so. This sample is not representative, nor is it in any way scientific, but we do think it provides a valid indication of thought(s) in the field. While our primary interest here is assessing the impact of artistic activism, and those people and practices who see the arts as expressive means to an instrumental end, we acknowledge that the boundaries of artistic activism are blurry and we consciously cast our net wide. A focus on the practitioners, no matter how we might identify them or they might identify themselves, is crucial. If we are to develop a theory of change and an approach of assessment that is useful to the field, we need to start with the practice as it is already occurring and being theorized -- or not -- by the people doing the work. Furthermore, if the recommendations of this report are to be accepted and employed by artistic activists it is absolutely essential to know what they think about their practice and how they feel about assessment.

This report will begin with a discussion of theories of social change, from the abstract and theoretical to the applied and specific, in an attempt to address the question of how change happens. From here we look at how theorists have thought about how art impacts society and brings about social change, and how artistic activists imagine their practice working in this regard. Finally, we consider models of assessment, both theoretical and applied, opening with a consideration of how impact has been considered and measured by researchers, and then by practitioners of artistic activists themselves. With this base of knowledge we turn to challenges the field faces in both conceptualizing social change and identifying and assessing the markers of this change. Finally, we conclude with practical recommendations: what sort of methodology might be applicable to aid artistic activists, and the institutions that support them, in assessing artistic activism and its impact.

We are wary of the risk of becoming a part of an evaluation society that has already run amok, and losing sight of those things we can never measure by concentrating solely on those things we can. Yet, we believe there is a productive space between the magic of creation and the science of assessment. The purpose of this report is to point toward that place. Our goal here is not to define a singular theory of social change to follow, nor to define *the* definitive set of metrics for assessment that can be handed down and applied mechanically across a range of practices.

Rather it is to develop a flexible but robust methodology that can be used as a tool by practitioners and their supporters to see more clearly what it is they are doing and supporting, reflect upon their practices more productively, and do with greater social impact.

Theories of Social Change

Underlying any practice aimed at having an impact is a theory of change. This theory of change can be small and personal. For instance, believing that exercising regularly will result in one losing weight. A theory of change can also be grand and social. Positing that each historical epoch contains within it contradictions that will inevitably lead to the overthrow of the given order and the creation of a new one is also a theory of change, in this case the Marxist theory of Dialectical Materialism. Big or small, what remains constant is a conception, fully conscious or not, that change happens and it happens for a reason.

There are multiple theories of social change, stretching back for millennia, but at the risk of oversimplification, they tend fall into two camps: *natural* theories and *social* theories. Natural theories suggest that there are “natural” forces which guide social development: this movement can be *evolutionary*, progressing linearly toward an ultimate goal; *devolutionary*: a story of decline and fall; *cyclical*: a never ending cycle of progress and decline; and *equilibril*: that societies naturally seek some sort of equilibrium and any action is met by a counter-action resulting in a sort of dynamic stability. Social theories, on the other hand, stress the influence of human agency in bringing about social change; it is people who make history.

Given that both arts and activism are decidedly human interventions, it is theories of social change with which we need to be concerned. Again, at the risk of oversimplification, there are two primary schools of thought when it comes to theories of social change: *idealist* and *materialist*. An idealist theory of social change contends that humans act to bring about social change because they develop an *idea* of what is wrong with society as it is, an *idea* of what a better society might look like, and an *idea* of what must be done to bring it about. Religion is probably the clearest exposition of this ideal of social change. While God may be the creator of all that exists, God’s plan for action is transmitted through a set of ideas. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” begins the Christian Gospel of John (John 1:1). It is then the role of prophets and priests to deliver these ideas to the people, and once these ideas achieve sufficient popularity a new world is born (or an old world is reinforced). As we pass from a religious age to an one ostensibly more secular, prophets are replaced by rulers and revolutionaries, professors and policy wonks, yet the idea that ideas create change remains constant.

A materialist notion of social change flips this theory on its head. Instead of ideas prompting people, it is the material conditions in which people find themselves and to which they respond that move them toward action and change. Probably the best known proponent of this theory is Karl Marx. “The first historical act...is the production of material life itself,” Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology* (156). It is through an interaction with, first, a natural material environment and, then, human-built conditions like institutions, laws, policies, and other social, political and economic structures, that humans develop the ability, and the desire, to bring about social change. From a materialist perspective, the world-changing ideas of priests and prophets are to be explained by looking at the division of labor in a society that would allow for a leisure

class of priestly intellectuals, and the conditions and relations of production that might prompt a radical reaction by these prophets.

These models of social change are, of course, what social scientists call “ideal types”: artificial categories which allow us to cleanly separate and analyze the messiness of the real world. In the mess of life, however, idealists acknowledge the power of the material. The value of ideas, ultimately, is the power these ideas contain to transform material reality (e.g. create heaven on earth). And even the staunchest materialist believes that humans don’t merely react to material conditions, they *interact* with material conditions, and this is a conscious and creative activity. As Marx, himself, writes in *Capital*: “[W]hat distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.” (344)

This idealist/materialist distinction, however, is not entirely an academic exercise. What is at stake for those of us interested in bringing about social change is a theory of how and where to apply our efforts to have the maximum impact. If one holds to a materialist theory of social change then the point of intervention is at the level of material conditions. Even if one acknowledges the importance of ideas, a Materialist believes that it is material environment which shape consciousness, thus to change ideas one must change these conditions first. An Idealist, on the other hand, would emphasize the production and dissemination of ideas, for it is only through a changed consciousness that people will have the desire and ability to transform the material conditions that surround them.

Artistic Activism, a form of activism which uses art forms as its medium of expression and action, seems to conform readily to an idealist theory of social change. Art, after all is said and done, is the communication of ideas, ideals and perspectives. It is Culture: a symbolic representation or expression, that influences culture, the system of meanings and ideals through which we make sense of our lives (Hall, et al.). Following this logic, exposure to or participation in some sort of artistic intervention will hopefully result in a shift in individual and, cumulatively, social consciousness. This shift in consciousness, in turn, will lead to a change in behavior, which will eventually lead to a transformation of institutions, laws, policies, practices and other social, political, and economic structures. In brief: *ideas shape material reality*, and cultural shifts can result in structural transformation.

All this seems rather straightforward, but the equation of the arts as simply the production and dissemination of ideas is too simplistic. We don’t just say that art makes us *think*, we say art makes us *feel*. Art’s effect on us is more than purely cognitive...art *moves* us.

Effect, Affect and *Æffect*

The words “effect” and “affect” are sometimes used interchangeably but their meaning differs subtly, and critically. *Effect*, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, is to “To bring about (an event, a result); to accomplish (an intention, a desire).” To have an effect, then, is to cause a demonstrable, often physical and material, change. *Affect*, the same source informs, is to “To have an effect on the mind or feelings of (a person); to impress or influence emotionally; to move, touch.” As such, to generate affect is to stimulate feelings, or create an emotional state in a person or group of people.

When we think of activism we often think in terms of its *effect*. This makes sense. Activism, as the name implies, is the activity of challenging and changing power relations. There are many ways of being an activist, but the common element is an activity targeted toward a discernible end: mobilizing a population, changing a policy, or overthrowing a dictator. Simply, the goal of activism is to generate an *effect*.

Affect, however, is a term we usually use when speaking of the arts. Art tends not to have such an instrumental use. It is hard to say what art is for or against; its value often lies in showing us new perspectives and new ways to see our world. Its impact is often subtle and hard to measure, and confusing or contradictory messages can be layered into the work. Indeed, good art always contains a surplus of meaning: something we can't quite describe or put our finger on, but has an impact upon us nonetheless. Its goal, if we can even use that word, is to stimulate a feeling, spur us emotionally, or alter our perception. Again, art *moves us*.

Stripped down to essentials the relationships might look like this:

Activism > Effect

Art > Affect

At first glance these aims seem at odds with one another. Activism moves the material world, while Art moves the heart, body and soul. The scope of the former is social change, while the latter is individual impression. But effect and affect are often complementary.

The social is not some mere abstraction: society is composed of people, and change doesn't just happen: it happens because people make change. As such, the individual and the social are intertwined. This is obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is *why* people make change (or prefer stasis). Classical democratic and economic theory would have us believe that people enact change because they have been "enlightened" to do so through a process of reasoned deliberations and rational choices. As any seasoned activist can tell you, people don't just soberly decide to change their mind and act accordingly, they are moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli, be it love, hate, fear, hope, or compassion (Ganz). And, as recent developments in cognitive science suggest, we make sense of our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts, and more through stories and symbols and metaphors that allow us to "make sense" of the information we receive (Lakoff). As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, effect and affect are intertwined. We might think of this as: *Affective Effect*, or *Effective Affect*. Or we can simplify both with a new term: *Æffect*.

Keeping the æffective dimension of artistic activism in mind reminds us that thinking about theories of social change needn't be an either/or proposition. Changes in ideas *and* material conditions are necessary in order for social change to happen, and artistic activism, if it is to be *affective*, must work on both levels.

Theories of Change in the Field(s).

Since relatively little has been written on the impact of artistic activism, per se, it is helpful to look at how other fields that intersect with artistic activism have thought about how social change happens. It is only, however, in rare cases that a "Theory of Social Change" is articulated, more common are assumptions made by practitioners and researchers in these fields

that give hints at what sort of theory they are using when thinking about the impact of their practice.

Social Movements

As one might guess, it is the activities of social movements that lie at the heart of this field's theory of social change. Social change happens when individuals act collectively towards a certain end. What causes groups to come together to bring about change, and what makes them effective or not, is contested terrain however. Broadly speaking there are three theories to explain why social movements occur and have impact. The first is Political Opportunity, which holds that social movements are created when there are historical crises and openings. A crisis in the economic order, like the worldwide depression of the 1930s in which the capitalist system was called into question and social movements -- labor, communist, and fascist -- arose, is one example of political opportunity. Wars that are perceived as unwinnable or unjust, or ruling regimes that have lost legitimacy, are others. At these historical junctures, people who might otherwise be passive feel a need and see an opening to press for change. The second theory is Resource Mobilization. According to this hypothesis, social movements form and become effective when people have access to resources: money, institutions, knowledge, media, and are mobilized to leverage these resources. People are abused and angry all the time, but social movements form when people have the tools at their disposal to make a difference. The third theory is Collective Identity. This theory holds that movements form when people have developed a collective understanding of themselves, the world around them, and their ability to act within that world. In brief, they come to believe in their agency and see themselves and their interests collectively. Of course, none of these theories are exclusionary, and change tends to happen when all three are in operation: historical crises happen, people develop a collective identity, and they have access to material and organizational resources to make their action effective.

Social Marketing

Social Marketing (not to be confused with social media marketing) is a subsection of marketing which aims at "social" change -- lower rates of smoking, increased use of seatbelts, and other effects that make for a healthier society -- through marketing initiatives like ad campaigns, public service announcements, educational programs, etc. The "social" in Social Marketing, however, needs to be qualified. While the emphasis is on creating a better society, social marketing -- like all marketing -- takes aim at the individual. Change happens, it is implicitly theorized, when individuals think, feel, and then act differently. The emphasis on *acting* is key, for behavioral change is always the final objective for this field. The introduction of new ideas or new perspectives is important, but these ideas must lead to action on the part of individuals for change to occur. As such, many of the tools used by social marketers are intended to move people from perceptual awareness of an issue to habitualized action that results in a different behavior. In other words, for social marketing the ideal must be tied to the material in order for change to happen.

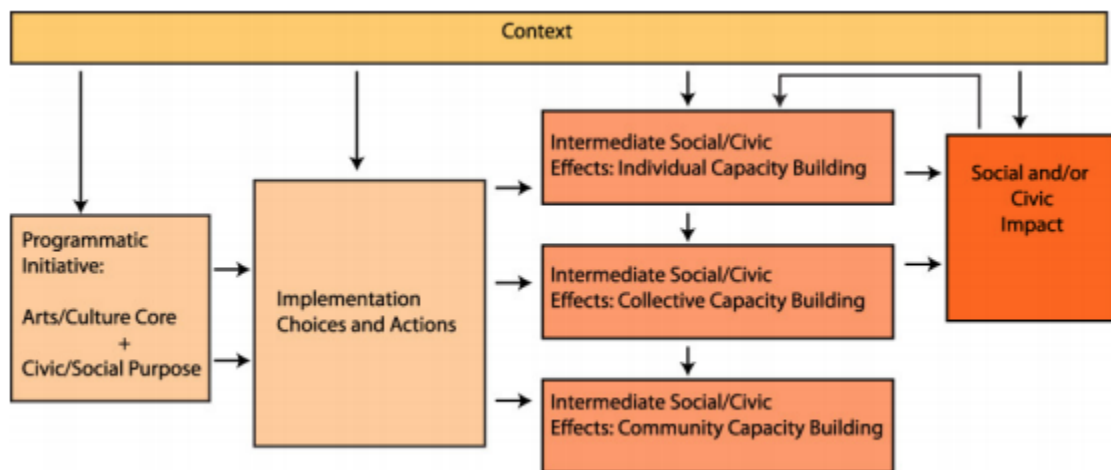
Media Activism: Film, Video and TV.

The field of media activism, most fully developed in the use of film, video and television, presupposes that access to information, empathic identification with that information, and the democratization of the production of new information, are necessary for social change. While documentary film emphasizes the power of revealing and knowing, and narrative film stress the

power of empathy and the ability “to transport the viewer” to a place of emotional identification with another’s situation, in both cases media “shapes perceptions and reshapes narratives,” transforming people’s ideas (and feelings) about the world and their relationship to it, ideally leading them to take action to bring about change (AndACTION 4). In recent years, however, people in the field of media activism have realized that transformation in consciousness may not be enough. Recognizing the inherent passivity of an audience and the problem this poses for any theory of change, activist filmmakers, for example, have developed ways to turn spectators into actors. Through conversations, talk-backs and linked activities after showings, and/or providing the tools and skills of media creation so that non-professionals can tell their own stories and reveal their own truths, media activism has made a turn from the creation of media to the facilitation of others’ media creations.

Activist Art

Two organizations -- Animating Democracy and A Blade of Grass -- lead the field in thinking about the impact of expressive arts as a form of social change activism. While never publicly advocating for a specific theory of change, Animating Democracy, a long-term project of the large arts advocacy organization, Americans for the Arts, suggests a “Conceptual Framework” that covers close ground. This framework, articulated in in a briefing paper for an internal working group, begins with an “Arts/Culture Core” initiative created for “Civic/Social Purpose,” in other words: an idea of an artistic activist project. The next stage is the implementation of this project within a social setting. Once this has occurred, and depending upon a myriad of factors, this intervention can lead to “Intermediate Social/Civic Effects” such as Individual, Collective or Community “capacity building.” This capacity building, in turn, leads to “Social and/or Civic Impact.” (Dwyer, Korza, Bacon, 3-4)



(Christine Dwyer, Pam Korza, and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, 2008)

At first glance this model adheres to an idealistic theory of social change: one intervenes by introducing new ideas – the Arts/Culture Core – and change is bound to happen. The intervening step of “capacity building,” however, complicates this simplistic model in a productive way. Capacity can be just ideological: new ideas and perspectives and empathetic understandings.

However, as it is defined by Animating Democracy, “building capacity” also includes new social relationships and networks, active engagement in community efforts and other more material effects. As such, ideas don’t stand alone, they are operationalized through social relationships and actions.

A Blade Of Grass, a non-profit funding organization devoted to the support of art activists and the development of the field, emphasizes the importance of these social relationships and actions that art can facilitate. In evaluations of their artist fellows, ABOG makes it clear that while ideas/expressions matter, it is the social (and artistic) process by which these ideas are generated, discussed, reflected upon, and enacted that leads to social change. In other words, art matters, not as repositories of new ideas, but as “catalysts” for developing new sorts of social relationships, and from these relationships change happens. As Jan Cohen Cruz, an evaluator for ABOG writes, what is of interest is “art that aspires to *affect*, rather than be about, the social issue it addresses.” (1)

Cultural Organizing

Like Activist Art, the focus of Cultural Organizing is on individuals who identify on the “artist” side of the spectrum, yet its aim is to build bridges between these artists and more instrumental activists. Perhaps because of this instrumental concern, The Culture Group, an influential collective of activist artists and researchers, has developed a fairly explicit theory of change. In their report, *Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy*, they describe change as a “wave” that builds over time and periodically crashes upon the shore; a process that builds up gradually then manifests itself dramatically in an event. For The Culture Group, culture is the larger ocean within which these events take place and these processes unfold, and Culture, expressed as art, is one of the things that makes up this cultural ocean. As they write, “culture is both the *agent* of change and the *object* of change” (5). Later in the same report they elucidate this theory of change, positing that:

Culture is the field on which change occurs. Public sentiment is gathered and swayed through cultural means. Political change is the lagging indicator demonstrating that cultural change has already arrived at new coordinates. By forming integrated partnerships with artists and cultural figures, the progressive movement can access the cultural waves that capture and persuade public hearts and minds, and can lay the foundation for systemic, enduring change. (49)

Michael Shank, in one of the first academic articles to explore the strategic use of arts by activists, develops this idea of art’s impact on the overall culture. All politics, he argues, is based upon “socially conditioned rationalities,” basic frameworks relied upon for making sense of our world. The common political mistake, he argues, is to understand these “rationalities” as entirely rational, that is as an entirely cognitive process. Politics -- and political change -- Shank argues, works on two registers: the cognitive and the emotional. It is latter which provides an opening for the use of art, for “art activists can use the languages of art to access emotional pathways” (539) thereby tapping into “art’s capacity to condition certain behaviors or rationalities” (535). In other words, to bring about social change activists must be able to speak to people’s *hearts* as well as minds...and art provides the means to do this.

Theories of Change in Practice

The ideas of theorists and researchers are well and good, but our concern here is less with theory and more with practice. What do artistic activists think about “Theory of Change?” The brief answer: not much. Amongst the practitioners we interviewed there was no standardized thinking about a theory of change and, almost without exception, they did not use the term. Instead, when asked if their work followed *a* theory of change, participants expressed a range of thoughts and ideas about *their* own practices and assumptions. By listening to these particular examples, however, we can see some general theories of how artistic activists believe change happens and the role of artistic activism in that change.

Shifting Culture

As artistic *activists*, it was not surprising that most believed that people have an impact on social change, as *artistic activists* it was no shock to hear a basic idealist framework being used to explain how change occurs, and as *artistic activists* it was predictable that people felt that arts and culture were a powerful means through which to bring about change. Culture, as a system of ideas, beliefs and norms, was generally understood to be a powerful force in society, whether propping up the system as it was, offering a vantage point with which to critique the status quo, or providing a framework for an alternative society.

Terry Marshall, co-founder of the artistic activist group Intelligent Mischief, deftly articulates how and why their mission is rooted in an understanding of the role that culture plays in social change:

[T]he thing we try to get at is how do we shift culture...culture shifting is the most valuable and important thing [for] socially transforming the world. The culture is the glue between everything else.

The importance of culture as what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once described as “webs of significance” that allow people to make meaning, is underscored by Alfredo Jaar, a world renowned art activist. “I create models of thinking, models of thinking the world,” he says. Alfredo then uses his art to disseminate these “models” with the hope of people applying them in transforming the world. As he told us: “hopefully these models of thinking, if other people and enough people apply them, confronting certain situations, the world will change.”

Ideas matter to artistic activists, as they are understood as the building block of cultural meanings. “It depends on what ideas you have. And what ideas you change. And what moment you change them in,” says Dread Scott, whose work was once denounced on the floor of the US Congress,

Look at the ideas Adolf Hitler had. He happened to, at the right time, get ideas to the right people and create a monstrous society that slaughtered 20 million. That was based on ideas. Those ideas resonated.

Art and aesthetics are useful in the creation and dissemination of ideas. Turning to early Soviet Art, whose politics he has considerably more sympathy, Dread explains,

They were trying to make a new aesthetic with new ideas. Making a whole new culture, a whole new society, a whole new world. And so that’s kind of how I think the art works.

Coco Fusco, also a well known art activist, takes up the refrain, articulating why culture is as important as political structures in creating change, or maintaining the status quo:

[T]o have an understanding of politics that is limited to organized electoral politics is not to understand how political formations work in the present. I think politicians understand that very well. That’s why religious organizations are so important to politicians. And

why the Nazis were so interested in film and radio. Because they understand there's a way in which culture, and particularly the culture of the image, works on people that direct political discourse doesn't.

While all artistic activists we talked to understand a "culture shift" to be the way to bring about social change, some set their sights smaller and are more instrumental in their efforts, using an intervention to move the needle on public opinion or pressure political and corporate institutions and elites. As Jacques Servin, one of the founders of the Yes Men, told us,

[I]t's very simple. I mean we live in democracies. The way to change is through mass attention to things. One avenue to that is through the mainstream media. So we basically hop on issues that have a certain momentum and we just try to add some more attention to it.

Other artistic activists saw the best chances of shifting culture as coming through the dominant culture itself, in using its languages and exploiting its openings. "I think we should put more emphasis on effecting popular culture as activists, as militants," says Paolo Pedercini, who has created video games that demonstrate the systemic brutality of capitalist profit motive. He contends that,

It's relatively easy to affect the culture in general, and it's very also easy to assess how certain ideas just penetrate the mainstream. This kind of superstructure is more flexible, especially in late capitalism where everyone has a niche, there is space for everyone or room for everybody.

Avram Finkelstein, who designed ACT-UP's famous SILENCE=DEATH pink triangle poster, speaks of "utiliz[ing] the language of capitalism as a sleight-of-hand to create the illusion that we were more organized than we were." And Gran Fury, the arts and propaganda wing of ACT-UP, frequently drew upon mainstream commercial esthetics and "queered" them for alternate ideologies, once famously pirating a Benetton advertisement and changing it to display homosexual couples kissing along with the tagline "Kissing Doesn't Kill. Greed and Indifference Do."

No matter what tactics are used in the short term, there's an understanding that shifting culture is a long term strategy that reaches deep into the way people make meaning in their lives. "We're mostly putting out fires," Diana Arce, a Berlin-based African American artistic activist explains, but the change has to come from socialization. It's the way that people are being taught to interact with other people. I don't think it's something that's going to come quickly; I think it's a generational issue. If we do enough right things now and teach these younger generations of people what's up, get them on board early, then a generation or two from now, something can happen.

In other words, change doesn't happen simply, and immediately, with the introduction of new ideas, but only when those ideas become deeply embedded in the culture of a people. Art is an ideal means to do this. Andrew Boyd, the creator of *Billionaires for Bush* and, more recently, *Beautiful Trouble*, recalls "a quote... from one of the Irish revolutionaries: 'The movement isn't really real until the people take it up in song.' This is how people take it into their hearts."

Affective Change

"People tak[ing] it into their hearts," is how artistic activists understand social change. Ideas matter, but it is not the rational, cognitive understanding of ideas that changes society, instead it

is ideas felt and experienced. Social change is more a matter of hearts than minds, and artistic activism is a strategy of *affective* change. Discussing his Rwanda Project, a critically acclaimed piece that grappled with the horror of the Rwandan massacre, Alfredo Jarr differentiated between ideas conveyed as information and ideas as art,

I wanted to inform with poetry, with art. It wasn't just information like journalistic information. Journalism had failed to inform us, so I was not going to replace journalism. But I wanted to inform, and I wanted to [do this] in a way recuperate some of the humanity we had lost by letting this happen without reacting.

Extending Jarr's distinction between ideas you can know and culture you can feel, Vanessa Carr, currently a successful documentary filmmaker but formerly of the San Francisco Print Collective, a group of artists who produce visual material in service to social movements, told us that "people are so saturated with things like letters to the editor and there is just information overload in a lot of ways." The goal for her is to bypass people's minds and reach them some other way. Art can do this:

[A]rt can draw people's attention in a way-- even someone who's already sort of tuned out or checked off -- you know, "I don't have time for this" or "I'm too busy" or "I already know about this"... there is something about the aesthetic pathway of cognition or something that I feel like bypasses a lot of normal people's defenses in a way.

Underlying this tactical choice for Vanessa is a deeper understanding of what creates change. As she continues,

The basis for any action is really a feeling, and I think if you can inspire that feeling in someone, which I think often is not necessarily a fully reasoned thing, someone might be inspired to act on a feeling even if they're not fully sure...

In brief: ideas move people to action when they are *felt*, not just understood.

Intimate Connections

This understanding of the affective dimension of social change perhaps explains why a number of people we interviewed discussed change – and their contribution to it – on a personal and intimate scale. Frederick Hewson, whose artistic activist work has been concerned with the economic interconnections and injustices of the flower industry, staged an action on International Women's Day in which he gave out roses with information about where the flowers came from and the labor conditions of the people that grew them. Nothing new here: the dissemination of ideas in the form of facts. But Frederick also attached poems and excerpts from the voices of the flower farmers, because, as he believed,

There's something very intimate and vulnerable about a poetic statement that you know is coming from someone that wrote it just for you as a consumer. That can be quite moving.

Eve Mosher, an environmental artistic activist, believes that intimate conversations might have the ability to move people in such a way that other forms of dissemination of ideas do not. As she explains

I started looking around at the work I was doing, and the environmental organizations that I was working with, and noticed we were sort of talking to the same people over and over again. Or the organizations were going out and giving lectures to people. I felt we needed to really have conversations and the most powerful way to make change happen was in a one on one conversation. So the [High Water Line] project idea was to go out and to do something that would spark a conversation.

Eve's action was visually stimulating. To draw attention to the future effects of climate change she walked the streets and sidewalks of New York City painting a bold line on the pavement indicating where the shore line will be with continued global warming. And she passed out factual information, in the form of researched pamphlets on the climate crises. But it was through one on one conversations that Eve felt she really reached people.

When we asked Joe Delappe, an activist artist whose interventions have taken place within the space of online, multiplayer, first-person shooter video games, about how he sees social change happening, he told us that "if you can get inside someone's head, and make the synapses shift for a second, then there's something really valuable to that." When we asked him to recall a moment when this might have happened with his own work, he told us the story of,

a recent exhibition of *Dead-in-Iraq* that had the projected imagery of the names [of US soldiers killed in the Iraq War] typing in and the reactions of the other players [in *America's Army*, a US Army sponsored video game] at a gallery in Santa Cruz. The director told me that at the opening a student ran from the gallery weeping, and she followed after him. She tried talking a little bit. And he said well, he was just, he was crying uncontrollably, and saying "I don't know why I'm so upset." And he said basically that his friends play games all the time and he'd never made any connection between real deaths and this sort of virtual experience. And that he was never going to play them again.

It was only one individual, committing to one small action, but for DeLappe this is where change begins.

"Change does not come very easy. And everyone who is in art and activism understands that," states Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-born art activist whose work often deals with the mass inhumanity of war. The solution for Bilal is to scale down and focus on touching individuals:

I'm not going there and saying, "okay I wanted to change people's lives and how they behave." I am hoping just to touch one person's life. And that person might touch another person.

Again stressing the intimate and personal, Joey Juschka, a transgender activist artist from Berlin muses,

[H]ow do you change the world? People think that you can't really do anything...But if one person sees a flyer on the street, and starts to think about an issue in a different way, then great - you changed something socially, even if the laws are still the same and the main industry is still the same.

"Everything I'm making is an attempt to change people's minds about things," fellow Berliner Diana Arce, explains, then qualifies "people" by explaining that,

I don't ever really think about the work that I make in the sense of trying to change the system as a whole, but it's about: How can you change the ideas of actual, individual people?

This emphasis on the affective and interpersonal connection leads to an intimate understanding of politics and what constitutes change. "I'm dealing with lowercase politics, between you and I and non-institutional dynamics," explains Red 76's Sam Gould, whose work often involves creating spaces and places of collective creativity. He continues:

Those are the things I'm interested in. Like politics doesn't end outside of, the like, capitol Rotunda, or outside of the oval office. It exists in the space between you and I.

Even Avram Finkelstein, whose artistic activist practice with ACT UP was deeply embedded in social movements targeting institutions of power, valorizes the power of individuals – this time as creators of culture -- in bringing about social change:

While communal responses, political responses, like ACT UP are incredibly valuable and noteworthy, there's also power in the individual voice. It was six gay men, who had no idea that they were surrounded by a community that was going to come into formation, who made this [Silence=Death] poster.

The celebration of the individual, affected by culture, as a changemaker is understandable. This is, after all, how artists have been largely taught to think of themselves, and all philosophy, as Friedrich Nietzsche reminds us, is autobiography. However, no matter how much artistic activists may talk about the power of reaching one individual or the magic of changing cultural frameworks, they are not as naïve as to believe that social change is one mind, or heart, away. Some of the artistic activists we interviewed, in fact, were quite critical of the emphasis on “consciousness raising” as a path to social change.

“It’s just way more complex than that,” insists Dara Greenwald, whose work animates radical histories, “because we have our consciousness raised about a lot of thing and it hasn’t changed the world.” Dara even wonders if critical ideas, by themselves, might actually retard social change:

[E]xpressing a critique is allowed in this particular society. And it’s allowed for a reason. Actually, I think... that it’s a release valve that allows for the system and status quo to maintain itself.

Even more “affective” engagement with critical ideas, it is feared, may not lead to social change. “The risk, the huge risk,” worries Paolo Pedercini, who designs video games to draw attention to social problems,

is to create a system, a software that has some kind of cathartic effect...I mean, okay, you’re, like, an activist, and you are changing things, and you play your game, and at the end, you are kind of relieved. “Oh, wow, that was easy!”...I mean, there is this danger effect to, like, make the people think or, well, give the illusion of empowerment.

Ideas to Action

Many of the artistic activists we interviewed, while stressing the importance of changing hearts (and minds) to bring about social change, mentioned a next step: the linkage between ideas and action. Andrea Polli, whose work imagines both real and speculative environmental solutions, began by telling us that, “I’ve tried to think about art as being effective in terms of changing the way people think.” But when pressed on what she meant by this, she clarified:

When I say “change the way you think,” it has to do with agency. It’s having the attitude that you can come up with new ideas and they can be implemented. Or they can at least be tried out. Changing people from taking a passive point of view to an active point of view.

The connection between ideas and action often remained a bit hazy, more a matter of faith than a theory of change. Nevertheless, several linkages were hinted at. For example, Gan Golan, an experienced artistic activist who has worked with a range of field defining organizations, including The Culture Group and Beautiful Trouble, drew our attention to “how meaning is motivating people to undertake these forms of action” like Black Lives Matter. Central to this

“meaning” is identity formation – the process through which people start to see themselves as agents of history, what social movement theorists call Collective Identity. “I think this notion of identity is really, really important, because these are invented identities,” Gan explains, referencing the role of culture in the labor movement:

If you look at the history of the labor movement, so much of the art and culture that accompanied it was about who we are as a labor movement and as a working class people. There was a class identity...It wasn't just about contract fights and negotiations and policy, it was about redefining who is “we” and who is the “they,” and creating that narrative, that story...that people were living the activism. [C]ultural organizing is nothing new.

What culture can do, then, is not only provide a different framework for making sense of the world, but also to understand one's agency within it.

In Gan's explanation of the role of culture in building identity as a political actor, however, there is another change-agent: the social movement. For as much as the “woke” individual is valorized amongst artistic activists, there is an awareness -- especially as one slides toward the activist side of the artistic/activist scale -- that collective efforts make social change. This social understanding of agency however, rubs against the modern tradition of artistic individualism. “There is this kind of the bizarre, romantic modernist throwback idea that art students have, and I see it in the classroom all the time,” Coco Fusco explains.

[T]hat you, as an individual, have to do something that effects millions of people. What kind of egotism does that speak about, right? The choice is not either “I as an individual change this” or do nothing about it. The choice is what can I do along with many others to keep on making it clear, publicly, that there's opposition to things that happen in the world. And that's a group effort, that's an ongoing thing. You see a little bit of result and then two steps forward one step back, two steps forward...that's how things happen.

Taking the idea that artistic activists working collectively is more effective than working alone a step further, some people we interviewed spoke of working collectively with other types of activists: seeing cultural change as part an overall strategy of change that might include political, economic, legal and other arenas. “I look at the cultural side of the movement as just one wing of the movement,” explains Larry Bogad, who trains traditional activists in the techniques of performance art.

You know, you have combined operations, in military terms. You can have air power and land power and sea power.” Culture *and* other strategies like legal, electoral, mass mobilization are *all* necessary for social change.

As Larry goes on to say, “A movement without a cultural aspect is not going to do so well, but the movement can't only be cultural workers. That's not enough.”

Beka Economopoulos, whose background is in activism, and her partner Jason Jones, who was trained in art schools, see one of their jobs as amplifying the culture already developed within social movements, “building off of what already exists rather than creating something new,” Jason says. Beka elaborates, explaining how they,

look at what's happening within movements. What are the songs, the stories, the means, the hashtags, the aesthetics, etc., that are being used, and how can we help to make that more legible and can teach us and signal a counter power?

For Igor Vamos, the other co-founder of the Yes Men, the role of artistic activists is to offer a critical component of an overall strategy for social change: “What we try to do is symbolic action in the service of social movements because we do think that social movements succeed.” To use language familiar to the social sciences: culture is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for social change. Mark Read, one of the founders of the Illuminator, a collective that creates and projects massive illuminated images in public places, often in service to social movements and social change organizations, deftly describes the role for culture, and artistic activists, in a larger struggle for social change:

I think what [we] are trying to do is changing or shifting the atmosphere in which more tangible political struggles or policies are in or take place. So that, we are not directly effecting policy, but we are trying to affect the conditions under which the discussion about policy take place.

Structures Matter

Along with social movements, there is an awareness that material organizations and institutions also have a role to play in furthering -- or retarding -- social change. Not only have Beka Economopoulos and Jason Jones created an alternative art space, Not An Alternative, but though The Natural History Museum, their most recent project, they have successfully applied pressure on mainstream museums to divest from corporations and individuals whose practices or views are inimical to science and art. Nato Thompson, the Artistic Director of Creative Time, also emphasize the importance of trying to shape institutions: “You know, it’s funny because I have kind of a materialist relationship to culture, which is to say I believe ideas are produced through physical spaces and structures.” He elaborates,

so, for example, the New York Public Library isn’t just an idea, it’s a place, and *Art Forum* magazine is both, it’s a physical object that’s distributed from a place; I look at those physical spaces and ...I look for clues in the way those structures are changing over time with the work I do to see if that’s having an impact.

Through the access and power he has within more mainstream cultural institutions, Nato sees his role as bringing artistic activism into these places and making them “legitimate forms of practice” in order to leverage the institutional power of dominant structures.

Nathan Santry, the art school trained director of Greenpeace’s famed Actions Team, also targets institutions. His strategy, however, is not to change the institution in order to change the culture, but to use culture in order to change the material practices of corporations. Changes in culture, in the form of public opinion, is one objective of the Actions Team, but they also use cultural tactics for structural effect: to slow down the internal workings of organizations. One particularly ingenious action involved having the actor William Shatner of Star Trek fame robo-call every employee at Hewlett Packard, asking them to ask their bosses why their company had reneged on an environmental deal. The immediate objective was to occupy employee work time as they asked one another if it was really William Shatner calling and disrupt morale as they wondered why their company had backtracked on the environment. As Nathan explains,

If you can tie up middle management anywhere, you kind of got people by the short and curlies, right? Cause they can’t, the world doesn’t work without middle managers spending their time doing something.

The Yes Men, who have put their talents in the service of Greenpeace in the past, are similarly invested in change at the tangible level. Not satisfied with changing ideas, or even behaviors,

they believe that social change happens when the end result is legal or structural change. “Let’s push for change,” Jacques Servin, says,

But not in a behavioral, like we should examine what we’re doing and do things differently kind of way. We should. But that’s not the path to change according to us. It’s through democracy. You’re actually taking action and writing laws.

Culture or structure? Awareness or action? Individuals or collectives? Hearts or minds? Amongst artistic activists there is no agreed upon Five Year Plan or Twelve Step Program to change. While there is no consensus amongst practitioners regarding a theory of change, there are general areas of agreement:

1. Humans create change
2. Culture, as a social system of meaning, must be changed to bring about social change
3. Culture, as an art form, can change culture
4. Culture works when it is felt, not just thought; affect is necessary for effect

Some artistic activists went further to argue that:

5. Cultural “awareness” is not enough and must be linked to action
6. Change is a collective endeavor
7. Social movements make change and culture is an integral part of social movements
8. Institutions, organizations, laws, and other tangible structures -- as well as cultural meanings -- must be changed for social change to happen

Perhaps because there is no consensus on a grand Artistic Activism Theory of Change, there is still quite a bit of mystery when it comes to explaining how social change happens. “[A] lot of it is quite mysterious,” Yes Man Jacques Servin admits, “Change happens, [and] some things happen in very unexpected ways that nobody predicts.”

How Art Works

Theories of Change provide a useful framework for understanding how artistic activism might bring about social change. Is it ideas that matter? Or is it material practices? Or, as we have seen above, a combination of the two, with the unique characteristics of the arts to intervene at a visceral human level and an emphasis on cultural engagement with and within movements and institutions. However, if we are to assess the real impact of artistic activism, we need to be more specific, more focussed, and look at the aims and objectives of the practices themselves. We need to step down a level and ask how art, and by extension artistic activism, works to make change.

From the beginnings of written history, the power of art has been recognized...and feared. In the Hebrew *Bible* God commands

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water underneath the earth.
(Exodus 20:4)

What to make of this strange instruction, important enough to be listed second of all God’s commandments? Like most Biblical passages, the meaning is elusive and has been debated for millennia, but when read along with relevant passages from Isaiah (40-41) and *The Quran* (Sura 21.51-66) we can infer that the authors of the Bible were concerned that the power of artistic representation challenged the ultimate creative power of God. In God’s understanding of things,

he is the subject and we are but objects. Human creativity – particularly any which might deign to represent God – reverses this relationship, making humans active subjects and God a mere object. To create, then, is to have the power of a God. Art is to be feared because it is a powerful expression of human agency, an action which can conjure up and define things of this world and beyond.

Judaism and Islam more or less honor this commandment against representation; Christianity -- with its paintings, frescoes, tapestries and stained glass windows, and its abundant imagery of saints and Christ, not to mention things of the earth and seas -- decidedly does not. One of the earliest Christian justifications for harnessing the power of art comes from St. John of Damascus, a Syrian monk living in the 7th and 8th centuries. St. John's theological defence of the image is complex, having to do in large part with the fact that God made Jesus as an image of himself and, just as we worship Christ, humans are free to worship images without the danger of being led astray from God. But slipped into this theological justification is a practical one: "images are the books of the illiterate" (13). St. John realizes that images are an effective way to convey ideas to the masses who can not read, and the proselytizing religion of Christianity can use such arts to change hearts, minds... and souls.

The power of art to impact hearts, minds and souls was recognized by the Ancient Greeks as well. Plato famously devoted a chapter in *The Republic* to explaining why art should be banished from his ideal society. Plato's objections to art are many, but his criticisms culminate in his fear that art can *move* its audience. Watching a play or listening to a poem, the audience experiences the pleasure and pain of the character in the drama. Rationally, the audience know that these are merely made-up characters, fictive creations of the artist, but emotionally they feel as if the struggles and victories of these fictions are theirs. Art's *effect* is one of *affect*.

Plato's student, Aristotle, picked up upon this power of art in his *Poetics* by arguing that affect was an essential – and positive – aspect of tragic drama. Tragic theatre, Aristotle argues, works because of imitation and identification:

[T]he reason why men enjoy seeing likeness is that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'" (55-6)

Good art places an audience in the shoes of a fictive person within a fictive space. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle believes that humans retain a critical ability to understand the separation of themselves from art. Imitation is *not* confused for reality: what is painful in reality can be pleasurable to watch in imitation. Yet art still has a profound affect, for by identification with these imitations we are able to relive *and relieve* these experiences and feelings for ourselves. "The proper purgation of these emotions," in Aristotle's words, or *catharsis* as it has come to be called (61). Art can be a safety valve for emotions.

It was this cathartic capacity that, two millennia later, worried radical artists like Bertolt Brecht and theorists like Walter Benjamin, both of whom were committed to the arts as a means of social change. Brecht believed that traditional theatre pacified the audience, lulling them into a fantasy through which they experienced the "proper purgation" of the very emotions that might stir them to action. He described theatre-goers as "people [who] seem relieved of activity and like men to whom something is being done." (187) In response Brecht devised theatre that he hoped would activate his audience through a series of techniques like giving away the play's ending at the beginning, having actors step out of character to address the audience, and breaking

up dramatic scenes with song and dance. Instead of drawing people into an illusion he strove to push them away, making the reality of the theatrical illusion obvious. Brecht's idea was to defamiliarize the familiar and, in so doing, create a critical distance for the audience so that they might reflect and act on their own. He called this *Verfremdungseffekt*, or Alienation Effect.

Walter Benjamin identified a parallel problem in the literary and visual arts: people relieving themselves of political activity through the consumption of "political" art. Commenting upon an exhibition of "matter of fact" photographs that included images of abject poverty, Benjamin worried that such displays of social problems don't raise awareness, nor lead to any sort of action. Instead they render social problems aesthetic: turning them into objects of contemplation, appreciation, and perversely, even enjoyment. Benjamin wanted us to rethink our understanding of political art: asking not what politics art is representing, but instead the political work the art is doing. For Benjamin, the solution was an art form that erased the barriers between the artist and the audience, moving the spectator from a passive recipient of activity into an active agent in creative production.

Thirty years later, the Brazilian dramaturge, Augusto Boal, was to take Brecht's ideas of active reflection a step further, and in the process realize Benjamin's ideal of a creative audience. Boal designed dramas in which an audience could both reflect upon their social reality as it was played out on the stage, and then intervene by making choices about possible solutions to social problems. Boal's audience was even encouraged to act out their solutions themselves on stage: becoming "Spect-Actors" in what Boal called "a rehearsal for the revolution" (122).

Brecht, Benjamin and Boal were all deeply indebted to the ideas of Karl Marx. This seems odd since Marx was a staunch materialist and all three, as artists and authors, seem to employ an idealist theory of change. Indeed Marx, while a great fan of Shakespeare in his leisure, gave art and culture scant attention in his writings and, where he did, seeming to dismiss it as merely a super-structural manifestation of the dominant material conditions. "The ruling ideas are in every epoch the ideas of the ruling class," as he and Engels explain in *The German Ideology* (156). *Marxism*, however, took a decidedly cultural turn in the 20th Century, as Marxists began to understand that art and ideas, in an age of mass literacy and mass media, take on increasing political importance.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Communist writer and politician, was one of the most thoughtful, and hopeful, of these cultural Marxists. Locked in a Fascist prison where he would spend the last decade of his life, Gramsci reflected upon the nature of power and the possibilities for social change. He reasoned that ruling powers, in addition to their command of economic and political life, needed also to attain cultural hegemony: a system of values, ideals, and even aesthetics that supported the vision of the ruling class. As such, in order to challenge and change those ruling powers, revolutionaries needed to create their own culture, or what Gramsci called "counter-hegemonic" culture.

Any successful strategy of contest and conquest, Gramsci argued, needed both a War of Maneuver and a War of Position. The War of Maneuver is the open conflict: the moment when the rebels storm the palaces and seize the factories. But to win the whole war, Gramsci argued, a War of Position also needs to be fought. These are guerrilla campaigns, where rebels stake out positions behind enemy lines: creating pockets of resistance that destabilize the dominant system

and forge parallel structures of power to build upon after the war is won. Counter-hegemonic culture functions as one of those pockets of resistance within enemy territory, a strategy designed to spread alternative ways of understanding and acting in the world that might shift the culture. Yet for Gramsci, culture is not enough. Art and other forms of culture might prepare the conditions for the seizure of the state and the taking over of the factories, and provide the sets of meanings and values to re-imagine and reorganize them in a different way, but in the end, factories still need to be seized and the ideal and the material have to be transformed together.

The war over hegemonic (and counter-hegemonic) culture is a theme developed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, politics, and the transformation of politics, is deeply rooted in “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience,” that is: how we “make sense” of the world. This “distribution of the sensible,” he explains,

[i]s a delimitation of spaces and times, the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (13)

Art, Rancière believes, plays a critical role in this “distribution of the sensible.” It can function *mimetically* as a mirror of the dominant distribution, either supporting the status quo by reinforcing and normalizing it, or critically reflect upon it by revealing it in order to make the invisible visible. This is what representative art largely does. Alternately, art can act *aesthetically*, offering up a new way of making sense of the world and opening up new possibilities for organizing society, a *re*-distribution of the sensible. This is the traditional role of the avant-garde. As the radical poet Audre Lorde once wrote: “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.” (37)

These twin functions of activist art – a reflection of the world as it is or a recalibration of reality to imagine a world that could be -- are useful in understanding much of the current debates over the work that artistic activism can do, and the theories of social change that underlie its practice. Contemporary art critics and social theorists like Claire Bishop, Boris Groys, and Chantal Mouffe emphasize the disruptive capacity of artistic activism: the “defunctionalizing [of] the status quo.” (Groys) the making of “agonistic spaces,” (Mouffe) or embracing “antimony” (Bishop). Although they enter into the conversation in different places and with different agendas, these three all hold that artistic activism is essentially a *critical* practice.

Another school of contemporary artistic activism theory and practice is best exemplified by the critic Grant Kester. Kester is less interested in the disruptive function of artistic activism as he is in its social-building, counter-hegemonic, capacity. His focus is on art’s ability to act as a catalyst for collaborative communities of conversation, creation and, sometimes, social action. “Dialogic art” is what Kester calls this practice, but it also goes by the names of “socially-engaged art,” “social practice art,” or simply “community arts.” Art in these communities of creation is not a product to be produced by the artist and experienced by the audience, rather,

[i]t is reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities [and] official discourse. (8)

The idea that art can create the conditions for a unique sort of knowledge reaches back to at least the 18th century writings of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, who believed that the aesthetic

could modulate between the universal ideal of the good and the particular desire and experience. From this perspective, artistic activism is a *generative* practice.

To summarize this whirlwind tour through two millennia of Western thought regarding what art does, or can do:

Bible & Quran	Gives humans agency to create and define the world
Plato & Aristotle	Creates an experience (or the illusion of an experience) in which people feel new ideas and perspectives
Bertolt Brecht	Alienates people from their own experiences and environments so they can reflect upon them critically
Walter Benjamin	Facilitates the creativity of others
Augusto Boal	Stages mental, emotional and physical rehearsal for the revolution
Antonio Gramsci	Provides a building block of cultural hegemony, and counter-hegemony
Jacques Rancière	Functions as a mirror of society as it is, or an aesthetic sense of what could be
Audre Lorde	Articulates unsayable ideas and communicates new sensibilities
Immanuel Kant & Friedrich Schiller	Opens up a space of new knowledges
Claire Bishop, Chantal Mouffe, & Boris Groys	Disrupts the status quo order and understandings
Grant Kester	Catalyzes new communities and conversations

There is no consensus when it comes to a theory of how art fosters social change. Art can create and it can disrupt, it can be critical or it can be visionary, it can alienate us from our present or train us to act for the future. Art, and artistic activism, can, and does, do all these things.

As we take a step down the ladder into applied theory, the question of how art works to foster social change does not get any simpler. In fact, the answers to the question of how art works multiply. In recent surveys of the field, Creative Time curator Nato Thompson recognizes six ways that art might “work” (18-33), while professional evaluator Christine Dwyer, provides an additional half dozen. The team at Animating Democracy outlines an even ten (4), arts educator Beverly Naidus offers up twelve (5) and Stephen Duncombe, one of the authors of this study, in an earlier article identifies fourteen possibilities as to how art might help bring about social change (123).

Thompson	Dwyer	Animating Democracy	Naidus	Duncombe
<p>demonstrate, perform, and thus reveal the brutality of the present</p> <p>intervene in the media sphere</p> <p>disseminate research and documents history</p> <p>demonstrate lived or imaginary alternatives</p> <p>set the stage for conversations</p> <p>provide a social service</p>	<p>form new relationships and strengthen existing ones</p> <p>overtly recognize stories untold and painful episodes previously unspoken</p> <p>create public policy openings, (even when not successful)</p> <p>help key players assume new roles, whether formal or informal</p> <p>shift power subtly</p> <p>involve the next circle of artists who can spark subsequent engagements over future issues.</p>	<p>raise awareness</p> <p>challenge current circumstances</p> <p>empower individuals</p> <p>reinforce individual or group identity</p> <p>inspire people to action</p> <p>build communal strength and capacity for action</p> <p>critique dominant social and historical narratives</p> <p>enable people to hear and understand different perspectives</p> <p>propose new possibilities</p> <p>create a focus and/or process for the exchange of ideas and perspectives</p>	<p>process or document something that the artist has experienced or witnessed</p> <p>offer questions about – or solutions to – particular problems</p> <p>foster dialogue between polarized groups</p> <p>awaken those who are numb or in denial</p> <p>compensate for social amnesia</p> <p>heal the maker</p> <p>make the invisible visible</p> <p>express outrage, alert and alarm</p> <p>stretch the mind</p> <p>develop positive images of the future and envision a different reality</p> <p>find others of a like mind</p> <p>make what is most compelling and beautiful in image, object, word, motion and sound</p>	<p>foster dialogue</p> <p>build community</p> <p>make a place</p> <p>invite participation</p> <p>transform environment and experience</p> <p>reveal reality</p> <p>alter perception</p> <p>create disruption</p> <p>inspire dreaming</p> <p>provide utility</p> <p>allow for political expression</p> <p>encourage experimentation</p> <p>maintain hegemony</p> <p>make nothing happen (anti-instrumentality)</p>

And this is merely the tip of the iceberg. There are as many ideas about how art works to bring about social change as there are books, articles and reports devoted to the topic.

In an effort to simplify and condense the myriad ideas on how artistic forms of activism can work, Mark J. Stern and Susan C Seifert, in a report for Animating Democracy, outlined three broad areas:

- *Didactic Theories of Action*: “the ability of the arts and culture to instruct or persuade the population.”
- *Discursive Theories of Action*: “the use of the arts to provide settings in which people can discuss issues, form conceptions and take action.”
- *Ecological Theories of Action*: “cultural participation as a form of civic engagement...that increase social capital and community capacity.” (15)

Approaching the problem of categorization from another angle, stressing the strategic theatres of engagement and adding the element of time, Duncombe provides four ways to think about the possible impact of artistic forms of activism:

- *Imminent Cultural Shift*: having an immediate impact on the way people think and talk about an issue, or whether they think or talk about the issue at all. In activist parlance, “moving the needle” on public opinion.
- *Ultimate Cultural Change*: having a long-term impact on the way people think, feel, and even sense reality as it is and could be. As with short-term cultural shifts, changes can be both “negative” in that they foster a new critique of the present, or “positive” in that they generate a new vision of the future.
- *Imminent Material Impact*: having an immediate, visible, physical effect on the world through tangible changes in laws, policies, practices and politics.
- *Ultimate Material Result*: having some sort of material, often structural, impact over the long haul such as the creation and implementation of new economic or political system. (124)

Complicating the question of how artistic activism might work in fostering social change is the problem of accounting for social change itself. As Irene Guijt, head of Research at Oxfam Great Britain and a member of the Accessing Social Change group notes, social change is 1) nonlinear and unpredictable; 2) the result of multiple efforts on multiple fronts; 3) takes place over a long term; 4) has “fuzzy boundaries” that constantly shift; and, as such, it is 5) difficult to recognise “valid” results (4-5).

In sum, art and social change are exceedingly complex phenomena. While there may be a consensus that art moves us, how and why it does so is still an open debate. It is also difficult to determine with any precision when social change has happened and what its cause was. Did the change happen because of something the artistic activist did? Were their actions among the many contributing causes? Or maybe change just happened coincidentally and they had nothing to do with it? There are too many moving pieces to answer definitively the question of how exactly artistic activism works with anything other than conjecture.

To acknowledge complexity, however, does not mean that we abandon the field and retreat into mysticism, repeating some mumbo jumbo about art’s magical powers that resist all such attempts

at comprehension and validation. While there is no certainty about how activist art works in general, we can know what it aims to do in particular, that is: what activist artists intend their art to do. Once we have addressed this question, we can begin to investigate whether activist art has succeeded in its own aims, on its own terms.

How Artistic Activism Works

We've outlined above some of the ways theorists and researchers believe that art and activism, and kindred fields like media, social marketing, and cultural organizing, "work" in bringing about social change, but if we are to develop an approach to assessment appropriate for artistic activists themselves we need to understand how *they* think of *their* practice as "working." Much of what the practitioners we interviewed had to say when asked how their practice works overlaps with their comments excerpted above regarding theories of social change. This makes a certain sense. It is, after all, through discussions of actual practices that many artistic activists were able to abstract a theory of change. In addition, every theory of social change suggests certain practical approaches on how to bring it about. Yet, at the risk of being a bit repetitive, it is still important to drill down a level from the general to the particular in order to get a better understanding of what those "in the trenches" think -- and hope -- they are doing.

As was the case with a theory of change, the artistic activists we interviewed rarely articulated a distinct and solitary response to the question of how their artwork worked. Instead they told stories: stories about their practice and what they thought, and hoped, happened as a result. We then pulled together these responses into the following, broad but not exclusive, analytic categories.

Presenting Ideas Effectively

A number of artistic activists we talked to stressed the importance of presenting critical, and often challenging, ideas in ways that the public might be more attracted and interested in them. Rebecca Bray, describing the Meatrix project, an animated multimedia piece that addressed factory farming she helped produce, recalled how she and her collaborators, were telling people how horrible the [conditions of factory farming] were and nobody really wanted to hear it. Everybody was disturbed and they didn't want to listen. So, we realized that we needed another angle...

Working at the time for a non-profit dedicated to food issues, Rebecca understood the importance of facts in making persuasive arguments, but also realized that these facts were frequently ignored. By approaching facts creatively, she hoped people might actually listen to them:

[T]here were also a lot of facts, you know, "how many facts can we get in?" It could have been very long and very preachy, but we managed to pare it back to something which was just getting basic information, but trying to bring characters into it, and some sort of personality and humor. That was the Meatrix.

As Bray's emphasis on "bring[ing] characters into it" and "personality and humor" suggests, creative approaches to conveying information entails thinking beyond the mere presentation of information. It requires thinking about how people receive information: in this case, through stories. And, above all it demands a consideration of who the ideas are meant for and how best

to reach them. That is: thinking about *audience*. Posterchild, a street artist from Ontario, Canada, is emphatic that,

To make it with an audience in mind--which to me is not a bad thing, it's the best thing!--doesn't mean that you're pandering to the lowest common denominator; it means you're trying to open up.

Artistic activists see their work as a corrective to the closed surety of the "how many facts can we get in" style of communications often favored by activist groups and advocacy NGOs. But it is not only communications on the activist side of the equation that needs help, the esotericism and elitism of the art world and the hyper-individualism of the artist also that get in the way of the effective communication of ideas. Avram Finkelstein, a designer of ACT-UP's Silence = Death poster, argues,

First of all, I think that art that isn't about communication is about class. So, if you're an activist who's making art and what you're trying to do or say is not clear, you're no better than being in a Gagolian Gallery. It's not activism if it's not understandable.

For Avram, the first lesson is to communicate in a language, visual as well as written, that everyday people understand. As he says, "vernaculars are essential." In an inventive (and humorous) analogy, Posterchild compared the esotericism of art languages to masturbation, explaining to us that .

Trying to make it perfectly obscure and using your idiosyncratic symbolism--that to me is masturbatory, anti-audience art. Which is fine, masturbation is great way to get to know yourself, it's healthy, it's a good way to get practice, but it will always pale in comparison to the interaction of sex.

Good artistic activism, like good sex, requires good communication.

Creating Conversations

While political (and artistic) communication is frequently uni-directional, with the activist or artist actively broadcasting their ideas or visions out to be received more or less passively by audience, the communications that a number of artistic activists we interviewed were striving after was more dynamic, interactive, and multi-directional: a conversation.

Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung, whose work combines a pop art sensibility with political subject matter, takes the novel step of putting his name, address, and telephone number on his work so he can talk to people about it, "because this connects me with the real people..." he says, describing one encounter:

[P]eople like to call me at 4 a.m I was sleeping and this guy from New York called me, I was in San Francisco at the time, and then said, "What the fuck are you doing, why the fuck'd you put the Twin Towers as a firework?" blah blah blah blah blah. "Do know you like 2,000 people died there," blah blah blah blah blah. "One of my friends died there." ...I'm not really good in English, but I just start talking and speaking with him, I just say this is the facts: Saddam Hussein, Al-Qaeda, we trained him. Basically just all these things that I read and I know, and I had just a really good, direct conversation with him,

While Kenneth' approach to prompting discussion is extraordinary, "creating conversations" or "stimulating dialogue" is a familiar objective in the world of arts and activism. Conversation itself can be seen as a world-changing activity: the creation of knowledge through a collaborative interchange of ideas as opposed to passively abiding by received wisdom. But simply "creating

conversations” can also be used as a way to refuse the responsibility that comes with committing to a point of view with stimulating dialogue” acting as a weak replacement for taking a stand. Many of the artistic activists we talked to, however, framed their interest in conversation in other terms. Far from evading politics by refusing to take a stance, and not content with conversation for conversation’s sake, they were interested in creating spaces for dialogue in order to activate particular ideas and make their public reception more æffective.

“It was a conversation starter,” says Avram Finkelstein, when describing the objective of his famous ACT-UP image. As he clarifies:

Stories are told one sentence at a time, or one word at a time. So, all we’re going to do today is come up with the first sentence. And that’s exactly what Silence=Death was doing.

“The project idea was to go out and to do something that would spark conversation” explains Eve Mosher, when pressed about the “work” her High Water Line project could do. But there were parameters to the conversation Eve wanted to spark. As mentioned in the previous section, the conversation needed to be intimate, affective and one-on-one. It was not any old conversation that Eve was after, however, it was a focussed conversation on climate change and its direct impact on where people lived.

The Illuminator, at first glance, is an artistic activist project as far away from conversation as one might imagine. It is pure spectacle, projecting images and ideas ten stories high. But Rachel Brown, a member of the Illuminator collective, told us that the function of that spectacle is not just to get people watching, but to get them talking. “[W]e go into physical public space, intervene there, and make a spectacle,” she explains, “and contribute to that conversation, kind of turning, changing the story.” It is not abstract “conversation” that these artistic activists are interested in, nor is it the monologic presentation of a set of ideas -- it is someplace in between. They see their work as setting the stage for specific conversations about particular issues that they, through their intervention, can then help frame. This is “just the strategy of communications,” notes Nato Thompson, who put together the field-defining Creative Time Summits and sees his work as creating the institutional space for discussions around the practice of artistic activism, “you set the terms of the debate, [and] now everyone’s arguing within your terms.”

Revealing Reality

Communicating ideas to audiences, and stimulating conversations around ideas, are thought to be an important function of artistic activism. But before an audience will listen, or discuss, ideas advocating change they need to understand why change needs to happen. They need, in contemporary activist parlance, to be “woke.” Amin Hussein, co-founder of the art space “Decolonize this Place,” points out that,

Everyone has a million thing things to worry about. They concern themselves with other things, they think they’re masters of their own journeys. It’s all an illusion....Once you break that illusion you create that space for people to see each other.

For that illusion to be broken people need to see reality, and a number of artistic activists talked to us about how they intended their intervention to reveal hidden, overlooked, or uncomfortable realities.

Ron Goldberg, the “chant queen” of ACT-UP described it this way in explaining the theatrics of ACT-UP protests:

[H]ow could we make what was happening real to people? As [LGBTQ activist] Vito Russo said, it was like living in an alternate universe where we were the only ones who could hear the bombs dropping. So, how do you make other people hear the bombs dropping?

“Bombs dropping” is very close to the reality that Aaron Hughes, an artist, veteran of the Iraq War and member of the activist group Iraq Veterans Against War (IVAW) hoped to reveal through an artistic activist piece he helped design. “Operation First Casualty,” as it was called, was a performance piece in which veterans, wearing battle fatigues, staged combat maneuvers learned from their experience occupying Iraq on the streets of US cities. When we asked about Aaron what he hoped to accomplish, he told us he wanted to bridge the disconnect between the reality of war as he experienced it and the fantasy that many people in the US held on to. “When I was over there it was a real space, nothing was mediated,” he explained, “and when I came back here everything was mediated, and the war wasn’t here.” The goal of “Operation First Casualty” was to bring the war home and, through performance, have civilians it feel it as something “real.”

The function of good artistic activism, explains Eric Triantafillou of the San Francisco Print Collective, is always,

to expose the relationship between appearance and reality. It’s to try to pull away the veil and ask questions that, is what you’re seeing, what you’re interacting with, is it really real? What’s real about it? What’s true about it? Or is that just some notion that naturalized society and capitalism has produced for you?

“I think on a basic level it’s about building awareness,” says Joe DeLappe, who attempts to reveal the horrors of war through artistic interventions in war-based video games. But it should be remembered from the previous discussion, that “awareness” like “information” for artistic activists is not solely a cognitive operation. It is about making people *feel* the facts, as much as know them.

Generating Affect and Empathy

Feeling rather than thinking, particularly a strong feeling of connection to an issue or relationship to people unlike oneself, is an objective that a number of artistic activists mentioned when asked about what they thought, or hoped, their work might do. *Affect* is their desired *effect*.

Faced with the economic crisis that began in 2008 and hit countries like Spain particularly hard, Barcelona-based artistic activist Leónidas Martín Saura organized joyful occupations in dispiriting places. In one intervention, Leó and his group Enmedio threw a dance party inside an unemployment office; in another they publicly celebrated a customer shutting down her account in a bank. Asked, “What was the point?” Leó replied simply: “to break the fear.” Asked to elaborate, he explained,

we thought a lot of people are not really suffering the crisis right now, but they are suffering the fear about it. So we wanted to do something about breaking that fear somehow. That was a goal.

For Leó the impact of the economic crisis in Spain was as much emotional as it was material, as even those who did not yet suffer economically were suffering psychologically. Channeling Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s famous declaration during a previous depression that the “Only thing we

have to fear is fear itself,” Leó held out the hope that his action could, if only for a moment, change the way everyday Spaniards felt, turning fear into joy and laughter.

Some artistic activists mobilize affect for a different effect: to generate empathy. Diana Arce stages what she calls “Politaoke,” a participatory Karaoke-style engagement where, instead of singing along to popular pop songs, audience members recite current political speeches, often from politicians with whom they don’t agree. When asked what the point was, Diana explained:

I was trying to see if I could make other people feel the way that underrepresented groups of people would feel in a situation, to see if I could flip minorities to majorities and majorities to minorities.

The problem with political discourse, as Diana understands it, is “whenever you talk about politics in a mixed room of people, all they do is get caught up in language and stereotypes... and then they don’t actually have a real conversation.” By mouthing the words of a political Other, Diana hopes to build empathetic bridges between folks who have stopped understanding, much less talking, to one another because of ideological divides. “For me,” she says, “it’s about finding a way to talk about politics without actually talking about politics.”

Making Openings

“Art is like a snake,” says Beatrice Glow, an artistic activist whose work operates through a range of sense experiences, “it moves through different sectors. It can come off as innocuous in certain societies where art isn’t seen as anything that can affect change.” Many artistic activists describe the function of their creative work as being able to reach people with ideas in ways that circumvent their usual defences. As Diana concluded above, the purpose of her Politaoke was to “talk about politics without actually talking about politics.”

Posterchild’s street art uses recognizable figures from pop culture and inserts them in unlikely spaces or pairs them with improbable messages. When asked about this he spoke of the value of creating openings for novel, critical and/ or challenging ideas. “I think a lot of it is thinking under people’s radar.” Elaborating, Posterchild adds,

When we see a protestor, there’s automatically a connotation depending on your political outlook of either a wack job or a hero. Either way, we know and are familiar with that method of delivering a message. The same with graffiti, the same with advertising; either way that method of delivering the message, we know it, we’re familiar with it. We’re very good at filtering information.

In order to really reach people the artistic activist needs to get through, or around, that filter.

The Hegemonologue, is what Larry Bogad calls the “hegemonic monologue of the dominant ideology” that closes down thought. When asked how his work with groups like the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, an “army” of absurd clown protesters that confronts riot police with ridicule at large protests in Europe, circumvented the hegemonologue, he theorized that,

“Events, protest events, tend to either occupy space or open space. There are some that do both, obviously. But there is an emphasis in activism on occupying space. “We’re taking this over and we’re going to chant our slogan, and now this space is about our slogans. And you’re not in here and we are.” And that sometimes is totally appropriate...

But artistic activism can do something else:

[O]pening a space is like, “Wow!” It’s not predictable. And it gets sloppy and messy and maybe that’s okay, because it’s more participatory and it’s more likely to be less predictable.”

For Larry, the key to “opening space” is “surprise.” As he elaborates: “surprise can open up a temporal, experiential space where anything can come in.”

Causing Disruption

“I paint street art with a purpose: to entertain, inform, and sometimes shock,” says another street artist, FINK, from Dublin. Art has long had the capacity to shock, indeed the *raison d’être* of Modern Art has been characterized, to crib the title from a popular art history textbook and British TV Series, as “The Shock of the New.” Artistic activists, however, are less interested in the expressive novelty of their practice than they are in the capacity of surprise to circumvent “the filter” or “hegemonologue” of everyday experience and assumptions.

While Larry Bogad underscored the ability of surprise to *open up* spaces so that “anything can come in,” some artistic activists emphasize the capacity of surprise as a way to shock people and *push them out* of their complacency with the status quo. Early in his career, artistic activist Dread Scott created a piece that invited the audience to walk over an American Flag. The artwork received such notoriety that it was denounced on the floor of the US Senate and called “disgraceful” by President George H. W. Bush. Asked what “work” his piece did when most of the response was negative -- more of a closing down than an opening up -- he responded that,

I wanted to do artwork people couldn’t just dismiss the politics of. Whether they liked it or didn’t like it, whether they agreed with me or didn’t agree with me, I wanted them to have some engagement with the work...It was debated.

And more than merely debated, as Dread explains, “it did get to the point where the U.S. Congress ended up adding words to legislation to ‘protect the flag,’ which specifically outlawed the work.” By generating a shock and by provoking a reaction, Dread hoped to reveal the reactionary reality hiding behind liberal democracy.

Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-born artist whose work has included an installation in which he invited people to shoot at him with remotely operated paintball guns, explained shock-value in terms that would have been familiar to Bertolt Brecht, “Since my work is political - and it seems like not only my work but other political work, as well - it alienates more than it engages.” Wafa discusses this “alienation” in terms of “aesthetic pleasure versus aesthetic pain” and “the conflict zone versus the comfort zone.” By knocking people out of their comfort zones and replacing desired-for aesthetic pleasure with pain, Wafa hopes to shock people out of their hegemonic understandings, in this case, of Iraqi people and war as play.

Encouraging Participation

If Dread and Wafaa are interested in, among other things, alienating their audiences in order to shock them into some sort of critical awareness, other artistic activists believe that what their work might do is draw people into a different sort of engagement: active participation. “It’s like cheerleading,” says Igor Vamos, of the Yes Men, when pushed to explain why it was important to publicize their actions. “I think a lot of what we do is about, at least for the younger people, is about overcoming the fear that they have of acting, of doing things.”

As Walter Benjamin suggested, one of the possible liabilities of activist art is that it can reinforce the division between those who do: the artistic activist, and those that have things done for them: the audience. This danger is well understood by a number of artistic activists we talked to. “I think of art as something that approaches the public and reaches out to them,” says Rebecca Bray, one of the artistic activists who created *The Meatrix*. Her creative partner Britta Riley, chimes in: “That’s basically what we’re wrestling with right now...How much are we going to present to people, and how much we’re just going to say, ‘figure it out yourselves.’”

At times, it seems as if the experience of activity itself can be as important as any material impact that results from that activity. Trebbe Johnson, founder of an artistic activist group called *Radical Joy for Hard Times*, when asked about the purpose of bringing people to devastated natural environments to engage in expressive acts of artistic creation, justified the practice:

Because it’s a way of doing something. It’s a simple action but it’s very powerful because so often people feel powerless, they feel that the problems that confront them in their communities and in the world are so huge and so technical that, “How can I possibly have any influence at all?” But making something together and giving it, leaving it there, is a first action. It is an action that you can see.

In a society where most people are encouraged to be consumers of what others have created, and have elected (or not) representatives act politically for them, moving people to action, no matter what the material effects of that action that is, is seen as the most important “work” of all.

While shifting public opinion and changing policies might be the primary work that *Beautiful Trouble*’s Andrew Boyd wants his creative actions to do, he also discusses at length the “secondary aspects” of,

bringing people in who were previously turned off of politics, who didn’t feel there was an outlet for them [because] they were too creative and most of the politics was too straightforward and lock step and boring.

When he was designing *Billionaires for Bush*, he crafted the project in order to bring people in and maximise participation, even at the cost of a certain amount of creative control. As he elaborates,

it just wouldn’t do to just have some huge event that I controlled and just do it. That wouldn’t achieve anything like the results that we wanted to achieve, and what we did achieve -- which was to foster this movement if you will, this mini-movement, this expanding mutating participatory artistic project and campaign in the political sense -- that required an open architecture that required us to let go of some control to a certain degree.

By emphasizing the “open architecture” of his work, Andrew created open spaces for people to participate... and more:

People would take ownership of it, see it as their own, reinvent it in small or large ways and then stay with in through the whole year and sustain that interest and enthusiasm. It became one of the most beautiful aspects for me, to see this set in motion, that I was sort of the prime mover of getting it to mutate and grow in ways that I previously hadn’t imagined.

Billionaires for Bush “worked” for Andrew when it took on a life of its own, when the lines between artist and audience, or activist and “the people” blurred and everyday people became artistic activists themselves. Echoing his fellow artistic activists above, Sam Gould of *Red 76*, when asked what he wanted people who participated in his actions to experience, replied:

I want them to feel like,
1) they could do this,
2) they can get involved,
and,
3) they don't need us.
They can just do it by themselves.

Or rather: *with other selves*. For many artistic activists the goal is not to facilitate individual creative action, but to encourage people to come together in acts of collective creation. "Creative collaborative action puts forth a process that is as much a goal as the results it aims to achieve," states Felicia Young, who uses pageantry to engage people in local environmental issues. Yes, saving community gardens in the Lower East Side of Manhattan is important to her, as is cleaning up the Vaigai River in South India, both places she has staged her interventions, but, for Felicia, "The art project becomes an excuse for bringing the skills of the community together."

Aiding and Amplifying Social Movements

When and where communities are already together and mobilized, some artistic activists spoke of their role less as relentless critics or bold visionaries, and more in the humble language of *service*. The function of their work, as they articulated it, was to amplify the impact of pre-existing social movements and activist organizations. "There are things that already have momentum," explains Jacques Servin who, with the Yes Men, frequently works with social change NGOs.

These movements already exist; there's already stuff going on and we can just add a little bit of information that gets out there more. I mean, you know, the more people are outraged and the more people take action of various sorts, the more likely things are going to change.

Sometimes this "little bit" of help is at the level of furthering the nascent creative tactics already in play in movements and campaigns:

What are the songs, the stories, the memes, the hashtags, the aesthetics, etc., that are being used, and how can we help to make that more legible and can teach us and signal a counter power?

These are the question that Beka Economopoulos, a co-founder of Not an Alternative and The Natural History Museum, asks herself as she enters into a project. "[I]t is very important to us," adds her partner, Jason Jones, to be "building off of what already exists rather than creating something new."

A practical example of this creative amplification is the symbol of the Monarch butterfly employed by immigration activists in the United States. Arising out of the social movement as a symbol that exemplified the beauty and naturalness of migration (the brightly colored butterfly migrates annually from the Northern US to Mexico and back) it was taken up, polished and popularized by artist and The Culture Group member, Favianna Rodriguez. As a "professional" image on posters and t-shirts and the like, the migratory Monarch and its newly created slogan "Migration is Beautiful" was then cycled back into the movement for use in their campaigns.

Other artistic activists see their job as bringing creativity into otherwise non-creative social and political spaces. John Leo, who works with a New York City chapter of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, explained to us how they were asked for help by a city council member,

“He was like, “I want to do this in my district! I want an emergency response team of actors where if a problem happens, you can make a play about that thing and then go and address it with legislators.”

Which is exactly what TONYC does: staging “performances” to help citizens understand and enthusiastically participate in mundane governmental procedures like the budgeting process.

In all cases, how these artistic actions “work” is to help along a campaign already in place or a movement already underway: honing the cultural work that is being done or adding in a cultural element where there is none. As Gan Golan, who has worked on numerous campaigns both independently and as part of The Culture Group and Beautiful Trouble says, “I really try to look at the way in which collectives are created and mobilized and then focus in on their action and the role that art and different creative practices play in that.”

Imagining New Worlds

If some artistic activists consider the work of artistic activism to be an instrumental tool in the service of social movements and organizations, others see the power and possibilities of their practice in envisioning the non-practical, the impossible, and the Utopian. Artistic activism is a way to fire the imagination.

Sometimes, what needs imagination is art and activism itself. Emilie Clark, a relatively traditional artist whose work occupies the intersection of science, the environment, and feminism spoke with us about a recent experience of hers that drove this point home. “I just saw a show the other day,” she recalled,

I just couldn't believe it; it made me really sad. There's a drawing of a woman masturbating with an oil tank on her stomach. That does not mean shit. I mean that is nothing....it was like, pornography meets oil dredging.

When asked about what she thought artistic activism could, and should, do, she expounded, I feel like art work has to do something more than be op-ed, you know, cartoon basically. And to have pornography meet oil rigs....I feel like all it does, if anything, is remind you that those two things exist and that there are similarities between them. But it doesn't make you take it to another level. It doesn't expand those two things....And I think as an artist I'm really interested in opening things up, carving out new space.

Creating new spaces is at the center of Sam Gould's work, and while he sees the value of these spaces as creating a forum for “conversation,” he also hopes his work can expand the types of conversations that might happen. His ultimate goal, in his own words, is to “provide an environment...to convey ideas that they might not normally encounter or might not normally seek out.”

Berlin-based trans artist Joey Juschka writes about the sorts of things that people encounter everyday, things like public bathrooms, in order to encourage people to imagine them in new ways. As she says: “I write about observations of things that I don't like and change it fictionally.” When asked, “What does that do?” Joey described something she noticed in her audience during her readings:

Even though they can't do anything in the end, because it's only a fictional law, for a second their reality was changed. For a second there was an opening into another world of possibility.

This sense of fictive possibility can have real world applications. As Joey continues

I believe once you experience this moment of "Oh! There actually was a solution to a no-solution-problem," then the next time there's an apparent no-solution-problem, you know that maybe it isn't a no-solution-problem after all. You can go back to that experience and hook into it, get reassured that there is a solution - maybe a real wacky one, but way wacky is way better than being stuck in thinking that there's no way one can change anything. You can change everything. Think broader, think more absurd, come up with whatever and go from there.

Way wacky. Like the power-generating windmills atop the Brooklyn Bridge that are represented in the work of Andrea Polli. "Obviously it hasn't gotten built yet, maybe never, right?" Andrea admits.

But I think it inspired people to say: why not come up with some really wild pie-in-the-sky idea? And try to push it through as much as possible. So, I think it was successful in that way, or effective in that way.

To be of practical service to activists in political demonstrations artistic activist Aaron Gach designed a "Tactical Ice Cream Unit," an old ice cream truck tricked out with loudspeakers and surveillance cameras from which he distributed propaganda, as well as free ice cream. But in addition to its instrumental use in protests, Aaron sees the function of his project as "manipulat[ing] reality."

I think the ice cream truck doesn't try and be a problem solver. It offers up models of creative problem solving approaches. And that's a very different thing than trying to tell people that this is what you have to do. It's a way to offer an alternative to the way things are being done. This is where the magic comes in. It's all about giving people a show that elicits a broader sense of reality, that reality is bigger than what we're told reality is.

The function of a cultural intervention is not to merely replace one set of ideas with another, or one culture with another. For Aaron, whose artistic training included studying with a magician and learning how to pick locks, the goal is to open doors (of perception) and provide the "magical" possibility that things could look differently so that people might imagine on their own. As he describes:

If they can see that there is an alternative to the way that reality is packaged and sold to them, then all of a sudden they can also begin to think on their own about how they might manipulate reality. How they might manifest their desires in reality. And that's a big forward step.

The role of art, as Audre Lorde, reminds us, can be to say the unsayable, and to imagine the unimaginable. As Leónidas Martín said to us: "We don't have the words, we don't have the grammatics for this medium we need in order to confront a conflict like climate change." One of the things that artistic activism does is help us develop new words for saying, new ways of seeing and being, and new environments where these imaginations might flourish. As Leó explains further,

[T]o transform what actually is already here...means to actually start living another way. And in order to do so, we need to open spaces, experiences, where the people can actually relate in a different way. This is what we are trying to do.

Doing Something

The artistic activists we interviewed rarely articulated a distinct and solitary response to the question of how their work worked. Many times they offered up multiple ways in which they thought the practice of artistic activism might work; other times they retreated into vague and almost mystical explanations. Aaron Gach's invocation of "magic" was not the first or last time we heard that word used to describe artistic activism's effect. When asked about the impact of one of his projects, Andre Leipold, from the Center for Political Beauty in Germany, describes how it was,

magical to see that it was possible to have some kind of influence in spheres where you typically don't have a connection with as an artist or citizen.... What I mean by magic is that it's possible to communicate with people in another form, in another way than by words.

Faced with uncertainty as to how, exactly, their projects actually impact people and the wider world, some artistic activists find a certain level of surety by turning their attention to the impact their practice has on something smaller and better known: themselves.

As part of the San Francisco Print Collective, Eric Triantafillou created posters in the service of social movements engaged in concrete campaigns, but he also took pains to point out that,

to exist today and to have any kind of sanity you have to, if you're a creative person, you've got to make stuff, you've got to do things, if you don't, you just take all that energy and try to channel it into this huge, difficult thing called politics [and] you get very little back. It's very painful. So making stuff is a way of keeping yourself sane.

It seems odd that some of the artistic activists we interviewed who were most embedded in social movements were also the first to turn the question of impact back upon themselves and their practice. But perhaps it is because they are so deeply engaged in concrete campaigns, where "success" seems so daunting, that they conclude the only place they can be sure their work is working is in the very activity of creation: the *process* of artistic activism.

"Sometimes we try to accomplish too much," the renowned artist Alfredo Jaar explains with humility.

So here it's really like the minimal strategy: let's see if we can insert this word, which is a concept, a story, a history, blah, blah, into their conscious or even unconscious, and let's see what happens.

Referencing Antonio Gramsci's maxim that what an activist needs is "pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will" Jaar tells us that "deep inside I share...Gramsci's intellectual pessimism and, of course, I still have this optimistic will -- because I have no choice. If not, I would just commit suicide." "I have an idea about radical resistance that is somewhat romantic," admits ACT-UP's Avram Finkelstein,

What was the Marx quote? Something about capitalism is so ingenious because it's the only system that has constructed itself in such a way that it can never be dismantled. And I think I'm over mourning the fact that it can't be dismantled...I feel like you have to fight anyway. Because, what's the alternative?

Lack of clarity regarding how and why artistic activism works can lead to a sort of existential theory of the practice: I can not predict exactly what my work will do, but I know change is essential, so I must do something.

But Does it Work?

Assessment, and the measurements used to assess performance, frequently inspire fear and loathing amongst artistic activists. Just the word “metrics” conjures up images of actuaries in grey flannel suits sucking the color out of creative projects so they can be safely written up and stored in drab metal filing cabinets. But evaluation, done correctly, needn’t be this.

Evaluation is something we do everyday. How would we learn not to pick up hot objects, much less undertake more complex tasks like cooking a meal, without some evaluative procedure determining what works and what does not, and what moves us closer to our goal or further away? Basic human activity would be impossible without some sort of evaluative feedback loop. Evaluation is also critical to successful social change projects. As a recent report prepared for the Ford Foundation on *Evaluation Frameworks for Social Justice Philanthropy* argues, evaluation is key for 1) Accelerated *learning* as practitioners and funders can determine what works and what does not, make course corrections and generate new insights and practices. 2) Appropriate evaluation also helps charts *progress* and demonstrates that what one is doing is working, or not. Social change is a long road, and evaluations provides encouraging mile markers along the way. And 3) at the conclusion of a project, evaluation provides a means to test efforts with empirical knowledge rather than assumptions and good intentions (5). Evaluation is common and it is necessary. The question is not whether to evaluate artistic activism or not, the real issue at hand is what kind of evaluation is applied and whether it is appropriate to the task.

Broadly speaking there are two types of measurements used in evaluation: *quantitative* and *qualitative*. Quantitative assessment, as the name suggests, entails measuring things in terms of quantities that can be counted. Quantitative measurement is also, ostensibly, objective and allows for comparison across cases and, for this reason, is favored in the sciences. Galileo, one of the pioneers of the scientific method wrote in the 1600s of the necessity of distinguishing qualities that “exist in external bodies” and can be measured: size, shape, quantity and motion, from qualities like color, smell and taste. The former has an autonomous and verifiable reality, while the latter “exist only in the sensitive body, for when the living creature is removed all these qualities are carried off and annihilated.” (48)

To return to our everyday example of preparing a meal, a *quantitative* assessment might consider things like the cost of ingredients, the amount of each ingredient used, and the number of portions created. Yet this is an incomplete measurement of a meal. While Galileo was no doubt correct when it came to things like measuring the velocity of an object reacting to gravitational pull, relying upon quantitative measurement severely limits the range of things that one might measure, namely those things that “exist only in the sensitive body.” Knowing the cost of ingredients or the number of servings might tell us something about a meal, but we would never consider such evaluation sufficient if we didn’t also assess how the meal *tastes*.

This is where *qualitative* assessment becomes essential, for it measures the quality of the object or experience in terms of the impact it has on Galileo’s appropriately named “sensitive bodies.” To measure human senses, of course, is a great deal more difficult than measuring the weight or volume of an ingredient. Advances in neuroscience which purport to quantitatively measure sense perception aside, in order to determine something like the taste of a meal -- or the affect of an artistic activist intervention -- one has to resort to other “measures.” When we follow a recipe

that calls for a teaspoon of salt we are using a quantitative measurement, but when we taste the dish and assess whether it needs more salt we are engaging in a qualitative evaluation. While qualitative measurement allows for a much more nuanced and rich, and appropriate, evaluation for a meal it is also, of course, subjective. What is perfectly salted for oneself, may be too salty or not salty enough for another. This is why we have quantitative measurements in recipes, and salt shakers on the table.

Artistic activism and its kindred fields employ a dizzying array of assessment measures. Every Theory of Change generates multiple understandings of what might work to generate that change and, in turn, each change-making activity calls for multiple ways of evaluating whether it worked or not. As such, the possible metrics of creative impact increase exponentially. While it is beyond the purview of this report to account for all the types of metrics employed in assessing impact of creative interventions, we can provide a broad brush picture of the fields, and a more finely sketched portrait of what artistic activists themselves think and say about the assessment of their practice.

The fields that surround artistic activism use measures ranging from highly quantitative to loosely qualitative. On the more quantitative side are those interested in social marketing and public relations campaigns, as well as people measuring the effect of media interventions on social change. The Media Impact Project, for instance, breaks down impact into four categories: Experience, Expression/Sharing, Participation, and Action. Quantifiable measures are then provided for each of these areas:

- *Experience*: website views, screening attendance, etc.
- *Expression/Sharing*: Youtube comments, Facebook shares, retweets, etc
- *Participation*: user generated content, advance registration, participating in events, etc.;
- *Action*: donations, petition signatures, volunteers, etc. (17)

While many of these can be quantified -- e.g. how many comments were posted on the YouTube page of a documentary video -- even a cursory consideration suggests the necessity of qualitative measures as well: Were the comments positive or negative? Did they reveal any sort of meaningful engagement with the issue at hand or were they merely a cursory thumbs up or down?

On the more qualitative side of the spectrum are groups like Animating Democracy. Instead of hard numbers of social media users, Animating Democracy prefers to group their metrics under a series of “Aesthetic Perspectives.” These perspectives -- Disruption, Commitment, Communal Meaning, Cultural Integrity, Risk-Taking, Emotional Experience, Sensory Experience, Openness, Coherence, Resourcefulness, and Stickiness -- are not reducible to numbers. (How can one quantify “Openness”?) Instead, they function as prompts for series of evaluative questions. For example, to assess Openness Animating Democracy recommends asking questions like:

- How do the artists open their process to multiple viewpoints and show their willingness for the work to evolve based on what is learned?
- Is the development and creative process of the work transparent to stakeholders and participants?

- Is the artistic team committed to analyzing, and possibly changing, creative choices in relation to context? (29)

There is little to objectively count here, instead what is relied upon is subjective self-reflection, observation, interviews, storytelling, document review, and narrative surveys.

Regardless of what measures proposed, be they quantitative or qualitative, the numerous reports of kindred fields we surveyed generally agreed on several things:

Creative impact is hard to measure.

In part this is due to the difficulties mentioned earlier in assessing social change writ large: there are simply too many variables in play to determine with any exactitude that if what you are measuring actually has the effect that one thinks or hopes for. This challenge is compounded by the particular type of work that art does, that is: its affective power. Claims by neuroscientists aside, feeling, perception, and sense are notoriously resistant to measurement.

Metrics are only meaningful in so far as they are appropriate.

Metrics need to match the creative intervention and its desired outcome. It does little good, for instance, to measure the number of international Facebook shares of an artistic activist project if it was designed to foster intimate conversation within a local community. Who is doing the assessing also matters. A number of reports on assessment generated by groups interested in accounting for impact called for participatory evaluation: including the community affected in the evaluation process itself (Stern & Seifert); others called for the participation of the artist herself. “Our assessment is artist-driven,” Deborah Fisher, Executive Director of A Blade of Grass, proclaims, “we don’t look for anything the artist isn’t asking us to look at.” (5)

Evaluation should not be an afterthought.

Assessment needs to be built into projects from the beginning, and used as part of a reflective process throughout. Measurement will only be appropriate if it flows logically from a plan that includes an overall goal, objectives that lead to that goal, and “tactical” creative interventions that bring about those objectives. And assessment is only useful if the knowledge it generates is fed back into the overall plan so that artistic activists can revise and re-plan accordingly as they move forward. This is what Mark Stern and Susan Seifert, in their report *Civic Engagement and the Arts: Issues of Conceptualization and Measurement*, call “becoming a learning organization” (37).

Assessment on the Ground

The artistic activists we interviewed, nearly universally, voiced serious concerns with assessment: what was being measured, by whom, and for what purposes. They even raised the question of whether artistic activism, with its debt to the affective qualities of the arts, could ever be measured. Yet, nearly universally, they also acknowledged the idea of some sort of assessment as valuable. As Jessica George of Revolutions Per Minute, a group who matches musicians with causes and movements, put it, “part of the reason you measure impact is to know if what you’re doing is good and it’s worth the effort.”

Public Attention

Many artistic activists, no matter their reservations, used some sort of “metrics” to determine if their interventions “worked.” The most prevalent indicator of a project’s success was public attention. Sometimes this attention can be observed in situ. While Vanessa Carr of the San Francisco Print Collective defines this success subjectively -- “if a visual presence has been created” -- street artist Posterchild actually hangs around his pieces to see if people stop and take pictures. When asked why, he replied,

That means someone noticed it. The first big step when you’re working on the street, in the gallery, anywhere, is to get noticed, to rise above the visual cacophony on the streets. People don’t notice ads, people don’t notice tagging, but people notice my shit.

Posterchild’s mention of picture-taking is telling, as it hints at what constitutes public attention in a mass mediated age. When asked when he knows one of his street theatre performances has worked, political puppet maker Elliot Crown, says “if I’m looking out and there’s ten photographers all shooting, it’s working.”

Media Mentions

To be seen is one thing, but to be seen, recorded and the distributed amplifies the public attention that a piece -- and the issue it speaks to -- might receive. It is no real surprise then that media mentions are the single largest metric used by artistic activists to determine success. FINK, a street artist we from Ireland we interviewed, told us that he is,

extremely proud of creating my artwork and promoting/influencing social change through my artwork. Not only was my marriage equality artwork featured on the front page of the *Irish Times* here in Ireland but also had internet features across the globe in Los Angeles, India, Australia, and more.

Jacques Servin talked to us about what is probably the Yes Men’s best known action: impersonating a chemical company spokesperson on the BBC and taking full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster. When asked if it was a success, and how he could tell, he explained:

There are a couple different measurements. One is simply number of articles or amount of media attention and the quality of media attention. So the BBC thing there were 600 articles in the U.S. press that wouldn’t have been there otherwise. They are writing about [the action] but had to communicate all the information about Dow and so on. So that was very successful. Even though nothing happened, even though it didn’t force Dow to change, it was successful because it actually got that attention and successfully got people talking about Dow.

In Jacques’s equation media=attention, and attention=conversation, and conversation=impact. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Yes Men’s BBC intervention the stock price of Dow Chemical plummeted (alas, only to shoot back up almost as rapidly) .

Part of the appeal of media attention is that it is easy to measure; it is a quantifiable metric. By monitoring “media hits” artistic activists can easily assess whether their action has had some sort of an impact. While most artistic activists we talked to shied away from quantifying the impact of their work, Beka Economopoulos and Jason Jones are proud of their numbers:

With the Natural History Museum, and the letter that we’re doing right now around [the proposed pipeline at] Standing Rock, we grew our email list to 100,000 in one year from scratch. We got 552,000 petition signatures to get David Koch off the board of the American Museum of Natural History. We built a network of 150 of the world’s top scientists, including several Nobel laureates. We now have about 800 museum professionals, directors, senior staff signed on to a political letter.

However, they also stressed that numbers alone were not, ultimately, what was important.

That's the "by-the-numbers" stuff, but then how do those numbers translate into impact? ... Around the sciences letter we released, it was something like 150 news hits around the world in the biggest outlets, and covered by news, science, climate, higher education, philanthropy, and arts and culture reporters. That's impact! But is just getting news coverage enough to change the game?

As was the case with Jacques, numbers -- of media hits, petition signatories, e-mail subscribers and so on -- were only valuable as *proxy indicators* of awareness and attention. To determine the real success of their project they needed to look into what those numbers meant. As Beka and Jason continue:

You can suggest that it's changing the conversation, but then we look for some qualitative assessment of that news coverage. Is it good? Is it on message? Is it communicating something different? Then we dug deeper to see if that coverage and these petition signatures actually impacted the conversation in the sector we're trying to transform.

Qualitative assessment of quantitative metrics was repeatedly brought up by the artistic activists we talked to. It is worth highlighting that in the same sentence where Jacques mentions the quantity of news hits he also makes sure to note "the quality of media attention."

An important quality of media attention has to do with who is reading, watching or listening and what they can, and will, do with this information. Beautiful Trouble's Andrew Boyd explains how,

you could have a thousand influencers in this particular space, whether they're state legislators or whatever or scientists in some kind of professional association who are moved and influenced [and it] is better than a million hits on some kind of wacky viral video of people who are going to be amused by it and send it to friends but are not going to have any bearing on the issue.

In other words, while cats are cute and "epic fails" are funny and both can generate lots of views, likes and forwards, neither may deliver the sort of political message or reach the influential audience to generate social impact. As Andrew sums up: "Sometimes a video with 500 views is better than two millions views. It depends who is viewing it."

In addition to stressing the quality as well as the quantity of media coverage when evaluating success, a number of practitioners raised a more critical concern of whether using media attention as a metric measures the wrong things and ultimately leads to bad practices. They worry that what gets the attention of the media does not always serve the political and aesthetic goals of the artistic activist.

As political puppeteer Eliot Crown frankly admits,

Most of my stuff is geared toward finding a simple, direct image with as few words as possible, or none, that visually encapsulates a critique, a message, so that someone will go, "Oooo, my editor is going to want to publish that!"

Like many artistic activists, Elliot understands that in order to get his message out to a wide audience he needs to use the media, and provide them with an attractive image, something artists and activists call "eye candy." Focussing on media attention, however, can also create a misleading criteria of success. Hans Haacke reflects,

Success would mean, in today's arts, media attention. I'm a bit uncomfortable with that because it means that...if it doesn't get picked up, then therefore it was a bad work and something, that for sensational reasons is being bandied about, therefore is a good one, a successful one.

Since the printing and sale of "confessional" chapbooks sold at public hangings in the 15th century Europe, sensationalism has sold the news. If media mentions constitutes a measure of success, that it stands to reason that artistic activists will be tempted to stage sensationalist interventions. As mentioned in the previous section, shock and surprise can be used productively to disrupt the status quo, but the danger is always there that by using sensationalism simply for the sake of attention, the message or the cause gets lost. "We have to look at the bigger picture: what's the objective of the controversy?" points out Wafaa Bilal.

Is it really just to get attention? Or is it to engage? These are two separate, different things. If the objective was to raise awareness, to let people know what you're trying to do, I think that's a noble objective. But if the objective is just to get media, I think that's crappy because then the work is not going to deliver what you want.

As much as artistic activists turn to attention, mass mediated and otherwise, as a metric of success, there is also an underlying unease: a fear that what is used as a measure will end up becoming a guide, and that the sensation itself will become more important -- and better recognized -- than the social issues that motivated the work in the first place. The fear, in Hans Haake's words, that artistic activism "becomes too much of a prisoner of media attention."

Interaction and Participation

Because media attention is a complicated, and compromised, criteria for evaluation, other artistic activists turn away from the quantity of attention to be generated via an international news story, and toward the quality of personal interest. When asked to explain the "success" of one of her public readings, Joey Jushka did mention news coverage: "The newspaper published the story [of her reading] afterward, but there wasn't much discussion of the content." This, however, was not really how she evaluated her impact. Instead, Joey explained,

one reaction that I remember was a 55 or 60 year old woman coming up to me after another reading of the story that I did, and she said, "This is literature that I've been waiting for. It has a meaning and a message that's more than just nice words. It's not just about a topic that has no connection to my life." And that's what I want to do.

Personal feedback, even from just a few individuals, is a mark of success. For Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung, who lists his contact information right on his paintings, this feedback comes from 4 am calls, or

[w]hen I got a bag of coffee beans. That's working...I got emails from time to time, actually, one time there's a lot of email coming in. So that's working, it's touching on a lot of people.

Dara Greenwald, practicing her craft in the small upstate city of Troy, New York, does not even have the option of getting national and international media attention, so she set her sights on a different measure. As she explains:

The site can determine different things that are successful. Like in New York [City], if we had done a project like that success would have been, "Oh, did the *New York Times* write about it?" or something like that -- I don't know. But in Troy, it's like, "Did anyone come?" I mean *anyone*....[And] several hundred people came.

People participating in a project is also how Adam Horowitz, co-founder of the pseudo-official U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, thinks about success:

[S]uccess for us is to bring people together who might never have [participated in a collective artistic activist organization]... So, it's who is participating, the scale of participation has been pretty exciting...so we measure it on that.

With participation as a goal, practitioners look for evidence that others have picked up their ideas and run with them. "Contagiousness," is what Jason Jones calls this, explaining that "[t]he measure of success is that [the signs and symbols and stories created] become something that other people pick up and use." Likewise, when we asked Amin Husain, what he wanted his audience to do, he answered simply "replicate it" and then went on to list actions similar to the ones he had helped plan that took place at other sites, even in other countries. Andrew Boyd, while freely admitting the overall goal of defeating the presidential election of George W Bush had failed, pointed to measure by which his Billionaires for Bush project did succeed:

[C]opycat chapters.... It was a quite extraordinary rate of growth and level of enthusiasm. We started with a chapter in New York and another chapter in LA... and it grew to up to one hundred chapters.

Material Impact

The materiality of effect, be it bodies at an event or the passage of a particular law, is how some artistic activists gauge success. "My first demonstrations resulted in people in power resigning," ACT-UP's Chant Queen Ron Goldberg reflected, "You would actually see movement; not as fast as we wanted, but you don't usually get to see it in front of your eyes." Beka Economopoulos and Jason Jones quickly point out how they've,

gotten eight institutions in the last year or two who cut ties to fossil fuel interests by either divesting from fossil fuels, dropping a board member from the industry, or canceling a sponsorship contract with a fossil fuel company. Those are traditional activist metrics for success.

For Eve Mosher, whose creative environmental actions included designing and building one hundred simple "green roofs" on New York City tenement roof tops, "the effectiveness, in my mind, is measured by how many green roof plots actually get out there. How much beyond those initial one hundred the project extends."

Pulling it Off

Perhaps the easiest, and most necessary, "material" effect to be measured is the creative action itself: simply pulling it off. In addition to getting people to show up at her inflatable recreation of a historic -- and forgotten -- black church in upstate New York where the famous the abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet once preached, Dara Greenwald elaborates,

Why it was successful to me is:

A) it worked

B) no one got killed [laughs]

...It's just that we made this huge inflatable church and then people went inside it. It stayed inflated, it didn't collapse, so...there's structural success in that what you make actually functions as you intend it to.

For some the material marker of success is even closer to home. When we talked to Coco Fusco and asked her how she measured success, she reminded us that being a Black, middle-aged,

woman artist “who hasn’t disappeared” and is still making art and making a living was for her a significant marker of success.

Empowerment

Measuring the impact of a creative project through its material outcomes offers a concrete, and sometimes even countable, metric of success. But even the most material-minded of the artistic activists we talked to raised problems with this approach. Andrea Polli, who has worked with NASA and the National Science Foundation, and holds a PhD in computing, communications and electronics as well as her more traditional Masters in Fine Arts, makes the case that, “evaluating an art project along the same terms that you might evaluate an engineering project or something like that can be problematic, because it can limit the project.” Speaking of her own work creating fanciful images of power-generating wind turbines on NYC landmarks, she elaborates:

I've tried to think about art as being effective in terms of changing the way people think... I think that's more important than producing energy. It's tangibly important to produce energy and that's great, but if you're changing the way people are thinking then you've got more people starting to do projects like that.

Pressed on what she meant by “changing the way people think” Andrea explained that,

When I say “change the way you think,” it has to do with agency. It's having the attitude that you can come up with new ideas and they can be implemented. Or they can at least be tried out. Changing people from taking a passive point of view to an active point of view.

One can easily measure the numbers of wind turbines created and the energy generated, just as one can count the numbers of newspaper articles, or people attending an event. It is even possible to account for changes in the way people think through opinion polls and the like. But when it comes to things like assessing the transformation in a person from a passive to an active point of view, precise metrics become illusive.

In addition to seeing (and counting) the number of Green Roofs that people built, Eve Mosher lists as a measure of success “giving [participants] that knowledge and confidence, empowerment, whatever.” “Empowerment?,” we ask. Eve responds, “I hate that word, I hate that word. [But] Sometimes it’s the only term.” People’s “empowerment” is frequently evoked as the ideal positive outcome of a creative project. It’s a worthy goal. It’s also a goal that is extremely hard to assess and measure. And this raises a dilemma. “I think a lot of the conversation on metrics has been actually damaging,” Gan Golan states bluntly, “because the things that are the most measurable are sometimes the least important. And I think that the most important are the least measurable.”

Problems with Assessment

While there is little agreement amongst the artistic activists we interviewed regarding what sort of measures are appropriate for assessing the success of artistic activism, there was remarkable consensus on one thing: metrics are problematic. Again and again, prompted only by our “positive” questions regarding how they assessed their own work, they launched into passionate and thoughtful critiques of assessment. While the comments vary by individual, taken together they sort out into several general categories of critique:

Who Measures?

A recurring criticism of assessment and, especially, measurement has to do with who is doing the evaluation and what it is for. “Who are we trying to convince, and of what?” Gan Golan asks.

Are we trying to convince funders? Are we trying to convince economists? Are we trying to convince advocacy organizations? And to do what? To spend more money on this stuff? You know, to respect the role of art and culture? Those are my questions.

Gan’s questions are answered point blank by Yes Man Jacques Servin:

I think it’s the whole NGO system...It’s more the NGOs who want funding are like, “We’ll guarantee your investment by measurements. We can measure our impact.” I think it’s as simple as that. I think it doesn’t do any good for activists.

Since artistic activism does not produce objects to be sold in an art market, artistic activists are often supported in their work by philanthropic funders and NGOs and, particularly outside of the US, governmental organizations all of whom, understandably, desire “accountability” for their investment. What measures these bureaucratic organizations demand, when they ask for them, and how they want them accounted for, however, is often at odds with the time-frames and skill-sets of the artistic activists. As a result artistically inclined individuals and groups react with suspicion to the whole idea of evaluation.

Part of this suspicion has to do with language, “If you use “measurement” and “evaluation” with my local activist group, “ says Beautiful Trouble’s Nadine Bloch, “they’re going to be like, yeah, whatever, and give you the glazed-over look.” Evaluation, like any specialized practice, has developed its own language and terms: “theory of change,” “qualitative and quantitative,” “metrics,” “data,” “variables,” “log frames,” etc. that can be alienating and intimidating for those without the proper training or education. During a recent forum on impact and evaluation organized by a group of New York based philanthropies (as well as writers of this report) Risë Wilson, a founder of the artistic activist Laundromat Project turned philanthropy director of the Robert Rauschenberg Center, made the point that although artistic activism is an “indigenous” practice of those most marginalized by race, class, sexuality, and legal status,

the folks that have the clearest fluency in the majority language are then able to gather the resources because they can describe the impact, [while] the people who have been doing this for their survival don’t speak that language.

Another cause for distrust has to do with who is evaluating and what are their interests. In the same forum that Risë spoke at, Jan Cohen-Cruz, who evaluates the projects of A Blade of Grass’ “Fellows for Socially Engaged Art” program, stressed that “It becomes important to ask *who* is the field researcher or the evaluator?” This is critical, she explains, because “based on who your writer is, what will be evaluated, what will be lifted up, will be different.” As Jan went on to stress, the problem with evaluation often has to do with using evaluators and methods of evaluation that are foreign to the artistic activist and the intent of their project. Jan, herself, is careful to distinguish her position as a “Field Researcher” rather than an “evaluator,” describing her practice as as one of “co-researching with [artistic activists]... a collaboration.” Again, this is in line with A Blade Of Grass’ philosophy that their “assessment is artist-driven.”

Some of the reservations with which artistic activists approach evaluation and measurement go beyond the issue of who measures and why. There is serious skepticism that appropriate and effective tools for the measurement of artistic activism are being used.

Inappropriate Tools of Measurement

“Was Rosa Park sitting on the bus effective?” Igor Vamos of the Yes Men asks, rhetorically, about the performative action that signalled the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and brought the US Civil Rights movement into the public eye.

Was that effective? It was important in the Civil Rights Movement. I think if you asked most people they would say: “yes, it was.” But if you actually went through and assessed it, I don’t know how you would actually measure it.

Asked to discuss what was arguably his most “successful” creative project, Billionaires for Bush, Andrew Boyd tells us that,

there was a lot of measurable metrics that we knocked out of the park. Like if you were going to measure by column inches you know, newspaper real estate that we captured, it would - well, I don’t have an actually final number but it was like, you know, three hundred articles.

“But,” he continues,

politically, we have absolutely no metrics. We have a few anecdotes about sort of little moments when we would have interactions with people and they would have these ah-ha moments, but we really don’t know what was going on inside their heads even. We have no metrics for persuasion. We have no idea if we were successful. We have no idea if we persuaded a single voter.

Part of Andrew’s frustration, and Igor’s skepticism, has to do with the scale of measurement, and the resources available for evaluation. It is easy to hit the “News” toggle of a Google search engine to see if anyone has written about your campaign; it is much harder to account for its long term impact on voting patterns, or how a creative action served as a catalyst for social change. But underlying Andrew and Igor’s lament is something else: a recognition that the type of work that artistic activism does is difficult to measure with the tools available.

Gan Golan points out how easily available metrics -- like column inches, or numbers of social media hits -- while easy to assess, don’t really capture what is important -- and worse, fool artistic activists and their supporters into thinking they have. “We’re tricking ourselves in the lab, so to speak.” He then elaborates,

I don’t think we have yet found metrics that really show meaning, but I do think that when you see massive levels of people willing to undertake risk, willing to exert their energy, particularly when they’re not being compensated by anything else, that’s when you start to see human meaning being actualized in concrete form. Meaning is what motivates people to do work.

And a sense of “meaning,” like Rosa Parks “willing to undertake risk,” or Andrew’s elusive search for “what was going on inside their heads” is not something that can be easily measured by social media use, or attendance numbers, or media coverage, or many of the other ways that artistic activists are asked to account for success. *And* it is these large affective impacts that distinguish artistic activism from other forms of activism.

Outside of What Can Be Measured

Aware of the shortcomings of the standard tool of measurement to capture the particular affective effect, or æffect, of artistic activism some practitioners come to the conclusion that *no* method of evaluation or tools of measurement will work. Metrics don’t work because what artistic activism does best is immeasurable.

“What may be the most effective element isn’t necessarily measurable in any sort of empirical way, and that’s a real challenge,” admits Aaron Gach, who has likened his practice to magic. He then provides an illustrative scenario:

So if you set up a blockade and it actually prevents the police from getting in, that’s sort of a concrete effect. But a psychic effect is difficult to measure. So if you curse the police, and they go home and they have nightmares at night, chances are you’re not going to know about that.

Aaron is being only half serious (he does believe in magic, after all), but he captures a sentiment shared widely and taken seriously: that the “magic” of artistic activism is outside of rational calculation. When we asked Leónidas Martín about metrics, he responded,

that’s a very tricky question, because it’s not easy at all. Since we [are] working with little parts of rationality, you know, we cannot measure it in a very rational way.

Some of the artistic activists with the most experience working with social change campaigns or delivering “measurables” to funders are also the most skeptical about the ability of these metrics to really evaluate whether their project is working. “There are measurables,” admits

Greenpeace’s Nathan Santry,

you can have objectives like: did I complete the project, did I deploy it? When I did the direct communication, did I directly communicate? But in the bigger picture, how do you know? And I don’t know.

Beka Economopoulos and Jason Jones, who can point to concrete material measures of success: mailing list numbers, petition signatures and media hits, not to mention getting eight major institutions to take action against their associations with fossil fuels, still see another level - the bigger picture -- where they question whether success can be measured. As Beka tells us, even with our Natural History Museum project where we have these sort of traditional metrics for success, we’re still aiming for something beyond that...So the world of metrics lives down here, but it’s like above this level of getting museums to do X, Y, Z, there’s this level. And above that there’s this level, and above that there’s universal egalitarian emancipation, you know? I don’t know how you fucking measure that!

Part of this problem lies in the goal of radical social change. If change is truly radical it will, by necessity, appear foreign to our current ways of making sense of the world. Such change will entail, to borrow a phrase of Jacques Rancière, a “re-distribution of the sensible.” In an earlier discussion, León Martín discussed the importance of creating “new forms of politics that actually are almost un-politics” and being attentive to,

[w]hen something is happening just right before it gets organized, [when it is still] undefined. ‘Cause we think these kind of things contain more than the things that are already organized...it’s, let’s say, much more open in that way.

León goes on to say that he is interested in using his craft for “creating a whole image system that is completely different than before.” Such a radical recalibration of reality, of course, renders all forms of measurement that came before, and that we might currently understand, useless. When it comes to a “system that is completely different than before,” as Beka might ask: How do you fucking measure that?

The Problem of Time

When pressed on the issue of the immeasurability of artistic activism, a number of the people we interviewed raised the problem of time. Evaluation and measurement is usually carried out at the

time of, or soon after, the intervention. The type of affective transformation that artistic activism is best at, however, takes place over a long time. “It took three hundred years to get rid of slavery and segregation in this country,” Coco Fusco reminds us,

[s]o do you think that means that the people in the nineteenth century who were abolitionists or who were anti-lynching activists were losers and that they failed? How long did it take the non-violence, through non-violent means, to decolonize India?

Decades of struggle. So does that mean that each individual instance is a failure?

Coco sees a lesson in this for artistic activists who are quick to evaluate their actions as a success or failure.

If you can’t measure the effect of individual art practices directly on social formations in this immediate sense, then do you want to consider them all failures? Or shouldn’t we start looking at the big picture?

To recast a phrase made famous by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: The arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, but it is *long*.

“It’s a long wave,” muses Beatrice Glow, whose multi-sensory work often grapples with our understandings of history. She elaborates,

I think of everything as being interdependent or part of an ecosystem, philosophically and biologically. There are urgent moments of crisis where the waves are crashing on the land, which are the moments that activists quickly rise to. But then there’s the long waves, behind them, that are holding a space. They’re affecting generational change, through educational, cultural methodologies. I see myself as being part of that [long] wave....

“But how do you measure that?” Beatrice asks herself.

That’s going to be difficult because - well, time is speeding up - but people used to say that it takes about sixty years to see a change. So, I hope that by the time I’m an old woman I might be able to see a little bit of change, if I get to be lucky and see that.

Not only can the long-term impact of artistic activism, and the long arc of social justice, be missed by short term measurement and evaluation, but some artistic activists find that it is the very nature of evaluation to privilege things or events, which can be stopped in time, over processes, which take place over time. “It gets back to this idea, like, what system of measurement are you looking at?” Sam Gould argues, elaborating:

Each project can’t get you to your goal. It’s just one more step towards reaching that goal, which is always on the horizon. But, you need this belief that, like, walking there is totally good enough, you know? Even though in your mind you know you can never actually reach the horizon. It’s so trite, but it’s the journey man! It’s the journey.

For Sam and the others, artistic activism is *æffective* not when it is thought as a string of actions that unfold over time and not in terms of discrete interventions. To use language an activist might understand: metrics, as they are frequently employed, emphasise the impact of tactics, but in order for tactics to be effective, they have to be a part of a longer campaign. In language more familiar to the arts the question is one of Product or Process. Which is it we should be looking at when evaluating the success of artistic activism?

Evaluation Hinders Creativity

When asking artistic activists about evaluation, even in its broadest, most open definition as a way of reflecting upon whether what one is doing “works,” a criticism is made that cuts to the

core of the practice: evaluation hinders creativity. The roots of this concern lie in the understanding that evaluation is a rational endeavor, and the belief that art's power -- and by extension, the power of artistic activism -- resides in its ability to transcend rationality.

Part of the promise of artistic activism is to generate the unexpected: to create novel perspectives on the past or new visions for the future. To accomplish this, its believed, artistic activists need to be able to reject what is "reasonable" and trust their own creative senses, taking their own path even if what they do doesn't "measure up." As Gan Golan explains:

I think artists are often accused of doing things that don't matter because they are intuitively doing things that are meaningful and make sense to them. Sometimes they may be plugging into something that is incredibly powerful and important. So, I would encourage people to keep doing things that don't matter to others the way that we define them, because we're reaching out into that dark, undefinable place in which so much of human experience actually happens.

It is to that "undefinable place in which so much of human experience actually happens" that artistic activism can reach. And any effort to define it, which is the prerequisite for any meaningful analysis and assessment, is suspected of delimiting its power.

Failure is Part of the Practice

Alfredo Jaar, speaks eloquently about the "failure" of his attempt to capture and convey the horror of the massacres in Rwanda:

I created different works. All failures. I did 25 works in six years. And so many in such a long period of time because I couldn't stop. I just couldn't stop. And each one had a different program, it failed and I moved onto the next one, it failed and I moved onto the next one. Of course, at the end, I learned a few things and I affected a few people.

Jaar's "Rwanda Project" is widely recognized as one of the most impactful pieces of political art in contemporary times. It is only through multiple failures that he made his artwork a smashing success.

Artistic activism is an innovative practice... and it is in the nature of innovation to fail. Thomas Edison famously experimented -- and failed -- with over 10,000 chemicals and materials when developing his alkaline storage battery before having a measurable success. Failure is a recognized part of the creative process of artistic activism, yet verifiable success is also the understandable goal of social movements, as well as funders, artistic institutions, and NGOs. In emphasizing markers of "success," artistic activists worry that measurement and evaluation will punish "failure" and thus discourage innovation and experimentation.

Evaluation Takes Time, Money and Skill

Alongside the lofty, epistemological critiques of evaluation are a set of reservations rooted firmly on the ground. Measurement and evaluation take time, money and technical skills that are often in short supply amongst artistic activists. When we asked Diana Arce whether she evaluates the impact of her Politioke project she replied:

I mean, I try, but it's an issue of time. I can send out a newsletter and ask people to participate in a survey, and now I try to interview someone at the end of the shows that I do to talk about how they feel about the show. But that's so immediate. It's one thing to be able to interview a person right after the show, but what I think would be more interesting would be to see what they say two weeks after the show.

For Diana, who is deeply interested in the social impact of her shows, it is a matter of where she wants to expend her limited resources. As she goes on to say,

do I invest energy in researching the effectiveness of the shows or do I continue doing shows? And I always happen to choose to continue to do shows or work on new projects. “I actually think that so many people are resistant to measures not because they don’t want to have impact,” explains Risë Wilson, following up on the issue of resource allocation that Diana raised, “but because [they are thinking] I’m too busy doing the work. If you want to pay me for some time and space to think...happily I’ll do that, but in the meantime I am trying to get it done!”

Regardless of whether one has the time to do evaluation, “[i]t’s something that requires different skill sets than what we have,” Igor Vamos of the Yes Men explains to us. And if you don’t have the skills, it means paying for someone who does. Igor continues:

We were looking into prices of doing research through a focus group company, and the prices were so exorbitant that there was no way we could afford to do it anyway. Given the creative skill set of artistic activists, as well as limited resources of time and money, doing evaluation seems simply not to make much sense. Even Paolo Pedercini, who actually does possess the technical skills to do the data collection and analysis, and whose Internet projects are relatively easy to track, concludes, “I could probably create a system and do some kind of data analysis, but I don’t have the time,” before adding, and “I don’t really care.”

So Why Evaluate At All?

As the critiques of measurement and evaluation accumulate, some of the artistic activists arrived at the sobering conclusion: why bother? Veteran artistic activist Andrew Boyd argues that metrics are “valuable” but not something acknowledged as “needed.” Speaking of his fellow practitioners, he elaborates,

That’s just not how they operate...there’s sort of an ideological resistance to being so instrumental or, even if they’re open to it sort of intellectually or ideologically, there is no mechanism for them -- in any significant way, in any way that matters, at any scale or scope -- to actually be guided by it.

Intelligent Mischief’s Terry Marshall, while also recognizing that metrics could be valuable, recognizes that the proliferation of bad measurements has made artistic activists skeptical of their use:

It’s hard to have the traditional measuring tools. It’s hard to measure, so I think people have settled on there is no measurement, you can’t measure these things. There are foundations or other institutions demanding these tools that don’t work. [So] people are like, “there is no measurement whatsoever, you can never tell with these things.”

Almost as if in response to Terry, Yes Man Jacques Servin, says, “I mean we have no idea how to measure our impact. It’s purely guesswork.” He continues:

When I see organizations like NGOs that we’ve worked with talking about measuring impact, I’m not sure they do a good job at all of that. I think they’re just kind of convincing themselves of things.

When we pushed Jacques, asking him if measuring impact -- if done well -- was useful, he was blunt in his appraisal:

No, I don’t think so. I think sometimes it’s just really obvious what to do, and those are the moments when it really does no good to measure, to think about measurements of impact. It can actually get in the way.

Means and Ends

Underlying many artistic activists' criticisms of evaluation is a question of means and ends. It is worried that by emphasizing what can be measured, the affective qualities that are the unique contribution of artistic activism will be disregarded. By measuring in the moment, the long-term effects of artistic activism to create new perspectives and sensibilities will be overlooked. By stressing what "works," experimentation and "failure" will be punished. And by giving time, money, and emphasis to evaluation, it takes away from scarce resources available to the artistic activist's creation. In sum, the fear is that evaluation and measurement, instead of being a means with which to create more effective projects, will become the goal. This version of instrumentality is what worries San Francisco Print Collective member Eric Triantafillou:

I would argue in order to envision and realize the change we want socially, we're going to have to deal with all kinds of instrumentalization, but we're so fearful. The thing is, it's a means to an end...[I]f we raise the issue of efficacy and we don't have that goal, that issue of what it is and how we're going to get there, then things like instrumentality become really scary.

Yet, in this -- valid -- criticism lies a solution, one recognized by many of the people we interviewed. Assessment must be tied with "what it is and how we're going to get there" that is: *what the artistic activist wants to do and how they want to do it.*

Contextual Assessment

Over and over again, we heard from artistic activists that they are interested in being able to evaluate whether what they are doing is working or not. What they are resisting is evaluation rigidly applied and added on after the fact to satisfy impact reports demanded by bureaucracies. They are, however, more comfortable with a different model of assessment, a system of evaluation flexible enough to adapt to the particularities of their project and their approach. As Alfredo Jarr elaborates,

I measure the success of my work according to how I have accomplished the program. And the thing is, of course, that each project has a different program, which is specific to that project, and so there are hundreds of ways to measure the success of each work, of the work, since there are different programs and different objectives.

In brief, evaluation and assessment for Alfredo only makes sense when it is *contextualized*.

Contextual assessment means taking into account the culture of those doing the creative work, and the type of work they are doing. Adam Horowitz, of the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, for instance, speaks of trying to figure out how to do evaluation "in a way that feels aligned culturally with the work that we're doing." And, as recounted by many practitioners and researchers quoted above, those who best understand the intended impact of the project are the artistic activists themselves, and those who are in the best position to comprehend its impact are those who the project intends to impact. Contextual assessment is also sensitive to changes over time, as evaluation is a moving target and what works at one time may not work in another. "[I]t's only going to work for a minute," Avram Finkelstein insists. Evaluation, he explains, is

a project in flux.... the objective is to train one's eye critically and to look for the meaning in every move that you make, and the meaning of every response....[E]ffecting change through creative endeavors is a very vast project that's always in flux....[T]he best way to approach it is to think of the looseness of it and to become adept at a looser set of responses.

The most meaningful variable in the context of any assessment is the intended goal of the artistic activist for their project, what Alfredo identifies as the “different objectives” of “different programs.” Nadine Bloch, as coordinator for Beautiful Trouble’s training workshops, is acutely aware of what’s needed to combine arts and activism into a force for social change.

So we identify goals.... Are you trying to uplift people? Are you trying to shock people? Are you trying to educate? Are you doing this because you want to give your membership a chance to experiment with self-organization and creating a small project that will be part of a bigger whole so that they feel they're part of the bigger whole? Like what is the actual strategic goal or bottom line objective of this? Is it just to beautify street corners? That's fine. But let's be clear about it. Is it because you're really angry and you just need to yell at someone? Also fine. Let's be clear about what the goal is.

Because, in the end,

identifying the goal...you really want to achieve is really critical to measuring impact.

This seems obvious: of course one needs to know what an artistic activist wants to do in order to determine if they've done it. But our experience as researchers, trainers and practitioners has demonstrated that when it comes to artistic activism this evaluative process is rarely undertaken with any rigor. Artistic activists give a great deal of thought to how they want their piece to look or sound -- their technical aims and mastery of their medium -- but far less consideration is given to what success means at a social or political level. In turn, evaluating bodies, in their search for demonstrable results turn to easily available data points whether or not they are actually measuring movement toward an end goal. But, as Andrew Boyd, also of Beautiful Trouble, succinctly states: “You're never going to know if you're successful unless you're clear what your goals are.”

Even seasoned activist organizations like Greenpeace struggle with setting goals. As the arts school-trained head of their Actions Team, Nathan Santry, told us,

we found out in the past what was part of our problem was that our campaigns were framed in such lofty, unachievable ways that the campaigns would kind of chug on, with a lot of resources, and not know whether they were making progress. So how do you take these goals—save the ocean, save the whales, save the climate, or whatever—how do you boil that down and say, okay, what do we mean by that?

On the other hand, by setting the objectives too narrow, Nathan explains, “we tightened up too much...we made what we wanted to win achievable at a scale where we started to lose some ambition.” As he theorizes,

you can't have something so lofty that you can never get any progress and you just go crazy in this broad kind of a vague space, but if you set your objective so narrow, you may also miss a lot of opportunities to kind of engage in the world in a really dynamic and interesting way.

Goal setting, Nathan learned, is an art in itself.

Even die-hard critics of metrics, like Jacques Servin, when asked about his own assessment, reveals that he does have a “loose” method of evaluation that includes “getting people to think through what they’re actually trying to do.” Because it reveals something about the methods of evaluation that are taking place in the field, and because the Yes Men are pioneers of and leaders in this field, it’s worth quoting Jacques at length. He tells us:

We do try to get people to think about strategy and how they think this action that they’re coming up with will affect things, but in a very basic, simple way.

Why? we ask.

Because activists make such basic simple errors. Like we’ll come up with some kind of an action where – hey, let’s do this die-in during the protest blah, blah, blah. We’ll have these puppets that represent good and bad; we’ll have this little skit going on. And it’s all very beautiful and exciting and full of puppets and music and so on, but then nobody actually bothers to step back and go, and who’s going to see this? And what are they going to think when they see it? And how is it going to work, you know?....

So what do the Yes Men do?

We just start getting people to think through what they’re actually trying to do. But not with – well, this kind of tactic has X percent chance of success. No, it’s got to be much more lively. It’s got to be much more fun and interesting than that. It has to be pretty free.

Conclusions

It would be nice if, having spent so much time researching and writing (and reading) this report, it ended with a snappy, synthetic conclusion that definitively stated that *this* is the Theory of Change that artistic activists employ, *that* is how practitioners understand how artistic activism works to bring about that change, and *these* are the proper metrics to be applied in order to assess impact. Such a conclusion would be satisfying... but dishonest and, ultimately, do little to move us in a direction of understanding how artistic activism works and developing a method for its evaluation. Any accurate analysis of the efficacy of artistic activism and any useful system of measurement and assessment needs to grapple with the conditions of the field as they are, and not as one wishes they were or hopes they may be. And the truth is that there is not a unified opinion when it comes to a theory of change, nor how artistic activism works, nor if one can even measure its impact. As indeterminate as the field may be, we do see, however, patterns of practice and tendencies of thought that can help us understand how to conceptualize and measure impact and guide the creation of assessment tools that will be of service to practitioners and their supporters.

While it is true that there is no self-conscious and clearly-articulated Theory of Change that artistic activists follow, reading between the lines of how they describe their own projects and what they hope to attain, a broad-brushed, rather Impressionist, portrait takes shape. Artistic activists believe in a *social theory of change* in that they, and other people, can and do make change. They also believe that change happens through changes in consciousness, and in this way they hew to an *idealist theory of change*. This idealist theory, however, is an unorthodox one, deviating from the “ideal type” in several significant ways. First, *consciousness*, as a rational and cognitive construct, is replaced by *culture*, lived and largely unconscious, “webs of significance,” to borrow a term again from Clifford Geertz. Second, *Culture*, as an expressive art form, is seen as a more effective means for ideas than more traditional vehicles such as

manifestos, reports, and words on a page or screen. Third, and flowing from the two conditions above, ideas are understood as things to be viscerally felt rather than just intellectually thought and, as such, the clean demarcation between (ideal) mind and (material) body gets fuzzy. Finally, many of the artistic activists insisted that the point of the “culture shift” engendered by artistic activism was to move people to bodily political action, even to the point where “empowerment” or “agency” -- detached from any particular issue -- is a goal.

When it comes to the question of what artistic activism does or can do, to shift the culture, empower people, and bring about change, there is even less agreement. Some artistic activists identified the objective of artistic activism as awareness through access to information, with the understanding that information must be presented in such a way as to appeal to the senses and build affective connections. Others stressed the ability of artistic activism to foster conversations, making ideas into something co-created rather than received. While others see the use of artistic activism as a way to disrupt what Larry Bogard calls the “hegemonologue” of the dominant society, opening up spaces for dissent. Still others understood the power of artistic activism as filling in those spaces, and providing alternative templates for seeing, being, and doing. And some artistic activists saw the role of artistic activism as joining forces with other methods of bringing about social change through alignment with social movements and social organizations.

It is around the topic of metrics that there is the most accord amongst artistic activists. But not around a particular tool or method -- ironically, they are united in their skepticism. While most agree that knowing if what one is doing is working is a good idea, most are *also* deeply skeptical about the impetus behind metrics, the appropriateness of the tools used to evaluate, and even whether the “magic” of artistic activism can be captured, recorded, measured and evaluated at all. The metrics artistic activists use are often those relatively easy to measure: low-hanging fruit like media hits, or attendance numbers, and even as they use such metrics, artistic activists are acutely aware of the limits of quantitative measures to capture the intimate affective qualities that artistic activism is aiming for. Measurement, when it happens, takes place an ad hoc fashion, not as part of an overall plan. Rarely, if ever, is assessment considered at the start of the creative process, or as part of a regular reflective practice throughout. If it happens at all, assessment usually occurs at the end of the artistic activist intervention: a way to measure what has already happened.

With a lack of tools appropriate to the practice, artistic activists sometimes retreat into what might be called “magical existentialism”: acting because you know you must act, and having a faith that doing a creative action will result in social change but without any real understanding of causality. Gan Golan brilliantly describes this tension between the magic and mystery of artistic activism, and the desire to understand it in order to be a more effective social change agent:

We’re trying to see the dark matter that’s out there and detect it and really understand it. If we can somehow observe the process that happens between a work of art and an idea reaching a community, and then that community taking a defiant form of action, that’s the black box. That’s where the great mystery is happening in these beautiful, unbelievable processes of moving from meaning to building relationships, to building power to taking action. That’s where I would love to be able to peer in more clearly.

Artistic activism *is* a bit of a black box. We have a hunch it works, but we don't really know how or why, and thousands of years of inquiry into the question, while illuminating, has not made the process by which artistic activism leads to social change transparent. This inconclusive conclusion does not mean, however, that we throw up our hands and retreat into the long tradition of art mysticism. It means working harder to understand all the myriad ways that artistic activism might work and developing tools that can help us see a bit more clearly.

Directions Forward

“I honestly don't see anyone else doing this,” is how Terry Marshall responds when we tell him about our goal of researching the efficacy of artistic activism and creating tools for artistic activists. Terry is mistaken, but instructively so.

One of the things we discovered in the extensive literature review which led up to this report is that lots of other folks are interested in assessing the social impact of creative activities. A Blade of Grass, one of the main funders of artistic activism, hired the respected academic Jan Cohen-Cruz to write a series of reports evaluating their “Fellows for Socially Engaged Art.” The Culture Group, produces and distributes a useful guide for artistic activists and NGOs called *Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy*, as well as a more indepth report on *Culture Matters: Understanding Cultural Strategy and Measuring Cultural Impact*, and is funded by institutional heavyweights like the Open Societies and Ford Foundations as well Arca, Compton, General Services, McKay, Nathan Commings, and Unbound Philanthropy. For years, Animating Democracy, a project of the DC-based interest group Americans for the Arts, has made a serious study of efficacy of the arts and has issued a steady stream of superb reports. These efforts culminated in their roll-out of *Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change* this past year. The report was issued in multiple formats, each targeted toward a different group of stakeholders in the field: artists, educators, curators, evaluators, and funders, and designed to help them assess impact. University of Pennsylvania has a Social Impact of the Arts Project and The Media Impact Project is housed at University of Southern California. The list goes on. In preparing for this report we read dozens upon dozens of articles, white papers, user-guides and the like. While most were interested more in the art side of artistic activism or related fields like documentary film, there is plenty of material available for those interested in the study and application of metrics to arts and activism

And if anyone should know this, it would be Terry. For nearly a decade, Terry has been at the center of the field. He is co-founder of Intelligent Mischief, a “creative action design lab” out of Boston, MA; he has worked as a trainer for both Beautiful Trouble and the Center for Story Based Strategy; and he is on the Board of Directors of the Center for Artistic Activism. If experienced, well-read, well-connected and inquisitive Terry Marshall “honestly [doesn't] see anyone else doing this,” the problem does not reside with Terry. Indeed, with only one exception, none of the fifty-plus practitioners we interviewed about assessment and measurement, referenced any of the work being done in the field. The problem lies with the field itself.

Part of the problem may be insurmountable, or at least require a very steep climb. Art and artists, at least in the modern era, have largely defined themselves against rationalization, and the idea of rationally accounting for effect, and even more so, for *affect*, rubs against the grain of tradition,

even for those who reject traditional *l'art pour l'art* and embrace the idea of art for social change. This resistance to instrumentalization is often compounded by the over-instrumentalization of funders and NGOs who ask for and apply metrics and use specialized language inappropriate to the work that artistic activism does well. And artistic activists are often under-resourced and over-taxed, and when faced to choose between “trying to get it done” or researching whether it worked, they will understandably choose creation over evaluation.

The lack of consensus amongst artistic activists on how social change happens and the role that artistic activism plays in bringing this about, as well as the dizzying array of different ways which theorists, researchers and practitioners think about these questions, leads us to the conclusion, perhaps obvious at this point, that there is no one way to assess the impact of artistic activism. Artistic activism, when all is said and done, is not a science but an art. There is no singular way it works, nor simple formula to determine if it has worked.

This, however, is where our humility gives way to hubris. We want to suggest that while defining writ large what artistic activism does and how it does it is a Sisyphean task, we can -- and if we are to take the practice of artistic activism seriously must -- create *a universal methodology for contextual efficacy*. That is, a way of considering impact appropriate to particular practices and goals, and a means to apply it that will, to follow the demands laid down above by Jacques Servin, be lively, fun, interesting, and free.

A Different Approach

At this point we might take this long and rather academic report, distill it to its essential points, throw in a few relevant case studies, hire a designer to present our ideas in an attractive and easy to read pamphlet form and put it out there in the world.

To be, we fear, largely ignored.

Again, one of the findings of our research is that 1) There are smart, well-researched, well-designed, and easy-to-use guides to assessment already available, and 2) They are not used, or even known about, by most artistic activists. Instead, we propose taking a different approach: an open, creative approach in tune with the culture of artistic activism. Acknowledging that there is disensus when it comes to how change happens, how artistic activism works, and how to measure it, or whether to measure it at all, we believe it is a mistake to provide yet another “expert” model of a theory of change and guidelines for assessment. Instead we feel that what is needed is an assessment tool that does what artistic activism does best: engage, ask questions, challenge perspectives, provide alternatives and move people toward action.

Our starting point is with the artistic activist themselves, asking them a simple set of questions:

- 1) What do you want your piece to do?
- 2) How will you know if it has worked?

And then, after the intervention has been done and assessed,

- 3) What do you want to do next?

These seem like simple questions, but the thinking they prompt is profound. Asking an artistic activist what they want their piece to do is a question that entails thinking deeply about what

artistic activism *can* do and, assuming it has some social impact, a theory of change that leads from the tactical to the strategic. It is a question that, if asked correctly, calls for the artistic activist to think in terms of their overall goal, the objectives that might get them toward that goal, and the creative tactics that will help them realize that objective. Answering the question of: How will you know if it has worked? involves the artistic activist thinking about specific indicators of impact. It transforms diffuse goals into concrete objectives, asks the artistic activist to think about audiences and what they want them to think, feel and/or do, and, in the end, provides a means with which to measure impact and gauge success -- as well as account for unexpected effects. And, What's next? leads the artistic activist to think about how impacts might be cumulative, each building off the other, as part of an overall campaign, instead of a one-off expressive gesture. In short, it prompts artists to think strategically about their practice.

Each of these "simple" questions, of course, need to be followed up with a myriad of clarifying sub-questions to take into account all the variables that go into addressing each major question. For example, asking What do you want your piece to do? might also encompass explorations of goals, objectives, audiences, and whether the focus of change is individual, policy, or advocacy, and so on. Each query addressed leads to a logical follow up, taking the participant on a guided journey to understanding their *own* creative and political process. The medium for such a query based method could be a script to be used by skilled interlocutors, or a paper worksheet to be filled out alone by the practitioners. A digital app, with its interactive capabilities, however, offers perhaps the most exciting possibilities.

Such an assessment approach demands thinking about artistic and activist intent, objectives, audience and potential impact at the start of the creative process, not just the end. It creates a plan that the artistic activist can check in with and measure their progress to, encouraging self-reflection and course adjustment as new circumstances arise and unintended consequences occur. It provides opportunities to refine and adjust objectives based on ongoing assessment. Not only does such an approach toward assessment make for a more thoughtful and self-aware creative process but it has the additional benefit of improving the quality and impact of the artistic activist intervention.

This query-based, interactive method, we think, is equally useful for those funding or otherwise supporting artistic activism. While the emphasis in our research and in this report has been on practitioners, our considerable experience training NGO staff to work with creative activists, funding and mentoring artistic activists ourselves, and working with program directors and funders as grant recipients ourselves, has taught us that what is needed is not an evaluative checklist to be ticked off at the end, but a method of critical, constructive and collaborative engagement with the artistic activist from the beginning. The methodology we are proposing provides a framework for having these discussions with the artistic activist about what they are trying to do and how they plan to assess what they have done. Just as it can be a tool for self-reflection in the hands of an artistic activist, and can be used as a means of joint reflection and focussed conversation between philanthropies, NGOs and governmental agencies and the artistic activists they support. The advantages of such approach are obvious, not only are meaningful evaluation criteria developed contextually for each project, but the metrics are not something forced down from on high but developed in collaboration from the ground up, with increased buy-in and compliance as a result.

Asking an artistic activist how they will know if what they have created has worked, prompts them to think about what *appropriate* metrics might be. In some cases simple empirically based approaches are possible. If one's objective is "raising awareness" it may make sense to survey a given population about their knowledge about an issue before and after an intervention. If it is "creating community" ethnographic observation of the growth of a community based around a certain issue or concern may be what is called for. But some effects of activist art may not be discernible to the naked eye, not in the short run, or even in our lifetimes—mass changes in sense perceptions, for instance. How do we judge the success of, say, Ranciere's "Re-Distribution of the Sensible" which, if successful, will have created entirely new criteria of success and failure? We probably cannot. And this is okay—we need to make our peace with some aspects of the indeterminacy of art's effect. The sort of query-based methodology of assessment outlined above, however, goes beyond assessing the impact of a particular project. It instills a strategic self-reflective intentionality into artistic activism. Or, in less expensive terms, it asks artistic activists and their supporters to take their efforts seriously, and provides them a means to do so.

This point of this query-based methodology is, again, not to impart a definitive prescription of what will work and how to measure it. The objective is to prompt a process whereby the artistic activist (sometimes along with their supporters) discovers for themselves how they think change happens, what part in that change their work can have, and how to assess whether their work is doing what they want it to do. The ideal is for all the stakeholders to have clarity about outcomes, even if the outcome itself is the process. For without clarity in this regard, the black box of artistic activism will remain opaque with no way to account for results, check one's progress, and move forward. In sum, we see an opportunity to help artistic activists and their supporters better understand and assess their practice, a way of thinking about and doing assessment which asks rather than tells and opens up spaces rather than closing them down, and that makes the artistic activist and their supporters co-collaborators in discovery. That is, an *affective* approach to assessing the impact of artistic activism.

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Rachel Brown & Mark Read
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Grayson Earl
Beka Economopoulos & Jason Jones
Fink
Avram Finkelstein
Coco Fusco
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Beatrice Glow
Gan Golan
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Ron Goldberg
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