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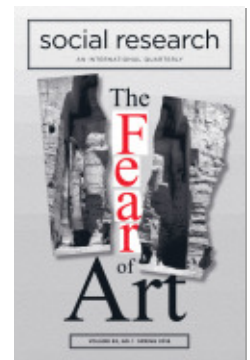
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## Does it Work?: The Effect of Activist Art

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# Stephen Duncombe

## Does it Work? The Effect of Activist Art

RECENTLY, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK HANS HAACKE A QUESTION. IT was a seemingly simple and straightforward question, one the artist is eminently qualified to answer. Haacke has exposed injustice and challenged authority for nearly a half century, from his censored show in 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum that revealed the real estate holdings of their board of trustees, to *Gift Horse*, his 2015 installation of a horse skeleton wrapped with an electronic stock ticker atop a pedestal in Trafalgar Square. In brief, Hans Haacke is one of the most talented and thoughtful activist artists alive.

I asked him this: “As an activist artist, how can you know when what you’ve done works?”

To which he responded: “I’ve been asked that question many times, and that question requires one to go around it before one really avoids it.”

Haacke’s reply was meant to be funny, but behind his humor lies a serious concern. In interviewing interviewing more than two dozen activist artists and surveying nearly a thousand examples of activist art, I am struck by the recurring inadequacy of the conceptualization of the relationship between activist art and social change. As a scholar, teacher, and sometimes practitioner of activist art, I am haunted by a question, a question that haunts, or ought to haunt, the entire practice: *Does it work?*

In this article I want to explore this question, and broach the subject of activist art’s affect and effect. This is an uncomfortable topic for many artists, since accounting for the impact of creativity is

often considered a form of heresy. Yet for over 40,000 years, from the recently discovered cave paintings in Indonesia to the most cutting-edge conceptual art coming out of contemporary art schools, artists have been using signs and symbols, stories and spectacles to *move* us. And for as long as people have been writing about art, the ability of art to have such an impact has worried—and thrilled—us. The Bible and the Qur'an are filled with strictures against visual depictions of all manner of things, both holy and profane. Witness the jealous God of Exodus when he commands Moses: "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 under the earth" (Exodus 21:4, emphasis as in *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*).

This fear of art is further elaborated in Isaiah. God, we are told, is the creator of all things, and for humans to create is an affront to his power. 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 subjects and God a mere object. As you might imagine, God is not pleased by this possibility (Isaiah 40–45).

Plato was so frightened by the power of art that he devoted a chapter in *The Republic* to explaining why it should be banished from his ideal society. Plato's objections 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 knows 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 (Plato 1955, Book 10). Plato doesn't like this. The ability of artists to create worlds and move people, which strikes fear into the hearts of philosophers and gods, is what makes art so powerful as a form of activism.

Yet the exact nature of this power remains elusive. From iconoclasts to neuroscientists, the power of art has been theorized in myri-

ad ways with no real consensus as to how it works. It is hard to think about art's power because the power of art lies beyond thinking. In the past, philosophers and critics called this the "sublime" quality of art. It is commonplace to judge a piece of art as beautiful or ugly, making these judgments based on cultural standards and personal preference. The sublime is something else: it can be beautiful but it can also be horrific; in either case it is beyond direct description, beyond measurement, beyond even comprehension—what the philosopher Immanuel Kant called the "supersensible" (Kant 1952). As mystical as it is, or perhaps because it is so mystical, the sublime is a powerful force that affects us in ways that our conscious minds cannot always account for.

The scope of this essay (the scope of any essay) precludes a definitive definition of the affect and effect of art, and for most artists and their critics such uncertainty is entirely acceptable. To be moved by a painting in a gallery or a performance in a theater, it is not necessary to know why and how you are moved, only that you are. But the burden on activist art is heavier; the standards are more demanding. Regardless of the current moniker—political artist, socially engaged artist, social practice artist, artistic activist, activist, et al. ad infinitum—the artist who hopes to bring about social, economic or political change through art must address questions about its impact. Artists have implicitly signed on to the project of using their creativity to create change, and if we are going to take this pledge seriously, it means asking over and over: Does it work?

## **ART AND ACTIVISM**

The difficulty in conceptualizing and articulating art's activism is understandable, for art and activism do different work in the world. Activism, as the name implies, is the activity of challenging and changing power relations, which the political scientist Harold Lasswell famously defined as "who gets what, when, how" (Lasswell, 1936). There are many ways of doing activism and being an activist. Activism does not necessarily mean going to a protest to condemn the powers

that be and demand more resources. It can just as easily be organizing a child care collective among parents in one's neighborhood, thereby creating new resources by empowering the community. The common element is an activity targeted toward a discernible end: change a policy, create an institution, mobilize a population, overthrow a dictator. Simply, the goal of activism is action to generate an effect.

Art, on the other hand, tends not to have such a clear target. It is difficult to say what art is for or against. Its value often rests 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. Good art always contains a surplus of meaning: something we cannot quite describe or put our finger on, but which moves us nonetheless. Its goal, if we can even use that word, is to stimulate a feeling, move us emotionally, or alter our perception. Art is an expression that generates affect.

Stripped down to its essentials the relationships look like this:

Activism → Effect

Art → Affect

At first glance these seem at odds with one another. Activism moves the material world, while art moves a person's heart, body, and soul. The scope of the former is social, while the latter is individual. In fact, however, they are complimentary. The social is not some mere abstraction; society is composed of people, and change does not 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 having been "enlightened" to do so through a process of rational choices based on reasoned deliberation with full access to information. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European coffeehouse is the model for this Enlightenment-era ideal. As I have argued elsewhere, this faith in political reason is just

that: a faith (Duncombe 2007). 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 that frame the information we receive. And, as any seasoned activist can tell you, people do not soberly decide to change their mind and act accordingly. They are moved to do so by emotionally powerful stimuli. As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other's business. If there is a causal relationship, it is this:

Affect → Effect

That is to say: before we act in the world, we must be moved to act. We might think of this as: *Affective Effect* or, if you prefer: *Effective Affect*. Or, using the grapheme æ, we can encompass both affect and effect by creating a new word: *Æffect*.

## **ÆFFICACY**

Now that we have a bit more clarity in terms (and a wholly invented new one), we can return to the all-important question of: Does it work? The simplest way to go about answering this question would be to set a singular criterion with which to measure activist art's *æfficacy*, and then go about determining if the practice met that bar. Other critics have argued that the function of activist art is the “defunctionalizing [of] the status quo” (Groys 2014), the making of “agnostic spaces” (Mouffe 2007), the fostering of “dialogic art” (Kester 2004), or embracing “antinomy” (Bishop 2006). There is nothing wrong with these objectives; in fact, there is a lot right with them, but my aim here is both more humble and more ambitious.

Art and social change are 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 artist did? Were our

actions among the many contributing causes? Or maybe change just happened coincidentally and we had nothing to do with it? There are too many moving pieces to answer definitively the question of how exactly activist art works with anything other than conjecture.

To acknowledge complexity, however, does not mean that we abandon the field and retreat into art 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 want 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. This is where my humility gives way to hubris. I want to suggest that, while defining writ large what activist art does and how it does it is foolish, we can—and if we are to take the practice of artistic activism seriously, must—create a universal methodology for determining relative efficacy: a way of assessing impact appropriate to particular practices.

## **AIM AND INTENTION**

The first step in crafting such a methodology is to be clear about the intentions of activist artists. This seems self-evident. Of course, one needs to know what an artist wants to do in order to determine if she or he has done it. But when it comes to activist art, this evaluative process is rarely undertaken with any rigor. Activist artists 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. However, by interviewing activist artists, analyzing case studies, and reading theorists of the practice, I have identified the following aims of activist artists. This is not an exhaustive list; some of these intentions overlap and many are complementary. What follows are what social scientists call “ideal types”: abstract, hypothetical concepts that help us organize and think through real-world practices.

Activist Artists may aim to:

*Foster Dialogue:* creating a conversation, usually around uncomfortable or overlooked topics. As artist and educator Pablo Helguera (2011) points out, this conversation cannot be controlled, but the artwork can set the parameters of what is discussed and the setting in which the conversation happens. Critic Grant Kester calls this “dialogic art” (2013).

*Build Community:* building and maintaining community. The activist artist’s objective might be broad: recognizing, valorizing, and facilitating “the public.” (Cruz 2012) Or her focus might be narrowed to an explicitly oppositional community, helping create what Antonio Gramsci (1971) refers to as a “counter-hegemonic culture.” Or the activist artist’s work might even educate (and entertain) a community already in existence by “preaching to the converted.”

*Make a Place:* creating places where discussions happen and communities meet, and where novel ways of thinking, being and creating can be explored, tested, or lived. Well known examples of this “creative placemaking” include Theaster Gates’s Dorchester Projects in Chicago and Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses in Houston; in each case fallow spaces were transformed into vibrant places for creative work.

*Invite Participation:* turning watchers into doers. People often confront activist art as spectators, the intention here is to turn them into collaborators: participating in the piece itself and/or with a social issue. Championing such activist art, Walter Benjamin once wrote that “this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, readers or spectators into collaborators” (Benjamin 1978, 233). Here, the apex of artistic creation is enabling the creativity of others.

*Transform Environment and Experience:* altering people’s environmental experiences and bodily practices. This can be done by reconfiguring spaces to alter experiences, prompting people to re-experience a familiar environment in an unfamiliar way, and/or directing people’s actions in order to create a transformational physical experience. As the radical theatre director Augusto Boal (1979) maintains,



thinking change is one thing, but acting out change with our bodies brings us one step closer to its realization.

*Reveal Reality:* holding up a mirror to reflect an aspect of the world otherwise unseen, and/or provide factual information about an issue that is little known. Sometimes thought of as simply “raising awareness,” a more creative approach engages what artistic activist Andrew Boyd (2012), among others, has called “making the invisible visible” – visualizing or performing a truth that would otherwise remain hidden.

*Alter Perception:* changing the way people perceive reality. One of the powers of art is its ability to help us to see the world through new eyes. This altered perception can be general: looking at light in a new way, or it can be more specific: seeing a particular issue or event from a different vantage point. At its very least, the aestheticization of reality de-naturalizes, or to use the term favored by Boris Groys (2014), “de-functionalizes,” the world as it is, thereby demanding that the audience perceive it differently.

*Create Disruption:* disrupting business-as-usual. Disruption can be cultural: challenging how people commonly think about an issue, or material: disturbing how things are usually done. Chantal Mouffe (2007) has argued that what artistic activism does best is create these “agonistic spaces” that unveil and disrupt the dominant consensus.

*Inspire Dreaming:* visualizing, either literally or figuratively, an alternative world. This envisioning can be done sincerely: This is what the world could look like! Or absurdly: The world could never look like this! This imagined world can be utopian: a dream to work toward, or dystopian: a nightmare to avoid at all costs. With any dream scenario the objective is to prompt people to ask: “What If?” (Duncombe 2007, 2012).

*Provide Utility:* creating a useful tool. These activist art practices aim to help specific publics by providing a needed service: a mobile phone app that guides immigrants across borders...and texts poems along the way (Ricardo Dominguez’s *Transborder Immigrant Tool*), or a call-up hotline that narrates telenovela style stories that inform

domestic workers of their rights (Marisa Jahn's *Domestic Worker App*). This is what artist Tania Bruguera (2011) calls *arte útil*, or useful art.

*Political Expression*: expressing one's political feelings. We are familiar with abstract expressionism, the arts movement of the mid-twentieth century in which the artist's rage, joy, disgust, or hope was expressed to the world directly through his or her medium. Political expressionism is the same principal applied to activist art, with political passions taking the place of the personal. (Duncombe and Lambert 2013). The act of political self-expression itself is the objective, and the success of the piece is determined by how well it conveys the artist's feelings about the political moment.

*Encourage Experimentation*: conducting an ongoing experiment. Umberto Eco once characterized all modern art as *opera aperta*: "open work." Artwork, for Eco, was an open-ended project, never complete and always creating new and unintended results—Calder's mobiles were his prime example (Eco 1989). In the case of activist art as an experiment, what doesn't work is as valuable as what does.

*Maintain Hegemony*: perpetuating the powers-that-be. One might argue that supporting the status quo, by definition, is not a function of activist art, but this is historically shortsighted. The early Soviet avant-garde, the legions of artists employed by the Roosevelt administration during the New Deal in the United States, and, more troubling, artists in the service of German Nazism, Italian fascism, and Japanese militarism, all applied themselves to creating and then maintaining power structures devoted to social change.

*Make Nothing Happen*: not "working" at all. Perhaps one believes that the biggest problem of contemporary society is that everything has to have a function. In opposition to this instrumentality, an activist artist might aspire to create artwork that, in the perplexing words of the poet W. H. Auden, "makes nothing happen" (1940, 94). It is hard to imagine a piece of work not working at all, for even not working is work of a sort, but it is an aim. *L'art pour l'art*.

Activist art that makes nothing happen? The point here is not to pass judgment on the validity of these intentions. Personally, I am

partial to using the imaginative power of art to inspire dreams of a better world, while I find political expressionism self-indulgent, but the purpose of this list is to identify what activist artists might want their art to do in order to have a baseline with which to judge whether they have succeeded or not. Again, this list is not comprehensive and readers will no doubt identify other aims. Arts educator Beverly Naidus (2009) and curator Nato Thompson (2012), for example, have come up with aims that overlap with mine, but also offer others. Yet all these intentions tend to aim toward one or more of four large targets.

*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, the artist wants to “move 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. If the objective is ultimate cultural change, then the artist sets their aim far out on the horizon to what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls a “re-distribution of reality.”

*Imminent Material Impact:* having an immediate, visible, physical effect on the world. This may entail creating work, for instance, that attracts people to a community meeting about policing, publicizes a law that prohibits the practice of stop and frisk, or helps elect a mayor who is sympathetic to the victims of police violence. The horizon line here is short, for what that activist artist aims to do is alter material reality in the near future.

*Ultimate Material Result:* having some sort of material, often structural, impact over the long haul. Getting people to a meeting, passing a law, or electing a politician are all worthy objectives to strive toward, but to stop racist policing completely, one needs to think bigger: different training for police officers, an end to the prison-industrial complex, a new state or perhaps no state at all. For

an artist to hope to have this long-term impact, their work must be conceived and executed in such a way to address the underlying structures—to use Marxist parlance, the material base—that give rise to contemporary phenomenon.

These overarching goals are frequently complimentary. In a democracy, for example, where public opinion ostensibly determines political action, cultural and material change are often linked: one needs to persuade people to think differently in order to build the public support that can pressure changes in policy. And one objective may fail while another may succeed. We can fail to sway public opinion in the short run only to discover that our work set into motion a sea change of thought that bears cultural and material fruit years later. Conversely, an immediate shift in public opinion may be a flash in the pan, with its effect dissipating over time as the idea or vision is co-opted back into the dominant system. Regardless of particular goals and outcomes, having a clearer idea of what artistic activism aims to do in the first place is essential to addressing the question, Does it work? For it is only relative to intent that one can determine effect.

## **METHOD**

With intention now accounted for, it is a relatively simple operation to gauge effect. If our objective is to build community, then are there groupings of people with shared sets of practices and values who are meeting, talking, and working together that didn't exist before our intervention? If our aim is to foster dialogue, then did we observe people talking about our piece and its concerns? Was the piece picked up by the media? Did that stimulate further discussion? What sorts of discussions ensued? If our intention is imminent cultural shift, then it makes a certain logical sense to sample public opinion. Advertisers and politicians do this; why not activist artists? We can ask our intended audience what they think about an issue before experiencing our artwork and again afterwards. Is there a change? Or did our art have a visible, physical result? Did more people show up to a meeting than before our intervention? Was a law passed or not?

Once we have our variables in place, the formula is straightforward: if the attained effect matches the desired effect, then the artwork has succeeded. If not, it has failed. And if attained effect comprises a fraction of desired effect, then we are on the right path but will need to push further. Expressed as a mathematical formula it might look like this:

$$S = \frac{\Delta_a}{\Delta_d}$$

where  $S$  = Success,

$\Delta_a = \Delta_{actual}$  = (achieved state) – (initial state),

and  $\Delta_d = \Delta_{desired}$  = (desired state) – (initial state).

Here it is in practice: Say we are interested in helping build an activist community committed to transforming racist policing practices. The first step in building such a community might be getting people to show up at organizational meetings. Only 10 people, however, show up at the first meeting and we, as activist artists, want to help double attendance at the next meeting. We create an artwork to engage, inform, and involve people in the struggle, show or perform it around the neighborhood and, lo and behold, 20 people show up at the next meeting. Plugging those values into our formula it looks like this:

$$S = \frac{(20 - 10)}{(20 - 10)} = \frac{10}{10} = \frac{1}{1} = 100\%.$$

$S = 100\%$ . We have completely succeeded in our aims. If 15 people show up at our meeting:

$$S = \frac{(15 - 10)}{(20 - 10)} = \frac{5}{10} = \frac{1}{2} = 50\%.$$

Our art is a limited success. If 10 people (or fewer) show up:

$$S = \frac{(10 - 10)}{(20 - 10)} = \frac{0}{10} = \frac{0}{1} = 0\%.$$

Our art is a total failure. And, if 30 people show up at our planning meeting:

$$S = \frac{(30 - 10)}{(20 - 10)} = \frac{20}{10} = \frac{2}{1} = 200\%.$$

Our art is æffective beyond our expectations.

If we were aiming at multiple targets, as an activist artist would do when planning a longer term campaign, we can set X number of different goals and measures, and find the average rate of success over them all. That formula would look something like this:

$$S_x = \frac{1}{x} \sum_{i=1}^x \frac{\Delta a_i}{\Delta d_i}$$

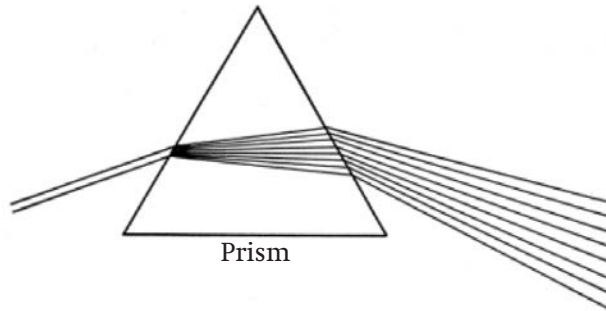
And there we have it: *The formula for determining the success of activist art!*

Am I serious? Yes... and no. The math works, but what it can work on is very little. At times, with relatively straightforward objectives that can be easily measured, such as increasing attendance at an organizing meeting; we might be able to use a formula like this. But such easily quantifiable objectives are few and far between, and this isn't really my point. I offer the formulas above more as metaphor than mathematics, a heuristic tool to get us thinking about the æffect of artistic activism and how to account for it. For whatever we establish as the goal for activist art, we need to have a method for thinking about whether it has done the work it set out to do.

## **RAINBOWS**

Art is marvelously irrepressible. It is forever producing æffects that we did not predict or even desire; one could even argue that this is its strength. Art, if it is any good, always creates a surplus, bubbling up and slopping over the sides of whatever categories we create to contain it; spilling out on the floor, making new forms and patterns that demand new perspectives to understand and new measures to judge.

As my frequent collaborator and Center for Artistic Activism co-founder, Steve Lambert, is fond of saying: activist art is in the business of making rainbows.



Light of different colors is refracted at slightly different angles

**Figure 1.**

In a typical dispersive prism, a beam of white light is aimed at a certain angle at a medium, commonly a triangular chunk of glass. The white light is then refracted by the angles of the glass and broken up into its constituent spectral colors. The result is a rainbow. This is how activist art works as well. Artists focus their ideas and intentions on their work, but what results when that piece is experienced by the audience is a range of output that is interpreted and acted upon in a myriad of ways. Simply put, the artist shines a light *in*—what we might call intent—but what comes *out* is a spectrum of æffect, and this is something the artist cannot entirely control for.

As such, a more accurate formula for determining success might look something more like this:

$$S_x = \frac{1}{x} \sum_{i=1}^x \frac{\Delta_{ai}}{\Delta_{di}} + S_y$$

where  $S_y$  = unintended or unanticipated æffect.

Returning to our example: maybe only 15 of the hoped-for 20 people show up at our meeting. In the terms of our original equation, the meeting is not a smashing success. But what if the people who did attend conceived of a brilliant idea that changed the entire campaign? It is not what we were aiming for with our activist art intervention, and we cannot account for what happened in the way

that one can count the number of people attending a meeting, but it is still a positive æffect. It is  $S_y$ .

The colors of the rainbow are a continuous spectrum, not the discrete categories of ROYGBIV we use to make sense of the gradient of color. Similarly, there is an infinite number of possible æffects of activist art and thus an infinite number of ways to evaluate their success:  $S_y$ ,  $S_z$ ,  $S_{zz}$ , and so on. Each new æffect of activist art can only be measured on its own axis; what measures success in terms of bringing people to a meeting will not account for the generation of a new idea. These variable æffects of activist art—increasing attendance at a meeting, facilitating the creation of new ideas, etc. etc.—can add up to nothing, diverging into scattered points in empty space, each brilliant in its own way but isolated from each other, and therefore doing little to dispel the darkness. Or these different æffects can complement one another, converging into a new quality, a new force, a new light that has the potential to change everything.

Some æffects of activist art may not be discernable to the naked eye, not in the short run, or even in our lifetimes—mass changes in sense perceptions or bodily patterns, for instance. How do we judge the success of, say, the “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 the indeterminacy of art’s æffect. Activist art, when all is said and done, is an art, not a science. There is no singular way it works, nor simple formula to determine if it has worked.

Acknowledging this, however, does not allow us to find refuge in magical thinking whereby an activist artist creates a piece and: poof! Change happens. What artists can, and do control is their input. Think again of the prism. If light aimed at a prism is weak and diffuse, nothing much happens: no beautiful rainbows result. Similarly, if the intention of activist art is feeble and its objectives are not carefully considered, then not much will happen either. This is why all the thinking and planning about affect and effect, intent and measurement, is so critical. Not because one can predict exactly what will



happen, but so we can make sure that *something* happens, and then, once we've determined what has happened, *refocus* our efforts.

## **METRICS**

I may have softened my approach with evocations of colorful rainbows, but make no mistake: what I am advocating for here is a rigorous methodology that will allow activist artists, and their critics, to judge the æfficacy of their practice. In a word, I am making an argument for metrics.

Metrics is an ugly word in the art world, one that conjures up images of insurance actuaries in grey flannel suits, sitting in cubicles in front of counting machines, busily sucking the color out of the world and burying it in a filing cabinet. Metrics, so the argument goes, has no place in creative work. This is naïve. The art world is already beholden to metrics: measurements of commercial success, gauged in terms of prices fetched for a work of art, gallery representation, and attendance at and length of run for a show; institutional success, determined by grants received, museum shows, and collections; and critical success, judged by approval by critics and peers, shows reviewed, mentions in scholarship, and, ultimately, place within The Tradition. As activist art has grown in popularity it too has become subject to metrics. In parts of the world where such activist artists rely upon NGO funding, metrics are determined by program officers and governing boards, resulting in what artists Alexander Nikolic and Sam Hopkins have begun calling the “NGO Aesthetic” (Hopkins 2014). Metrics already exist. The question is not Yes or No; it is Which and Whose?

My purpose in this article has been to introduce the process of developing appropriate metrics for activist art by providing a methodology with which to think through the æfficacy of activist art. We may not have, nor want, the equation that can be applied to all artistic activism; Vladimir Lenin's confidence notwithstanding, there is no one answer to “What is to be done?” But if we are to take activist art seriously, if we truly believe that art can change the world, we need

always to be asking the critical questions: What work do we want activist art to do and how will we know if it works?

The hardest part of answering these questions may be asking them in the first place. When we raise questions about what works, and how we know, we are confronted by the activist artist's worst fear: that maybe what we are doing doesn't really work. That, just maybe, all this talk of the merging of arts and activism is pure bunkum and we've been wasting our time and deluding ourselves. Avoiding this dark place, we often opt instead to make our work, get it out there in the world, and hope that something happens. This, however, is magical thinking, an approach better suited to alchemy than activism. There is magic in activist art, but that doesn't mean that we cannot also apply reason and rigor.

### **CODA: BAD ART**

Rainbows are nice and pretty, but doesn't any consideration of the political efficacy of an artistic creation, no matter how you color it, inevitably lead to the creation of bad art?

This a valid concern, one raised nearly every time I give a talk on this topic. But it is a concern that presupposes a disconnect between great aesthetics and efficacious politics. This is a false division. Aesthetics and politics are intimately connected, and not just on a grand theoretical plane. While it is certainly true that what we consider aesthetically pleasing is determined by larger social, historical, and political forces, aesthetics and politics are intertwined on a pragmatic level as well: *bad art makes bad activism*. Without the power to attract and challenge the audience, such art is useless.

Activist art that doesn't move us leaves us standing still.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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