



# Assessing the Impact of Artistic Activism

## *summary*

Adapted from a paper by [The Center for Artistic Activism](#)

### **The Problem**

A few 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.

Artistic activism is a hybrid practice combining the emotional affect of the arts with the instrumental effect of activism. It has existed for as long as people have articulated and communicated their aspirations through sign and story, but in recent years artistic activism has gained wide recognition in the educational, artistic, philanthropic and NGO worlds. Yet a question haunts the practice: Does it work? And, further, What does “working” even mean when it comes to a practice which marries the arts and activism? This is not merely an academic question. The ability to assess impact is essential for artistic activists seeking to bring about social change, as it is for their supporters in philanthropic and non-governmental organizations, for without these metrics there is no basis upon which to determine whether one's efforts are moving in the right direction, or whether a course correction is necessary.

This study explores the question of assessment and impact of artistic activism through a review of critical literature on the social impact of the arts as well as a survey of recent reports done by organizations interested in arts, media and assessment. But central to this study is data provided by in-depth interviews done by the research team with nearly 60 practitioners of artistic activism, including 10 “field leaders” who run institutions, training schools, and prominent groups devoted to artistic activism.

### **What Artistic Activism Can Do**

To conceptualize the impact of artistic activism, one must first acknowledge that art and activism do different work in the world. When we think of activism we often think in terms of its *effect*. 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*.

The power and potential of artistic activism is in combining effect with affect. 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. 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. 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 simplify both with a new term: *Æffect*.

### Theories of Change

In both academic and organizational literature there is little consensus on how art moves the world, or how to measure its impact. This indeterminacy is mirrored by the practitioners themselves. However, while 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, and 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 off, *consciousness*, as a rational and cognitive construct, is replaced by *culture*, lived and largely unconscious. 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 and material gets blurry. Finally, many of the artistic activists insisted that the point of the "culture shift" engendered by artistic activism is 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 more diversity in points of view. 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 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.

### **Assessing Effect**

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 to provide “proof” to outside funders.

### **Moving Forward**

For artistic activism to live up to its world-changing potential, and to be taken seriously by funders and NGOs, assessment of impact is essential. Yet any system of assessment will fail unless it acknowledges the concerns and suspicion of the practitioners themselves. 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 artistic activists in the field. 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 that 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.

We suggest a query-driven methodology that begins with the knowledge possessed by the practitioners, and sharpens it through a series of queries. These queries would cover:

- A clear conception of the work they want their project to do: What do I want to have happen?
- A method of measuring and assessing that work: How will I know if it has happened?
- A plan for the next steps toward their ultimate goal: What do I want to have happen next?

Each of these queries, of course, will need to be followed up with a myriad of clarifying sub-questions taking into account all the variables that go into addressing each major question. For example, asking What do I want to have happen? will also entail explorations of a theory of change, goals and objectives, and audiences, 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 interactive capacity, however, offers perhaps the most exciting possibilities.

A query-based methodology of assessment outlined above goes beyond assessing the impact of a particular project. It instills a strategic self-reflective intentionality into artistic activism, prompting a process whereby the artistic activist (possibly in concert 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. 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. This makes the artistic activist and their supporters co-collaborators in discovery. That is, an *æffective* approach to assessing the impact of artistic activism.

**For Full Research Report, including Bibliography, list of Artistic Activists Interviewed, Research Team, and Advisory Board please download pdf [here](#).**

