



## INTRODUCTION

### *A Values Guide to Evaluating Arts & Social Justice Work*

**A working document of the Evaluation Learning Lab, a collaborative effort of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, the Arts x Culture x Social Justice Network, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation**

Evaluation of arts and social justice work should be grounded in the same values that guide the work itself—values such as equity, collaboration, and reciprocity.

It's fair to say that all forms of assessment or evaluation are inherently tied to a set of values that serve as the basis for analysis. However, common evaluation sometimes falls short in terms of being relevant, ethical, equitable, and realistic when it comes to assessing arts and social justice work.

**What are some of the challenges with current approaches to evaluating arts and social change work?**

- Just as power analysis is a key driver in arts and social justice work, so too is power analysis in evaluating that work. Common evaluation may privilege certain voices in the design, implementation, and analysis of results and disempower others. It is often imposed by funders or entities rather than growing out of the interests and potential uses of stakeholders and participants at the heart of arts and social justice endeavors.
- Although several forms of participatory assessment and collaborative learning have emerged over the years, a recent survey of the field revealed that very few evaluators endorsed these methods as their primary orientation. In fact, only 1.7% of those who responded reported that they intentionally adopt a social justice oriented framework.<sup>1</sup>
- Emphasis on measurable metrics is problematic. It prompts measurement of transactions and reach that may be easy to capture but either not of a scale that seems effective or not always telling of important transformational outcomes better understood through qualitative research or assessment.
- Common evaluation may prioritize artistic products and outputs whereas in arts and social justice work, it is often in the creative process and engagement strategies where important outcomes occur.

Evaluating the social and aesthetic efficacy of arts and social justice work may require disrupting common evaluation practices that undermine or distort the connections among art, culture, and social justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Add citation from AEA report

- Aesthetic standards by which conventional creative forms such as stage performances, exhibitions, films, etc. are judged are often grounded in Eurocentric or “mainstream” values, and don’t reflect non-dominant cultures, community-based priorities and practices.
- Arts practitioners and funders may set unrealistic expectations of social outcomes, particularly at the project level, which in turn sets up conditions for “failure” and challenges of proving causal relations between outcomes and the arts and social justice work.

#### Assessing Aesthetic Dimensions

The Evaluation Learning Lab is also developing a framework to Assess Aesthetic Dimensions of Arts & Social Justice Work. If you’re interested in reviewing and offering feedback, contact Animating Democracy, [pkorza@artsusa.org](mailto:pkorza@artsusa.org).

**What values should guide evaluation of arts and social justice work?** To be intentional about evaluation practices that reflect values congruent with social justice, in the accompanying table, Evaluation Learning Lab participants have framed nine values and related questions to help arts practitioners, evaluators, and funders plan and implement responsible and ethical evaluation.

**These values are, in effect, indicators of evaluation approaches that are appropriately aligned to assess arts and social justice work.**

- Shared learning and understanding
- Reciprocity
- Collaboration
- Context
- Equity
- Right-sized expectations
- Appropriate metrics
- Ethics
- Adequately resourced

By nature, these values grounded in the values of social justice underscore the importance of engaging the knowledge and perspectives of diverse stakeholders and specific populations that affect and are affected by arts and social justice work being assessed in evaluation planning and implementation. These might include: community organizations, peer entities, specific populations, artists, organizers, funders, etc.

## Benefits of using *A Values Guide to Evaluating Arts & Social Justice Work*

A values-based approach has many potential benefits across the range of stakeholders—arts practitioners and organizations, community partners and organizers, funders, and evaluators. It:

- ensures that evaluation does not inadvertently privilege values and approaches that are misaligned with the nature and values of arts and social justice work.
- recalibrates expectations that are more realistic in terms of both outcomes of arts and social justice work and what it takes to evaluate;
- supports a more nuanced understanding of social or civic outcomes that takes into account the complex nature of the work and enhances artists,' cultural organization leaders,' and community partners and stakeholders' understanding of the work's outcomes;
- supplies useful information to improve arts and social justice practices and efficacy;
- ensures relevant voices in determining efficacy of programs work that attempt to reduce disparities, meet the needs of disadvantaged or underserved groups, or intentionally empower marginalized members of society;
- supports funders' decision making and evaluation processes, from the development of a new grants program, to implementation including panel processes, and assessment and reporting;
- helps funders gain a truer sense of the outcomes of their investments.
- promotes a broader range of aesthetic dimensions of arts and social justice work
- equalizes power in evaluation and promote a spirit of co-learning between funders, grantees and evaluation professionals.

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