INTRODUCTION

A Values Guide to Evaluating Arts & Social Change Work

In 2015, the Evaluation Learning Lab (ELL), a collaborative effort of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation developed this guide to values-based evaluation.

Evaluation of arts and social change 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.

• 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.
• 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.

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 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
• Adequate resourcing

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.

Assessing Aesthetic Excellence

The Evaluation Learning Lab developed Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change. The framework’s 11 attributes aim to enhance understanding and evaluation of creative work at the intersection of arts and civic engagement, community development, and justice and to address aesthetic biases in evaluation. Find it here.
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 program work that attempts 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.

*Evaluation Learning Lab participants included:* Kiley Arroyo,* Cultural Strategies Council and Slover Linett Audience Research; Andrea Assaf, artist, Art2Action; John Borstel, artist; Denise Brown, Leeway Foundation; Chris Dwyer, RMC Research; Rahwa Ghirmatzion, PUSH Buffalo; James Kass, YouthSpeaks; Maurine Knighton, The Nathan Cummings Foundation; Lisa Yun Lee, University of Chicago and Imagining America; Keryl McCord, Alternate ROOTS; Jose Serrano McClain, Queens Museum; Stephanie McKee,* Junebug Productions; Wendy Morris, Intermedia Arts; Judi Nemzoff, San Francisco Arts Commission; Lisa Marie Pickens,* evaluation consultant; Erin Potts, RPM; Nick Slie, Mondo Bizarro; Jessica Solomon, Art in Praxis; Carlton Turner and Keryl McCord, Alternate ROOTS; Mark Valdez, theater artist; Rise Wilson, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts

*Drafters of *A Values Guide to Evaluating Arts & Social Change Work*

In collaboration with:
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<th>Value</th>
<th>Indicators of Responsible Evaluation</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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| Shared learning & understanding | • is more about improving practice and efficacy than about judgment or proving value and impact  
• helps artists and partners contextualize and frame their work, understand its contribution to impact  
• helps create a narrative of value  
• reconsiders the role of the evaluator, e.g. in a supportive and active role; facilitating a developmental evaluation approach  
• honors pluralistic ways of knowing |       |
| Reciprocity                  | • is useful and designed for mutual benefit to key stakeholders, e.g., partners and constituents, as well as to the artist, cultural organization, and funder  
• sets evaluation requirements that are transparent and aligned with key partners,’ participants’ interests  
• balances power between cultural agents and their stakeholders, partners and funders in evaluation design implementation and reporting |       |
| Collaborative                | • honors and seeks community and stakeholder knowledge, perspective, and participation in:  
  o defining meaningful outcomes and designing evaluation processes (tools, questions)  
  o implementing evaluation,  
  o analyzing and interpreting data and results |       |
| Contextual                   | • takes social, political, cultural, economic, historical context into account and considers what are meaningful (artistic and social) outcomes within the community context  
• demonstrates openness to evolving outcomes; fluidity regarding when outcomes are defined and allowance for changes in defined outcomes |       |
| Equity                       | • provides a platform for inquiry and dialogue about equity in arts and social justice work  
• assesses how projects are structured (who has access to opportunity, resources; how power is addressed; who has agency and authority; how artists are treated) as well as outcomes of the work  
• empowers those who have been historically marginalized to participate in evaluation |       |
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| Right-sized expectations | • respects realistic expectations for outcomes  
• is scaled to the arts and social change activity/organization and to the skills and capacity of those implementing evaluation  
• acknowledges the complexity of the work and what it takes for artists or cultural/social change agents to achieve impact over time  
• embraces experimentation and failure as learning opportunities and a likely and natural part of a larger trajectory of work |       |
| Appropriate metrics   | • requests attainable, meaningful data; metrics are defined as they are relevant and proportionate to the intent and scale of the project or organization  
• considers outcomes and impacts that may be incremental and cumulative over time and values intermediate outcomes as preconditions for other change to occur  
• considers the possibility of looking retrospectively at impact |       |
| Ethical               | • recognizes that harm can be done to disenfranchised populations, through lack of confidentiality, unethical practices, cultural insensitivity, appropriation  
• is transparent  
• is accountable |       |
| Adequate resourcing   | • is resourced to provide for expertise, time to do the work and meet needs and requirements of funders and/or partners |       |

### Questions for Discussion

1. **Do these values resonate?**
   - To what extent are these values relevant to you? Your agency? Your grantees or constituents?  
   - Are there any values missing?

2. **How or when might you use these values (or this framework)?**
   - To encourage or guide the design and implementation of evaluation?  
   - To stimulate reflection and self-assessment within the organization?  
   - For funders, in the grantmaking cycle (e.g. program design, proposal review, evaluation guidelines for grantees, site visit, evaluation/reporting requirements)?  
   - Other?