



Aesthetic Framework for Social Justice-Oriented Art An Introduction

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

Purpose

Conventional framing of standards/criteria used to describe aesthetics/artistic values/artistic qualities are not well suited to discussing work that is at the intersection of art and social justice. The lack of common language to discuss the artistic values of such work has unfortunate consequences, including assumptions that the artistic quality doesn't meet rigorous standards. We think that there are ways to frame qualities that expand and extend the usual language to enrich the discussion and assessment of aesthetics of all types of art work within this realm. This introduction and accompanying Framework for Assessing Aesthetic Qualities of Arts & Social Justice Work offer a beginning set of qualities for discussion.

Definitions

In zeroing in on **aesthetics** as an important consideration, the Evaluation Learning Lab hopes to differentiate, but not detach, those aspects of social justice-oriented art that focus on the human experience of created works and the process of creation. We have explored and debated various definitions of the word "aesthetics" and its place relative to social justice intent. At points we have even questioned our use of the word itself as insider-speak that reinforces a sense of privilege, and considered the phrase "artistic excellence" as an alternative. We've also weighed the value of a plainspoken but probing question like, "What is the beauty you experience?" allowing that beauty might be defined and experienced in many ways. While we've opted to retain the term "aesthetic" as one with general currency among artists, academics, arts philanthropists and other partners, the range of ideas reflected in the definitions we considered has influenced the refinement of the criteria.

How broadly or specifically we are defining **social justice** has also been a point of discussion. Social justice and social change are not necessarily the same. Users of this aesthetic framework will likely apply it to a wider range of outcomes, yet social justice and interests for structural, systemic level change is important to keep in view as attention increases on "social practice." Whether a project has a direct or tangential relationship to a social justice outcome may not matter so much in relation to these criteria. But understanding the concept relative to the intentions of an institution (e.g.: funder, presenter, community partner) does matter.

Ways to Apply Aesthetic Qualities

In the spirit of thinking about the values underlying the aesthetic qualities, care should be taken in how they are used. While there may be temptation to seize upon the qualities as a new set of criteria to use in judging and comparing works, it would be a mistake to do so in a reductive manner, e.g. treating the qualities as equivalent and/or assigning simple rating points to a scale. We encourage instead that the qualities be used to guide reflection and discussion.

Considerations

Some points to consider when applying the Aesthetic Framework:

The aesthetic of social justice art work should be understood as plural and diverse. This document suggests aesthetic considerations for art that addresses and advances social justice. This is not to suggest that there is a single aesthetic appropriate to such work. In a diverse society, multiple aesthetics co-exist and, and ideally, function in cultural dialogue.

Different projects call for different emphasis. No two artists are alike. No two projects are alike. And certainly, no two communities are alike. A single standard cannot be used to judge all work. Audience, context, and intentions all matter. Among the considerations, emphasis will land in different places for different projects.

Aesthetic considerations are relevant across the process/product continuum.

Artists with community-engaged practices often defy the traditional dichotomy between process and product, sometimes by opening up their practices to participation, collaboration, and dialogue in ways that can constitute meaningful products on their own. For this reason, aesthetics can be considered not only in relation to the completed artistic work, but relevant across the process-product spectrum. That said, in a given endeavor some considerations may apply more to the means and methods of its development, others to the experience of its public outcome.

Art allows for ambiguity, contradiction, and the coexistence of opposites. The same applies to aesthetic considerations. It could be argued that one of the functions of art is to help us live with the ambiguities and contradictions of our world. Thus art often contains ambiguities within its form and content. Art is big; it can show us how each thing contains its opposite. For this reason, every consideration must be understood as a point on a continuum where a value that may seem oppositional also can have a role to play in expression and positioning. For instance, the dominant feature of an artist's aesthetic might be cohesive, but the artist might also employ fragmentation as a tool within that aesthetic. Or work might be disruptive in its approach but employ important traditional elements.