

## Analysing the Art of Resistance

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By Mary Ann DeVlieg

A theatre director is beaten and stabbed to death in front of his apartment. Another is shot to death in front of his wife and child. A filmmaker is kidnapped, his fingers cut off, and he's left to bleed along the roadside. A radio DJ wakes to see his car in flames. A writer comes home to a house drenched in kerosene. A dancer is raped. A performance artist is kidnapped and beaten. A singer is imprisoned for years. A television comedian is kidnapped, threatened and told to never work again or be killed. These are real cases of artists whose artwork speaks truth to power and upholds social justice.

Shall we measure the work of these artists by the number of people in their audiences, how many workshops they have given or how much turnover their artistic output has generated, directly or indirectly, to the 'evening economy' of the city? Can these standardized indicators capture the depth or long term effect of thought-provoking artistic interventions in highly charged public and political contexts?

We are living in a period of measurement by economic indicators that define financial and legal support. The arts sector has continuously balked at submitting its 'intrinsic values' to market measures, even if it has been tempting to play the risky game of citing urban regeneration and 'creative' economic development as benefits.

Today, we believe that public and private financial support ought to be awarded on the basis of objective criteria that confirm an (often elusive) idea of quality. The distribution of money must be accountable to taxpayers and donors. Subjective choice here is suspect, yet evaluation concepts have been offered, argued, and contested with no clear conclusion. Are we hell-bent on finding the perfect means of objectively assessing artistic quality, aesthetic delight, taste, and the impact of thought on human development?

Evaluating the impact of art and cultural activity is tough already. Throwing in human rights and free speech complicates the issue. Support for human rights defenders who confront governments, civil or religious groups is justified by international law. But how do we evaluate arts practices that raise awareness of universal rights or individual identities in situations where they are denied? Egyptian writer Alaa Al-Aswany writes, "My father told me his legacy to me was prison cells. My legacy to my son will be prison cells." On what 'impact measures' are artists risking their lives?

More research is needed on alternative methods to analyse fields that resist economic-based measurement. We need to describe the real impact of supporting artists and cultural communicators whose politically or socially charged work places them into the crosshairs of repressive regimes intent on quashing perspectives differing from their own. If numbers-driven criteria can be supplanted by deeper, more long-term analysis, donors can feel confident supporting such work.

Some researchers are trying to explain what happens in circumstances where traditional quantity measures are not the most meaningful indicators. In a [recent article](#), Dr. Patrycja Kaszynska dissects "the difficult relationship between cultural value, economics and the

problem of measurement and evaluation.” She concludes that a major problem is the assumption that a natural hierarchy of disciplines places economics on top, as the final arbiter of all other disciplines: a hierarchy, which is not accepted by many, and is accompanied by “the fear of flattening all expressions of value into a single register.”

Regarding human rights, [Johannes Thoolen](#) adds, “ The first problem of assessment is that common to all human rights advocacy work, namely the difficulty of measuring and establishing a causal link between a particular intervention and an outcome.... assessing advocacy for individual cases is the least developed.”

Clearly, the current means of valuing art that upholds social justice is inadequate. There must be a more comprehensive method that brings together different disciplines as well as value systems and objectives.

[freeDimensional](#) (fD) is one of a very few [NGOs and non-profit](#) associations working at the intersection of arts and human rights. Since 2006, fD has supported artists and culture workers whose artistic work presents alternatives, challenges the status quo, a government line, or fundamentalist views. These cultural communicators may be threatened, their economic livelihood denied; they and their families can be physically harmed, imprisoned, or worse. fD recognizes them as doing the work of human rights defenders, identifies shelters in artists residencies, and develops artists’ safety networks in high risk regions.

But non-profits such as fD are mired in the current evaluation stalemate, pressed by funders to demonstrate impact in an interdisciplinary area comprising sectors bogged down by lack of adequate evaluation methodologies.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. At the upcoming International Conference on Cultural Policy Research ([ICCP](#)) in Hildesheim, Germany, fD will call out to universities and researchers interested in tackling these issues, identifying best practices and exploring alternative methods to describe the impact of supporting artists whose work defends human rights and social justice.

The challenge is about measuring the impact of work that influences thought, poses a question to engrained perspectives, and may take years or even generations to reach a concrete tipping point. [Rebecca Solnit](#) finds, “many now do not even hope for a better society, but they recognize it when they encounter it, and that discovery shines out even through the namelessness of their experience.”

Let’s work across disciplines - cultural workers, human rights workers, universities, and researchers - to share information, build upon lessons learned, and ultimately find ways to measure impact and convince potential legal and financial supporters. It is important to uncover the ripple effects of these artists’ courageous behaviour and in doing so, learn how to better support, defend, and protect those who undertake it, at great risk to their own safety.