

## **The Art of Change: Arts and Culture in the Advancement of Human Rights**

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Arts and cultural activism refers to the use of arts and cultural strategies to build more equitable societies. This kind of activism is a key intervention tool towards transforming attitudes in society and cultivating awareness and acceptance for marginalized communities. Creative in nature, arts and cultural activism often enables policy changes that seed new realities and lived experiences, and provides sustainable long-term solutions to human rights challenges. In this article, we explore how grantmakers can exemplify this commitment to arts and cultural advocacy, and how we can analyze the value and impact of the arts as a tool for social change. We also provide a useful evaluation tool for grantmakers to measure the impact of arts and cultural activism.



A crowd dances to Cocomama at Writeous!, a celebration of Astraea's Lesbian Writers Fund's 20 years. Photo courtesy of Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice.

### **Grantmaking for Arts and Cultural Advocacy**

Supporting arts and cultural work has been a unique priority since the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice's first round of grants in 1980. For 35 years, Astraea has prioritized arts and cultural advocacy as a fundamental strategy for advancing human rights, and has distributed nearly four million dollars in grants to arts and cultural initiatives. In its nascence, Astraea supported film and video projects, visual artists, and, in 1991, established a groundbreaking Lesbian Writers Fund. Today, our commitment to arts and cultural advocacy remains central as one of our four programmatic grantmaking pillars.

Grantmakers allocate only limited funding to arts and cultural initiatives that seek to advance human rights. As reflected in a 2011 report by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, "Each year, approximately 11 percent of foundation giving [in the U.S.] – about \$2.3 billion in 2009 – is awarded to nonprofit arts and cultural institutions." However, this mostly goes to large organizations with budgets greater than \$5 million and that dedicate less than four percent of their grant dollars to advancing social justice goals.<sup>1</sup> Data on arts and culture grantmaking on an international level are scant. We often hear from our grantee partner community that it is very difficult to find funding for arts for social change programming since government and traditional grantmaking institutions are usually unwilling to support this kind of work. In general, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the potential of arts in social

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<sup>1</sup> "Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change: High Impact Strategy for Philanthropy." October 2011. National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. [http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/Fusing\\_Arts\\_Culture\\_and\\_Social\\_Change.pdf](http://www.ncrp.org/files/publications/Fusing_Arts_Culture_and_Social_Change.pdf)

change strategies and an overall lack of analysis demonstrating the value and impact of the arts as a tool for social change.<sup>2</sup>

As human rights advocates, we recognize that movements for change have often been inspired and unified by artistic and cultural expressions. Examples from the field demonstrate the ways in which arts and cultural activism, alongside advocacy campaigns, are successfully being used to increase visibility of human rights issues and secure human rights victories on both local and global levels. Highlighted below are two examples of organizations successfully using arts and cultural advocacy to secure high impact policy changes.

### Effective Arts and Cultural Initiatives

Using video and photography as well as legal advocacy, the Organization of Transsexuals for the Dignity of Diversity (OTD) has been able to advance and secure Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) rights in local, regional, and international arenas. Most notably, their multi-strategy activism has prompted dialog and recognition of SOGI rights within the United Nations and the Organization of American States.



Photography by Mario Casado, courtesy of Organization of Transsexuals for the Dignity of Diversity

In 2012, OTD assembled a photography exhibit entitled, *In Transit: A De/Construction of the History of Transsexual Bodies*.<sup>3</sup> The exhibit featured 30 photographs depicting the naked bodies of trans people, their partners, and their families, and was first shown in a public plaza in Rancagua, Chile. It was exhibited for 6 days and was viewed by over 5,000 people. According to OTD, the purpose of this exhibit was to celebrate the beauty of trans bodies. It denounces transphobia and moves people to be open to the idea that there are more bodies than those of men and women. Most importantly, the exhibit reminds viewers that trans people also deserve human rights. This exhibit took the risk of being public, confronting people with their own fears and prejudices. *In Transit* has been well received by diverse audiences across the globe.

OTD launched this exhibit alongside a campaign supporting an anti-discrimination law that includes gender and sexual identity as a basis for discrimination in Chile. The law was approved in May 2012 and was signed by Chilean president Sebastian Piñera in July 2012. The new measure permits anti-discrimination lawsuits, and adds hate-crime sentencing provisions for violent crimes. By creating this powerful photography exhibit alongside their advocacy

<sup>2</sup> "Trend or Tipping Point: Arts and Social Change Grantmaking." Americans for the Arts. Published by Animating Democracy. October 2010. <http://animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/documents/pages/Funders%20Report%20Narrative%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> A video by Astraea's grantee partner Mujeres al Bordo from Colombia, documenting the *In Transit* exhibit is available in Spanish here: <http://www.mujeresalborde.org/spip.php?article153>

campaign, OTD simultaneously promoted awareness-raising cultural efforts aimed to educate communities about trans issues, which enabled them to move their policy goals forward.

Side by Side is an international LGBT film festival that travels through several Russian cities featuring films, documentaries, and shorts to promote dialogue, educate audiences, and to foster respect for LGBT human rights. Side by Side faces several challenges, including backlash from local right wing-organized youth and even local authorities. Moscow, for example, has banned Pride parades for the next hundred years. In response to this policy and other queer and transphobic laws and regulations, Side by Side organizes to promote SOGI rights and to bring about greater societal acceptance and inclusion for the LGBT community throughout Russia. While they have not yet had a major advocacy win, in 2011 their festivals provided 26 blocks of screenings resulting in the presentation of 86 LGBT films, 13 discussions and a workshop. Nearly 1,200 people attended, three quarters of whom identified as LGBT.

Side by Side's example helps us highlight the importance of remembering that, while policy wins can occur quickly, they often require years of groundwork. According to Tanya Beer, Associate Director of the Center for Evaluation Innovation, "It can take several years—or even decades—for advocates to build the necessary momentum and pressure to make significant policy progress."<sup>4</sup> Side by Side Film Festival, like OTD's *In Transit* exhibit and other arts and cultural activist campaigns before them, is working to lay the foundation necessary for future policy and advocacy wins.

### **Evaluation and Grantmaker Tools**

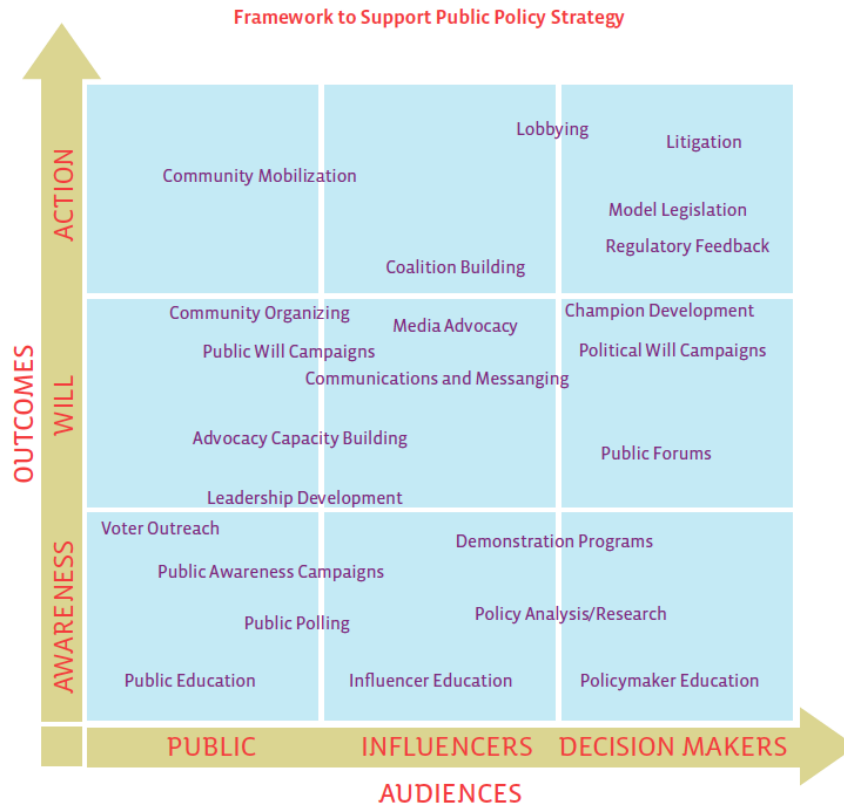
As these examples illustrate, arts and cultural activism is a powerful strategy in promoting human rights. In order to mobilize more funding towards arts and culture for social change, as grantmakers, we are tasked to develop tools to measure, evaluate and communicate the impact of these powerful strategies. The impact of arts and cultural activism is difficult to evaluate because changes in the minds and hearts of audiences are not as tangible as policy changes. Jackie Williams Kaye, Director of Research and Evaluation at Wellspring Advisors, adapted a public policy strategy measuring tool (Chart 1) developed by Julia Coffman.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Beer, Tanya. "Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Advocacy Grantmaking." 2003.  
<http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publications/best-practices-and-emerging-trends-advocacy-grantmaking>

<sup>5</sup> Beer, Tanya. "Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Advocacy Grantmaking." 2003.

Chart 1



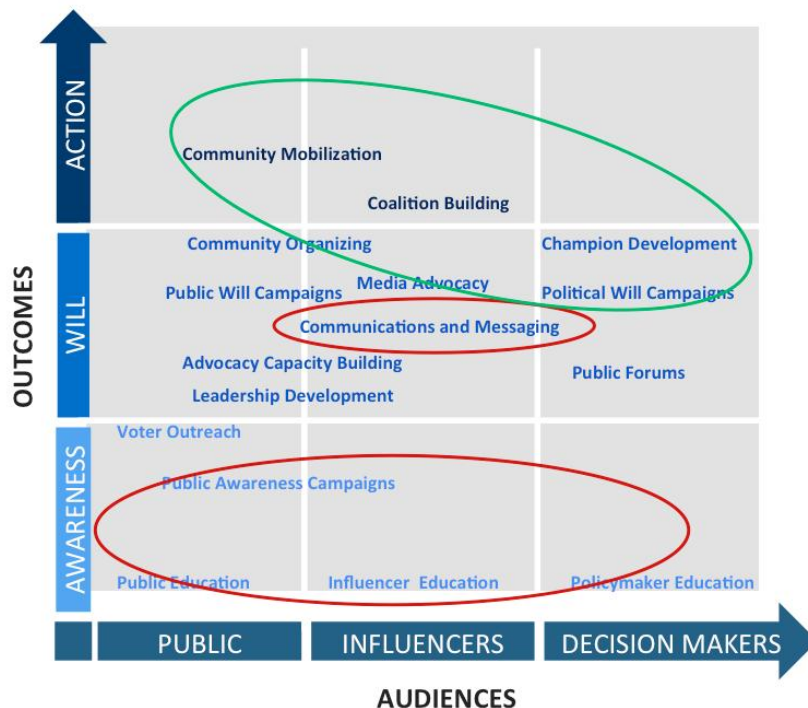
The adapted social change tool tracks outcomes and audiences at the same three levels of engagement towards a social change goal. The three levels of audiences include the general public, influencers, and decision-makers, and they can move from awareness, to will, to action. According to Kaye, and as seen in Chart 2 (below), people mostly think of arts and culture as contributing to the lower left of the chart, namely, to awareness-raising efforts. However, with this tool, the case can be made that arts and cultural activism contributes to increasing will and ultimately community building and mobilization for social change (see Chart 3).<sup>6</sup> For example, in the case of OTD, the policy advocacy strategy that the group identified was to pass an anti-discrimination law that considered hate crimes and violence against LGBTQI people discrimination. However, they had a parallel social change goal that was advanced by a strong arts and cultural strategy. This strategy moved OTD members and the larger community from a public awareness campaign on issues facing the transgender community, to community mobilization for the passage of the anti-discrimination law.

<sup>6</sup> Kaye, Jackie W. Director of Research and Evaluation at Wellspring Advisors. "Movements that Express: Arts and Cultural Advocacy for the Advancement of Human Rights." Panel at the IHRFG New York Conference, July 17-18, 2012. Organized by Wellspring Advisors, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and Leeway Foundation.

Chart 2



Chart 3



Arts and cultural activism strategies are essential to moving audience members into action. Without arts and culture, coalition and movement-building are less likely and often impossible. Strong bridges are made through working, sharing and being inspired as a community. Arts and cultural strategies are often the base for member engagement with an issue affecting a community and they are a way to guarantee that the -long fought for- laws and policies improve the lives of LGBTQI people.