

# New Report: Artistic Activism Trumps Traditional Practices

*Why don't artists use their greatest asset -- the arts! -- in their arts advocacy?*

By **Jeff Poulin** - December 8, 2019

I don't think I will ever forget the day, before his January 2017 inauguration, that news outlets reported that President-Elect Donald J. Trump intended to [eliminate federal funding for the arts and humanities](#). I was in Anaheim, CA, preparing to attend the National Association of Music Merchants show, presumably surrounded by tens of thousands of people who disagreed with this move. What has really stuck with me, though, was how *engaged* the arts community became — has become — as a result.

Despite a [national arts-advocacy apparatus](#) aimed at protecting the federal dollars that support the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities, the new president's pledge to eliminate this funding really stuck with people. People got engaged, [turning up in Washington, DC](#) for the largest arts-advocacy event in 30 years!

True, advocacy for the arts has not yet come close to other marches, protests and petitions against the president's actions — such as the [Women's March](#) and [airport protests against the Muslim Ban](#). But the [role of artists in those efforts](#) was — and still is — apparent. And it should not be surprising to us: most artists, and most arts supporters, know that the arts provide a simple pathway for effective advocacy. Just look at the incredible [protest songs from the civil rights](#)

movement. Or the art that emerged from protesting the Vietnam War.

In September, the NYC-based [Center for Artistic Activism \(C4AA\)](#) released [The Copenhagen Experiment: The Report](#). It examines what happened when researchers sought to answer a simple question: Do creative forms of activism work better than more conventional ones?

In May 2018, the C4AA research team mounted multiple activist interventions around a current environmental issue on a popular, well-traveled bridge in the middle of Denmark's capital. Each day, a conventional activist intervention, such as public speaking, petitioning or flyering, was paired with a more "creative" way of accomplishing the same task. Observers watched interactions and took notes; interviewers stopped passersby to ask their opinions; a camera person filmed interactions to capture micro-dynamics and general movement patterns; and a survey was sent out two weeks later to inquire about recall of the event and resulting actions. What they found was that creative approaches were more effective than conventional ones at delivering on traditional advocacy objectives, such as awareness, engagement and receptiveness.

One of the authors of the report, Stephen Duncombe (also a director of C4AA), [recently discussed](#) the significance of these outcomes:

*The data generated by this experiment points decisively to the conclusion that creative forms of street activism are more effective, in part because they are more affective, than conventional tactics. This is an important conclusion for social actors seeking to maximize the impact of civic engagement in public spaces,*

*as well as scholars looking to understand the dynamics of effective and affective activism.*

What we should learn from this study is the vital role of artists as activists — and then we should apply it to advocacy *within our own sector*.

My observation of the field is that it is divided: Part A uses activism for self-preservation (i.e., advocating for funding); Part B uses activism for social and political change in their community or country. Part A, however, is scared to use the arts *as* their activism, and engages in traditional advocacy; Part B pulls out all the stops to use the arts to advance other social or political causes.

We have **great profiles** of artist activism in a **number of publications**. We also have great frameworks for **evaluating our impact**. And now, with this new study from C4A, we have data decisively concluding that what we, as artists, bring to the table is more effective than the established advocacy tactics.

So, why don't artists and arts administrators use our greatest asset — the arts — within our arts advocacy?

I assert that we must embrace ourselves as artists, rather than hide in a closet, when we promote our sector. Let's not only stick to the talking points vetted by the other side, but use our own language from our lives and own artistic experiences. Here are a few ideas:

1. The next time you speak to a city council member, a school board member, or legislator, forget the suit and tie — dress like you would to your opening night or gallery opening.
2. When students perform in front of community influencers, don't strive for perfection — showcase the gritty artistic process.
3. When reporting to grant-makers, invite them into your space with clay on the floor, tap shoes piled on a chair or instruments stored in weird places, rather than filing a professionally edited report with stock imagery.

I wonder what might happen if, instead of bringing 500 arts advocates dressed in suits to Capitol Hill, we showed up with marching bands, dancers, theatrical performances and art displays from the White House to the Capitol? Would we change the mind of the president about federal arts funding? Probably not. But would we get some great press attention and maybe, just maybe, show off why the arts impact our communities? Most definitely.

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