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Stephen Duncombe, ***Æffect: The Affect and Effect of Artistic Activism,*** New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2024, 264 pp., $33.00 (paperback), $116.00 (hardback), $32.99 (ePub).

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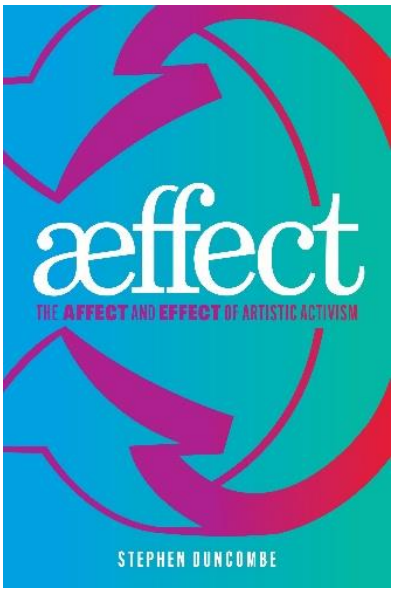

As with the philosophers and critics, among artistic activists there is no one universally agreed-upon notion of what artistic activism does. Depending on whom you speak to, artistic activism makes ideas accessible *or* it surprises and confuses, it reveals realities *or* it imagines new ones, it creates conversations *or* facilitates participation, it circumvents barriers to acceptance *or* creates spaces and places for creativity, it generates affect and empathy *or* shocks and disrupts, it is aimed outward toward social movements *or* inward toward oneself. Or it is some of these, or all of these, or some of these all of the time, or all of these some of the time. (p. 102; emphasis in original)

Scholarship on activist art, socially engaged practice, and the politics of reception has long recognized that artistic intervention operates across multiple temporal scales and registers of meaning (Sanz & Rodriguez-Labajos, 2021). Drawing on more than 25 years of his own practice and over 100 interviews with artistic activists, Stephen Duncombe's ***Æffect: The Affect and Effect of Artistic Activism*** sets out to answer a deceptively simple question: How do we know when artistic activism has worked? Framed around the twin concerns of *affect*—which Duncombe describes as "reaching minds through hearts" (p. 82)—and *effect*, Duncombe seeks to explain how artistic activism works, why it matters, and how its impact(s) might be effectively evaluated. Its central premise is compelling: Duncombe rejects the easy opposition between art as expressive gesture and activism as instrumental intervention, arguing instead that artistic activism must be understood through its own hybrid logic. Indeed, Duncombe writes, "Defining artistic activism by its subject matter or even its results is not productive" (p. 9). His insistence on affect—rather than focusing solely on effect—as a meaningful dimension of activism is one of the book's most important achievements. It reminds readers that social change is not produced only by legislation, protest turnout, or media visibility, but also by shifts in imagination, solidarity, and emotional orientation. This is a useful corrective to narrow instrumentalism, and it gives the book real relevance for scholars of performance, visual culture, and social movement.

The prose is clear, accessible, and generally free of unnecessary jargon, which makes the book unusually readable for a scholarly text. The result is a book that can travel across disciplinary boundaries, speaking to art historians, cultural theorists, activist organizers, and readers in media and performance studies. Its interdisciplinary reach is one of its major accomplishments, and it should become a useful reference point for anyone studying the changing relationship between culture and political action. The book's structure is effective, reflecting a serious attempt to move the discussion of artistic activism beyond celebratory generalities. Indeed, Duncombe's principal claim is that artistic activism should not be judged

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solely by conventional political metrics because its aims often include affective, symbolic, and relational transformations that are not easily captured by immediate outcomes. That is an intellectually responsible position, especially given the tendency in cultural policy discourse to collapse value into quantifiable impact. Yet the book's strongest premise also exposes its most persistent difficulty: It aspires to provide a general method for assessing an unruly, context-specific practice that may resist precisely the kind of standardization the project requires.

There are vivid and highly accessible examples throughout, well-chosen in that they reveal the diversity of artistic activism across geographies, media, and political objectives, as well as the challenges of developing a standardized, universal tool. This breadth helps the reader understand that artistic activism is not a single method but a contingent set of tactics, aesthetic forms, and organizational relationships. Duncombe explains that the "point of sharing these stories is to demonstrate the different ways that this methodology [proposed in the book] can be adapted and adopted for different needs, in different places, and for different situations" (p. 176). Of course, this only adds to the complexity of how to effectively measure its impact. As such, those searching for an explicit tool applicable across all sectors may be left wanting. Duncombe offers a flexible framework, which he calls the "Æffect Assessment Method," that is heuristic and extremely valuable as a reflective tool yet arguably falls short of an effective evaluative instrument that may be employed to meet the indicators, comparators, and criteria often requested by funders for causal inference (i.e., collapsing value into quantifiable impact). Instead, it works as a "short script of queries" (p. 149) or seven prompts for artistic activists to reflect upon: (1) What do I want my project to do? (2) Who do I want to engage? (3) How do I want to act? (4) What do I want to create? (5) How will I know if it works? (6) Did it work? (7) What do I do next? (pp. 149–152).

As Duncombe has written elsewhere (Duncombe, 2016), affect can mobilize, but it can also aestheticize suffering, deepen polarization, or substitute symbolic participation for material change. The book acknowledges unintended consequences in broad terms, but it does not fully confront how artistic activism can be absorbed by the same institutional and market systems it seeks to challenge. That omission matters, especially in a field where visibility, funding, and professionalization can blunt radical intent. Indeed, while Duncombe has focused here on artistic activism, I was consistently struck by the strong overlaps with social change research more broadly. The text thus not only represents an important contribution to scholarship on cultural politics but also provokes reflection on the intersections between our work and social change.

"Change is something often outside the control of the artistic activist; the intention of change, however, is not" (p. 9). This line echoes a challenge often faced in academia; as researchers and educators, we are increasingly being asked to demonstrate how our work is impactful (Aiello et al., 2021; Holbrook, 2017). Throughout the book, Duncombe discusses challenges that resonated with my own social change research, including "slippage" of projects (p. 10), the need for "metrics" (p. 19), "creating conversations between audiences who might otherwise not speak to one another, about topics they might not usually talk about" (p. 76), and "listen[ing] up to the words and wisdom of people in the communities they work" (p. 101). Indeed, Duncombe acknowledges that "[d]emonstrable social change . . . is an elusive marker of success in artistic activism" (p. 127), just as it is in social change research; social impacts are typically beyond project timeframes and thus difficult to attribute (Costa & Andreaus, 2021).

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Overall, *Æffect* is a thoughtful, well-researched, and practically useful contribution to the study of artistic activism. Its central achievement is to make evaluation seem neither hostile to art nor naive about politics, but necessary to both. For readers interested in how aesthetic practice can intersect with social transformation, Duncombe offers a persuasive and generative account of what it means to ask not only whether art can matter, but how it matters, for whom, and under what conditions. At a moment when many scholars and practitioners are increasingly interested in the measurable social impact of their work, Duncombe offers both a language for analysis and a set of tools for reflection. I strongly recommend this book not only for those wanting to learn more about artistic activism or how to evaluate its impact but also for anyone who is passionate about social justice and ensuring their work makes a difference.

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