

Evaluating the Social Impact of Indigenous Art Projects by Way of Aesthetic Impact

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Indigenous artists have long used art as a means of pushing back on colonial actions, ideas, and ways of being. It is not only a powerful vernacular in which to communicate about the persistence of Indigenous peoples and who they are today, but also an effective means of questioning dominant worldviews and inspiring social change.

In 2014, to both celebrate and promote these valuable aspects of contemporary Indigenous art, the [Native Arts and Cultures Foundation](#) (NACF) launched a new initiative, the [Community Inspiration Program](#) (CIP). The basic program strategy was to identify and fund unique projects that were led by Native artists, spoke to socially important issues, and engaged communities.

The four CIP projects were:

The Story of Everything, a music, dance, visual imagery, and spoken word performance by the slam poet Kealoha, which focused on the Big Bang, climate change, and Indigenous knowledges.



Kealoha in rehearsal for The Story of Everything. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Repellent Fence, an ephemeral installation by the arts collaborative Postcommodity, featuring 26 giant helium balloons tethered in a line bisecting the international border near Douglas, Arizona/Agua Prieta, Sonora that queried border policy.



Repellent Fence. Photo courtesy of Postcommodity.

SHORE, a performance installation by Emily Johnson's dance company Catalyst, which combined story, volunteerism, performance, and feasting and challenged audience members/participants to be "in community" with one another.



SHORE. Photo courtesy of Emily Johnson and Catalyst Dance.

Sundance Native Forum, a workshop offered through the [Sundance Institute's New Frontier](#) program that engaged Native artists, activists, and innovative media makers in transmedia storytelling for social and environmental justice.



New Frontier Lab + Native Forum. Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

The NACF also included evaluation as a key component of the CIP. NACF staff, board, and funders wanted to know: How can we understand the impacts of these projects? How can we see the difference that they are making? What is the community value of this arts and social change work?

NACF contracted with my organization, the [Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona](#) (NNI), to conduct the evaluation. NNI's mission is to be a self-determination and self-governance resource for Native nations worldwide; our work includes research, evaluation, policy analysis, education, and service to tribal communities. Both NACF and NNI see self-determination as crucial to Indigenous peoples' persistence and success. Both view Native cultures as containing vital information for organization and action. And both see great value in Indigenous ways of knowing.

Armed with these commitments, NNI and NACF embarked on a journey to better understand the impacts of the four CIP projects. We found that determining an appropriate approach to the evaluation was challenging. For example, logic models can incorporate nontraditional measures of inputs, outputs, and outcomes, which makes them adaptable to the arts for social change context. Even so, their cause-and-effect reasoning may be too linear to capture the circuitous pathways and serendipitous encounters that can lead to arts-inspired social impacts.

Halfway through our evaluation process, we came across an early draft of Animating Democracy's *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework. It was in development and incomplete, and what we really wanted was more of it. But the connections to our work were clear, and we determined to make do.

That was the right choice. The framework provided a way to integrate the logic of intrinsic impact evaluation with Indigenous methodologies, especially storytelling. It value-added with guiding questions that gave us new ways to describe and even calibrate impact.

Consider Postcommodity's massive land art installation, *Repellent Fence*. The framework's aesthetic attributes *disruption* and *stickiness* gave us ways to identify, discuss, and demonstrate the power of this project-as-metaphor to disrupt a negative narrative and promote *communal meaning*. As we note in the CIP [evaluation report](#):

No matter who one talked to during the land art installation, no matter the venue in which something was discussed, and no matter the medium in which something was published/posted, people were talking about *Repellent Fence* as a challenge—a *disruption*—to how they thought. More than that, participants in these conversations were using similar ideas and phrases to make their points about the challenges to their thinking (including "suturing the border," "erasing the border," "binational cooperation and collaboration" and "I crossed the line for art"), showing the *stickiness* of ideas the *Repellent Fence* inspired. Numerous conversations have begun, changed, or moved forward faster as a result of *Repellent Fence's* disruptiveness.

Aesthetic Perspectives firmly positioned our inquiry as "How do we know that this is going well?" as opposed to "How well is this going?" This step was pivotal. As evaluators, we understood our work to be asking the former question. Yet the word "evaluation" often shifted our conversations uncomfortably toward the latter. By returning again and again to the questions in the framework, we were better able to draw out stories and to identify the projects' specific impacts. As a result, the final NACF CIP impact evaluation report presents a textured set of findings that allows artists, funders, and communities to see the difference these projects have made.

With the full framework now in hand, I continue to be struck by its usefulness. NNI's primary work is supporting Native nations in their efforts to become more sovereign and self-governing. Because these efforts generally require social change, I believe the framework can be an invaluable tool for assessing tribes' nation-building progress. More generally, *I believe the framework is useful for evaluating any activity or intervention that is meant to have a social impact or inspire social change*. The specific evaluation questions may be somewhat different, but the components of the framework remain the same.