

# Embodying Resistance

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## Abstract

The struggle for justice is not new, yet the impact of intentional embodiment and dance in protest is on the rise. Bringing together embodied anti-racist work and dance as a practice of resistance, this artists' statement describes a grassroots coalition in Rochester, New York: Artists Coalition for Change Together. Co-founded in 2017 as a response to the recent election, ACCT began as an organization of progressive dance artists and collaborators who sought to generate social change through performance, direct action, community dialogues, and scholarship. Written as a dialogue between two founders of ACCT, this statement examines the history of the coalition and its acts of embodied protest. As moving bodies and art communicated resistance in direct "ACCTions," community activism was generated. Through the lens of existing research and college courses on arts activism, the authors reference multiple reckonings in the North American cultural body, which peaked during the pandemic in 2020.

KEYWORDS: resistance, art, embodiment, justice

## Introduction

In response to the U.S. election in 2016, many artists took it upon themselves to use their art as a form of resistance. Embodied practices of justice crystallized as activist performance, direct action in the streets, and community engagement in many forms. Although dance and movement have a long history of resistance, the

emergence of previously hidden blatant, unapologetic racist rhetoric has brought a deeper—and perhaps more embodied—understanding of the threat of oppression.

## Dialogue

Rose: Artists Coalition for Change Together (ACCT) was born amidst the complicated political terrain of the Trump era. Originally founded by the two of us and Heather Roffe, ACCT became an organization of progressive collaborators that sought to generate social change through advocacy, dissent, resistance, facilitation, and healing. Consistent with those dialogical practices, we have written this paper as a conversation that highlights “ACCTions” designed to face the multiple reckonings of the Trump presidency.

Donna: Rose, you said ACCT was born; how did that happen?

Rose: I had a physical response to the 2016 election: fear appeared as constriction in my body, sadness revealed itself as paralysis, and anger emerged as the fight activation in my psoas. After years of arts activism, the moment called for more. I cast a wide net, you and Heather responded, and thus began our collaboration. Despite working full-time, we reallocated our personal resources to move into action through art.

Rose: Looking back at the four years of ACCT, what patterns emerged?

Donna: As dancers and choreographers, we were passionate and a bit naïve when we started ACCT. We spent weeks contemplating the right title and its acronym—who and what would comprise the scope and purpose of the coalition. In hindsight we realize we focused on three goals: 1) anti-oppression, 2) radical joy, and 3) connecting communities across differences. Driving our organizing was commitment to change and the action it takes to make progress. These three outcomes, while not our initial mission, are revealed and prominent within the ACCT Chronicle (January 2017-2021), which lists 50 “ACCTions,” including organizational meetings, community workshops, performances, protests, rallies, parades, art installations, and artist gatherings to create work.

What began as an intellectual, political response became embodied as direct community action to drive cultural change. Highlights in Rochester, NY, included a curated dance performance, “Stop Motion/Start Action,” at the Multi-use Community Cultural Center (MuCCC) during the Fringe Festival; an ensemble dance and vocal homily at Spiritus Christi Church; a community workshop titled “Subtracting the Divide,” which led to a performance of movement and spoken word; a “Families Belong Together” rally and art installation at Washington Square Park; a multi-generational outdoor pre-parade movement improvisation at Memorial Art Gallery to celebrate pride in the LGBTQI+ community; and two versions of “The Reckoning,” which are described below. All these creative, communal activities were embodied by its members as activism. They were acts of protest, and yet we recall not only the rage and conviction but also the joy of community connection, the collaborative spirit that drives people to march

together, to stand in solidarity in freezing cold and scorching heat, to join a very long history of marches against oppression in the USA.

Donna: I have heard the term “Social Somatics” and I’m not sure what it means in relation to dance as protest.

Rose: Like Somatics, Social Somatics integrates the body and mind, focuses on perception and awareness, and acknowledges the body’s intelligence as it relates to the environment it moves within. It deepens the belief in the social impact on and of our bodies. If social systems influence the embodied lives of the individual, then people shape the body of culture.

Drawing upon ancient eastern philosophies and healing practices, Somatics has long been part of the dance and movement field in the U.S. More recently, embodied practices have begun to emerge in social justice circles using Social Somatics practices as a path towards justice. These practices are spearheaded by people like somatic educator Martha Eddy; Resmaa Menakem working in somatic abolitionism; Dr. Sará King, integrating neuroscience and mindfulness; and organizations like Generative Somatics that focus on the body, social change, and climate justice.

When we consider the holistic implications of Social Somatics as it relates to protest, it is quite powerful: every human being has a body that brings them into relationship with the world. When inner intentions are aligned with outer expression, our bodies become vehicles for acts of resistance.

Rose: Speaking of embodied activism, didn’t you teach a college course on embodied activism in the spring?

Donna: Yes, I did. As a co-founder of a social justice studies college program, I was influenced and encouraged by Nkem Ndefo and Rae Johnson, who taught an Embodied Philosophy course in July and August 2020 titled “Embodied Activism: Navigating the Intersection of Embodiment and Social Justice.” I joined hundreds of participants on-line to re-think social change, trauma, liberation, and resistance and to connect our learning to future embodied actions. When I designed this community arts course to focus on embodiment as an expression of inner conviction to drive change, I was thinking of the semester as a journey to deepen awareness, gratitude, and resilience, especially during a pandemic when students had to be at least six feet apart and personal safety existed within the virtual world. “Embodied activism,” a familiar term in the early 21st century, signals the centrality of human integrity and passionate conviction. Rather than being triggered intellectually by political ideology, activism that is embodied starts from a somatic, internal site within the body. Absent the need for a witness, embodied direct action is contrasted with performative activism, which my students recognized as “being seen” protesting, a flawed definition of activism. By the end of the course, students shared performances and writing that expressed changed identities in relation to activism, drawing a connection to their own embodied experiences.

Rose: Also as an educator, I was able to include my classroom by designing both of my Arts + Activism courses around ACCT's community art piece, *The Reckoning*. I had hoped to encourage future change makers as my students worked beside the seasoned activist-artists of ACCT.

Donna: Because we created two "Reckonings" before major elections, modeled around notions of "dancing the vote," do you believe these live events became examples of arts production for social change?

Rose: *The Reckoning* was an example of how movement and performance can be used to activate audiences. Conceived collaboratively, the production emerged out of fear of voter apathy and a desire to activate potential voters. In both iterations (2018 and 2020), collaborating artists crafted interdisciplinary performance pieces that addressed "hot button" issues on the ballot, which included immigration, healthcare, LGBTQIA+ rights, gun violence and more.

The 2018 performance was set up like a house of horrors that ushered the audience through unpredicted spaces, each installation finding new ways of provoking engagement. In one movement installation on the topic of immigration, the audience became the performers. Cast members, dressed as immigration officials, asked questions from the U.S. citizenship test, allowing the audience to move forward only if they answered historical questions correctly.

The success of 2018 led us to carry *The Reckoning* into 2020. Although the second iteration required a different format due to COVID, we had the opportunity to re-envision aspects of the event. With pandemic restrictions in mind, our central questions became: How do we safely engage the most diverse audience? Can we reach audiences that may not seek art as protest? How do we encourage a wider range of voter engagement?

While the original intent of *The Reckoning* was preserved, the 2020 version could not have been more different. We extended our run of performances by producing an event for four weekends leading up to the election. We exploited Covid restrictions to generate creative problem solving, ultimately traveling to four different neighborhoods in Rochester. Each outdoor performance was unique: one dance piece with spoken word streamed fully online; one open air art installation on a college campus; one interdisciplinary movement and film event projected onto the side of a building; and one culminating event with live dance, music, and visual art outside a local art gallery.

Regarding the possibility of arts production for social change, ACCT was founded upon the assumption that interactive elements encourage audiences to interrogate their own beliefs and histories. Acting in an embodied way is likely to have more impact and change in the body is more likely to sustain intentionality and translate to action.

Donna: How has this journey with ACCT influenced you as a person?

Rose: Working with ACCT gave me the opportunity to claim my activist identity, something I did not do within the dance world. The invisible code that discourages being "too political" within the dance field was imprinted upon my own body and

art making. Working with ACCT has caused me to become more aware of who has access to my work. During our time together I have recognized problematic patterns in my own attempts at activist work. I often struggle with the balance of making art from a place of personal expression and ownership of the stories I can tell. I make art with my body first, often discovering a piece alone in a dance studio, yet I also want to tackle difficult themes of injustice. I struggle to situate critical concepts as movement in my body of privilege. What happens when my white, cis-gender, middle-class, American body should not be centered? Do I continue to take action in my art? My answer has been to differentiate the type of work I make, either personal or communal. In the latter, I remove my white body from the choreography and turn to the community, to the layered stories that engage the multiplicity of human experience.

Donna: I feel deeply indebted to you, Rose, for your vision in November of 2016. As a result of your courage, we started a coalition, which existed for and with other activist artists and community partners. I must name some of these partners: Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 21st Century Arts and the Women of Color Art Collaborative, FrazeeFeet Dance Company, Spiritus Christi Church, and the Memorial Art Gallery, to mention only a few. Our work together became a small part of society's resistance to old injustices that were being praised and reinforced by new public rhetoric. We had two goals, first, to generate more equity and belonging for all marginalized people, and second, to get people out to vote against Trump. It seems that ACCT represents a microcosm of failures and successes in modern society—how grassroots activism can make a difference and how little difference it makes.

On a personal level, as a woman of color with academic privilege, ACCT taught me to love community activism and to question academia. As a result of our journey as artists in ACCT, I can now admit to assimilating for years, trying to fit into a predominantly white institution, and therefore to being complicit with racism, even against myself. Internalized racial oppression is real, and I have now faced its pedagogical effects. I've asked myself what I have unconsciously taught my students. Even as our artists' coalition addressed multiple reckonings—Trump's presidency, Covid-19 pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter response to George Floyd's murder—we all had to face personal reckonings too and realize how each of us must coalesce new insights to resist oppression everywhere, even within ourselves.

## Conclusion

While performance can leave a kinesthetic impression on those who witness it, we wonder if dance and performance can actually make change. Should it try? Dance is often assumed to be apolitical, yet can any human art be apolitical? Although dance may not change policy, we know that dance changes people; the essence of dance is change in the body as it comes into relationship with others. The power of embodiment resides within its liminal truth.