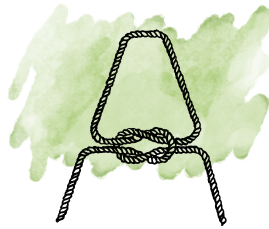# Educator Companion

AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES
Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

disruption

commitment
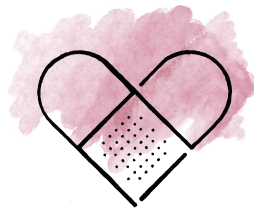
communal meaning
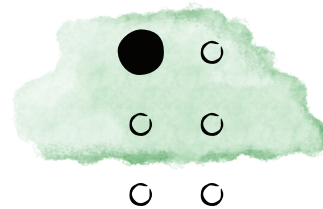
cultural integrity

risk-taking
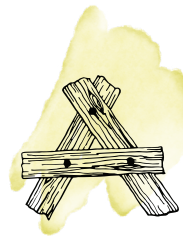
emotional experience

sensory experience

openness

Animating **Democracy**
A Program of **Americans for the Arts**

coherence

resourcefulness

stickiness

Companion Guide for Educators

By Bob Leonard
Edited by Pam Korza

Welcome! This brief guide is an introduction to Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change and how it can serve educators' and students' needs and interests.

The *Aesthetics Perspectives* framework can enhance your understanding, description, and evaluation of work at the intersection of artistic creation and civic engagement, community development, and justice. The framework describes 11 attributes that can be observed in artistic processes and products that contribute to the work's artistic potency and effectiveness in contributing to social and civic outcomes.

We invite you to draw upon and adapt aspects of the framework to guide reflection, planning, and assessment of artistic work with social or civic intentions.
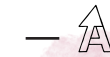
"Arts for Change," for the purpose of this framework, is an umbrella term that refers to artistic and cultural processes, products, and practices geared to progressive and positive change including justice, civic engagement, and community development.

Who might find the framework useful in secondary and higher education institutions?

The *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework offers artists, scholars, writers, teachers and students a fresh orientation to making art as well as evaluating it. The need for concrete, specific terms and ways of thinking that apply expressly to Arts for Change impacts not just artists and their community partners but scholars and writers, teachers and students. As such the framework may be of interest to:

- Teachers and students in all the arts
- Students of and faculty teaching about community-based and community-engaged arts, social and civic practice, community cultural development, public art, cross-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary studies and projects
- Faculty and students engaged in critical writing in the arts
- Public scholars and students interested in arts, humanities, and design
- Faculty and students in Schools/Colleges of Education who are exploring ways of understanding art and training artists
- Staff, faculty, and students involved in centers for humanities, civic engagement, outreach, and in creative service learning projects in and with communities

- Community partners in arts and non-arts organizations involved in community-campus partnerships
- Curatorial staff of university/college galleries and museums
- Educators and administrators in high school and higher education looking to understand and guide their students through the evolving arts fields
- University research administrators seeking comprehensive understanding of creativity in the context of the common struggle to orient art and art-making in terms of university research
- Faculty and administrators who are assessing community-engaged arts, humanities, and design in tenure review and program accreditation processes

Interests and concerns the framework can help address

The need to articulate standards of excellence in Arts for Change. Standards of excellence are dangerously *assumed* in community-based practice but only rarely *articulated*, let alone *critiqued*, or *tested* in an open fashion. Standards of excellence, when assumed but not expressed, can be used to separate and exclude.

Non-relevant and Eurocentric standards of excellence and beauty that too often prevail in describing and assessing the aesthetics of work that is socially and civically engaged. It's imperative that the leaders and visionaries in the academy join practitioners and their partners in renewing and promulgating a dynamic critical paradigm, reflective of diverse cultures as embodied by community-based, social, and civic arts practices. The framework lessens the distracting need to deride or dismantle conventional standards by expanding to include practical, relevant, compatible attributes for evaluation.

A need for flexible models that enrich student learning. For artists, scholars, writers, teachers, and students, this framework provides a fresh and deeply considered orientation to aesthetic considerations in making, describing, and evaluating community engaged art. Developing effective vocabularies of aesthetics in arts training programs can begin to change how we understand, train for, and practice a rigorous aesthetic profession. The framework can expand students' comprehension of professional career options, and it can provide new models for teachers to explore and share with students.

This is the work of scholars and writers, teachers and students every bit as much as it is the work of artist practitioners or those who would support them.

The often hard to grasp nature of Arts for Change, particularly for people who are unfamiliar with the work. Our dominant western culture often understands art in terms of commodified consumption of market-based products. In working with colleagues, with other disciplines inside the university, and with community partners, it can be challenging to describe different artistic paradigms that open up the artistic experience for makers, partners, audience, and evaluators alike. What does the creative work look like and how does it work? How can the art sometimes be the creative process itself? Left unaddressed, these difficult challenges of communication and understanding can jeopardize partnerships, proposals for resources, and case-making to university leadership for initiatives that could benefit from integration of arts.

Challenges of professional and artistic rigor. There is an unfortunately common perception that community-based practices in arts, humanities, and design are of lesser quality and value, and are less rigorous in concept and artistic execution. This framework provides a ground level entry point to confront, overturn, and replace such perceptions and assertions through comprehensive scholastic inquiry and practical application on campus and in the professional arts fields.

Tenure review and program accreditation. Tenure review and program accreditation criteria are typically inadequate for assessing public scholarship in arts, humanities, and design that is deeply rooted in community-based practices. This framework has direct and practical application to surmounting these inadequacies.

Distinguishing Streams of Practice

Michael Rohd has articulated these careful distinctions in creative practice:

Studio Practice: Artists make their own work and engage with publics as audience.

Social Practice: Artists work with publics on an artist-led vision in ways that may include research, process, and/or content with an intention of social impact outside traditional audience experience.

Civic Practice: Artists co-design project with publics; the spoken intention is to serve a public partner's self-defined needs.

From Jacqueline E. Lawton's **Summary of the 2015 Conference of the Theatre Communications Group.**

How teachers, students, and others might apply or adapt the framework

- **Curriculum development** (e.g. vocabulary; discussions of aesthetics, excellence, and efficacy)
- **Faculty/student feedback**, specify, clarify, expand and deepen criteria for evaluation of student work in the classroom, in production, and in student response to art experienced on- and off-campus
- **Peer critique and review**
- **Planning community-based projects to**, clarify artistic intent, describe the creative work to community partners, guide artistic choices to support social and civic intents, design community engagement strategies and approaches
- **Designing dialogue** (in the classroom, as part of productions, in the community) around community cultural development in all its forms
- **Assessing Arts for Change work** using criteria aligned with the values of community-engaged scholarship
- **Using or adapting reflective questions** in the attributes pages for academic program development, re-visioning, and accreditation processes
- **Substantiating appeals** for internal and external funding
- **Training** for urban and regional planning, community organizing, community development, municipal and county administration, and more

Connecting contemporary aesthetic concerns to a body of knowledge

In undergraduate liberal arts programs and in graduate training programs, there are essential reasons and curricular opportunities to explore and develop the connections between aesthetics, theories of social change, and the function of the artist as public intellectual. Important writers, thinkers, knowledge builders in a variety of humanities disciplines abound, such as philosopher Herbert Marcuse, cultural critic Carol Becker, Canadian political and social science philosopher Charles Taylor, Brazilian theatre practitioner and theorist Augusto Boal, and educator Paulo Freire.

The Aesthetic Attributes

Commitment - Creative processes and products embody conviction to the cause espoused through the work.

Communal Meaning - The creative work facilitates collective meaning that transcends individual perspective and experience.

Disruption - Art challenges what is by exposing what has been hidden, posing new ways of being, and modeling new forms of action.

Cultural Integrity - The creative work demonstrates integrity and ethical use of material with specific cultural origins and context.

Emotional Experience - Arts for Change facilitates a productive movement between "heart space"—the emotional experience that art evokes—and the "head space" of civic or social issues.

Sensory Experience - Vivid sensations deepen the experience of the creative work and heighten the power of its messages and the potential for change.

Risk-taking - The creative work assumes risk by subverting dominant norms, values, narratives, standards, or aesthetics.

Openness - The creative work deepens impact by remaining open, fluid, transparent, subject to influence, and able to hold contradiction.

Resourcefulness - Imaginative use of available resources drives artistic innovation and demonstrates responsible social and environmental practice.

Coherence - Strong ideas expressed with clarity advance both artistic and social purposes.

Stickiness - The creative work achieves sustained resonance, impact, or value.

In the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework, each attribute section includes:

- **Conceptual description**
- **Reflective questions** to help users apply the concept to specific work and contexts
- **Arts for Change project examples** to further illuminate the attributes and questions

…what if these attributes were applied to all of the arts?

I believe we orient, understand, and make meaning of the world we live in through our imagination. In his book *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor's rich analysis of the changes in western social imaginaries from the Medieval through the Renaissance into the modern era connects, for me, with the power of the arts as makers of image and story. Looked at this way, I believe we can see that authentic art sometimes reflects and sometimes leads the way into deep social change.

I think the aesthetic framework would be wonderfully applied to the more conventional arts, especially to the so-called greats in the canon, such as Beethoven's 9th or Ibsen's plays. I've long wondered about connections between the emergence of the democratic principles of the late 18th and early 19th century and the emergence of the multi-voiced orchestra and other aspects of Beethoven's music. And what was Ibsen writing about the woman's place in a marriage, and how effective was he in his time? And what was driving the initial emergence of realism, anyway, and how did that aesthetic journey intersect with the impulses for democracy?

I think there could be great gain in seeing what would emerge by way of both comprehension and critique if the attributes were applied to all of the arts. I guess that is consistent with my conviction that all art is political, whether it works for positive social change or it works for the maintenance of the status quo. It certainly was one of the ways Marcuse was chasing in his understanding of aesthetics. Using these attributes to identify specific strategies and artistic choices that bolster the status quo could be every bit as useful as revealing the strategies and choices in the work this framework more directly advocates.

BOB LEONARD

Additional Resources

Becker, Carol, editor. ***The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, And Social Responsibility***. Routledge, 1994. Contributors from South Africa, the Czech Republic, Iran, Poland, Mexico and the U.S. discuss the role of artists in their own societies and analyze their activist identities as a basis for their own work. Writers include Fusco, Ehrenberg, Ndebele, Dyson and Sadri. Includes a helpful review and assessment of Marcuse's thinking 20 years later in the editor's essay "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art."

Boal, Augusto. ***Theatre of the Oppressed***. Pluto Press, 2000. New edition of classic work on radical drama, brought up-to-date with a new introduction by the Brazilian author and director. Depicts theater as a popular form of communication and expression and instrument of social change, drawing on theories of Aristotle, Machiavelli, Brecht and Marx.

Cleveland, William. ***Art and Upheaval: Artists on the World's Frontlines***. New Village Press, 2008. A riveting collection of six stories of artists creating at the frontlines of social change around the world, told by a masterful storyteller from nearly a decade of first- hand on-the-ground research.

Freire, Paulo. ***Pedagogy of the Oppressed***. Continuum, 1996. A radical approach to learning, teaching, and organizing, based on the practical experience of the Brazilian educator and theorist.

Heifitz, Ronald. ***Leadership Without Easy Answers***. Harvard University Press, 1994. The concept that art offers a "container for complexity" through which new ideas, new perspectives and understandings can emerge is central to the Aesthetic Perspectives framework and connects with the idea of "holding environments" forwarded by Ronald Heifitz in his career-long study and practice of adaptive leadership.

Marcuse, Herbert. ***The Aesthetic Dimension***. Beacon Press, 1978. A brief book, written late in the life of this important thinker, about aesthetics considered in terms of the political and the impulse for progressive change for social and economic justice. While sometimes a bit dated and dense, as a radical, progressive challenge to Marxist aesthetics, it is worth the effort. Marcuse insistently situates art in the realm of human experience through individual sensory perception and emotional life.

Taylor, Charles. ***Modern Social Imaginaries***. Duke University Press, 2004. A landmark inquiry into the metaphors and beliefs that lie at the heart of our contemporary cultures, and how they have emerged in the evolution of western social imaginaries.

Bob Leonard is Professor of Theatre in the School of Performing Arts at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA. Leonard directs the MFA in Theatre program and is the primary advisor for the MFA program in Directing and Public Dialogue. From 1975 to 1998, he founded and led The Road Company, a theatre ensemble based in Johnson City, TN, where he and the ensemble created more than 20 new plays. His recent community projects include: the Building Home project with the New River Valley Planning District Commission; the Christiansburg Institute, an African American school with a 150-year history; CultureWorks, an arts-based community cultural organizing effort in Baltimore, MD; and On The Table, Sojourn Theatre, Portland, OR. Leonard authored with Ann Kilkelly *Performing Communities, An Inquiry Into Ensemble Theater Deeply Rooted In Eight U.S. Communities*. He is a founding board member of Alternate ROOTS and the Network of Ensemble Theaters (NET). He is currently the Principle Investigator of VTArtWorks, an initiative to create and develop an innovative online communications hub and knowledge-building repository with and for the emerging field of Community Cultural Development.

Americans for the Arts serves, advances, and leads the network of organizations and individuals who cultivate, promote, sustain, and support the arts in America. Founded in 1960, Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts and arts education.

Launched in 1999, Animating Democracy is a program of Americans for the Arts that works to inspire, inform, promote, and connect arts as a contributor to community, civic, and social change.

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change was developed by artists and allied funders and evaluators who participated in the 2014-15 Evaluation Learning Lab led by Animating Democracy at Americans for the Arts, in partnership with the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Arts x Culture x Social Justice Network. Activation of the framework is supported by Hemera Foundation.