

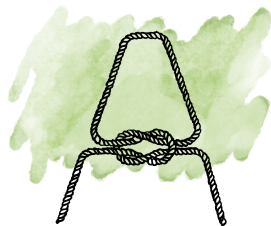
# Evaluator/ Researcher Companion

## AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES

*Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*



**disruption**



**commitment**



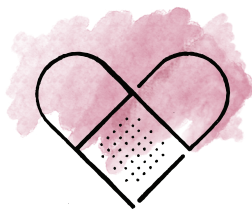
**communal meaning**



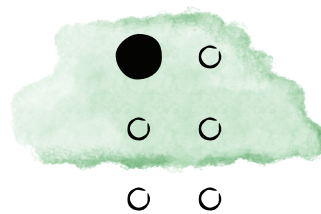
**cultural integrity**



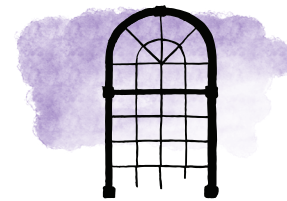
**risk-taking**



**emotional experience**



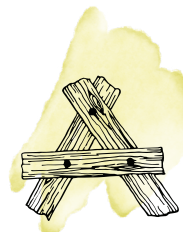
**sensory experience**



**openness**



**coherence**



**resourcefulness**



**stickiness**

# Companion Guide for Evaluators/Researchers

By Susannah Laramée Kidd

Edited by Pam Korza

---

Find the full **[Aesthetic Perspectives](#)**

framework including:  
Introduction offering rationale, context, and terms aesthetics and Arts for Change, Attributes, and illuminating project Examples.

---

Find a **[Short Take](#)** of the Aesthetic Perspectives framework.

---

**For more on the social impacts** of Arts for Change, see Animating Democracy's **[Continuum of IMPACT](#)** and other resources on its **[IMPACT web site](#)**.

**Welcome!** This brief guide is an introduction to Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change and how it can serve your interests and needs as an evaluator or researcher.

**The *Aesthetics Perspectives* framework can enhance your understanding, description, research, 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.

# When can this framework help me in my work?

**Increased activity in art that has civic or social intent has required a corresponding shift in research and evaluation approaches.** Older approaches have tended to evaluate artistic merit in terms of the critical reception of artwork or to measure success based on numbers of audience members. In many cases, there was no expectation that the artistic or aesthetic dimensions of the work should or could be evaluated.

The aesthetic attributes provide a reference for evaluators who might not have experience assessing artistic projects with social or civic intent, but who are increasingly being engaged by funders and cultural organizations to do so. The framework reflects language generated by artists to describe this work and can help evaluators to:

**Understand the community's experience of art.** An evaluator is working with public art program staff to develop methods and tools to better understand people's experience of public artworks in the community. The staff wants to go beyond describing whether the community has a positive or negative reaction to the work.

**Work within cross-sector partnerships.** An evaluator is working with a community mental health agency that is collaborating with an artist for the first time. The agency wants to understand what value is added by integrating art into their work and what progress is being made toward achieving agency goals. The evaluator is experienced in assessing mental health outcomes but assessing how the art contributes to them is a new venture.

**Further organizational learning for arts organizations.** Standard audience development evaluation is proving inadequate to the task of understanding the effects of socially engaged performances and exhibitions on audiences and program participants. An evaluator is charged with rethinking the methods and tools to help a contemporary art center assess progress towards their creative and social justice visions.

**Define artistic excellence for collective impact.** A funder who has been funding Arts for Change work wants to create evaluation guidelines for their grantees. In the past, grantees have resisted evaluation efforts that subordinate artistic goals to social outcomes. An evaluator is helping the funder come up with guidelines that respect the artistic dimensions of the work.

**Figure out how arts for change works.** Researchers who are documenting and writing about "arts for change" want to understand how the aesthetic properties of these projects contribute to change efforts. They want to start by considering aesthetic principles that artists have defined themselves to describe what is important in their work.

# The Aesthetic Attributes



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



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



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



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



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



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



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



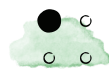
**Coherence** - Strong ideas expressed with clarity advance both artistic and social purposes.



**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.



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



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

**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

# How can evaluators and researchers use this framework?

Here are some ways evaluators and researchers can apply and adapt the framework in their work.

**Developing a shared language with stakeholders about the creative work.** Evaluators can use the framework to discuss which aesthetic attributes are the most relevant for a particular project with artists and stakeholders. Whether the attributes are useful as they are or whether stakeholders further refine or adapt them through their conversations, the discussion process can help clarify and shape a project as well as communications about its aesthetic dimensions.

**Defining indicators of artistic success.** Early in evaluation design, evaluators can use the framework in conversations with artists to sharpen the expression of artistic intent. This can create ownership in the evaluation process for artists and ensure that the measures of success are pertinent to the artwork.

**Guiding data collection.** Evaluators and researchers may draw upon descriptions and questions on relevant attribute pages to develop collection instruments for use with community members and program participants.

**Designing developmental evaluations.** The framework can be used to identify unexpected aesthetic outcomes. A challenge in evaluating arts for social change is that the artistic process is often inherently open to exploration and surprise. Instead of the traditional summative evaluation question of “did it work?” the aesthetic framework helps to answer the questions “what happened?” and “was it good?”

**Communicating findings and lessons learned to the field.** Evaluators and applied researchers may zero in on successes with a particular attribute to share with others doing Arts for Change work. Projects with similar attributes could be compared in order to discover how particular artistic processes lend themselves to one aesthetic or social outcome over another.

**Evaluation consulting and training.** The framework could be incorporated into evaluation consulting and/or training with funders, grantee cohorts, cultural organizations, and teaching programs related to Arts for Change work.

## Types of projects and contexts that could benefit from the aesthetics framework

---

### Community-based, participatory art projects.

Attributes such as *openness* and *stickiness*, along with *sensory experience* and *emotional experience*, can be used to assess the quality of artistic engagement in communities from a participant perspective. The attributes and range of questions that unpack each one are flexible enough to be contextualized in multiple communities.

**Culturally specific work.** On the whole and through specific attributes such as *cultural integrity* and *communal meaning*, the framework foregrounds ways to consider the aesthetic aspects of work that comes from and is shaped by culturally grounded values and creative practices. (The framework doesn't address any particular cultural contexts, so engaging people from the culture(s) of focus would also be important in shaping markers of quality or success.)

**Creative placemaking.** As the discussion of how to evaluate the impact of creative community development continues, the framework can help guide conversations about assessing intangible and aesthetic processes as well as products for a range of cultural production in this area. The attribute of *disruption*, for example, may be particularly salient for creative work aimed at intervening in community dynamics. On the other hand, *emotional experience* is an important aesthetic principle that may not be captured in an assessment that only looks at the typically assessed economic and physical impacts of creative placemaking.

## What should I look out for?

The preface to *Aesthetic Perspectives* stresses that these aesthetic attributes are not a set of criteria, but are a guide for organizations and individuals in setting their own terms. It bears emphasizing here that, from an evaluative standpoint, the framework is not a list of indicators or standards by which to measure whether a given project is successful. Any given project may not embody all of the attributes in the framework, and an attribute could be prized highly in one project and be an undesirable outcome in another.

Evaluators and researchers know this, but there is always a danger of conflating outputs or products with outcomes. This is especially murky in talking about arts for social change when the process may be the product and the outputs and outcomes overlap. This framework is particularly useful in helping to describe and evaluate artistic processes as well as products. Once the aesthetic dimensions of the artwork are elaborated, the relationship between an artistic output and its intended outcomes will be more clear.

Many arts for social change projects will have explicit social outcomes that require their own measures for evaluation. For instance, educational outcomes or public health outcomes are not provided for in this framework. Therefore, these aesthetic attributes should be used in conjunction with other measures of success depending on the project. Ideally, aesthetics support social aims, but in some projects, the aesthetic attributes may actually be in tension with certain social change outcomes. This framework can help identify when aesthetic choices may work against intended social outcomes rather than supporting them.

# Additional Resources

- Alvarez, Maribel. **“Two-Way Mirror: Ethnography as a Way to Assess Civic Impact of Arts-Based Engagement in Tucson, Arizona.”** Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2009. This piece describes taking an ethnographic approach to evaluation in which the emphasis was placed on stories rather than quantitative data as measures of success. The ethnographic approach offers possibilities for assessing an aesthetic work both from the point of view of the artist and community members or program participants.
- Brown, Alan, Jennifer Novak-Leonard, and Shelly Gilbride. **“Getting in on the Act: How Arts Groups Are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation.”** The James Irvine Foundation and WolfBrown, 2011. This report contains an audience involvement spectrum to describe how the artist or organization invites the public to participate in art-making with varying levels of creative control over the artistic product.
- Callahan, Suzanne. **“Moments of Transformation: Rha Goddess’s LOW and Understanding Social Change.”** Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2009. This is an example of an evaluation that placed emphasis on assessing *Emotional Experience* in response to a socially-engaged artwork addressing mental illness and foregrounding the artist’s interests in understanding the effects of her artistic choices.
- “Evaluating Impact/Appreciating Evaluation.”** Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2012. This piece explains the benefits of evaluation in the context of artwork designed for social impact and what kinds of social impact can be expected from art. This resource is helpful in discussions with artists about what social impact flows from the aesthetic choices they have made in their artwork.
- Finkelpearl, Tom. ***What We Made: Conversations in Art and Social Cooperation.*** Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. The projects in each of the chapters give examples of the kinds of activist or participatory art projects that could be assessed using these aesthetic Attributes. The dialogues address the difficulty in separating the aesthetic and social outcomes for a number of these projects.
- Fogel, Katie Fritz, Beki Saito, Mary McEathron. **“Creative CityMaking Minneapolis: An Adaptive Action Evaluation.”** Minneapolis, MN: Rainbow Research, 2017. This is an excellent example of a developmental evaluation of an arts program integrated with the racial equity goals set by the City of Minneapolis. The evaluators monitored and assessed the implementation of this artist-in-residence program and documented the outcomes that emerged in the artistic processes of the artists and the relationships with city department teams.



**Susannah Laramee Kidd, PhD** is Mellon-ACLS Public Fellow and Research Analyst at the Los Angeles County Arts Commission where she is evaluating civic art and public engagement projects. Her academic work was in the anthropology of religion, gender and literature, so she brings an ethnographer's sensibility into her work as an evaluator.



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.



HEMERA

