

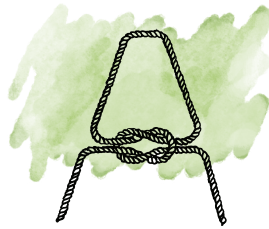
AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES

Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

Short Take



disruption



commitment



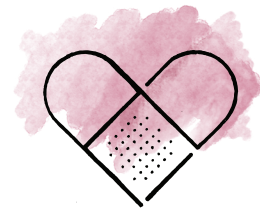
communal meaning



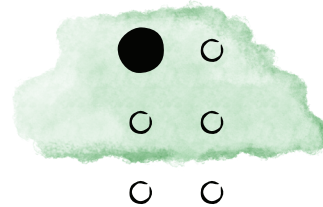
cultural integrity



risk-taking



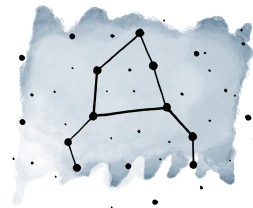
emotional experience



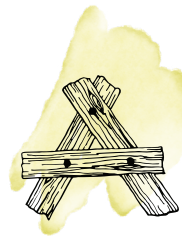
sensory experience



openness



coherence



resourcefulness



stickiness

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

What attributes make arts for change work excellent? Arts for Change—projects at the intersection of artistic creation and civic engagement, community development, and justice—often challenge the conventional terms by which creative work is described and assessed. Unfortunately, evaluative language often inadequately considers the unique qualities that make for strong Arts for Change projects.

This framework offers 11 attributes designed to enhance understanding and evaluation of Arts for Change. Driven by the conviction that artists can and should play a role in shaping the criteria by which their work is evaluated, the flexible framework developed by artists has a variety of applications by artists, funders, evaluators, students, educators, curators, critics, and audiences.

Establishing a common language around how art contributes to positive social change can foster more illuminating communication about outcomes and fuller appreciation of the aesthetic dimensions of and the rigor required for such work.



“One of the things I love about the aesthetics framework is that, through articulating the aesthetic dimensions of the work, we can better articulate what an artwork does.”

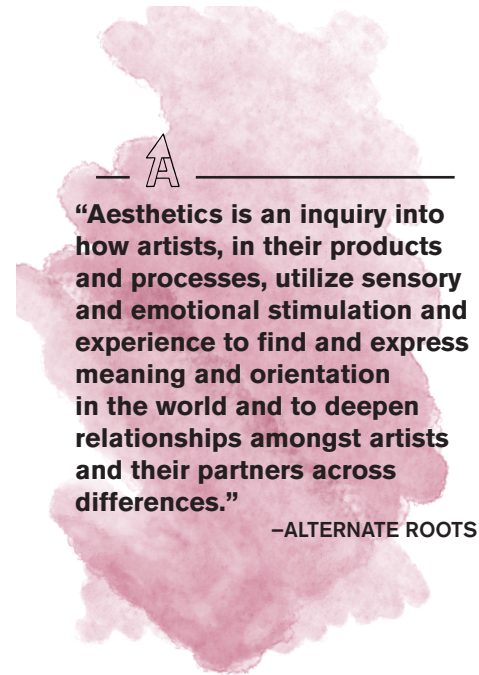
SUSANNAH LARAMEE KIDD, EVALUATOR/RESEARCHER

Reclaiming "Aesthetics"

All art-makers and cultural traditions engage aesthetic considerations and values, whether explicitly or implicitly. Audiences, witnesses, and participants also bring aesthetic values to their experience of artistic work.

That said, the use of the word "aesthetics" has often been problematic. While elements considered for their aesthetic value (color, shape, line, texture, tone, pitch, rhythm, resonance) are generally relevant to an understanding of a diverse spectrum of artistic and cultural expressions, the systems for valuing and interpreting them may carry a history of hierarchy, ethnocentrism, and colonial dominance.

Moreover, an understanding of Arts for Change sometimes suffers from the assumption that artistic quality is compromised by social intent. In considering Arts for Change work, we propose to reach beyond a limited aesthetic framework to embrace multiplicity through the set of attributes offered in this framework.



"Fundamentally, the framework is troubling the idea of a singular standard. It offers lenses that help to consider and understand beauty and excellence in Arts for Change work."

RISÉ WILSON, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION

Uses for This Framework

We encourage consideration of these aesthetic attributes to guide planning, reflection, and assessment of artistic work with social justice intentions. We hope that different practitioners can draw upon and adapt aspects of the framework in varied ways. [Companion guides](#) are available on the Animating Democracy website to help various users learn how they can apply the framework to address their needs and interests.

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](#).

Artists

To spark creative ideas, set priorities in planning, frame artistic intent, describe work, aid self-assessment, and enhance dialogue with communities, partners, and supporters.

Written by Mark Valdez

[ARTISTS COMPANION >>](#)

Funders

To frame program mission, design application materials, guide processes for proposal review including panelist guidelines, and evaluate grantee outcomes.

Written by M. Christine Dwyer

[FUNDERS COMPANION >>](#)

Curators

To evaluate the aesthetics of an exhibition or project, inform the development of interpretive materials and dialogue activities, and communicate the aesthetic dimensions in Arts for Change work.

Written by Sara Reisman

[CURATORS COMPANION >>](#)

Evaluators

To provide a set of questions that help define program purposes and guide assessment of aesthetics in arts and social justice work.

Written by Susannah Laramée Kidd

[EVALUATORS COMPANION >>](#)

Educators

To guide written analysis, shape curriculums, focus areas of study, and expand how students think about art early in their careers. **Written by Bob Leonard**

[EDUCATORS COMPANION >>](#)

"I think there could be great gain in seeing what would emerge by way of both comprehension and critique if these attributes were applied to all of the arts. I guess that is consistent with my conviction that all art is political...."

**BOB LEONARD, PROFESSOR OF THEATRE,
SCHOOL OF PERFORMING ARTS, VIRGINIA TECH**

Attributes of Excellence

The following 11 attributes can be observed in socially engaged work in all artistic disciplines.

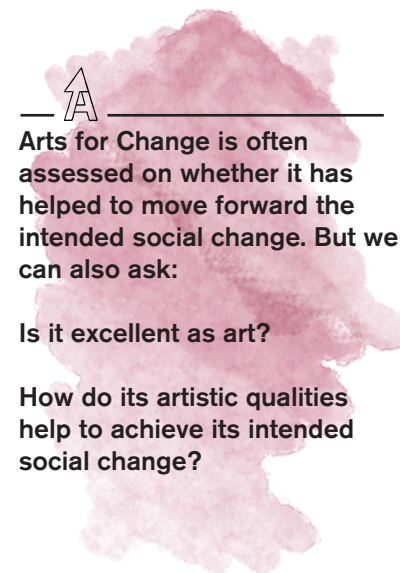
Equally relevant to artistic processes and outcomes, the attributes address the potency of creative expression to embody and motivate change. They are abbreviated here with a brief descriptor and select sample questions representative of a fuller conceptual description and series of reflective questions.

Please visit the full [Aesthetic Perspectives framework](#).

Identification of these attributes is not meant to imply that Arts for Change requires an entirely distinct set of criteria, nor that conventional aesthetic attributes are irrelevant to an understanding of such work. In fact, enhancing the standard vocabulary of aesthetics with these attributes affords a deeper understanding and more equitable assessment not just of arts for change work but a range of practices, including community engagement, experimental, and conceptual work.

The Aesthetic Perspectives framework is best thought of as...

A pallet of possibilities	rather than	a checklist of requirements
A guide for description	rather than	a scorecard
Inspiration for shaping programs, projects and guidelines	rather than	a prescription of required elements
A tool to guide inquiry	rather than	a definer of success or failure
A spectrum or continuum	rather than	a hierarchical ranking system



The Aesthetic Attributes



COMMITMENT

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

What is evidence of the commitment to civic engagement, community change, or justice? To what extent is that commitment a clear underpinning of the creative work?



COMMUNAL MEANING

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

In what ways does the work reflect purposeful relationship among stakeholders and participants? How is the topic explored in the work relevant to the community?



DISRUPTION

Art challenges what is by exposing what has been hidden, posing new ways of being, and modeling new forms of action. In what ways does the work break away from established practices, either social or artistic? How do the work and creative process cause audiences/participants to question their own beliefs or values?



CULTURAL INTEGRITY

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

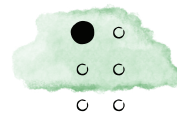
How have the artists and stakeholders explored the relationships of power, privilege, and cultural context within the process of making the work? How have they explored questions of credibility, authenticity, and integrity?



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.

In what ways does the work elicit emotional responses? How does the emotional response function in relation to the social justice or change-making focus of the work?



SENSORY EXPERIENCE

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

How does the work highlight or challenge sensory expectations? How do the sensory responses relate to the social, civic, or justice intentions of the work?



RISK-TAKING

The creative work assumes risk by subverting dominant norms, values, narratives, standards, or aesthetics. How does the work take risks of form, content, or medium? What is the point of risk-taking? In what ways does it advance a meaningful purpose or idea?



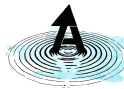
COHERENCE

Strong ideas expressed with clarity advance both artistic and social purposes. Are artistic choices connected to an overarching intent? In what ways? Is there a meaningful connection between medium and message?



OPENNESS

The creative work deepens impact by remaining open, fluid, transparent, subject to influence, and able to hold contradiction. How does the art and its process offer multiple points of entry for people with varied expectations and aesthetic preferences? How do the artists show their willingness for the work to evolve based on what is learned?



STICKINESS

The creative work achieves sustained resonance, impact, or value. Is the creative work part of an overall strategy addressing civic or social change that supports continued engagement on the issue? After the experience, what do people remember about the work?



RESOURCEFULNESS

Imaginative use of available resources drives artistic innovation and demonstrates responsible social and environmental practice. How does the use of resources engage the audience's imagination and enhance their participation? How does the work demonstrate creativity in maximizing the possibilities of the human, social, financial, and physical resources available?



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.



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