

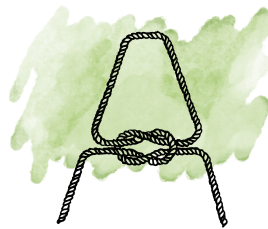
Performing Artist Companion

AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES

Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change



disruption



commitment



communal meaning



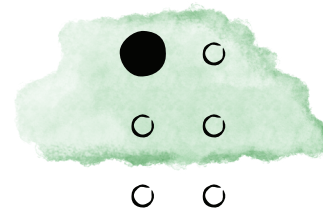
cultural integrity



risk-taking



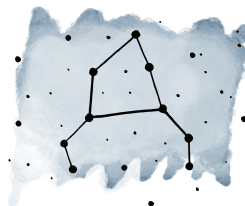
emotional experience



sensory experience



openness



coherence



resourcefulness



stickiness

Companion Guide for Performing Artists

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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 a performing artist or performance company.

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?

The framework is relevant to the performing arts field in that it helps to:

Direct focus towards aesthetics. We are artists. We make art. AND we care about change. Too often art that lives at the intersection of change and justice is viewed as creative social work, but not as art. The framework reminds viewers and makers that the work is, indeed, grounded in a rigorous aesthetic practice and philosophy that deserves to be viewed through that prism. *For example, funders or community partners can be encouraged to see the seriousness behind the process and product of the art, even if their interest is in the social outcomes and benefits that stem from the creative work.*

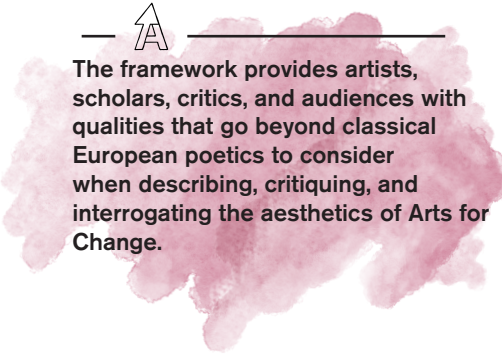
Clarify how Arts for Change works. The process yields the aesthetics. In other words, the aesthetic results are arrived at by the choices and values made in the creation of a work of art. The framework illuminates aspects of process, as well as results. *For example, a researcher is examining an Arts for Change project. The framework offers her insights into attributes of the process, which she can consider to better understand how the work gets made and the values surrounding that practice.*

Inform the creation of new programs in new contexts. We are at a moment when other sectors are interested in integrating the arts while at the same time performing artists, presenters, and arts agencies are looking to contribute to civic and social goals. While well intentioned, there is often a shallow understanding of the ways that performing arts function toward civic and social change. The framework informs new ventures at these intersections and offers attributes to look for when identifying qualified artists, reviewing artists' proposals, and considering how to maximize art's impact. *For example, the mayor's office is supporting a creative placemaking program. The framework offers considerations for integrating artists and creative components toward achieving excellence in creative processes and products.*

When can this framework help me in my work?

Expand the aesthetic discourse. For a long time we have been missing an aesthetic vocabulary defined by artists to discuss the aesthetics of Arts for Change. The framework provides artists, scholars, critics, and audiences with qualities that go beyond classical European poetics to consider when describing, critiquing, and interrogating the aesthetics of Arts for Change. *For example, you've invited a critic to write about community engagement activities and a culminating play about immigrant rights. You offer the aesthetic framework to introduce her to a set of attributes that may help her consider this community-based work through some relevant lenses.*

Support grant panel review. Grant panels often comprise individuals who represent diverse aesthetic practices and dispositions. Panelists may not have an adequate foundational understanding of Arts for Change and may feel unequipped to evaluate the work, or worse, will evaluate the work using inappropriate aesthetic criteria. The framework provides questions to consider. *For example, the artistic director of a theater whose work focuses on the Western canon serves on a panel. He and fellow panelists understand conventional aesthetic attributes. The framework helps direct their attention to other qualities they might not normally consider.*



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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.



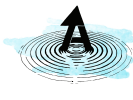
Cultural Integrity - The creative work demonstrates integrity and ethical use of material with specific cultural origins and context.



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 I draw on the framework to support my own work?

Here are some ways performing artists and companies can apply and adapt the framework in their work:

1. **Describing and writing about the aesthetic dimensions of the work.** Consider the attributes in the framework to help sharpen how you describe your work in artist statements, proposals, and reflective writing. As pointed out in the introduction to the framework, Arts for Change often challenges or questions the systems that have formulated dominant standards. Viewed through this perspective, writing about attributes such as *disruption* and *commitment* may help describe ways your creative choices contribute to change or even a movement.
2. **Grantwriting.** Many grant applications ask artists to describe their process and artistic goals. The attributes and related questions can help you articulate talking points about the creative underpinnings of, and intentions behind, your work. For example, reflective questions may help describe how you've considered artistic choices to create a certain emotional experience as well as implications of the *emotional experience* for audiences affected by issues. Likewise, the framework, shared with performing arts funders, can help panels and funders better understand, and know what to look for, when considering Arts for Change.
3. **Planning and developing a new project.** Whether Arts for Change is your main practice or a new approach, the framework provides considerations for you or your company to articulate the values and priorities, such as *communal meaning* or *risk-taking*, in the creation and implementation of the project. Remember, these aesthetic considerations are relevant across the process/product continuum.
4. **Creating a shared language with collaborators.** Sometimes it's difficult to describe to non-arts partners what they can expect from a process or a performance. The aesthetics of social justice artwork can be considered as plural and diverse, and collaborators can and do shape the work and help define the aesthetics, so it's especially important that we find ways to communicate with our partners. The framework offers discussion points to help this conversation.

What should I look out for?

5. **Examining creative practices.** Arts for Change may achieve meaning as much by the making as from what is made. If you or your company is committing to art that contributes to change, the framework offers a prism to “test” your methodology and practices against attributes such as *coherence* and *cultural integrity* so that you may better understand to what degree you are delivering on your intended aesthetic as well as community social outcomes.
6. **Defining indicators of artistic success and developing evaluation frameworks.** It's often difficult to measure artistic success. The framework's attributes of excellence and accompanying questions can help you design evaluation tools to focus your and your partner's observations and to collect audience and participants' feedback.

As the preface to *Aesthetic Perspectives* points out, the aesthetic attributes are not proscriptive criteria, but considerations for artists and organizations to use when creating, evaluating, and/or communicating about their work. It might be useful to think of the framework as a glossary to help you frame and look at your work, rather than a checklist for necessary components.

Also, don't let new terms distract you. Words like “openness” and “stickiness” have not been part of the aesthetic discourse and they may not feel natural to speak. If that's the case, change it up. The questions and the descriptions get to the meaning (which is what matters). Again, this is a *guide*. You'll probably want to add attributes of your own and some will be more useful than others. Either way, make it useful to you.

Especially within the Arts for Change realm, it's important to look not just at the aesthetics but to consider social/civic intentions and effects as well. The work lives in both areas—art *and* change—and so the most successful work addresses both. *Aesthetic Perspectives* is meant to be complementary, not as a stand-alone guide.

Additional Resources

- Frock, Christian L. **“Hello No, We Won’t Go: Outstanding Radical Art and Global Movements in 2014.”** KQED Arts, December 29, 2014. Christine Frocks makes a case for 2014 as a significant year in the creation of “radical art,” broadening the lens of art and performance and offering many examples of Arts for Change, all the while maintaining the position that we must look beyond cultural institutions to see the work as well as its makers. <https://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2014/12/29/hell-no-we-wont-go-outstanding-radical-art-and-global-movements-in-2014/>
- Geer, Richard Owen. **“Out of Control in Colquitt: Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Soup.”** TDR vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 1996). A first person account of creating a community performance in and with the residence of Colquitt, GA, which demonstrates how the various aesthetic attributes play out and are evidenced in real world projects. The story highlights a variety of aesthetic questions and tensions and chronicles their resolution.
- Korza, Pam, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, and Andrea Assaf. ***Civic Dialogue, Arts & Culture: Findings from Animating Democracy.*** Americans for the Arts, 2005. The chapter on Artistic Practices examines various elements of art and artistic practice to set the conditions for meaningful dialogue, including: metaphor, abstraction, humor, story, nonverbal modes, traditional forms, “community dramaturgy,” among others. <http://animatingdemocracy.org/publications/books>
- Korza, Pam and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, eds. ***Dialogue in Artistic Practice: Case Studies from Animating Democracy.*** Americans for the Arts, 2005. Three case studies about arts-based civic dialogue projects implemented by Cornerstone Theater Company, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, and Urban Bush Women analyze artistic concepts and practices in relation to qualities of effective dialogue. <http://animatingdemocracy.org/publications/books>
- Lederach, John Paul. **“On Art and Social Change.”** *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace.* Oxford University Press, 2010. While the book is grounded in peacebuilding, Lederach’s chapter on the art of social change delves into an exploration of the aesthetics of art of change, including metaphor, symbol, and the “moral imagination” which lets us recognize turning points and possibilities.

- McGregor, Paloma. **“Dance and Civic Engagement.”** Working Guide Papers on Arts for Change. Americans for the Arts, 2013. Choreographer and organizer Paloma McGregor highlights exemplary contemporary community-based dance practice and concert dance that is intentional in connecting to community members and issues. http://animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Dance_TrendPaperFINAL.pdf
- Orr, Niela. **“Chats About Change: Ethics and Aesthetics.”** KCET: February 5, 2015. A summary of highlights from the panel “Pivoting: Ethics and Aesthetics,” as part of the social practice conference Chats About Change: Critical Conversations on Art and Politics in Los Angeles. Conversation focused on the question: How can one mediate the social accountability connoted by ethics and the merits of self-derived aesthetics? <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/chats-about-change-ethics-and-aesthetics>
- Standley, Fred L. and Louis H. Pratt, eds. ***Conversations with James Baldwin.*** University Press of Mississippi, 1989. A collection of 27 interviews with the writer/activist James Baldwin. Of particular interest is Baldwin’s conversation with Chinua Achebe, “In Dialogue to Define Aesthetics.” The two engage in a dialogue about beauty, morality, and the political duties of art and the artist.
- Stropnicky, Gerard. **“Three Lenses on MicroFest USA: Intentions, Values, and Propositions.”** Network of Ensemble Theaters, 2013. Against the backdrop of performance work explored during the Network of Ensemble Theaters’ MicroFests, Stropnicky proposes five core values that guide theater that most effectively transforms, revitalizes, and renews distressed communities—agency, authenticity, artistry, audacity, and accuracy—as well as thoughts on the complex interrelationships between them. http://www.ensembletheaters.net/sites/default/files/files/StropnickyNOLAPaper_Final.pdf

Mark Valdez is an artist and organizer based in Los Angeles. He has worked at theaters such as Cornerstone Theater Company, Alliance Theatre, Trinity Rep, the Mark Taper Forum, Mixed Blood, and others. Current projects include a commission from the Alliance Theater to create a new play with and for people living and working along the Buford Highway, home to one of Atlanta's largest immigrant/New American communities. Mark is also working with health providers and the East African residents of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis to use personal narrative as a tool for building social cohesion and improving health care advocacy and service. Mark was previously the executive director of the Network of Ensemble Theaters and a participant in the Animating Democracy Evaluation Learning Lab.



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.

