

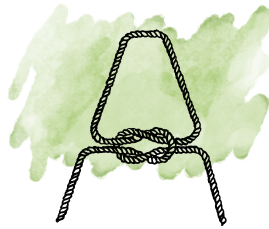
# Curator Companion

# AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES

*Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*



**disruption**



**commitment**



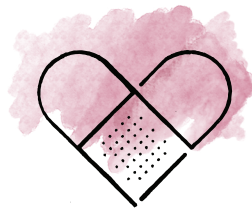
**communal meaning**



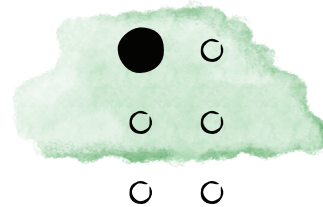
**cultural integrity**



**risk-taking**



**emotional experience**



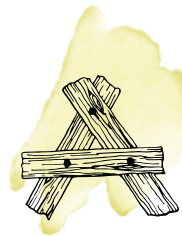
**sensory experience**



**openness**



**coherence**



**resourcefulness**



**stickiness**

# Companion Guide for Curators

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Edited By Pam Korza

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## Find the full **Aesthetic Perspectives**

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

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Find a **Short Take** of the Aesthetic Perspectives framework.

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**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 be used by curators working in/with visual arts, socially engaged art, and time- and performance-based projects** to enhance understanding, description, and evaluation of work at the intersection of artistic creation and civic engagement, community development, and social justice.

The framework describes 11 artist-defined attributes observed in artistic processes and products that contribute to the work's artistic potency and effectiveness in contributing to social and civic outcomes. These attributes are relevant to Arts for Change work happening in exhibition and pedagogical spaces, including nonprofit galleries and alternative spaces, museums, university art galleries, curatorial training programs, and art in public spaces.

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.

# What does the framework address?

**The framework challenges the conventional aesthetics paradigm often applied to describe and evaluate Arts for Change work.** It asserts, “In the U.S., evaluative practices—from academia to professional art criticism to funding panels—have historically been dominated by Euro-American values, and the terms ‘aesthetics’ and ‘aesthetic excellence’ are often used to privilege white Eurocentric standards of beauty, while dismissing or ignoring standards relevant to different artistic and cultural practices.” In contrast, the framework embraces a multiplicity of attributes that provide a relevant, complex aesthetic framework. It emphasizes that aesthetics are integral, not incidental, to the efficacy of civically and socially engaged art.

**The framework upholds the idea that there is rigor in Arts for Change work.** Arts for Change sometimes suffers from the assumption that artistic quality is compromised by social intent. Critics and the media, colleagues in the arts sphere, even fellow staff and board members within museums or other nonprofit cultural organizations who are not versed in socially engaged art may view such work as relinquishing aesthetic rigor as it often employs community-based practices. The framework’s attributes offer a rich set of considerations regarding what constitutes “rigor” in the distinctive practices of Arts for Change.

**The framework links aesthetics to audience and community engagement.** In its social, civic, or community intentions, Arts for Change work—by nature—suggests the importance of making meaningful connections with audiences and communities. Curators and programmers want to understand the effects of their aesthetic choices and strategies, as well as engagement strategies, on audiences and community participants. Attributes in the framework—such as *emotional experience* and *sensory experience*, *communal meaning*, *disruption*, and *stickiness*—direct focus to how aesthetics of creative process and product work contribute to meaningful connection with audiences.

## Curatorial Risk

In the 2002 exhibition *Mirroring Evil*, The Jewish Museum in New York took curatorial and institutional risks by dramatically shifting the common focus on victims in Holocaust representations to the perpetrators. The intent was to stimulate discussion about complicity and complacency toward evil, and to help young people find relevance in this history as violence continues around the world. The exhibition featured young artists whose work included several charged representations—a bust of Mengele, a Lego toy concentration camp among them—that would challenge and even enrage some constituents. Acknowledging that the artwork could be contentious, curators and administrators first engaged staff, as well as museum board and external advisors, to build ownership for the exhibition and its goals. They developed exhibition videos providing historical and cultural context and capturing points of view from artists and diverse members of different communities reacting to the exhibition. The museum partnered with religious and educational organizations to design dialogue opportunities both in and outside the museum that connected deeply within the Jewish community as well as to a public of all faiths.



**Example from Aesthetic Perspectives framework.**

## How is the framework useful to curators?

**The framework can help curators to:**

**Elucidate the ideas or principles behind an exhibition, project, or program.** The framework offers vocabulary to stimulate thinking about or to describe the unique characteristics of socially engaged art. A curator might draw upon the framework in writing interpretive materials, funding proposals, press materials, and in field discourse.

**Communicate the aesthetic dimensions in Arts for Change work to the media and critics.** Reporting and critical review of such projects, exhibitions, public art works, etc. do not always focus on the relevant or distinctive attributes of excellence. The framework may serve as an internal resource when talking with media and in developing press materials, story pitches, and messaging around projects.

**Evaluate the aesthetics of an exhibition or program.** Relevant attributes and related questions can be used in the beginning stages of conceptualizing an exhibition or program's curatorial premise and how that supports social or civic intents. In evaluation, they can help frame evidence of change to document, develop interview questions for assessing audience or participant experience of the creative work, and help in program evaluation and grant reporting.

# 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

# A curator's view on the attributes of excellence

**Communal Meaning** - This attribute challenges the creative work and/or the curatorial approach—whether it engages multiple perspectives or expresses a particular point of view—to consider its relationship to the community, location, or context. The framework helps examine how the creative work and programmatic choices enhance participants' ability to make connections and meaning, for example, through dialogue or engagement opportunities.

**Disruption** - A curatorial project in a gallery setting is not likely to disrupt the wider cultural context, but an exhibition or artist project can push individuals to think in new ways. You might assess how the artist and creative work makes use of disruption or how you as a curator do so by considering framework questions, such as: What is the point of the creative disruption? In disrupting, does the work offer alternatives to current conditions?

**Cultural Integrity** - An awareness of cultural bias and equity in curatorial practices requires that attention be paid to the issues of integrity, authenticity, and appropriation. Gauging cultural integrity requires examination of the source material used in the artwork as well as the social and historical context and content of the artwork. The framework can help further guide exhibition/program development to ensure cultural integrity by prompting considerations regarding: 1) the background and connections of artists and partners to the cultural context, issue/topic, traditions, community, population, and/or place that is the focus of the work; 2) the way a work of art is conceived and developed; 3) awareness and understanding of cultural values and forms (cultural competence); and 4) the way the work involves and is experienced by stakeholders.

**Emotional Experience** - Curators can create a space for the experience of artwork that honors the emotional and spiritual potency of the work, as intended by the artist(s), but at the same time exercise care on behalf of audiences. The framework raises questions to consider such as: How does the emotional response evoked by the work function in relation to the social or civic intention? Does the creative work take a responsible approach to potential emotional response; for example, dialogue opportunities or partnerships to support emotional response?

**Commitment** - Creative practices demonstrate commitment by valuing community and showing accountability for how creative work contributes to change. In socially engaged artistic and curatorial practice, we are often critical of short-term or shallow attempts at community engagement. As curators we have to understand what level of engagement and input we are soliciting and how to engage without building unrealistic expectations from the community. Prompted by the framework, some questions to consider include: Have links been made with community stakeholders and local organizations? If concerns are raised by the community, what is your commitment to listen and work to address those concerns?

**Risk-taking** – Curators may characterize “risk” in terms of featuring new or under-recognized artists, artwork and/or ideas, or investments or risks required of audiences or participants. The framework challenges curators to think about the consequences of risks being taken up in an artistic environment and opens up such questions as: Does the curatorial framework position the artwork and viewers to participate in dialogue or action that involves transformative thinking and risk? Was there experimentation in the exhibition or associated programs that might have challenged internal support, been controversial, or “failed” and what was learned from taking this risk?

**Openness** – In curatorial practice, openness is important in terms of creating a space for the artwork that is both accessible to a wide range of audiences and open to interpretations. Openness is particularly relevant to participatory or interactive exhibitions. The framework offers questions to consider such as: To what degree is the exhibition or project allow for the viewers' presence or engagement to have an impact on the artwork, and does it allow for meaningful participation?

**Stickiness** - This attribute can prompt curators to think about: How is the creative work resonating or reverberating with various publics and audiences in the short- and long-term? Do viewers return to see the exhibition and if so, what about the creative work or the overall exhibition experience is resonating; what new or deeper insights or information are revealed on multiple visits? Have the aesthetics of an exhibition or project gained visibility and currency in the context of other exhibitions, critical writing and discourse, and media?

## Additional Resources

Bishop, Claire. ***Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship***. Verso, 2012. Bishop's book offers a means for critically evaluating what we now refer to as socially engaged artwork. The book gives examples that illuminate the aesthetic development of socially engaged art, while critically analyzing the ethical dimension of community engagement.

Finkelpearl, Tom. ***What We Made: Conversations about Art and Social Cooperation***. Duke University Press, 2013. Finkelpearl's book is made up of interview chapters with artists and critics who discuss the experiences of working in public and of working with museums and libraries, opportunities for social change and the elusive criteria for elevating participatory art.

Helguera, Pablo. ***Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook***. Jorge Pinto Books, 2011. This primer is a materials and techniques book for socially engaged art, especially helpful for defining terms.

Jacob, Mary Jane with Michael Brenson, Eva M. Olson. ***Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago 1st Edition***. Sculpture Chicago, 1995. Catalogue for exhibition Culture in Action which pioneered community-based curatorial practice. Writings by Jacob, Brenson and Olson provide critical perspectives on the curatorial process of working within different community spaces, artists, and collectives.

Soskolne, Lise. ***“Who Owns a Vacant Lot? Orthodoxy vs. Culture Industry”*** Shifter 21: Other Spaces, 2012. Soskolne's essay maps out the relationships between artists, organizer/curators, and real estate, an increasingly pressing issue for curators involved in community development projects.



**Sara Reisman** is the Executive and Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation which is focused on supporting artistic projects that intersect with social justice through grant making to organizations and curating exhibitions at The 8th Floor, including *When Artists Speak Truth, In the Power of Your Care, Enacting Stillness, and The Intersectional Self*, among others. Reisman previously directed New York City's Percent for Art program at the Department of Cultural Affairs. She has served as Curatorial Consultant for Public Art at the Queens Museum of Art, Associate Dean of the School of Art at The Cooper Union, and Program Director of the International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York. Reisman was the 2011 critic-in-residence at Art Omi and a 2013 Marica Vilcek Curatorial Fellow, through the Foundation for a Civil Society. Reisman is on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts Curatorial Practice MA Program.



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.

