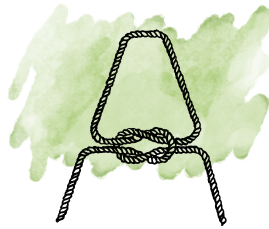# Funder Companion

# Aesthetic Perspectives
## Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

**disruption**
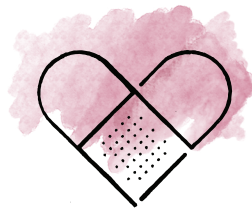
**commitment**
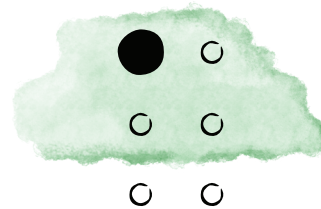
**communal meaning**

**cultural integrity**

**risk-taking**

**emotional experience**

**sensory experience**

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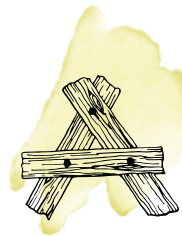
Animating **Democracy**
A Program of **Americans for the Arts**

**coherence**

**resourcefulness**

**stickiness**

# Companion Guide for Funders

By M. Christine Dwyer
Edited by Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon

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

— Ⓐ _____

**"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.**

**The *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework has something to offer if you are:**

- An arts funder who wants to advance community, civic, or social change
- A funder who sees that its community development, civic engagement, or justice goals can be advanced through supporting arts and cultural strategies
- An arts funder who is shifting emphasis from audience development toward community engagement
- A trustee who wants to understand the unique qualities of arts and culture investments that advance social goals

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

**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.**

# Why focus on aesthetics?

**This framework embraces and reclaims the word aesthetics** as an essential dimension of Arts for Change work. It acknowledges that the terms "aesthetics" and "aesthetic excellence" are often used to privilege white Eurocentric standards of beauty, while dismissing or ignoring standards relevant to artistic and cultural practices from other traditions (**or from other sources**), in particular community-based, traditional arts, and arts with civic or social intent. In considering this work, we embrace multiple attributes that expand the common view of aesthetics and support a full understanding of Arts for Change work as art.

# How can the aesthetics framework support funders?

**The framework offers guidance** for discussing artists' approaches to work (e.g., *communal meaning*), the qualities of the work as experienced by audiences and participants (e.g., *emotional experience*), and the connections of art to context (e.g., d*isruption)*. The framework:

- **Offers language** and concepts to support aesthetic excellence, illuminating what artmakers value, how they convey meaning, and by what creative means they develop and deepen individuals' relationships to each other and with important ideas.
- **Addresses biases** in the grantmaking cycle and reinforces funder accountability by supporting a fair and rigorous look at aesthetics in Arts for Change work.
- **Provides attributes of excellence** to back up what might be considered riskier choices.
- **Opens opportunity** for lesser known artists and cultural organizations, traditional arts, and socially engaged arts.

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.

**Posters** with descriptors of the 11 Attributes are available from Animating Democracy. These may serve as helpful reminders and reference points if posted in the panel meeting space.

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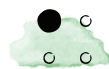
**Emotional Experience** - Arts for Change facilitates a productive movement between "heart space"—the emotional experience that art evokes—and the "head space" of civic or social issues.

**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.

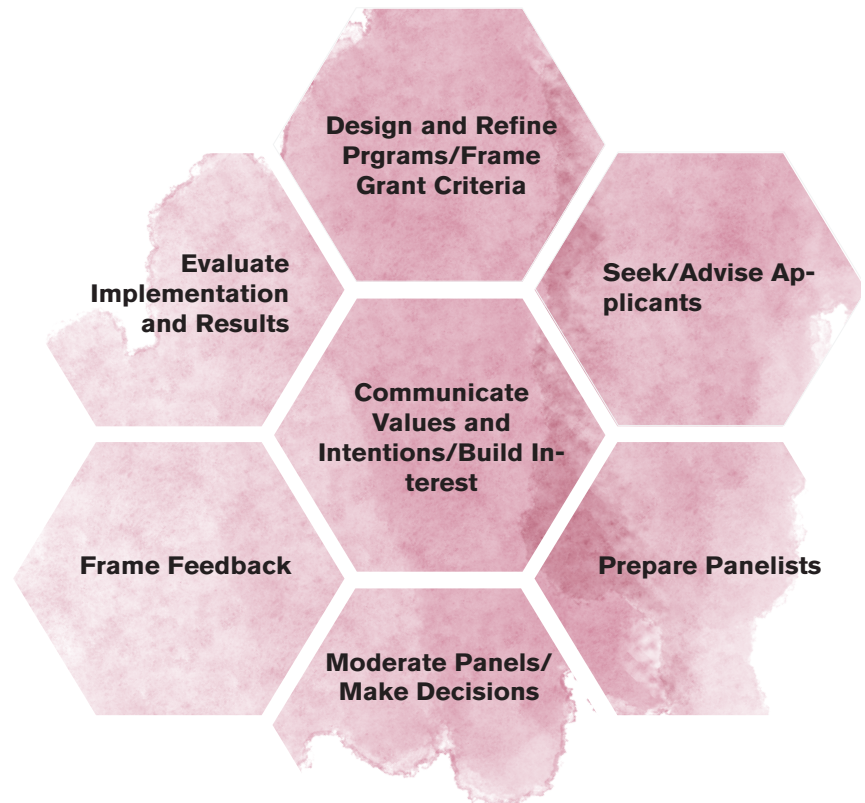**Stickiness** - The creative work achieves sustained resonance, impact, or value.

**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

# How can funders use this framework?

The *Aesthetics Perspectives* framework is an "open source tool" to be drawn from and adapted for application at different points in the grantmaking cycle when aesthetic dimensions are relevant. Funders might use the framework to:

1.  **Communicate values and intentions.** A funder might borrow aesthetic attribute terminology and descriptive language to communicate the goals and values of a funding program or initiative.

2.  **Frame grant criteria.** Sharper language and descriptions of aesthetic characteristics of interest—for example, projects that are grounded in *commitment* to social goals through creative practice, *take risks*, or demonstrate *communal meaning*—can help applicants assess if and how their work relates to initiative goals and frame their proposals.

3.  **Seek and advise applicants.** Artists often need assistance in learning how to talk about their own work. When artists and cultural organizations see their interests reflected, this may encourage new and different applicants. Funders might share the framework with artists who are preparing proposals as a way to encourage reflection on aesthetic features of their work. Attributes and



Design and Refine Prgrams/Frame Grant Criteria

Seek/Advise Applicants

Evaluate Implementation and Results

Communicate Values and Intentions/Build Interest

Frame Feedback

Prepare Panelists

Moderate Panels/ Make Decisions

# How can funders use this framework?

their associated questions for reflection can be adapted for applications or interviews.

Consider, for example, the opportunity provided to applicants by these varied questions:

- *How are proposed artistic choices connected to or informed by the overarching social justice intent?*

- *How does the intended emotional response function in relation to the change-making focus of the work?*

- *How have the artists and stakeholders explored relationships of power, privilege, and cultural context within the process of making the work?*

4. **Prepare panelists.** The framework can provide context and ground a discussion of excellence in Arts for Change. Selected attributes and related art examples could be used to alert panelists to priority criteria, help them raise and reflect on questions about creative practices, and support a nuanced, informed, and critical assessment and discussion of aesthetic qualities. For example, a panelist orientation could include a discussion about *cultural integrity*—what it means; when the issue of cultural integrity is likely to come into play; cautions about cultural appropriation; and examples of projects that might be either good models or raise red flags— especially important with diverse panels likely to have differing perspectives, and/or when including reviewers new to panel processes.

*"Some people hold that, in Arts for Change work, the art is secondary to the social intention and activity, i.e. 'do-gooder' work and not a rich artistic exploration and experience. 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."*

**RISË WILSON,
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION**

# How can funders use this framework?

5. **Moderate panels/make decisions.** Panel moderators can use the framework to prepare themselves with probing questions to open up conversations. During panel deliberations, the moderator can encourage panelists to consult the attributes to give fair review to work samples and to support their arguments for particular applicants. This helps to level the playing field for artists and organizations who are unknown to panelists.

6. **Frame feedback.** Even when projects are not selected, funders can support applicants with specific feedback that may help them clarify and better articulate their aesthetic intentions and capacities. For example, a funder might share details about one or two strong attributes to build upon (e.g., *commitment*) as well as those where the applicant may have fallen short (e.g., *coherence, emotional experience*).

7. **Evaluate implementation and results.** The framework may help funders develop evaluation and reporting guidelines, focus site visits, and assist grantees with assessing how their projects met aesthetic intents. The framework may be shared with evaluators working with funders as the basis for discussion regarding assessing aesthetic dimensions of the work. For example, an evaluator might focus on whether a project has indeed facilitated *communal meaning-making*, offered many access points (*openness*), and sustained resonance (*stickiness*) with participants.

8. **Design and refine programs.** A funder who is at the point of designing a new initiative, rethinking a current program, or simply examining the assumptions on which a program is based might employ selected attributes and related questions as guides to review and assess the current portfolio, frame alternative program goals, and communicate intentions to colleagues and board members.

> *"This is a helpful framework to structure grant criteria and outcomes, especially if it's used as a menu to reflect the vision and mission of a funder or a specific grant category serving within a social justice framework."*
>
> **JUDY NEMZOFF, SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION**

## Supporting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: Making the Case for Disruption in Grantmaking

Many funders are making the case for the urgency of critically examining current grantmaking practices and outcomes in light of artists and cultural organizations that are addressing pressing social and civic needs.

As funders have become increasingly sensitized and motivated to address issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in their grantmaking, they're rethinking the fundamental assumptions of their grantmaking. They may see that their pool of applicants does not reflect the community's or nation's diversity. Even when they attract a range of diverse proposals and applicants, funders may be disappointed that grant selection processes don't yield a greater variety of funded projects—new voices as well as traditional ones—and also uncomfortable that the Matthew Effect seems to always win out in debates about organizational capability. They desire rigor in making decisions but are concerned that too often the default in deliberations about rigor is convention or Western tradition. They are acknowledging that biases toward the status quo are deeply embedded in seemingly routine practices such as recruiting applications, identifying and vetting panelists, and adjudication systems such as combining ratings.

Funders attuned to these factors, while acknowledging their positions of privilege, are open to questioning their practices, shifting paradigms of status quo grantmaking, and taking more risks. They aspire to make investments that contribute to social change and demonstrate aesthetic excellence in terms relevant to context and intent.

**Funders who have had a chance to work with the ideas in Aesthetics Perspectives believe the framework is a step in the direction of opening up disruptive conversations that can challenge current grantmaking practices and lead to supporting a wide range of aesthetic expression that more broadly advances equity, diversity and inclusion.**

*"I've been gathering a cohort to look at how bias operates in the panel room and in the selection of panelists. What can we do to be awake to it and to actively address it? The language contained in the framework is smart, inspiring, elegant and there is profound potential in it. I would welcome a more in-depth conversation about the possible uses of these paradigms by funders."*

**MOIRA BRENNAN, MAP FUND**

# Cautions and Challenges

**Aesthetic Perspectives is intended as a flexible tool** with many possibilities. However, funders anticipate some challenges in using it and also caution that some uses could bring negative consequences. Therefore, in using the framework, funders should:

**Examine the basic assumptions and goals of your funding initiative.** The attributes may represent a significant departure from criteria that have been used in the past, and while potentially appealing, may or may not be well-aligned with the underlying intentions and values of an initiative. It is only fair to applicants that a funder reflect on the appropriateness of attributes in light of purpose and messages provided about an initiative. For example, the attributes of *risk taking* and *disruption* may not align well with initiative goals related to organizational and community development.

**Ease in.** The full set of attributes may seem overwhelming to applicants, panelists, and panel moderators. It also takes time to develop fluency with the meaning and use of the attributes, so it is wise to focus on the most relevant ones.

**Don't use the framework as a checklist.** The attributes are not a comprehensive list of standards by which to measure the success of a given initiative. Attributes may be relevant to some projects but not others.

## Steps Toward Describing and Assessing Traditional and Folk Arts

Lily Kharrazi, Alliance for California Traditional Arts

As an organization whose DNA is based on California's many cultural communities and their arts practices, we are always advocating for our artist communities to be better represented among funding portfolios. Traditional and folk arts often embody many of the criteria outlined in the framework: *coherence, commitment, communal meaning, cultural integrity, disruption, emotional experience, openness, resourcefulness, risk-taking, sensory experience, stickiness.*

While much in the attributes applies to our constituency of artists, I am wondering how funders wishing to diversify their grantmaking will invite traditional artists and cultural communities into their applicant pools. Because there is a strong bias towards art-making as "new work," sometimes guidelines prohibit support for strong artistic practices at the nexus of social change and art-making. Traditional and folk arts provide important statements and acknowledgements of who people are. For example, the creation of regalia for a coming-of-age ceremony for young Yurok and Karuk (Native CA) girls was revived after a 200-year hiatus. The careful use of bark cloth, handmade baskets worn as hats, shell jewelry, and other natural materials was both historic and beautifully rendered. This was a political act; a strong statement of disruption and cultural continuity.

We wonder who will consider these practices and more importantly, if they are invited in, who among the panelists will be able to create understanding for the many aesthetic and layered meanings? Will such a project get lost because panelists are afraid to cast judgement or because Western frameworks prevail? How do we train or create a bank of reviewers who can advocate for the many cultural communities that could provide excellent examples of social change and art-making? Can the framework help to approach traditional and folk arts work on its own terms?

**Adapt the framework language to context and community.** The framework describes the attributes in generic terms in order to be applicable to different art forms and social justice intentions. Framework developers encourage others to choose their own terminology and develop their own reflection and review questions that are tailored to specific fields of interest and language used within the community of potential applicants.

**Avoid "packing" applications with lots of questions.** Be judicious in selecting from and/or adapting the many reflective questions offered in the framework. Funders are advised to favor questions that allow for a multiplicity of responses. Narrowly focused questions risk discouraging the very applicants that funders may be seeking.

**Keep other criteria that are relevant to your interests.** The aesthetic dimensions represented in the attributes are not intended as the sum total of criteria necessary to distinguish among proposed projects. Funders also likely would employ a parallel set of criteria associated with social change intentions, project viability and organization capacity, and additional aesthetic considerations associated with a particular discipline.

**Think through implications for scoring and decision making procedures when adding criteria.** While decision making models are beyond the scope of this document, consider the implications of any additional criteria on procedures (e.g. qualitative judgements vs. scoring, setting thresholds, composite scores, weighting, consensus discussions, and so forth). Be alert to unintended consequences that may give more weight to certain criteria.

**M. Christine (Chris) Dwyer** is senior vice president of RMC Research, a national firm engaged in research and consultation in areas related to the well-being of families, children, and communities. Dwyer's experience includes program and policy evaluations for foundations and governments. She has frequently worked in the fields of education, media, literacy, and arts and culture. With a longstanding interest in the arts, Dwyer has carried out studies for numerous private foundations, work that has often involved translating research findings to practical applications. She has focused on numerous dimensions of arts and culture including: community arts, civic and social justice benefits of the arts; arts organization development and transformation; aesthetic and artistic development; audience development; collaborations across the cultural domains; economic benefits of the arts; and arts education. Chris was a member of Animating Democracy's Evaluation Learning Lab and a co-creator of the framework, Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change.

# Additional Resources

**"Aesthetics & Social Change Blog Salon."**  Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2014.
This week-long blog forum features artists, arts leaders, and funders including Denise Brown (Leeway Foundation), Carlton Turner (Alternate ROOTS),  Deborah Fisher (A Blade of Grass), and Roberto Bedoya (then with Tucson Pima Arts Council).

**"Arts for Social Change Funder Portraits."**  Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2014.
This series of profiles and podcasts examines evaluation questions with each featured funder along with a broader array of topics regarding how, why, and to what effects funders are supporting Arts for Change.

**"CASES & POINTS: A Summary of the Funder Exchange on Evaluating Arts & Social Impact."** Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts,  2013.
Based on a 2013 Funder Exchange presented by Americans for the Arts' Animating Democracy program and hosted by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, this report summarizes key points in the discussion around concrete approaches and measures funders are using to understand the impact of arts and social change investments.  The report features case studies about evaluation approaches that were presented by the Crossroads Fund, J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Fledgling Fund, and Porch Light Initiative of the Mural Arts Program, Philadelphia.

**"Continuum of IMPACT."**  Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts.
Animating Democracy's Continuum of IMPACT offers a good companion to Aesthetic Perspectives.  It outlines six categories or families of social or civic outcomes—knowledge, discourse, attitudes, capacity, action, conditions—to which Arts for Change projects commonly aspire and contribute.

**"Evaluation in ACTION! Webinars."**  Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2013-2014.
These webinars hone in on common evaluation challenges artists, arts organizations, and their community partners face.  This archived series presents specific stories, techniques or tools, along with conceptual frameworks to guide evaluation design.

**"Evaluating Impact/Appreciating Evaluation."**  Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts, 2012.
This paper shares two artists' stories to convey how evaluation helped them know what difference their projects and aesthetic choices made and show how evaluation can be doable and even enjoyable.

**Visit Animating Democracy's website** for other **Funder** and **IMPACT** Resources.

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.