A Condensed View
Aesthetic Attributes in Arts for Change

The full **Aesthetics Perspectives** framework includes an Introduction that explores rationale and context and the terms aesthetics and Arts for Change; and a full presentation of the 11 Attributes, and illuminating project Examples.

Aesthetic Perspectives: **Companions** elaborate on possible applications of the attributes for specific users—artists, funders, evaluators, curators and educators.

The condensed view of aesthetic attributes offers abbreviated descriptions and a sampling of the questions found in the full Aesthetics Framework.

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change Work aims to enhance understanding and evaluation of Arts for Change. These 11 attributes defined by artists can be observed in socially engaged work in all artistic disciplines. Equally relevant to artistic processes and outcomes, the attributes encompass both the external qualities and underlying values of such work. They address the potency of creative expression to embody and motivate change. They are designed to inspire reflection, dialogue, and rich description through a variety of applications by artists, funding organizations, evaluators, students, educators, critics, presenters, programmers, curators, and audiences.

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.

COMMITMENT

Creative processes and products embody conviction to the cause espoused through the work. In Arts for Change the commitment to civic or social change is paramount and is supported by knowledge and intention. Creative practices demonstrate commitment by valuing community, engaging in a long-term process, and showing accountability for how the creative work contributes to change. Artists consider who makes aesthetic choices and how and whether their work supports community participants' aesthetics, their own aesthetics, or both. Commitment reflects rigor, consistency, and sustained dedication that reaches beyond the qualities of passion and aspiration.

CONSIDER:
- To what extent is commitment to civic engagement, community change, or justice a clear underpinning of the creative work?
- In what ways does the artist demonstrate commitment to stakeholder input in defining the purpose of creative work as well as outcomes?
- How committed are partners to working with artists in ways that maximize creative possibilities?
- How does the work reveal a connection to the artist's earlier work, or represent an intentional departure from what the artist has done in the past?

COMMUNAL MEANING

The creative work facilitates collective meaning that transcends individual perspective and experience. Arts for Change values individual experience but delivers an experience of shared significance. Communal meaning may be derived from reinterpretation of a well-known work, or from collaboration between artist and community members, or through engagement around an individual artist's own creative work. Creative choices such as the use of story or abstraction can open space for differing interpretations, and even disagreement, as well as finding common ground. By affording participants an active voice in defining the work's social or civic purpose, making aesthetic choices, its interpretation, and in assessing its artistic and social impact, artists can help achieve communal meaning.

CONSIDER:
- How does the work or process afford participants access to collective expression, engagement, and/or reflection?
- How is the work relevant to the community, location, or context?
- How does the work enhance the participants' ability to see intersections and make connections? (e.g. through dialogue, interaction, or interpretive information)
- How might aesthetic choices support or inadvertently undermine engagement or dialogue?

DISRUPTION

Art challenges what is by exposing what has been hidden, posing new ways of being, and modeling new forms of action. Disruption relates to both form and content. In terms of content, creative work can disrupt: who has access to self-expression; dominant stories; and power structures. In terms of form and delivery, a work can disrupt artistic conventions of its genre, standards of what is considered beautiful or pleasing, or the ways that the art encounters its audience. Effective disruption is mindful and intentional. It can propose positive alternatives to dysfunctional conditions.

CONSIDER:
- What is the point of the creative disruption? In disrupting, does the work offer alternatives to current conditions?
- In what ways does the work break away from established practices, either social or artistic?
- Does it disrupt dominant systems by supporting traditional expressions that are important for particular stakeholders and that typically are not supported?
- How do the work and creative process cause people to question or consider their own beliefs, assumptions, or values?

CULTURAL INTEGRITY

The creative work demonstrates integrity and ethical use of material with specific cultural origins and context. If the goal is justice, then truth, authenticity, and integrity are inherently important in the creative work. Meaningful aesthetic choices in Arts for Change respond to lived, historic, and cultural realities. Integrity as an aesthetic characteristic can be observed in: 1) the background and connections of artists and partners to the cultural context, issue, traditions, 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) in the way the work involves and is experienced by stakeholders. Related to Cultural Integrity is the serious issue of cultural appropriation. Ethical practice is governed by an awareness of historical and contemporary inequities and practices of respect, remuneration, and reciprocity.

CONSIDER:

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

- How do the people affected by the work have agency to intervene in its development and act on their own behalf?

- What history and relationship does the artist have with the knowledge, traditions, and practices they are engaging in?

- If the artist is not of the community or culture in which the work is rooted, how are they dealing with questions of privilege?

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. Art and culture may evoke diverse emotions or spiritual nourishment from participants depending on context and the perspectives they bring to it. It may surface deep-seated emotions based on experience, memory, or unresolved conflict. Where stakes are high, art may validate feelings of anger, sadness, or fear and allow emotion to exist in public space. The consequences of arousing emotion may be positive (increased empathy, building bonds, healing); or they may reinforce negative attitudes or dominant power structures. Responsible Arts for Change may prompt strong emotions, but also helps people channel such emotions into healing or action.

CONSIDER:

- What are the roles of such emotional responses as empathy, feeling of belonging, anger, indignation, or sorrow to the overall social intent of the work?

- Is a responsible approach taken to help people process or cope with the potential emotional responses that the creative work may evoke?

- Did participants' emotional response to the work move them to heightened awareness or to engage in dialogue or action?

- Did the work provoke emotional responses that are in opposition to the intended change (e.g., alienation or resistance)?
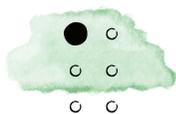
SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Vivid sensations deepen the experience of the creative work and heighten the power of its messages and the potential for change. Artists may take deliberate advantage of the senses to strengthen participant/audience experience and amplify meaning. Images, sounds, smells, and other sensory devices can act as strong triggers for memories, emotion, and notions of beauty. These can generate meaningful collective experience, but may also serve as negative triggers in certain participants or audience members, which is something for which artists may want to prepare.

CONSIDER:
- 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?
- How do sensory elements affect people's experience of the creative work? Does the work elicit purposeful discomfort, the impulse to tell a story, or physical responses (movement, vocal, facial expressions, etc.)?

RISK-TAKING

Creative work assumes risk by subverting dominant norms, values, narratives, standards, or aesthetics. The high stakes of change and justice call for attention to risk in artmaking. Risk-taking in creation, programming, and/or connecting art with audiences may allow new possibilities to develop and often requires investment from audiences and participants. By discussing risk at the outset, artists, partners, and stakeholders can develop an understanding together of what responsible or irresponsible creative risk might look like.

CONSIDER:
- How does the work take risks of form, content, medium, engagement, or the relationship among these elements?
- What is the point of risk-taking? In what ways does it advance a meaningful purpose or idea?
- How (and with what intent) are audience members or participants engaged in meaningful risks? Are artist and stakeholders conscious of and responsible about the creative risks?
- If the work has risked and "failed" (by some measure) has something been gained nonetheless?

OPENNESS

The creative work deepens impact by remaining open, fluid, transparent, subject to influence, and able to hold contradiction. The creative work is accessible and offers multiple entry points for people to engage in the development stages, artmaking, and presentation and engagement around products. There is transparency around artistic choices and ethical use of community stories or other material to help level power and build trust. Artists invite fluidity in and between process and product, allowing the creative work to change based on stakeholder exchange and input. The creative work allows exploration of complexity and ambiguity within opinions and attitudes.

CONSIDER:
- How does the art and its process offer multiple points of entry and/or forms of participation for people with varied expectations and aesthetic preferences?
- How do the artists open their process to multiple viewpoints and show their willingness for the work to evolve based on what is learned?
- Is the development and creative process of the work transparent to stakeholders and participants?

COHERENCE

Strong ideas expressed with clarity advance both artistic and social purposes. A coherent work demonstrates unity of form and purpose and shows clear relationships among its subject, values, form, and expression. Coherence may be evident in how parts of the creative work relate to the whole of the work or project, or in a powerful overall impression that the work makes. Artists may choose to work against the expectation of coherence or the supposed coherence of a dominant point of view; these too are valid choices when the work communicates effectively in relation to Arts for Change purpose and meaning.

CONSIDER:
- Is there a meaningful connection between medium and message?
- To what extent is there a clear artistic point of view or a clear relationship among multiple artistic perspectives?
- Does the work advocate a particular point of view? Or does it allow for multiple viewpoints in relation to its community, social, or civic intent? What are the implications?
- In what ways can audiences/participants find meaning in both the parts and the whole of the work or project?

RESOURCEFULNESS

Imaginative use of available resources drives artistic innovation and demonstrates responsible social and environmental practice. By nature, social change undertakings usually make mindful use of resources; aesthetic endeavors can reflect a parallel commitment. Site specific work draws upon physical, social, and historical context to gain relevance and meaning. Artists may employ materials, money, and energy in ways that maximize their possibilities. Resourcefulness may stem from practical considerations, but aesthetically, it can stimulate the imagination, as well as elicit a sense of pleasure or meaning through the ingenuous use of resources. While resourcefulness can be a value integral to the work, it is important not to perpetuate the practice of under-resourcing artists whose work deserves equitable funding.

CONSIDER:
- How does the use of resources engage the audience's imagination and enhance their participation?
- To what extent is the use of resources aligned with the artists' commitment to social justice and change?
- How does the work demonstrate creativity in maximizing the possibilities of the human, social, financial, and physical resources available?

STICKINESS

The creative work achieves sustained resonance, impact, or value. Change happens over time. When creative work "sticks," its influence lasts, which facilitates future engagement with the intended ideas, issues, or movements. Stickiness describes the qualities of a message that make it memorable. Memorable aesthetic features—a phrase, a powerful visual image, a musical hook—can become representative of larger and more complex concepts. For a long-term project or ongoing body of work, stickiness may also come from the meaning that is drawn from the overall or cumulative experience.

CONSIDER:
- What are the literal or figurative marks of the work that are compelling, resonant, or striking?
- What are participants' takeaways from the experience and how do they connect to the social aims of the work?
- Is the creative work part of an overall strategy addressing civic or social change that supports continued engagement on the issue?

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.

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