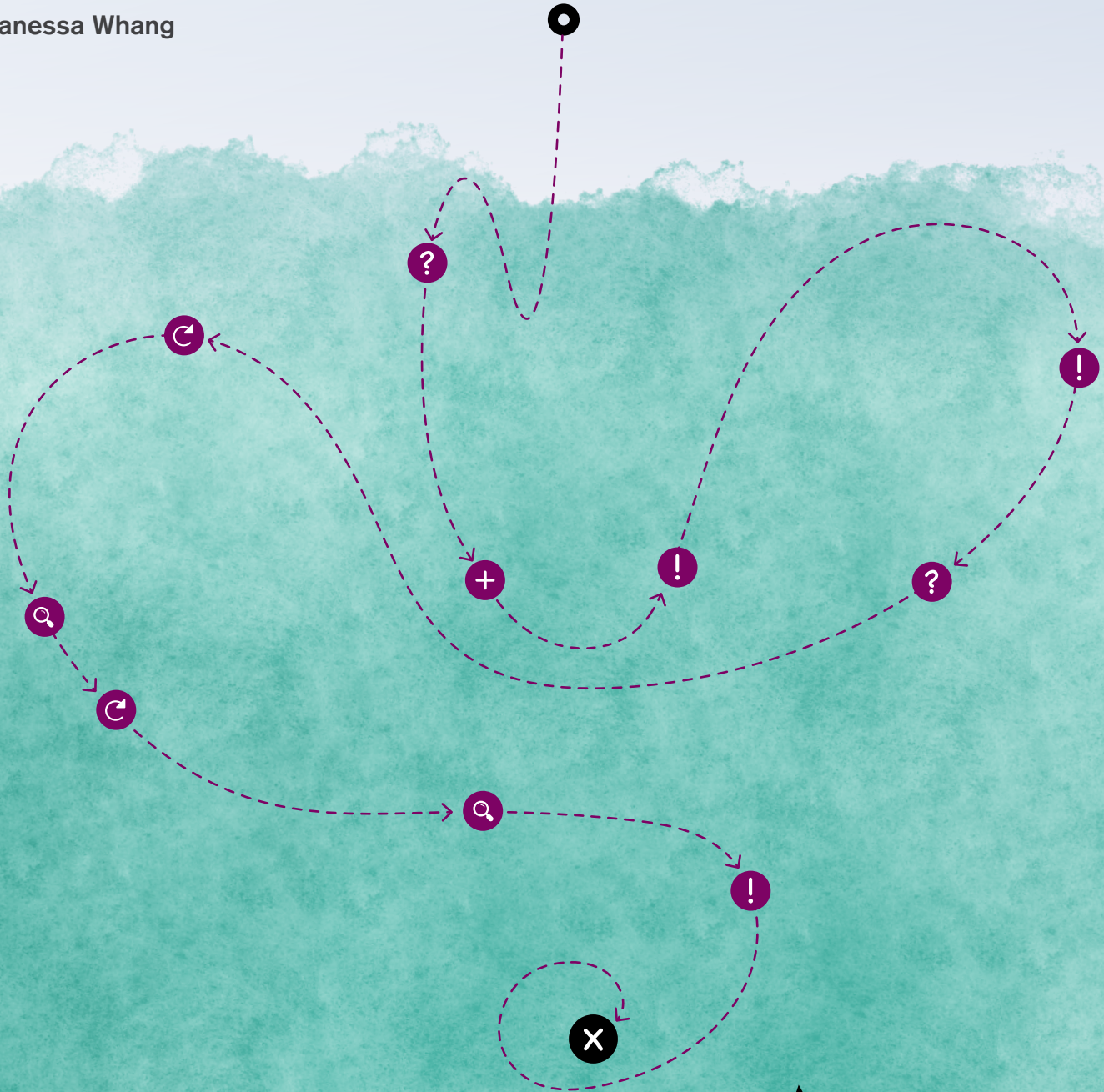


Diving into Racial Equity: The MAP Fund's Exploration

by Vanessa Whang



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The MAP Fund supports original live performance projects that embody a spirit of deep inquiry, particularly works created by artists who question, disrupt, complicate, and challenge inherited notions of social and cultural hierarchy across the United States. MAP invests in artistic production as the critical foundation of imagining, and ultimately co-creating, a more equitable and vibrant society.

mapfundblog.org/about

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There is always more to do to raise awareness of our biases and prejudices as individuals, but it is a different matter to consider how we hold institutions and systems up to the light.

The approaching *minority majority* tipping point in the US is palpable, and the juggernaut of demographic change is currently crashing against some of the most racially hostile rhetoric we have heard in the public sphere for decades. Perhaps this has given rise to the growing presence of terms like *racial equity*, *social justice*, *white supremacy*, *white fragility*, *colonialism*, and *decolonization*—not just in progressive blogs, but in mainstream newspapers and periodicals, and not with the eye-rolling use of scare quotes, but quite matter-of-factly.

There were heady times in the past that appeared to hold the promise of a new day dawning for racial justice, only to evaporate like so much morning mist. However, today's growing understanding that racial, income, and other forms of social inequalities are codified in and sustained by institutions and systems has shifted the frame of where and how social justice work needs to focus. It's not just a personal blame game at play, and it feels like there is cause for new hope.

There is always more to do to raise awareness of our biases and prejudices as individuals, but it is a different matter to consider how we hold institutions and systems up to the light, examine them, and expose how the instruments of inequity are held in place and then do something to shake them loose—or at least put a wrench in the works. It's not an easy task, even for the willing, because, more often than not, we've grown up inside those systems and our responses are ingrained. The question is, to paraphrase Carlos Fuentes, can we act on the world, and not merely be subjected to it?¹

This is the admirable task the MAP Fund has chosen to take on within the boundaries of its philanthropic practice. The story of how it is doing this reveals how intricate the systems maintaining inequity are and how there are no clear instructions on how to disassemble them.

1. Fuentes, Carlos. *Latin America: At War with the Past*. Toronto: CBC Massey Lectures, 1985.

Some Background

The concerns of the Rockefeller Foundation in the late 1980s when it established the MAP Fund² bear a disheartening resemblance to our current predicament. In its 1988 Annual Report, Peter C. Goldmark Jr., then president of the Foundation, stated:

“For millions, 1988 was a year of famine. Drought in some areas, floods in others, and deforestation throughout the tropical zone underlined warnings of environmental deterioration. And for many of the poorer developing countries, 1988 was again, in the perverse logic governing the cycle of international investment, trade, debt and aid, a year of net capital outflow to the First World and donor agencies. At home, our own country was wealthier—and less at ease.... We appeared increasingly unsure of the terms of the national social compact.”

In a hopeful response to the zeitgeist, two brilliant women at Rockefeller who made their mark on the arts and culture field, Alberta Arthurs and Suzanne Sato, created the MAP Fund “to support innovation and cross-cultural exploration in new works of live performance.” The program exemplified its founders’ efforts to “address issues of cultural difference in the United States and internationally, with an emphasis on Third World³ cultures.”

For context, here are additional historical details about the Fund.⁴

- Founded in 1988, MAP remained a program of Rockefeller until 2001 when it was outsourced to a funding intermediary, Creative Capital.
- In 2008, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation became MAP’s principal funder and was joined in 2010 by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.
- In 2016, MAP became its own 501(c)(3) grantmaking intermediary, separate from Creative Capital, and currently partners with ArtsPool for administrative support.
- Over its life, MAP has disbursed more than \$30 million to more than 1,300 projects in playwriting, choreography, music composition, interdisciplinary collaboration, and ensemble, site-specific, and community-based performance.
- Each year MAP receives around 1,000 applications and funds up to 45 projects in the range of \$10,000–\$45,000 per grant, for a total of \$1 million.
- Projects have been undertaken in every region of the United States, as well as internationally.
- By a conservative estimate, MAP projects have touched more than two million audience members.

2. The MAP Fund, originally named the “Multi-Arts Production Fund, was created by the Rockefeller Foundation to support innovation and cross-cultural exploration in live performances” as a program at Rockefeller; the organization is currently known simply as the “MAP Fund.”

3. The term *Third World* emerged after World War II to refer to countries aligned with neither the capitalist West nor the Communist bloc. By 1988, the term came to refer to developing countries in what is generally now known as the *Global South*.

4. MAP Fund [website]. Accessed 28 September 2019 at <https://mapfundblog.org/about>.

MAP has been a stalwart in the field of funding the production of new work in the performing arts. Other programs that also did so in the Fund's early days have come and gone. Some funders have turned their arts and culture commitments towards other priorities or reframed the context for their support of artmaking, but MAP has stayed its course of investing in adventurous artistic production with an openness appreciated by many contemporary artists.

However, the Fund's mandate to "address issues of cultural difference... with an emphasis on Third World cultures" has evolved in parallel with changing notions of multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and cultural diversity. Its guidelines have broadened to embrace artists exploring issues of "race, disability, status, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, generation, religious affiliation and other aspects of cultural difference."⁵ MAP now supports "original live performance projects that embody a spirit of deep inquiry, particularly works created by artists who question, disrupt, complicate, and challenge inherited notions of social and cultural hierarchy across the United States."⁶ Throughout, MAP's encouragement of innovation and experimentation in artistic forms and production as a means of investigation has remained constant.

5. MAP Fund. 2019 MAP Fund Grant Cycle Application Guide [webpage], p. 1. Accessed 28 September 2019 at <https://mapfundblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-application-guide.pdf>.

6. Ibid.

A Dive into Racial Equity

In 2014, MAP's staff undertook “a deep examination of—and renewed commitment to—one of the program's foundational priorities: racial equity in arts and culture grantmaking.”⁷ Moira Brennan, MAP executive director, described the motivation for this move.

“An externally facilitated staff training in racial equity led us, frankly, to stop congratulating ourselves for a historically diverse grantee list and ask how the systems we were designing and executing would fare in a racial justice assessment. And the answer was, not well. In fact, we came to see that in some ways, because the program's mission was to support non-Western practices, and because our grantee lists were diverse, the back end—where the power resides—was being given a pass. Once we had that analysis, there was no choice but to name it for what it was and dig into systems change.”

What started as a technology system upgrade to “better enact anti-racist and anti-oppression values in the application itself” turned into a much broader and layered inquiry into the many processes of arts grantmaking. The inquiry looked at the language of the application and the efficiency of the

application platform, reenvisioned how those who assess proposals are chosen and the methodology used to bolster fairness in analyzing scores, experimented with ways to raise awareness among assessors about unintended bias, and examined how assessors can articulate their common or disparate views on aesthetics.

Were there things inadvertently being communicated through the application process that made some artists feel like a proverbial square peg in a round hole?

The Ghost in the Machine

MAP's racial equity journey began in the most practical of ways. It asked itself how it could remove barriers in the mechanics of the application process, such as reducing technical complications in the online application platform or being able to respond more quickly to user feedback through digital tools that staff can manage without

an intermediary. The Fund ended up adopting a suite of new, internally manageable software that increased adaptability and made user testing easy, facilitating MAP's desire to engage artists, applicants, grantees, panelists, and other grantmakers in the revamping process.⁸

7. Slone, Lauren, and Kevin Clark. “Collaborative, Iterative, and Responsive Agile Techniques Transform MAP's Grantmaking.” GIA Reader, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter 2019). Accessed 28 September 2019 at <https://www.giarts.org/article/collaborative-iterative-and-responsive>

8. For more details on this process, see Lauren Slone and Kevin Clark, *ibid.*

Understanding how to improve application language and the sequencing of questions were among other needed steps, but MAP also sought to dig underneath different aspects of its practices to unearth how cultural assumptions could be influencing details as minute as a checkbox about who was producing the work or who the lead artist was on a project. Were there things inadvertently being communicated through the application process that made some artists feel like a proverbial square peg in a round hole? To get to a useful answer to this question, MAP had to ensure it could obtain honest feedback from the field. Brennan explained what made this possible.

“One of MAP’s foundational principles is to make the staff as utterly available to our constituents as possible. All of our work is rooted in building relationships with artists so they feel welcomed and encouraged to share their experience, needs, and wants, and to critique aspects of the program without fearing a backlash. Over the years, I believe we have been able to cultivate a sense of trust with them.”

Creating a feedback-rich listening environment has been a key component of MAP’s organizational culture. Feedback is collected formally through annual applicant and reviewer surveys as well as through one-on-one phone calls and live meetings by appointment. In addition, throughout the year, MAP’s constituents also email staff to let them know what they think is or isn’t working about the process. This ongoing feedback loop has helped MAP make simple but meaningful changes for some applicants who saw obstacles in the tasks they needed to complete to apply to the Fund. It also led MAP to a much more complex consideration of interconnected processes on a number of different levels.

Examples Of Application Improvements

The MAP Fund...	This change...
...eliminated the need to have a fiscal sponsor at the Letter of Intent (LOI) stage of application.	...opens the door to applicants who might have a compelling project, but do not have ready access to a fiscal sponsor, to apply. Previously, the fiscal sponsor requirement privileged those with more infrastructure access from the get-go.
...allowed the submission of work samples at the LOI stage instead of just written narrative.	...allows for alternative communication modalities beyond the written word for those who can make their case more powerfully through media (particularly those who might not be fluent in English or have access to a grantwriter).
...removed the assumption that the new work would either be self-produced or produced by an institution and premiered.	...welcomes projects using collaborative, nonhierarchical, or iterative creation and presentation models.
...diminished the role of the budget as the primary means of demonstrating project viability.	...allows for more investment in projects that have not yet demonstrated a high percentage of secured income at the time of application submission. Also, reviewers are encouraged to look at the budget for evidence of intent to, e.g., build relationships of reciprocity among collaborators (via fees, etc.).

The Human Touch

After scrutinizing the application process, MAP also looked at how it assigned applications to peer reviewers (artists and arts professionals who read applications and rated them in MAP's first stage of the adjudication process). Staff had been sorting projects based on their primary discipline (e.g., music, dance, theater) and distributing them to the reviewers with that discipline expertise. However, they had not taken into consideration specifics of culture or aesthetics when making those assignments. The staff realized their automated pairing process could result in a group of reviewers with training in one particular aesthetic judging a project with a completely different orientation. MAP made the critical, though painstaking, move of asking applicants to specify their particular

aesthetic⁹, as well as their discipline. Since its application platform didn't allow for such fine-grained sorts, the staff created dockets for each reviewer *by hand* (necessitating more than 4,800 manual pairings). The rethinking of which elements to combine in application-reviewer pairings, along with a number of other process revisions, constituted MAP's many initial internal attempts to counter practices that could be subtly holding social inequities in place.

“...As you begin to intervene, you have to ask yourself: what are the micro-finesses that move the macro system towards greater equity?”

Lauren Slone, Director of Grants & Research,
MAP Fund

Lauren Slone, director of grants and research at MAP and chief engineer of its grantmaking system, has a rigorous design mind well-suited to her position.

“There is a giant spiderweb-like pattern to observe and keep track of when you tinker with any part of the application and review process. You intervene in one area and then three other areas suddenly pop up with a problem you didn't anticipate. Employing a specific strategy in one area does not create a macro equity utopia—in fact, it often exposes other inequities. Ultimately, as you begin to intervene, you have to ask yourself: what are the micro-finesses that move the macro system towards greater equity? How do you simultaneously unravel elements and keep the mechanism in motion? We either leave the systems alone because these questions are too daunting or we get under the hood and begin to better understand how these interlocking pieces actually work. We don't see the former as an option.”

Finding and Working with Allies

By 2015, MAP was looking beyond its own experiences, practices, and systems and reached out to allies in the field—many of whom were also grappling in very practical ways with what it meant to

9. MAP staff created an open-ended comment box for artists to self-describe aesthetics, concepts, or practices that were central to their project. Various dimensions of reviewers' expertise were cross-referenced with applicants' descriptors.

look at their work through a racial equity lens. In addition to overhauling front-end application details, the Fund also took a focused look at that part of the review process often regarded as the most consequential—namely, the peer review panel.

The MAP Fund, though founded as a program of a private foundation, was mandated from its inception to involve field practitioners in its grantmaking practice. In MAP's case, it has done this by engaging *both* reviewers and panelists. In what was known as Round One of MAP's adjudication process, reviewers (typically a group of between 25 and 50 artists and arts professionals) worked individually to read and rate Letters of Intent (LOIs)—a process that narrows down the applicant pool by 85 to 90 percent. In Round Two, panelists (a group of five to seven artists and arts professionals) individually assessed about 80 full applications and then came together to discuss and rank the proposals in a three-day, face-to-face meeting resulting in up to 45 projects being recommended for funding. Collectively, these assessors had the sole responsibility of rating the proposals. MAP staff do not vote, but do design and guide the assessment process, and eventually determine award amounts.¹⁰ MAP has recruited a different collection of reviewers and panelists annually over its 30-year history, so the arts sector practitioners who have served in its ranks number well into the hundreds.¹¹

Contrary to much private arts philanthropy practice, which doesn't require outside opinions, peer review panels for public arts funders are standard, since arts and culture agencies, councils, and commissions are by nature imbued with a democratic ethos and are in some instances legislated to open their panel processes to public scrutiny.¹² So, in 2017, when MAP and its colleagues expanded and diversified its discussion group about panel review from five members to 12, about half the group ended up coming from public or semi-public entities. Formally organized as the Equity in the Panel Room cohort, the group met regularly in-person and virtually, and did racial justice training together through a program designed by consultant Ama Codjoe, supported by the [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#).

Together the discussion group laid bare sensitive, though vital, questions in its investigations.¹³ How do you increase access and parity and decrease barriers and privilege in the different parts of the grantmaking process? How prepared are panel facilitators to guide those they bring into the process on racial equity issues? Who gets to be at the table and why, and how is the table set to promote

10. The subject of how funders determine award amounts and how this could be done through a racial equity lens is a subject worthy of its own essay.

11. To see recent lists of MAP reviewers and panelists, go to <https://mapfundblog.org/past-reviewers-panelists>.

12. Despite the democratic nature of peer review panels, public funders can struggle with creating the conditions for cultural equity in both their application and review practices—bureaucracy itself often being a great barrier to equitable access.

13. With only one annual grantmaking cycle to make adjustments to, Slone wishes there was an ongoing lab for testing facilitation strategies (like an artists' residency, but for grant program designers), so different methods could be assessed without the high stakes pressure of allocating actual dollars.

diversity, equity, openness, and surface bias? How is transparency practiced with applicants regarding the process and outcomes of decision-making, and is communication with them uni-, bi-, or multidirectional?

Who gets to be at the table and why, and how is the table set to promote diversity, equity, openness, and surface bias?

The learning that emerged from the group's probe was captured in a report, [RE-Tool: Racial Equity in the Panel Process](#),¹⁴ that was shared with the arts and culture field in 2018. Succinct, thorough, and organized with the depth of real-world experience, the report is full of detailed, actionable advice and follow-up resources. It also wisely points out that there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for this work: advice should be considered in context to be most useful and working iteratively will likely reveal different

shades of value to the tips offered. *RE-Tool* is a rare resource for an activity (grant application adjudication in the arts) that is widespread in the field and yet is practiced quite idiosyncratically—and within private philanthropy, largely without codified standards, transparency, or, to be blunt, accountability. So, this joint private/public effort to not only expose the inner workings of panel review, but to hold them to the fire of racial equity, was an unusual and laudable project for MAP and its colleagues to undertake.

A Parallel Endeavor

As the process that created *RE-Tool* was underway, a parallel, though distinct, endeavor was being pursued by [Animating Democracy](#), a program of [Americans for the Arts](#), through its [Evaluation Learning Lab](#) (ELL) in collaboration with the [Art x Culture x Social Justice Network](#) and the [Nathan Cummings Foundation](#).¹⁵ The focus of ELL was to create practical tools for evaluating *arts for change*, defined as “creative work at the intersection of arts and civic engagement, community development, and justice.” The artists, funders, and evaluators who participated in ELL were motivated to address “evaluative practices historically dominated by Euro-American values, and the terms *aesthetics* and *aesthetic excellence* that are often used to privilege white Eurocentric standards of beauty, while dismissing or ignoring standards relevant to different artistic and cultural practices.”

With the goal of enhancing understanding and promoting equitable standards for evaluation of *arts for change* (e.g., within the realms of art, academia, art criticism, and grantmaking), ELL

14. Savage, Eleanor (lead author). *RE-Tool: Racial Equity in the Panel Process*. Jerome Foundation, 2018. Accessed 28 September 2019 at https://www.jeromefdn.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/Re-Tool_2018.pdf

15. As it happened, there was no crossover in the membership between the RE-Tool and ELL cohorts.

Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change



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



Risk-taking - 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.



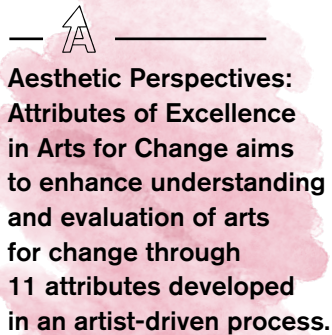
Stickiness - The creative work achieves sustained resonance, impact, or value.



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

These attributes are further described online and are available for free download from the [Aesthetic Perspectives](#) webpage.

- **Pointed descriptions** relating each attribute to Arts for Change
- **Reflective questions** to guide consideration of the attribute in Arts for Change work
- **Illuminating examples** of creative works and projects that exhibit the attributes



Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change aims to enhance understanding and evaluation of arts for change through 11 attributes developed in an artist-driven process.

produced [Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change](#),¹⁶ a framework informed by values and practices congruent with this kind of creative work. The framework also challenged the prevailing notion that art which centers social change compromises aesthetic considerations and therefore is typically found wanting in artistic excellence. *Aesthetic Perspectives* shifted the ground for describing and evaluating civically and socially-engaged art practice—literally changing the terms for defining rigor and expanding the criteria for determining excellence.

Recontextualizing and redefining the seemingly immutable, platonic ideals of *artistic excellence* or *artistic merit* were very much overdue. Within the arts field in the US, these narrowly defined, though widely applied, evaluative criteria have served as battlements around the castle of so-called high art and the treasure expended on it. This brand of excellence or merit circumscribed within a Western European elite tradition (and its progeny) has relegated many artists to a second-class status. Those who do not make their work within that cultural system, those whose vernacular forms have committed the “sin” of being utilitarian or seen as popular, and those who have sought to combine the power of art with a desire for social transformation have long suffered being underrated, under-resourced, or excluded.

The more than 20 artists, evaluators, and funders who participated in Animating Democracy’s ELL shaped the concept for the framework and began to identify what they thought to be the aesthetic attributes of the most potent *arts for change* work. A subgroup of the ELL, largely composed of artists, then condensed a draft list of aesthetic attributes down to the 11 that came to constitute the framework. Its aim was to augment understanding of what could make for excellent creative expression that is imbued with a desire for positive social change. The list doesn’t claim to comprise all the attributes of *arts for change*, nor the only ones. Rather, it is meant to serve as a “palette of possibilities” or “tool to guide inquiry.” Some of these qualities clearly can apply to any form of artistic work, while others invite reflection on what qualities make social practice social, or what values can inform the integrity of certain kinds of community-oriented artistic processes and products.

16. Borstel, John, Pam Korza, et. al. *Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*. Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2017. Accessed 29 September 2019 at <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>

Wading into the Framework

It is not surprising, given MAP's commitments to racial equity and the interrogation of inherited notions of socio-cultural hierarchy along with ELL's intentions, that the two should intersect around the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework. Animating Democracy invited MAP Fund staff to review and comment on early iterations of the framework as part of an extensive field vetting process. Brennan was enthusiastic about the framework's potential value for funders and provided an additional opportunity for scrutiny by members of the Equity in the Panel Room cohort who were examining aesthetic bias in panel processes. This introduction to the framework convinced MAP to not just consider it in theory, but to wade into the process incorporating the framework into its practice.

Those who facilitate peer review panel meetings have a lot of power and therefore responsibility to keep their own as well as panelists' awareness raised about possible aesthetic, racial, and other forms of social bias seeping into deliberations. With that understanding, Slone had the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework on hand at MAP's 2017 panel meeting to see if it could help her manage possible bias as she facilitated the discussion. Having gained a comfort level with the 11 attributes, she handed out a list of them at the meeting and improvised its use during the deliberations. She found the framework provided some leverage to probe or unstick a conversation and also brought new understandings of the connection between artists' projects and MAP's review criteria.¹⁷ Of this first use of the framework, Slone noted, "it was very novel, so I was careful not to overly emphasize our usage of it—especially since the panelists didn't have it with them when they were reading proposals to prepare for the panel. We also didn't mention it to declined applicants wanting panel feedback since it wasn't clear if or how it played a role in the voting."

Though wanting to proceed cautiously at the outset, Slone was enthusiastic about continuing to explore the framework's potential and made detailed plans to more fully incorporate its use into the next grant cycle and to track its impact.

Jumping into the Deep End

There are countless steps and decision points to designing and implementing a grant program. At almost every step, a grantmaker can influence—consciously or unconsciously—not only the final result of who is in and who is out, but also the minute mechanisms that narrow the funnel of access. Some of those decisions include the determination of:

- eligibility requirements,
- how and when funding can be applied,

17. For more details about Slone's first experience using the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework, see her Americans for the Arts ArtsBlog post, "Enough with the Tea Already." Accessed 29 September 2019 at <https://blog.americansforthearts.org/2019/05/15/enough-with-the-tea-already>

- the kind of information that must be supplied and how that information is to be delivered,
- the technical assistance and information provided to applicants,
- the criteria for judging applications,
- who gets to sit in judgment,
- how the process of adjudication is facilitated,
- the mathematics of scoring and ranking,
- the curatorial priorities determining the overall character of the final cohort of grantees, and
- how to explain to those hopeful for an award why one would not be forthcoming.

These are just some of the considerations that go into grantmaking. MAP surfaced as many of these as it could to examine them in the light of racial equity.

After consulting with Animating Democracy, MAP decided to deeply incorporate the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework into the 2018 application and adjudication processes—with a particular interest in seeing how it could help mitigate bias in application review. MAP staff also wanted to encourage its assessors to use the framework as a *questioning tool* to help open up more nuanced ways of interpreting MAP’s review criteria, as well as their own accustomed ways of thinking about aesthetics and artistic excellence. The two organizations decided to collaborate on tracking how the framework could impact MAP’s grantmaking and hired an outside evaluator, the TerraLuna Collaborative, to observe the Round Two panel process, survey and interview Round One reviewers and Round Two panelists about their application review and panel experiences related to the use of the framework, and report back on if and how it influenced personal and group assessments or dynamics.

MAP started by revamping its various guidelines in order to provide more access and support to applicants, increase transparency about the review process, and root out or revise practices that might be holding oppressive forms of racial and social bias in place. At that point, the framework was available in two forms—the [full framework](#) (56 pages) and the [Short Take](#)¹⁸ (eight pages)—and was complemented by a series of [Companion Guides](#) (six to ten pages) for performing artists, funders, evaluators and researchers, educators, and curators.¹⁹ MAP reached for the tools that made sense for its process and utilized the *Short Take*, full framework, and performing artist guide variously with its applicants, reviewers, and panelists.

18. Animating Democracy. *Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence for Change Short Take*. Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2017. Accessed 29 September 2019 at https://issuu.com/americans4arts/docs/aesthetics_short_take

19. Since then, two documents have been released: the *Teaching Artist Companion* (2019), <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/resource/teaching-artist-companion>; and *Pittsburgh Artists Working in Community: A Case Study of Aesthetic Perspectives in Action* (2019), https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/PittsburghArtists_HiRez.pdf.

When the 2018 MAP guidelines were released to the field, they included a new section, Additional Resources, which provided applicants with aids for strengthening their applications and for understanding the details of how they would be reviewed. Topping that list was an exhortation to applicants to read the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework (in either of its two forms), as well as the [Performing Artist Companion Guide](#) by theater artist and ELL participant Mark Valdez. The *Companion Guide* shows how the framework can be used to “spark creative ideas, set priorities in planning, frame artistic intent, describe work, aid self-assessment, and enhance dialogue with communities, partners, and supporters.” These aids, along with general composition advice, were meant to help applicants (whatever the outcome) describe their work in as rich and authentic a way as possible for potential future use, given the almost inevitable experience of disappointment. (MAP is able to fund only about four percent of what comes in the door.) “We want artists to feel that if nothing else, the experience of applying to MAP could result in their ability to grow closer to the way they want to express their ideas,” noted Slone.

On the adjudication side, the 53 reviewers of the more than 800 eligible LOIs were required to read the *Short Take* as “an important resource in order to complete scores” and encouraged to read the full framework as time permitted. Though application scores were solely based on MAP’s criteria of how projects demonstrate “deep inquiry” and “question, disrupt, complicate, and challenge inherited notions of social and cultural hierarchy,” reviewers were offered the framework as a tool for thinking “more deeply and broadly about how to apply MAP’s funding criteria to a vast range of aesthetic approaches within the applicant pool.”

Reviewers also were asked to identify the three *Aesthetic Perspectives* attributes they found to be most evident in each application. This ensured that reviewers would actively engage with the framework during their process and helped MAP understand what attributes resonated with reviewers with regard to different kinds of applications. MAP also hoped the attributes would give some positive content and added substance to the overwhelming task of providing meaningful comments to applicants who had been declined.

Stakeholders in Arts for Change will benefit from these [Companion guides](#) for *Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*.

Funder Companion

by M. Christine Dwyer

Curator Companion

by Sara Reisman

Educator Companion

by Bob Leonard

Evaluator/Researcher Companion

by Susannah Laramee Kidd

Performing Artist Companion

by Mark Valdez

Teaching Artist Companion

by Dennie Palmer Wolf and Jeannette Rodríguez Pineda

See also this case study which includes application of the framework to grantmaking:

Pittsburgh Artists Working in Community: A Case Study of Aesthetic Perspectives in Action

by Susannah Laramee Kidd

Round One: Complicating MAP's Review Criteria

The culling process of Round One had reviewers working primarily independently, though MAP used a Slack²⁰ channel to enable them to confer through instant messaging to share insights, ask questions, and provide MAP staff with feedback about the process. The back-and-forth among the reviewers and MAP brought to light a mixture of reactions to the framework and the ways to work with it. At the beginning, there were questions related to the perception that the framework's attributes could function like a checklist to move projects closer to a Yes. MAP staff quickly redirected the reviewers from that rather literal notion of using the framework to the idea of its serving as a dialogic device that questioned panelists' initial way of thinking about MAP's review criteria and opened new pathways for reflection. Was the attribute of **disruption** only to be found in the formal aspects of a work or could it also be in the kind of space the work was presented in or in who the intended audience was? Could **stickiness** be projected into a work's potential for sustained resonance or as something evidenced in a project's plan for public engagement with an issue over time? MAP found that question probes inside the framework could give reviewers a new take on MAP's broadly interpretable review criteria and influence how they might eventually score a proposal—particularly with respect to the work of artists pushing against historic forms of disenfranchisement or systemic oppression.



Disruption



Stickiness

Round One: Grappling with Bias

There are dynamics that typically arise in the assessment of grant applications—whether the assessor is reading applications at home alone or is face-to-face in a panel discussion with colleagues. These dynamics are the all-too-human manifestations of bias and unquestioned assumptions. Bias (preference and prejudice) is inescapable, and in the case of implicit bias, inaccessible (to our conscious minds) as well. So, it was a significant test of the framework to see if and how it might help mitigate the biases of MAP's application assessors. (See sidebar, p. 19.) That being said, there was a good faith effort on the part of Round One reviewers to use the framework to broaden their inquiry into the merits of proposals. Some reported to TerraLuna that the framework helped them work through questions of personal preference and familiarity and also gave them a touchstone to refer back to that helped create a collective standard in the group.

"...It puts us in a structure in which you can't just stomp your feet and say: But I like it! There're other things in play that are inherent in a work, that is more than just about preferences of aesthetic in form, or content, or theme."

"Holding us to these particular considerations [shifted me] away from personal aesthetic preferences toward some collective considerations of the work itself and whether it was achieving... any of these multiple layers of attributes, and not whether it was something I would want to go see."

—Comments from reviewers

20. Slack is an online platform that supports collaborative activity—instant messaging, file sharing, etc.

Both reviewers and MAP staff saw how the framework could get underneath typical bias dynamics, including the *privilege of the pass* and leanings toward first-hand knowledge, and lift up how biases can play both an understandable and yet questionable role in decision-making.

The thoughtful and arduous Round One process of narrowing the project pool to some 80 contenders came to a close after about two months, and then the Round Two process began. Those applicants who pulled through were asked to submit additional materials (e.g., budget information and a revised narrative benefitting from Round One feedback from staff), and then their applications entered a new form of scrutiny.

Round Two: Panel Protocols

The dynamics of a typical, face-to-face, application review panel meeting in arts philanthropy include elements of camaraderie, contention, humor, and gravitas. The panel facilitator is responsible for setting the ground rules and the tone of the adjudication and keeping the commentary on track with a tableful of people who carry knowledge and wisdom of the field, but often from very different quarters. Panelists may not know each other, so the facilitator has the added task of building respect and trust among them in a short period of time so that they can make decisions together by the end. Various host, Socratic questioner, diplomat, and wrangler, the MAP panel facilitator is charged with getting the group to fashion a list of about 40 projects from the already extraordinary cohort of 80-some projects that survived the crucible of the Round One review.

The dynamic is not unlike a culinary competition that involves serving a panel of judges with different cultural backgrounds 80 high-quality, but diverse, courses over three days. The judges then have to vote on which 40 of the 80 dishes demonstrate the most vision and potential. An added dimension of the MAP challenge is that it isn't a simple matter of the 40 top-vote-getters prevailing, but rather, the judges must *unanimously* agree that the chosen 40 represent, *for the nation*, the most promising array of offerings *in combination with each other*. No easy task.

The framework offered shared language and a form of inquiry for a group of people who had never been brought together before.

Slone, as the facilitator of MAP's 2018 panel meeting, found the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework a welcome support. First and foremost, the framework offered shared language and a form of inquiry for a group of people who had never been brought together before. They all had received an orientation to the framework well before the panel meeting (that is, when they were reviewing proposals at home) and had had a chance to get used to using the attributes to help them dig into their task. Slone offered an example of what happened at the meeting when she invited panelists to consider the attribute of **risk-taking** and apply it to the proposal at hand.



Risk-taking

MAP's Characterizations of Bias in Grant Review

"Suddenly everyone in the room could start to grapple with what risk-taking meant within the context of this proposal, within the context of the docket, within the context of the field, or the geography where this proposal was located. It was a conversational tool to get closer to MAP's criteria and so very effective within the decision and conversational process itself."

There is much less time in the Round Two panel process than in the Round One at-home review for the group to acclimate to the deliberative process and to each other. So, having the foundation of a shared vocabulary that the framework provided was useful not just for moving the decision-making forward, but for enabling the conversation to go deeper. Slone observed the attributes of **disruption**, **cultural integrity**, and **communal meaning** to be particularly useful in assessors determining conceptual thresholds for proposals' strengths and weaknesses.

*"...This idea of **disruption** means that there's a norm, there's a thing that's expected, and you are then operating outside of it or pushing it in some way.... That's a really dangerous centering when we are talking about the field because we know what happens oftentimes [is] we are centering white European Western aesthetics... and that somehow gives work a level of validation that doesn't exist unless it's contextualized within white Western aesthetics."*

*"As an immigrant myself and an artist, I do a lot of work around immigrants, so having that sensitivity around **cultural integrity** is really important to me.... That was a big part of how I looked at the applications."*

"As a touring artist, I think a lot about what it means to come in and out of communities and how to build touring in a way that isn't extractive.... It's about how the community and the cultural space... wind up laying on top of the work in a way that feels good, appropriate, and supports the work of the people who are actually living in the city..."

—Comments from assessors

Cup of Tea. MAP acknowledges that everyone has tastes concerning art forms that may or may not be one's *cup of tea* (a phrase MAP borrowed from Theater Communications Group's Emily Cachapero). However, MAP strives to reduce *cup of tea* biases in the decision-making process and emphasizes that a project's alignment with MAP's review criteria is the sole basis for voting for or against a project.

Privilege of a Pass.* Giving artists, producers, presenters, or institutions a pass or the benefit of a doubt on a questionable project because of their status, track record, or developmental infrastructure, thereby disadvantaging lesser known personnel or organizations.

First-hand Knowledge. Giving someone or someplace you know personally or have seen in person a preference over someone or someplace with which you are not familiar, despite an equivalent level of quality based on submitted materials.

Expertise Deference. Overriding one's own assessment or intuition about a project and following the opinion of whoever claims the knowledge or expertise about an artist, art form, organization, etc.

**This term was coined by MAP's 2017 panel cohort, and has been used by MAP ever since.*



Disruption



Cultural Integrity



Communal Meaning

Interestingly, as Slone employed the framework to advance the panel's deliberations, she found using it was less about making the decision process easier or simpler, and more about complicating the conversation and pinpointing the subtle, yet crucial, differentiations in the proposals.

Round Two: Lifting Up the Field's Point of View

The good news for Round Two MAP panelists is that there were no bad choices to make as about 80 proposals made it through the gauntlet of Round One, surviving the up to 90 percent reduction in application numbers. The bad news is that the panelists, collectively, had to come up with a rationale for leaving half of those deserving proposals behind.

Once a panel gets to the endgame of its adjudication, its responsibility shifts. In addition to holding up the individual merits of each proposal, panelists also must be able to look holistically at a final cohort of projects and consider what it communicates about or to the field at that moment in time.

"It all springs from the principle that MAP strives to be responsive to the field, and that includes the body of people whom we've asked to make the selections, rather than our being prescriptive."

**Moira Brennan, Executive Director,
MAP Fund**

It is worth pointing out that this is where MAP once again takes the road less travelled. Many a funder prides itself on creating a list of grantees that communicates its values, priorities, or strategies. Spotlighting one's own grantmaking agenda can sometimes influence others to join in or complement investments and in that way can leverage the grantmaking itself. Brennan explains that MAP, however, is not looking to promote its particular point of view to the field through its grantmaking, but rather it seeks to have its grantmaking lift up a point of view from the field.

"It all springs from the principle that MAP strives to be responsive to the field," clarifies Brennan, "and that includes the body of people whom we've asked to make the selections, rather than our being prescriptive." This stance is so unusual that assessors can be confused by the interpretive and curatorial latitude they are being given in MAP's process. "It can cause its own kind of problem because people—applicants, reviewers, and panelists—are constantly looking for our parameters. But we're asking them to set them."

Slone explains how she aspirationally frames the responsibility that MAP assigns to panelists curating that final cohort of grants.

"If the 40 projects can in no way equitably represent the vast spectrum of work happening in the US, then how might the panelists use this opportunity to create a symbol of the field they want to see rather than the field that is? So, in whatever way they think about what that can mean in terms of race, gender, geography, etc., they have that opportunity to send that message out—metaphorically and concretely."

The last rounds of voting are tough—for the panel and the facilitator. With, say, half of the 40 in place, panelists are encouraged to advocate for what could add value to what is there and persuade others to follow their lead. Those gifted with rhetorical skill can have an enormous influence in convincing others to go along with them, so it can be up to the facilitator to give a hand to those who might be less adept at presenting oral arguments. As she described these dynamics, Slone pointed out that she would use the framework at times to prompt folks to speak long enough to get to the *heat* that

Slone pointed out that she would use the framework at times to prompt folks to speak long enough to get to the *heat* that they may not have been able to articulate in their initial sentence or two.

they may not have been able to articulate in their initial sentence or two. “I was sensing intuitively that they might not have gotten to the power of the Yes if I hadn’t asked more questions and used a term that we had all been sharing along the way to get there.”

Though panelists reported to the outside evaluator that they were more aware of considering current field trends and their

own artistic views than of referring to framework attributes towards the end of the deliberations, MAP staff were convinced of its utility in reaching the unanimous votes that were essential to bringing the process to its conclusion.

The 2019 Cycle: More Seats at the Table

Throughout MAP’s grantmaking history from 1989 to 2018, there always has been a peer panel to close out the proceedings, and Slone has presided over the last five of them. “They’re extraordinary, always such an incredible learning moment. It is a depth of relationship with colleagues that very simply is like no other context that we know of—to go that deep about practice and about larger questions of the field.”

One would be hard pressed to find an activity in the nonprofit arts sector quite like sitting on a multiday grants panel with a tableful of people who have extensive histories in the arts and culture sector—as artists, designers, presenters, producers, curators, managers, or other arts professionals—to talk about what Slone calls the *library of dreams*—the hope-filled descriptions of prospective artistic endeavors from the countryside, small towns, and big cities of the US. It is a rarefied enterprise, to be sure. First, it’s an enormous privilege to be witness to the aspirations and inventiveness of a broad diversity of artists and organizations, and to make decisions about how scarce resources will be directed to an achingly minute portion of the creativity under consideration. Second, it is one of the best professional development opportunities you can have while sitting at a table. You can learn how vastly different artists frame and approach their work; what ideas are being nurtured, questioned, or disrupted across the country; and which communities are seeking change or are themselves generating it. Third, it is an extraordinary opportunity to be personally transformed

by having deep discussions about work you'd normally never see with thoughtful and passionate colleagues whom you've just met. And fourth, it's a chance to have the exceptional experience of negotiating a shared sense of value, ethics, aesthetics, and interconnection with them.

Given that, it was no minor decision for MAP to jettison the panel process in favor of something different in 2019. Slone was both ready and fearless.

"I had very strong impulses about so many of the questions I'd been receiving from the field in terms of who was at the table and who was not. So I started to think about MAP's review process and that metaphoric table and felt very unafraid to think about taking it apart for the sake of welcoming in many more people who have never participated in MAP's process to have the opportunity to decide where the dollars are going."

Peer review panels have many benefits, but they also have their downsides. MAP was aware that the process concentrated a lot of power in very few hands, even if good ones, and that made the panels a less democratic mechanism than the review system of Round One. There was also the fear that those who had broad knowledge of the field, along with the ability to take the time off from work to come to New York for three days, tended to be people who sat in some of the more privileged seats in the field. These "professional panelists"—people who are well-experienced in the panel process and tend to land in many different decision-making seats—have outsized influence on the field and the allocation of resources. MAP was also concerned that the personal persuasive power of some

individuals in the face-to-face panel meeting occasionally could distort the outcome of the decision-making.

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With equity still at the top of their minds, the MAP staff redesigned the application process by reducing the two application submissions—LOI followed by full proposal—to a single full proposal. And instead of a large group of reviewers followed by a small in-person panel, one large group of 59 reviewers assessed all applications and the in-person

panel was eliminated. The new calculus of the adjudication enabled more reviewers to read each application (in 2018, three to nine reviewers read a single application; in 2019, three to 14 read a single application). All reviewers were first-timers in the MAP process, and the majority of them were people of color. Their proposal evaluation extended over eight weeks, with four iterations of review that gradually narrowed the record 1,027 applications received to the recommended cohort of 42.

As it had in Round One of the 2018 cycle, MAP once again employed the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework, though this time it served even more as an anchor for the adjudication, given there wasn't the direct check on reviewers' biases that the advocacy and challenge of an in-person panel meeting can provide. In some qualitative observations about its 2019 review process from a reviewer survey, MAP noted:

"Aesthetic Perspectives provided reviewers with a concrete framework to enhance their thinking about their own biases and the qualities present within a vast spectrum of artistic approaches and cultural practices. One reviewer noted that, 'The presence of the framework reminded me to move away from taste and bring more attention to looking for program alignment.'"

MAP is committed to replicating this methodology in its 2020 grantmaking cycle in the interests of deeper learning. It will, however, as is MAP's practice, incorporate feedback from applicants and reviewers from the 2019 cycle into the next iteration.

Rebuilding the Proverbial Ship and Figuring Out Where It's Going

How *do* you continue to sail the ship as you are rebuilding it—that is, how do you keep a process in motion at the same time as you are trying to improve it? One could argue that you may need to start from scratch if you want to get to as radically different a destination as a fair and just society. But if you

One of the things a grantmaker can do to address biases, as MAP has done, is to bring a broader range of people to the table.

have typically found a good landing—in this case, a challenging and diverse set of arts projects—does it matter how you got there? For MAP, the answer is clearly yes, and inherent in the belief that process matters is the assumption that a better process will eventually lead to a destination that also is better.

For MAP, its use of *Aesthetic Perspectives* has revealed the framework's worth—both as a question generator that has nuanced assessors' understanding of MAP's review criteria, and as an effective tool for challenging individual preferences and

not my cup of tea propensities. No matter what one does to try to raise awareness of individual biases, interrogate them, or significantly curtail them, at least situationally, there is no getting around them.

One of the most obvious things a grantmaker can do to address biases, as MAP has done, is to bring a broader range of people to the table. Their diverse experiences, cultural backgrounds, points of view—and their own biases—will mitigate the predominance of any one particular kind of bias.

Is equity a matter of bringing as many biases to the table as are present in a society? Perhaps. Achieving equity is one matter, creating a just society that understands and honors its diversity and interconnectedness is another.

Troubling the Water

MAP's deep dive into operationalizing racial and social equity values has succeeded in refreshing and improving many aspects of its internal workings as well as its interfaces with the field. Its application platform, communication tools, guidelines and requirements, applicant advisement and supports, transparency efforts, and adjudication processes have been variously pushed and pulled, torqued and tweaked, and remolded and remade. Yet for all the good created, this movement also couldn't help but trouble the waters and bring questions and some unintended consequences to the surface.

A Set of Surrogate Review Criteria?

The *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework has definitely evolved into an invaluable helpmate in facilitating MAP's grantmaking process, but its introduction into application adjudication caused some initial confusion. Assessors were unclear about the framework's intended role in the evaluation of proposals. The framework did not play a formal part in the scoring of applications, yet 2018 Round One reviewers were required to read *Aesthetic Perspectives* and select up to three attributes that resonated with each proposal. It was perplexing to reviewers why this was required if it wasn't necessary for a proposal to formally address any of the framework attributes. Instead of the framework being an additional set of criteria for proposal review, MAP has since clarified that it sees the framework as a tool to raise nuanced questions about projects' alignment with its review criteria, a prod to help reviewers move past *stuck thinking*, and a way to check personal bias.

The introduction of the framework was also a cause for some confusion among applicants, in addition to some worry. Though it was offered in the spirit of transparency and as a possible conceptual resource for enhancing a project narrative or artist statement, the framework was perceived by some

The framework was perceived by some applicants as a new set of requirements.

applicants as a new set of requirements. Slone expressed her dismay at the misunderstanding.

"Any tool that our reviewers have, we want to make sure that applicants have to orient them to some of the lenses through which their proposal will be viewed. But suddenly, there was a great deal of anxiety and confusion about, "How do I talk about risk-taking now?"

or "How do I address openness specifically?" No matter how many ways we encouraged applicants to not feel like they had to use those words to describe their practice, there was worry about that."

No Middle Ground

Interestingly, MAP has found that artists' reactions to the framework have tended toward the extremes of a continuum, with very little middle ground. Some artists, particularly ones working in the *arts for change* realm, have embraced the framework as a long-needed tool that provides a helpful articulation of characteristics as well as validation of their way of working. On the other end of the spectrum, Brennan has encountered an "allergic reaction" from some artists that appears related to their work being labeled by the framework.

I was struck by how fiercely [some] artists themselves did not want to deal with the attributes, have them ascribed to them, or be defined by them in any way—especially by a funding body. My sense was that it felt minimizing of their work, their imaginations, their ambitions, and uniqueness as individual artists, which I very much sympathized with, since those are the very qualities we are celebrating at MAP.”

Brennan is interested in exploring the difference between the framework's clear utility for artists with a social practice (and for MAP's application review process) and its rejection by some artists as reductive.

Shared Language or Checklist?

One of the great benefits for MAP of using the framework is that the attributes provide the reviewers with some shared language and understanding about aesthetic and social aspects of projects to use in their autonomous virtual reviews. A possible downside to avoid is that reviewers may want to use the attributes as a short-hand or checklist instead of a tool to deepen interrogation of the alignment of projects with MAP's criteria.

Another reason why assessors might tend to reach for the framework as a checklist is to lighten the significant responsibility on their shoulders. Assessors are charged by MAP with interpreting the rather open review criteria in their own way and to define their priorities for the field through their choices. MAP's ethos to lift up the voice of the field in this way is admirable, but it can leave some reviewers feeling a bit unmoored by the unusual amount of power being placed in their hands. Using the attributes as a checklist to rule proposals in or out can be a tempting though slippery tether for reviewers to hang on to until they find their bearings. This is a dynamic that might be hard to avoid given the circumstances.

Aligning the Framework to MAP

What is the conceptual alignment between what MAP is looking to support through its grantmaking—a “spirit of deep inquiry” and “works created by artists who question, disrupt, complicate, and challenge inherited notions of social and cultural hierarchy”—and the attributes of the framework? Though many of the framework attributes can apply to a range of artistic practices that are not specifically about *arts for change*, the framework itself was conceived as a tool to enhance the understanding and evaluation of that kind of creative work. Does centering the use of the framework in project review send the erroneous message that MAP projects should be about *arts for change*?

Part of the power and the problem of the *Aesthetics Perspectives* framework (depending on how you want to use it) is that it is just that—a framework. To some, it may look like a rubric for formal use rather than a malleable tool to be taken apart and reshaped or reconfigured—that is, a “tool to guide inquiry rather than a definer of success or failure.”²¹ If MAP wants to reduce the anxiety of applicants and the confusion of reviewers about the role of the framework in its application evaluation, it may have to be willing to deconstruct and reconstruct the framework (as it has its own guidelines) and make it more of a flexible inquiry tool specifically suited to MAP's purposes rather than using it in its unmodified form.

How to Measure Progress

Striving to increase the aesthetic range of proposed projects is something that is in the DNA of MAP. Its efforts to lower barriers to a diversity of artists by revising the mechanics of application, adding resource materials, and increasing staff support on application drafts are some of the subjects of MAP's practice of continual improvement. However, it is in the nature of this Sisyphean goal that it will never be reached but always sought after given that cultures are in a constant state of flux, renewal, reinvention, and recombination. Still, it is worth trying to see how far the boulder has moved up the hill.

So how does MAP define and measure the progress it has made in its efforts towards racial equity? Is there a way to measure the diversity of the applicant pool and grantee list from year to year to see if efforts have paid off? (Like the manual pairings of applications with reviewers, this seems like a pretty daunting task.) Does MAP track the diversity of the cohort of reviewers and the aesthetic expertise they bring to the table? Does it analyze the demographics of where the applications come from? Would any or all of that be valid, helpful, or even possible ways to measure progress? A knotty part of MAP's process has been its stance toward collecting demographic data.

*"MAP did not require the submission of detailed demographic information beyond how artists chose to self-identify or represent themselves as they saw fit throughout the proposal. Due to the varying number of participants in each project, collecting demographics and identifying each member of an artistic, producing, and/or administrative team is extremely complicated and rife with ethical issues. One of our 2020 application goals includes researching the most appropriate and effective way to collect relevant and comprehensive demographic information."*²²

The tension between trying to respect the different realities of artists and the needs of assessors to be conscientious and fair puts MAP in a bind. The TerraLuna evaluator noted this.

"Some 2018 applicants apparently feared discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, gender, religion, and/or sexuality. These applicants decided not to list this information on the application. However, some reviewers interpreted this lack of information as an attempt to disguise dominant culture-based artists. While the Aesthetic Perspectives framework did not address this directly, identity plays a large role in determining cultural integrity and disruption."

These tensions are difficult to unpack and address, and, no doubt, impossible to be resolved in a wholly satisfying way. But it is critical to contend with these tensions so that equity aims can advance. Hopefully, MAP's efforts to bring more diverse voices into its process, along with the trust it has built with the field over the years, will go some way toward solving some of these identity and disclosure issues.

21. For a statement of how the authors intended the framework to be used, see *Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change*, p. 12. Accessed 30 September 2019 at <http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>

22. Malliha, Syeda, and Lauren Slone. "2019 Applicant Pool Summary + Addendum." MAP Fund Blog [webpage], 13 March 2019. Accessed 30 September 2019 at <https://mapfundblog.org/2019/03/13/2019-applicant-pool-summary>

The Role of the Framework

As observed earlier, the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework was created with a particular purpose in mind. Focused on broadening understanding of the aesthetic palette of *arts for change*, much of it also is relevant to a wide range of other artistic endeavors. The framework offers itself as something as formal as an evaluation tool as well as something that is adaptable and can be experimented with as context dictates. It also should be said that the framework is not a panacea for all that ails the arts field in terms of racial equity, nor was it meant to be.

Before delving into the details of the attributes, the full version of the framework observes, “The aesthetics of social justice artwork can be understood as plural and diverse. No single aesthetic is

appropriate to such work. In a diverse society, multiple aesthetics co-exist and ideally function in cultural dialogue.” The lack of explicit language about race and equity here and in the definitions of the attributes made a number of MAP assessors wonder about the framework’s stance on these considerations.²³ “Is this a way of talking about race without really talking about race? Is this a way of talking about equity without talking about equity?” TerraLuna staff also observed that “while panelists seemed more optimistic about creating change in their personal practices, they seemed doubtful that the framework could alter existing arts organizations unless the organization had already committed to change.”

It is as important to see what the framework can do as a tool for deepening reflection and decision-making about what can constitute strong, compelling, and conscientious artworks and practices as what it can't do.

It is as important to see what the framework can do as a tool for deepening reflection and decision-making about what can constitute strong, compelling, and conscientious artworks and practices as what it can't do. The framework is an able tool for enlarging the conversation about how we think about art and its importance in many different contexts, but it may not be fair or wise to depend on it to carry more water than it was designed to do.

A Concluding Thought

The MAP Fund’s difficult, but important work to challenge its own systems, practices, and assumptions leaves many valuable lessons and inspiring examples for philanthropy in its wake. Its efforts are also a potent reminder that when one wades into the waters of racial equity work, one must brave the troubled waters before one can emerge healed.

23. Animating Democracy staff and the creators of the *Aesthetic Perspectives* framework were driven by the underlying inequities in systems that evaluate *arts for change* work. The attribute descriptions don’t call out racial inequity explicitly, but references to equity, power, privilege, and cultural appropriation are present in them.



Vanessa Whang is a researcher, program designer, evaluator, and thought partner to funders and organizations engaged with culture and arts, and their role in social change. Her work grapples with what a just society could look like in a diverse nation built on codified inequality and how a deeper understanding of culture is critical to imagining a new way forward. Whang served as a program director for the National Endowment for the Arts and for California Humanities. She has consulted on cultural equity issues, program design, and evaluation variously for the Akonadi, Barr, and Ford Foundations, among others, and completed a recent cultural plan for the city of Oakland centered on equity and belonging. She also served as director of multidisciplinary arts and presenting for the National Endowment for the Arts. Whang has worked as a cultural activist, performing arts presenter, and a musician, and serves on the boards of the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts and The Whitman Institute, a trust-based funder for social good.



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