

EDUCATOR GUIDE



Vhils: Haze

February 21, 2020 - January 12, 2021



Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted to have you join us at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) for Vhils' first museum exhibition in the United States, *Haze*. The exhibition is on view from February 21, 2020 - January 12, 2021.

Vhils offers the "cool" factor of being a graffiti and street artist, as well as the ability to have deep conversations around identity, the impact of social media and technology, the loss of history and cultural difference, and the creative process.

One of the most consistent themes in the exhibition is the idea of reciprocal shaping. How do we affect others—how do they affect us? In Vhils' works, he is specifically thinking about environments, but the possibility for discussions on empathy is appropriate and encouraged for all ages.

We invite you to explore, create, immerse yourselves, and discover what stories, connections and lessons can be found within this exhibition.

Enjoy your visit!

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

About the Artist

Alexandre Farto, AKA Vhils

- Born in Portugal, 1987. Raised in an industrialized suburb across the river from Lisbon (the capital of Portugal).
- He started doing graffiti at the age of 13.
- Farto studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art, London and Central St. Martin College of Art and Design, London.
- Considers his “greatest schooling” to have occurred from making graffiti, says it links to a more “expressive dimension.”
- Farto has been working under his tag name, Vhils, since the early 2000’s, when he was making works in public spaces “illegally.”
- Vhils has been exhibiting his work since 2005, in over 30 countries around the world.
- Notable exhibitions include the EDP Foundation (Lisbon), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Barbican Centre (London), CAFA Art Museum (Beijing), and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (San Diego), among others.



About Vhils’ work

- *Haze* will be Vhils’ first large-scale exhibition in an arts institution in the United States.
- He uses a variety of tools and materials to make his work, anything that might make a mark or remove material, including chisels, hammers, drills, etching acid, bleach, and explosives.
- Vhils often makes work in public spaces - on the side of buildings, walls, and other found sites.
- He pioneered the use of TNT to explode material off the surface of a wall in order to create artwork.
- Vhils, like many street artists, began creating by using spray-paint to graffiti, but soon became more interested in the surface and material layers that make up walls, buildings, billboards, etc.
- Vhils developed the signature method he uses in many artworks of carving/removing material from the surfaces of walls and buildings in order to create a new image.

- Farto grew up in Portugal during a time of intensive urban development in the 1980's and 1990's. This time brought large social, historical, and environmental changes that he was greatly impacted by.
- Farto's father was an activist during The Carnation Revolution of 1974, which caused Farto to take notice of the activist murals painted on walls all around the city. In the 1990's a surge in print advertising pasted over these murals got him to take notice of the ways walls "remembered" the history of the city.
- The Carnation Revolution was a military coup in Lisbon on April 25, 1974, which overthrew the authoritarian Estado Novo regime. The revolution began as a coup organized by the Armed Forces Movement, which was composed of military officers who opposed the regime, but it was soon coupled with an unanticipated, popular civil resistance campaign. The revolution led to the fall of the Estado Novo, terminated the Portuguese Colonial War, and started a revolutionary process that would result in a democratic Portugal. The effects were the release of Portugal's colonies; a slump in the economy, which began to grow in the 1980s again; freedom of religion and speech.
- Vhils is interested in the "reciprocal shaping" that the city (a modern urban environment) and the individual (those who inhabit the city) conduct on each other.
- The work is also a commentary on the homogenization of culture and urban environments as a result of increasing globalization in contemporary society.

Quotes

"Destruction is inherent in all forms of creation. Even if you're a writer, you have to destroy the white paper to pursue your craft."

- Vhils

"We are a result of everything that is surrounding us, in a way."

- Vhils

"Graffiti was my first art school, it taught me a lot and gave me skills I'm still using today in my work. So, having started out as a graffiti writer it was easier to become an artist than an astronaut, which was my lifetime ambition"

- Vhils

"I never disregard mistakes or errors, in one way or another, there is a lot of potential in them. I also truly believe that anything we create or produce is a reflection of the times we live in, of the multiple influences we are subjected to in our daily lives, so you never really know when something inspiring might come up."

- Vhils

About the exhibition

The CAC is excited to host an exhibition of Portuguese street artist Alexandre Farto (aka Vhils) in Spring 2020. Vhils is renowned for his unusual technique of removing the surface layers of urban walls to create riveting portraits and imagery. Using construction tools like hammers, chisels and pneumatic drills, the artist exposes and confronts architectural surfaces as they narrate the history of a city itself. Etching acid and bleach onto urban walls, Vhils sculpts pieces with texture, dimension and layers. His subject is almost always the same: the faces of anonymous city residents. Part artist, stone mason and archeologist, he gives careful attention to common people inhabiting their cities. Vhils' walls serve as both canvas and historical context for themes of identity, the passage of time and interdependence between people and environments. The artist also works in other diverse media including screen prints, wood, metal, recycled paper and more.

Vhils' art has been presented in art museums and galleries in over 30 countries; one of his pieces was even placed aboard the International Space Station in 2015. Vhils is creating a public wall work for the Blink festival. The CAC exhibition is Vhils' first ever large-scale exhibition in the United States.

Vocabulary/Key words

Erosion graffiti globalization archaeology
permanence/impermanence cultural homogenization ephemeral

Themes

Globalization: Vhils has made work across the globe, and is largely influenced by the urban landscape in which he is working. At the same time, he is conscious of the ways contemporary society is increasingly global in its nature, and critical of the loss of individuality.

Interdependence: How do the buildings and material we are surrounded with reflect our actions, memories, and values? The city, or urban environment, is a living organism - it grows, changes, breathes, and responds to the actions of those who live in it. At the same time, inhabitants of the city or urban environment are impacted by the space around them.

Destruction as Creation: By using his inventive carving techniques, Vhils creates new things by destroying the old. He intervenes in existing structures by removing material from the surface, uncovering colors, textures, and remnants of what was there before. By destroying

parts of what previously existed, Vhils is able create new works of art—emphasizing the cycle when they get destroyed/covered.

Individuality/Identity: Many of Vhils' works include large-scale human portraits. Often, he depicts members of the communities where his work is made. By situating these faces amongst the visual complexity of the urban landscape he tries to humanize the city; a space that easily dehumanizes and homogenizes our experience as individuals.

Ephemerality: Many of Vhils' works are not permanent, carved into the sides of buildings or walls in public areas they can be painted over at any time. However, traces of the carving can still be seen or felt even after being painted over, leaving behind a different version of the artwork, while also making commentary of the ephemerality of history (another layer).

PRE-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, "Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I'll help you."

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised \$5000 (about \$93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their "office" consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, "the best new building since the Cold War."

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to "open their minds" to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC's 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid's first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC's former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine's "100 Most Powerful Women," and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World," and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.

RULES AND GUIDELINES

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that there must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.

- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries- no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

- Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text is available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Contemplation Room.
- For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org

ARTWORK DISCUSSIONS

These discussions can occur prior to, during and after viewing.

- How do you think these were made? What kinds of materials do you see? Why do you think the artist used these materials?
- How do the buildings and material we are surrounded with reflect our actions, memories, and values?
- Why would the artist carve into walls, buildings, or doors?
- How has media affected individualized culture?
- Do you think cities across the world feel the same or different, and why? How is the location of Vhils' work important?
- How does the work make you feel about cities? Working, living, or visiting a city?
- How do your physical surroundings shape the way you live? Is the "concrete jungle" a hindrance or a benefit?
- How do we shape our surroundings over time? What do we leave behind in our environments? What do they "leave behind" for us?
- What is the difference between destruction and creation? How are they related?
- Consider the cycle of destruction and creation. How does Vhils' work show this idea?

LESSON PLAN IDEAS

1. Discuss subtractive sculpture. Consider how Vhils uses different subtractive methods to create his works. Using multiple colors of air dry clay, have students roll out thin layers of clay. Lay each layer on top of each other and create a uniform shape (round, square, etc.). Using a scratch tool, have students create a composition, taking into consideration what colors are revealed, and how deep to carve.
2. Have younger students use scratch paper to create portraits. Older students can create their own scratch paper with vellum or acetate with gesso over top.
3. Have students draw a portrait, building or design with only lines to create a stencil. After cutting out the stencil, place the stencil against another material and use spray watercolor. Experiment with layering different versions of this stencil painting.
4. Discuss what community means to the students. What structures, sounds, places speak to their experience and their identity. Have the students discuss what materials speak to that identity. Discuss how their identity impacts the community they live in. Have the students create a collage that speaks to the relationship they have with their community and the community with them.

ARTWORK AND WALL TEXT INFORMATION

Introductory Wall Text

Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto (b. 1987) has worked in cities around the globe under the name of Vhils since the early 2000s. Although known for his bas-relief carvings in building walls, Vhils utilizes a variety of media including sculpture, screen printing, wood carving and video to create his work. His process, which he refers to as “creative destruction,” is much less traditional. Often employing methods more akin to construction—drilling, hammering, and explosions—Vhils acts as an urban archaeologist, bringing to the surface a city’s historical identity.

Haze, Vhils’ first solo exhibition in an arts institution in the United States, can be seen as a continuation of his work of the last decade. His subjects are often the city and its residents. Through his process, however, Vhils exposes not just layers of plaster and brick walls. He makes revelations about contemporary culture. His work is an ongoing reflection on identity in a global society that increasingly promotes media saturation, cultural uniformity, overproduction and overconsumption.

By exploring life in urban societies, Vhils brings to light the paradigm of contemporary life in the city: how do we reconcile the benefits of globalized culture with its disadvantages? Increased trade and economic development with growing economic inequalities? Elevated living standards with greater environmental impact? *Haze* requires us to slow down and reflect, despite the busy city outside the gallery doors. It forces us to consider the cost of our material comforts. And, through this contemplation and questioning, we begin to wonder what revelations Vhils' destruction might bring.

Artworks and Object Labels

Lobby

Overexposure

Formed by an arrangement of tubular LED light bulbs suspended from the ceiling, *Overexposure* is a three-dimensional structure that plays with the visual perception of the viewer, giving shape to an image that can only be fully viewed and understood from certain points in the gallery. The deconstructed image is created by overlaying strips of black vinyl onto areas of the bulbs to block the light, creating a visual impression—a lasting imprint—on the viewer's retina.

Overexposure addresses technological stimulation. Because of their overuse, many contemporary societies have become desensitized to visual representations. This work questions the intentions of these technologies: How are they used to control the masses? How are they used to dictate what is, or is not, acceptable, beautiful, normal or violent? The continual use of an image, regardless of what it represents or aims to convey, always generates familiarity, becoming normalized over time, just like the viewer's overexposure to this installation generates its own loss of impact.



Fourth Floor

Panorama

This panoramic film installation is comprised of videos from the *City Slow Motion Series* depicting urban life, which were shot in several locations Vhils has worked in the past few years, including Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Lisbon, Hong Kong, Macao, Beijing and Paris. The slow-motion, highly detailed videos act to separate the neutral gallery setting from the

bustling city streets, and establish a dialogue of similarities and differences between the cities.

Acting as a decompression chamber to begin a reflection on the exhibition, this installation invites viewers to slow down and focus on the mundane moments of beauty found, yet often ignored, within the bustling urban environment. Visitors are presented with the opportunity to observe and draw connections between the cultural and material elements giving shape to our daily lives. And, to reflect on what brings us together and what differentiates us, helping us understand how we are becoming increasingly alike due to the influence of homogenized globalization found in advertising, consumer brands and products, city planning and architecture.



Global projects, local walls

Vhils has presented work at 116 locations in over 30 countries worldwide. For his pivotal *Scratching the Surface* project, Vhils has created over 250 works alone. For which, the artist uses his groundbreaking bas-relief carving technique to create large-scale compositions on public walls.

In many ways, walls are the most important medium with which Vhils works. Walls were the gateway to his artistic path—the backdrop of growing up in post-revolution, industrial Lisbon, and the canvas for his formative graffiti work in the early 2000s. For Vhils, walls are not merely static, lifeless facades. He views them as organic surfaces that are evolving markers of history, the pulse of a place, and unique to every city.

Whether created in connection with projects that explore real-life issues affecting a specific community—such as sweeping urban redevelopment schemes and enforced relocation programs in cities like Lisbon, Shanghai or Rio de Janeiro—or with his artistic reflections presented in gallery exhibitions, such as in



London, Sydney, Los Angeles or Hong Kong—the poignant, poetic portraits that form the *Scratching the Surface* project aim to bring life to cities and humanize public spaces, while looking at the imprint left by globalized models of development on local identities.



Diagrama

Part of Vhils' *Dioramas* body of work, this large-scale installation features polystyrene foam sculptures, which the artist uses to create three-dimensional panoramic works that blend human portraits with cityscapes. Depending on the viewer's perspective, this piece can be read either as a detailed urban landscape, when seen from the side, or a composition of faces, when seen from directly above.

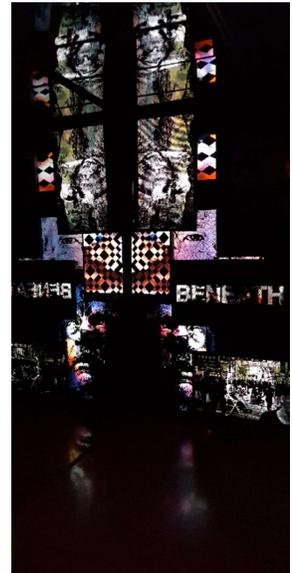
Brought to life by means of lighting and contrast, this elaborate architectural piece explores one of the pivotal concepts in Vhils' practice: the process of reciprocal shaping that exists between the city and its inhabitants, by which both develop a shared character. The result is a composite that, though based on the fusion of different elements taken from real-life subjects and locations, is an imaginary city that speaks of the process of amalgamation and increased homogenization taking place in our global cities today.



Gamut

This multi-sensory installation reflects the city's chaos, creating a deeply immersive, somewhat dazzling, yet jarring environment. Created by layering perforated acrylic sheets that act as stencils over programmed television sets, the moving images behind the stencils allow the static images to be read, providing a kaleidoscopic experience.

Conveying the relentless bombardment of visual culture that people are subjected to on a daily basis in our contemporary urban societies, the installation seeks to address the issue of how our individual identities are being influenced and shaped by the ever-present flow of visual information around us—in both public and private spaces. The visual framework of the installation is based on clips taken from a multitude of sources, including the Internet, television, advertising, and original footage captured by Vhils in various urban locations around the world.



Pulsão/ Detritos/ Hint

First explored to further emphasize his destructive approach to creation, Vhils' work with explosives is a natural progression from his original bas-relief carving technique used on walls. According to Vhils, walls retain within their layers something of the history and essence of the city, which can be symbolically exposed when he carves into them. By employing explosive charges to reveal these portraits and compositions, Vhils takes this process to its logical conclusion.

Explosives were first used by Vhils in 2010 for the *Detritos (Detritus)* series of art videos as a

visual metaphor for the social and economic volatility brought on by the 2008 global financial crisis. As such, both this, and the subsequent series, speak of how, at times of turmoil, the veneer of civilization we take for granted can easily explode and bring forth previously tamed expressions of intolerance, extremism and violence that simmer beneath the surface. As the entire process is eruptive and dramatic, its result can only be truly appreciated on video. Most of these have been shot using a high-speed digital camera that enables the artist to capture the moment at a very low speed, which seems to almost freeze the flying debris.



Fifth Floor

Identity

This is the first wall piece that Vhils has ever created with explosives in an exhibition setting. This site-specific installation delves into the concept of human IDENTITY, acting as a visual metaphor that invites the viewer to reflect on its volatile nature in the complexity of the present-day world.

Capturing the moment when charges were detonated with an extremely low shutter speed (as low as 2 microseconds), the slowed-down video footage imprints a poetic intensity onto what, at first, might simply seem an exercise of force and violence.



Fractal

This three-dimensional installation with pieces of wood, like *Diagrama*, is part of Vhils' *Dioramas* body of works. For these works, he has also worked in such mediums as polystyrene foam, cement and cork sheeting.

This fragmented sculptural panorama blends a human portrait with an urban landscape—a representation of the concept of reciprocal shaping, whereby both develop a shared character because of their interaction. The light and dark/positive and negative elements of the sculpture symbolize the dichotomy of the city. Both create the story of the city—the beautiful and the ugly, the new and the old. Similarly, the contrast of light and shadow allows the piece to be read simultaneously as both portrait, when seen from a distance, and landscape, when seen up-close, representing the continual process of interaction between city and citizens.



Spectrum

Vhils initially began working with accumulated layers of advertising posters he found on city streets in 2005. This was the first medium he used to explore his signature carving technique, and led to his concept of dissecting and decomposing objects and surfaces to reveal the formative layers that describe the intimate relationship between the city and its inhabitants. Created by layering these posters on top of one another, obliterating the top layer with white paint and extracting an image by carving into the pile, these artworks bring an assortment of random elements to the surface, creating a physical manifestation of the evolving visual identity of urban life.

Seeking to reflect on how human identity is both formed and conditioned by the city's imposing visual discourse, these pieces blend advertising and signage with portraits. Both have been sourced from a variety of contexts around the globe in a bid to express how the same forces are present in urban societies regardless of their location.

Capturing aspects of the visual chaos present in the urban landscape, this body of work speaks mainly of our present-day consumer culture. The works play with the visual vestiges of the language contained in advertising and its false promises and imposed needs. Expressing the negativity of this influence, the faces depicted here are seen undergoing a process of effacement, dissolving into a background of visual noise, rendering their features almost as abstract as the graphic elements that are engulfing them.



Taint

Vhils has been making use of recycled wood from derelict buildings and sites as a source material since first experimenting with it in 2009. The material and conceptual link with the urban environment lies in their status as discarded objects, part of the waste the city generates during its cycles of destruction and creation.

The artist's gesture further subverts the worthlessness of the original articles by elevating them to prized aesthetic objects—transferring them from the profane space of the landfill to the sacred space of the gallery. Vhils' recurrent use of wooden doors also symbolizes the correlation and



opposition between the private and public realms—the two spheres that dictate our relationship with society and the world at large.

The carved portraits also seek to imbue the works with a symbolic representation of life, emphasizing their connection with personal histories taken from the localities in which he works.

The resulting installation presents a patchwork of disparate portraits of individuals sourced from various locations around the world, inviting us to reflect on the convergence of people and discourses across the globe that coalesce through their shared immersion in the contemporary urban experience.

RESOURCES

<https://www.vhils.com/about/>

<https://www.vhils.com/map/>

[http://www.tmoa.org/biography-1\](http://www.tmoa.org/biography-1)

https://www.academia.edu/30751374/Interview_with_Alexandre_Farto_aka_Vhils

<https://www.designboom.com/art/vhils-exhibition-paris-fragments-urbains-decombres-06-20-2018/>

<https://mymodernmet.com/vhils-street-art/>

<https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/street-art/interview-vhils-and-the-things-we-leave-behind/>

<http://www.streetartbio.com/vhils>

<https://www.contemporaryartscenter.org/exhibitions/2020/02/vhils>

<https://www.lazinc.com/artists/vhils-aka-alexandre-farto/biography/>

<https://adst.org/2015/04/the-carnation-revolution-a-peaceful-coup-in-portugal/>

Video: [Creation Via Destruction with Vhils](#)

Video: [Vhils: Explosive Street Art](#)

LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Ohio Common Core Links

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards>

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards>

Kentucky Common Core Links

<https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx>

https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards>

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts>

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>