

# THE VIEWER? THE ACTUAL PURPOSE OF ART

“Nevertheless, the passions, whether violent or not, must never be expressed to the point of arousing disgust, and music even in situations of the greatest horror, must never pain the ear, but must flatter and charm, and consequently remain music.”

Mozart<sup>1</sup>

Now why would this be different for visual art? Understanding myself as virtual bridge-builder between facts from science and the target audience of art, I seek to offer valuable insights into how we look at art, different from a mainstream consensus. This approach may be comparable to how from physical science we were made aware that regular physical movement or well-considered diets contribute to our well-being. You are welcome to disagree, while I *do* wish this different approach may stir your own thoughts. If you are intrigued, you may be motivated to read my book with this same title.

To build bridges to the art audiences, we need to be able to explain their own need for art beyond only a few fun hours at a biennial, an art fair, a museum or gallery. This is possible by providing and interpreting scientific knowledge about the experience itself. We in the art world are trained and fixated to talk about the contents of art, metaphorically within the picture frame, or the possible innovation in history and the hit parade of who would be most important. We forgot the artwork is nothing until a viewer likes to look at it. To be able to understand the viewer to be the actual purpose for making art, we need to explain why art is beneficial to our well-being and health. The *Actual Purpose of Art* is chosen as straightforward title, because the art professionals mostly focus on the artist and the artwork.

## INTRODUCTION

Market originally has two meanings: a public place to socially meet and exchange opinions and a place for selling and buying. One can certainly welcome art events accessible and enjoyable to all, but we have to be aware these events fulfill only the first meaning of market. Just like how a restaurant owner, a bar keeper, a music orchestra or a book-author cannot survive without customers, this is the fundamental and simple truth for artists and art intermediaries. The art world should become aware of the needs and interests of the target audiences of art. The question is not *what* art would be contemporary, or innovative, or what the latest trend would be, but *for whom* is art? What is *the purpose* of art? After centuries of focusing on the artist as creative genius and half a century of focusing on the perspectives of the art professionals and the illusion of art being independent, we hardly know anything about the target audience of art: *the viewer*.

## THE PURPOSE

The purpose of art is to make a meaningful contribution to the viewer's personal life. The individual may appreciate the experience of art as a psychological, an emotional, or a spiritual experience; nonetheless, the trigger is a visually appealing artwork and the process is primarily physical.<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging and respecting cultural and individual differences and preferences, I focus on the fundamental level where all people are more similar than

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by French painter Eugène Delacroix in his journal, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1856. See *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, Phaidon Press Limited, London/New York, 2006, ISBN-10: 0 7148 3359 2, p.346.

<sup>2</sup> I emphasize the importance of an experience *instantaneously* evoked by the artwork, because the first glance at a work of art counts more than is being acknowledged in the traditional analysis of works of art. As is the case when tasting a good wine, the first taste is decisive to make one interested to continue tasting, or not.

different. This comes to the fore in the human need for art as part of everyday well-being, in how perception works, and in the processing in our whole of mind/body.

### **THE INTERACTION WITH ART**

*“A true work of art speaks immediately to the spectator.*

*The spectator should immediately respond to the work of art.”*

Kandinsky, 1916<sup>3</sup>

Most people naturally sense what they like to look at but feel insecure in following their own intuition. We need to have a better understanding of the way an individual encounters and experiences an artwork, as well as of the role such an artwork may play in an individual's personal life. This approach demands an entirely fresh look at how we understand and discuss art. In short, the meaning or purpose of art may not be found within the artwork itself, nor in its art historical or social context, but in the natural *interaction* of you with the artwork. How can we understand this interaction? What features do we all have in common in the interaction with different kinds of art?

### **ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

Without ignoring or denying historical and theoretical knowledge, it is time to focus on the most fundamental and pragmatic features of art, that have been ignored for far too long: what is it that makes a person look at a work of art, what makes a person look long enough to be able to acquire a genuine experience? What causes people to find *pleasure* in viewing artworks? Why do we need this *visual* excitement? Why do we need *art*?

### **LIFE REQUIRES STRESS AND DECLINE OF STRESS**

Worrying, acknowledging problems, sometimes even seeking problems that do not necessarily exist, seems a general human inclination, and it connects to our innate need to recognize potential danger. However, our attention loses its alertness when we worry continuously or when we try to be happy all the time. We need moments of happiness and pleasure to interrupt episodes of worrying or profound unhappiness. Alternating periods of proactive problem seeking, anxiety or unhappiness with periods of happiness may likely be a natural process, a drive for survival aiming for equilibrium. We need such turmoil because a permanent equilibrium in biological terms is tantamount to death. Scientists found the brain continuously needs contrasting experiences and degrees of stress to function properly.

Summarized, in everyday life it is only natural and good for our health and normal functioning to build up stress, but for the same reasons, we need also to decline stress. Therefore, an equilibrium, a feeling at ease, will always occur only for a limited time. In principle, the whole of our organism, the brain as well as the rest of the body, is in constant turmoil caused by the natural processes within and of our bodies. Our physical encounter with art, our experience of art is part of the biological necessity to search for a temporary equilibrium and thus decline of stress. The news media more than cover our daily need for spotting potential threats. We do not need art to inform us what is wrong in the world and thus incline stress, but art perfectly accommodates our innate need for experiences that trigger positive emotions, allowing for a decline of stress and therewith allowing us to cope with life.

### **MEANING IN ART**

One could say there are two ways of looking at meaning in art. Meaning can be projected onto the artifact regardless of its visual appearance; this kind of meaning is invested in the artwork

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<sup>3</sup> Kandinsky, *On The Artist (Om Konstnären)*, Stockholm, 1916, in Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter Vergo, *Kandinsky – Complete Writings on Art* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994, ISBN 0 306-80570-7), p. 417.

by ritual, tradition, culture, the artist, the critic or curator. Then there is meaning provided by the visual appearance of the artifact itself. We have been taught that only the first matters and have hardly been told about the latter. But if we like to understand the viewer, obviously the latter is what matters most.

## **ALIGNMENT**

*The experience of art is not about what is depicted.*

*It does not actually matter if the artwork is figurative or abstract.*

*The experience of art is caused by how the artwork is executed.*

*Visual appeal is everything.*

Fré Ilgen

The first step is to acknowledge how visual appeal is defined by alignment – instantaneously recognizing that what appeals is made by another human. Throughout history artists have said that they think with their hands. The importance of the actual action of our hands, the motions of our hands and arms to write, scribble, point, hold, weigh, handle tools, gesticulate, focuses our attention, but also the way this contributes to our social functioning, is beyond doubt. Seeing brushstrokes in paint, or marks made by hands in clay, or even manually made marks in steel, a viewer unconsciously perceives a retracing of the artist's manual efforts in creating these marks.

An experience somewhat comparable to seeing another person gesticulating: without necessarily understanding the gesticulations, the manual movements by themselves attract our gaze as something meaningful and familiar. A familiarity that can be explained in terms similar to the neuronal activity attributed to *mirror neurons*: in the brain of the viewer a neuron is automatically fired that is similar to the neuronal activity involved in the artist when he or she made the work. The unconscious experience of the viewer, called *alignment*, equals the experience being the acting person, a phenomenon everyone knows from watching sports.

## **EYE MOVEMENT**

During daytime a lot of information is absorbed in the brain. Neuroscientific research, including sleep research, has demonstrated that the brain needs a certain time to process and organize memory anew to be able to address a next day. There is a clear link between eye movement and the capacity for such resetting of the brain. A combination of eye movements and brain processes are noticeable in looking long enough at artworks and observable in deep sleep, a sleep state known as REM (Rapid Eye Movements) in which we dream. The comparison between the dream-state and art lies in the amount of involved eye movements and the subsequent brain processes, not in the comparison of the specific narrative of dreams with the narrative in a work of art.

Repeated eye movements only happen when the artwork is manually made, because the human brain responds to the marks in the material made by another human through the process of alignment. The imperfection of manually made artworks causes more eye movements than through digitally or industrially made artifacts. They more effectively evoke the amount of brain activity desired for causing a profound experience.

## **ART, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

Regularly experiencing works of art corresponds thus to a natural need set by the human organism and is not necessarily a conscious choice by the viewer. Everyone can experience that enjoying the pleasure of appealing art allows for a moment to forget everyday concerns. The temporary shift of focus leading to a real diversion of brainpower can be understood as tension-relieving hence as beneficial to our whole organism. This explains the experience of works of art as providing a sense of well-being. In that sense one may compare our occasional

desire to view art to the way our organism signals the mind and body when it requires drink or food. We may decide when and where and what to eat and drink, but we cannot decide not to eat or drink. Our biology sets the tone in much more of our behavior than we are aware of. This does not refute any social or cultural reasons for creating or viewing art, but nevertheless emphasizes the generally ignored biological component of art appreciation.

### **BODINESS AND FOCUS OF ATTENTION**

The ongoing view in the art world that the *intellectual* intentions of the artist, or of the curator, take precedence over the *physical* encounter with the artifact. However, when a person encounters a work of art, it is a physical, biological entity (a specific human mind/body) - the viewer - meeting some material substance shaped by another physical, biological entity - the artist. The encounter between artist and viewer is mediated through the artwork by the ways the human mind/body biologically responds to the mind/body of the other. The biological component is here more prominent than the conscious, psychological or conceptual component. This is what I propose *bodiness* to be about.<sup>4</sup>

In general, there are two different but overlapping and mutually influential ways of focusing attention: one is biological by nature, the other mostly psychological. The biological focus of attention is caused by the complex ways our bodies respond to and interact with our immediate environments. In the case of vision, it is about how our gaze is caught, directed and held. The psychological focus of attention builds on one's personal history, obviously including one's family background, culture, society and education.

The encounter with a work of art may instantaneously spark our attention or not at all. Described very simply: the visual presence of artworks will work the same way in all humans within the scope of their biological focus of attention, while within the scope of their psychological focus of attention the personal preferences for kinds of artworks will differ. In Baroque churches, in Islamic mosques, or in Asian temples, a viewer cannot help but gradually let his/her eyes and brain roam over all details, colors and intricate contrasts. The process of focusing attention brings about a genuine and meaningful experience, first and foremost evoked through the senses.

### **ART IN THE PRIVATE ENVIRONMENT**

Given the status of the current global art market, it is crucial to start a discussion about the role and functioning of artworks in the private home; after all, this is the place for the most immediate confrontation between the individual viewer and art. In public, for social reasons, a person may tend to avoid critical opinions about what art one likes and what not, but the same person will intuitively and immediately know what art one likes to enjoy at home and what not. An artwork in our daily environment, at home or in the office does not necessarily need to have a permanent impact, but its presence functions as pleasant 'noise' in the background, like background music, supporting and enhancing a person's focus on work or other things. Thus, a better understanding of the viewer, a better understanding of what and how art functions in the private environment will also be helpful for museums and galleries to consider how to refresh the aim of their activities.

### **THE NARRATIVE OF THE VISUAL**

Artworks can function not similar but still analogously to the way music functions. Traditionally the meaning of art is restricted to descriptions of the historical context, or the

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<sup>4</sup> *Bodiness* is a term I have proposed in *ARTIST? The Hypothesis of Bodiness*, Tübingen, Wasmuth GmbH, Germany, 2014, ISBN 978 3 8030 3364.

depicted narrative, or of the appearance of the artwork, like the format and materials, or descriptions of the specific handling of the materials by the artist. All of this is certainly interesting and useful, but far away from describing the experience offered by the artwork. How does the actual visual appeal of an artwork work?

The artwork that catches the eyes of the viewer must evoke a sense of bewilderment in that viewer, otherwise the artifact is not appealing and cannot be perceived as creative. Although it may sound contradictory, what is perceived as creative builds on the familiar. To hold the gaze, the artwork must contain a variation of the familiar, offering a certain degree of surprise. Such a surprise must not necessarily be part of the subject matter, or narrative, but can be, for instance, a surprising combination of shapes and colors. Of course, the degree of surprise cannot be pinned down in a formula, but it is certain that a degree of surprise should come into the artwork to offer familiarity and not *only* surprises. When a work offers mainly or only surprises, it offers too little connection with experiencing life as it is, and, surprisingly, viewers may perceive the work either as boring or, on the other side of the scale, as shocking. In both cases the work will not appeal.

While in poetry a visual image in the mind is generated by the words that appeal to the individual reader's imagination, in fine art the narrative triggered by the seen image is open to the individual viewer's association and imagination. Because looking at artworks instantaneously evokes memorized verbalizations, this automatically makes the viewer to virtually read some narrative in any artwork. Here there is no difference between figurative and abstract art.

For instance, Malevitch's abstractions are explained as a narrative of infinity or continuous motions of the universe. When here I mention the narrative feature of artworks, it relates to this feature of verbalizing, either mentally or aloud. Needless to mention that such narratives more often than not are personal associations and are to be distinguished from the visual perception itself, and also differ from a narrative given to the artworks by the artist. When we read a text, the required focus is mainly a process of a learned mental co-ordination of eye motions and memorized knowledge, hence a focus from the inside outwards. Artworks that visually appeal make our eyes move and activate our brain and body, which is a process from the outside inwards.

### **THE LESSON TO BE LEARNED**

The most important lesson is to differentiate between how we interact biologically with an artwork, how we indeed also biologically process this interaction within ourselves, and how we *verbalize* this experience to ourselves or to others. We cannot only focus on the verbalized interpretation of the experience but have to pick up the courage to address what comes first, the so-called biological component of visual appeal. Science offers sufficient knowledge to be able to start such acknowledgement of the actual experience of art. We will find this not to be that different from the importance of biological components involved in enjoying music, a good wine or good food.

Though scientific understanding of the complex processes within our bodies merely scratches the surface, the implications provide new ways of understanding why and how we look at art. The most fascinating and innovative understanding is that while the focus of attention is a key-factor, the art historical position or content and the subject matter are not unimportant, but less prominent and less decisive than the visual appearance of the work of art. Without a viewer there is no interaction; without this interaction there is no experience, without the experience there is no reason for the artwork to be.

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