



Enjoying Monet at MoMA, photo: Fré Ilgen

**Synopsis of the manuscript *The Viewer? The Actual Purpose of Art*, anticipated to be published 2022. The book will be hardcover and have roughly 200 pages, including full color illustrations.**

**Key notions: the viewer, focus of attention, art for the private environment, art as part of corporate social responsibility standard.**

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*Many features of art presented in this book are what we always sensed about the artworks that we instantaneously find appealing. Facts and interpretations from neuroscience bring forward an entirely new way of understanding the purpose of art and is a logical and necessary addition to art historical knowledge.*

## **SHIFTING THE MAIN FOCUS**

*The Viewer? The Actual Purpose of Art* offers historical, scientific and economic arguments for a necessary shift of focus in art away from the artist, or other art professional, back to the viewer. Earlier interest in the viewer evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while since the 1960s the emphasis was gradually directed away from the viewer. A shift back to the viewer (the viewer to be more important than the art professionals) has actually already happened, but still has to be generally acknowledged. After centuries of focusing on the artist as creative genius, and after half a century of focusing on the perspectives of the art professionals, as well as on creative financial constructions, we hardly care about the target audience of art.

## **THE PURPOSE**

The purpose of art is to make a meaningful contribution to the viewer's personal life. The individual may appreciate an artwork as a psychological, an emotional, or a spiritual experience; nonetheless, the trigger is a visually appealing artwork and the process is primary *physical*. To the artist, creativity is about finding solutions logical to the creative person but surprising to everybody else. *The viewer* is the key figure in the understanding of art. While acknowledging and respecting cultural and individual differences and preferences, I focus on the fundamental level where all people are more similar than different. In the human need for art as part of everyday well-being, in perception and in the processing in our mind/body,

people are more similar than most are aware of.

### **§1. MOTIVATION**

The majority of readers may have experienced discrepancies between their own responses to and preferences for works of art, and the responses and preferences of art professionals. I am motivated by the observation that 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 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, the viewer (your mind/body) and the assembled materials that are the artwork.

### **§2. INTRODUCING THE VIEWER**

Since the changes due to the financial crisis of 2007 something has snapped in the global art world, and this change deeply challenges artists, art intermediaries and many other art professionals. This disruption is mirrored in a global decline in attendance of exhibitions of contemporary art in galleries and museums. The idea that art could exist regardless of the viewer is a fallacy. Without ignoring or denying academic knowledge (historical and theoretical), it is time to focus on the most fundamental and pragmatic features of art, ignored 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 excitement in viewing artworks? Why do we need this *visual* excitement? Why do we need *art*?

### **§3. ART DEFINES SELF - A PHYSICAL PROCESS**

Appreciation of a work of art demands that the artwork function as intermediary between the viewer's mind/body and the world. When a work of art appeals to you, when it attracts your attention and holds your focus, the experience offers you a moment to reflect on yourself and on the world. Science offers us ways to appreciate how the physical processes of our mind/body shape the foundation and perimeters for such natural ways of reflection.

### **§4. PHYSICALLY ENCOUNTERING ART - THE WILL TO EQUILIBRIUM IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EQUILIBRIUM ITSELF**

Worrying, acknowledging problems, sometimes even seeking problems that do not necessarily exist, seems a general inclination, and it connects to our innate need to recognize potential danger. However, our attention loses its sharpness 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. This can be understood as a drive towards a hypothetical *homeostasis*, between the different actions, reactions and reflexes of our bodies and our environment. The world fills our days with incentives that demand response. Therefore, an equilibrium, a feeling at ease, will always occur only for a limited time. The adjustment of one's equilibrium to a new incentive is the result of the continuous will to achieve a new equilibrium. 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. People need this turmoil because a real equilibrium in biological terms is tantamount to death. Our physical encounter with art, our looking at art and experiencing it, is part of the natural will to equilibrium.

## §5. ALIGNMENT AS PROCESS - SENSING MEANING IN ART

The news media more than cover our daily need for spotting potential threats. Our natural inclination to scan for threats and danger is counterbalanced by the urge to scan our immediate physical and social environment for things and occasions that trigger comforting emotions. Here I do not mean comfortable chairs or a comfortable bank account, but rather emotional experiences that provide a sense of comfort to one's mind/body.

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 by ritual, tradition, culture, the artist, the critic or curator. Then there is meaning provided by the visual appearance of the artifact itself.

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. This explains the importance of physical rituals that demand, when meditating, specific actions with hands and arms while chanting or speaking. The alignment of our thoughts with the actions of our hands enhances our focus exponentially.

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 efforts in creating these marks. I suggest that the body of the viewer automatically recognizes these marks as being made by another human body, comparable to the attention immediately drawn to footprints on a deserted beach. The natural recognition of one's own kind provides a sense of familiarity and 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 close to the neuronal activity that was involved in the artist when she or he made the work. This is the process of *alignment*.

## §6. BIOLOGICAL NECESSITIES - PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Though an artwork certainly can attract our gaze, our brain loses interest quickly when we *instantaneously* understand what we look at and are not bewildered by what we see.<sup>1</sup> When an artwork at first glance offers (abstract or figurative) shapes that a viewer instantaneously feels he or she recognizes, though the meaning may not be entirely clear, then such artworks balance familiarity with bewilderment, a balance that induces the artifact to be experienced as art or not. Complex biological processes are involved in such mostly unconscious experiences; conscious decisions play a lesser role than assumed.

*Too much* or *too little* bewilderment does not attract our eyes and brain. When there is too much bewilderment, we cannot instantaneously sense any familiarity in what we are looking at, meaning that there is no alignment with existing paths in the brain and our attention moves elsewhere. When what we look at is too obvious, there is *too little* bewilderment and this leads to an immediate sense of boredom, with the same result: attention moves on. Imperfections, irregularities that naturally cause the eyes to repeatedly roam or scan the artwork, are fundamental for catching and holding the gaze. The experience is exponentially stronger, the longer the gaze is held and the more brainpower is required.

This biological process is not triggered when artworks are rendered by digital technology that either skips or actually imitates such imperfections. 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. When an artist manually creates an artwork this naturally involves a transformation that is not pre-calculated and includes surprising mistakes and discoveries. A transformation from what the artist sees and processes through his/her own brain and body, results in a handling through his/her own hands into the actual world in front of one's eyes.

## §7. EXPERIENCING ART, A HEALTH ISSUE

My hypothesis is that regularly experiencing works of art corresponds to a natural need set by the human organism and is not necessarily a conscious choice by the viewer. 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. I expect we may find that both the need to create art and the need to view a work of art are needs that prevent a straining of the healthy brain.<sup>2</sup> In that sense one may compare viewing art to the way our organism signals the mind and body when it requires drink or food. 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. It is interesting to note that scientists have located in the amygdala brain region centers that activate the body's stress response by releasing stress hormones when danger threatens. Danger and excitement can be close matches. One day scientists may understand viewing artworks experienced in one's own home in the periphery of life may cause a decline or even dissipation of stress hormones released by the amygdala.

## §8 MEANING, A WHOLE-BODY EXPERIENCE

We all grow up being more or less aware that any meaning given to an object, an experience, an opinion, a book, movie or artwork results from a mental or psychological process and depends on one's culture, timeframe, social status, general education or specialization. Meaning in art is neither embodied in the creator nor in the viewer, and it is not embodied in the artifact, but virtually embodied in the interactive process between viewer and viewed. That is, meaning depends much more on the circumstances of the individual viewer such as her/his environment, state of mind, etc., than on the artwork itself, and not merely on the artist's intention or the curator's statement. Art without a viewer is just an assemblage of dead materials which becomes alive and begets meaning by and only within the interaction with a viewer.

## §9 THE HYPOTHESIS OF BODINESS

In neuroscience the brain is not perceived as separate from the rest of the body.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of the argument of this book it is necessary to be aware of 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. This represents the false understanding of a split mind/body and a false perception of the artwork in perfect isolation. 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. Hence it is only logical to acknowledge the impact of the virtual meeting of human bodies: the mind/body of the viewer mostly unconsciously recognizing in the artwork the marks made by the mind/body of the artist.<sup>4</sup> 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. This is what *bodiness* is about.

## §10 MICROSACCADES AND HOW EYES MAKE ARTWORKS WORK

The eyes are not just portals *to*, but part *of* the brain, and the movements of the eyes involuntary triggered by something within the field of vision, cause motor activity. Not necessarily by a conscious decision, but by a biological response too fast to be consciously noticed. Motor activity of the eyes influences the brain, while simultaneously and vice versa, a conscious focus of our thoughts will influence the motor activity of the eyes. The eye-movements we are aware of are called *saccadic* movements. The so-called *microsaccadic movements* are rapid eye movements with a small electrical amplitude (the strength of an

electrical signal) occurring about five times per second.

Microsaccades are important as they rapidly and repeatedly refresh the image projected on the retina with a new image. This process of renewal, or repetition of the same image, is required for a perceived image to last, because otherwise the visual perception would fade very quickly by the habituation or decrease of the visual receptors of the retina. The brain needs continuous, contrasting impulses to cause brain activity. Without any such contrasting impulses the brain would theoretically not process, not function at all. Though for obvious reasons empirical research still has to be set up for investigating what features and what range of artworks would offer the desired visual impulses causing a repetition of microsaccades, my personal view matches what Paul Cézanne said so long ago: *it is all about contrasts*.

## §11 FOCUS OF ATTENTION

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. One person might explain the experience as spiritual or religious, and the other person might only be in awe of the artistic expressions and art historical meaning. The process of focusing attention is more important than the artwork by itself. According to this logic, the viewer is therefore more important than the artwork itself (and thus more important than the artist).

A large part of the research on attention concerns vision and the involvement and influence of eye-movements on attention shifts. Of course, attention is also stirred by the other senses, such as sound, smell, or feeling heat, cold, draft, touching, seeing or hearing something moving or falling. Researchers distinguish between *overt* and *covert* attention. Overt attention describes the act of directing one's eyes towards an object or location in space. Covert attention is a shift in focus in one's mind without moving one's eyes towards a different location and does not depend on eye-movements. We can direct our attention to some object or subject in our 'mind' without necessarily shifting our gaze. The distinction between overt and covert attention does not any longer represent a consensus in current science, because more brain parts are involved than previously assumed. This challenges the differentiation between overt and covert attention.

Furthermore, when acknowledging the importance of the orientation of attention, one can distinguish between external (exogenous) and internal (endogenous) processes. The complexity is that these are not always easy to separate. While in exogenous processes the stimulus is considered to be in control, endogenous processes are controlled, or initiated, by thought processes and include expectations. Researchers have described exogenous processes as *bottom-up* or stimulus-driven attention, processed in the parietal and temporal cortices and in the brainstem. Endogenous processes may be understood as *top-down* or action-driven focus, processed in the frontal cortex and basal ganglia, and related to working memory and

other features. Researchers think that the processing of attention might involve even more complex neuronal networks, working simultaneously bottom-up as well as top-down.

As an artist, I am familiar with the visual appeal of large and small contrasts within an artwork, yet I doubt that randomness is at issue and predict that specific features in artworks will be found that lead our roaming focus. In other words, the viewer's eyes are attracted by many impulses observed within the artwork, and these differ in degree of attraction. Nonetheless, the attractive features do not differ from each other greatly, so the viewer's eyes hop from one such attraction point to the other: roaming. In the future, scientists may identify such features by analyzing the hierarchy of visual features that trigger micro-saccadic eye-movements. Looking for certain patterns in the paths the eyes follow, called eye-tracking may help to show this hierarchy of attraction points, although such patterns themselves will seem entirely random.

Art critics tend to place the individual artwork or the individual artist at the center of most analyses. While a good artwork does concentrate the viewer's focus of attention, in everyday life art is not necessarily a permanent subject of attention. There the artwork plays a role, even if only in peripheral vision, and can be appreciated as an important component and even stimulus of normal functioning in everyday life. This role is, however, more modest, though important as essential component of our biologically complex functioning. 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 visual small talk or even 'noise' in the background, supporting and enhancing a person's focus on work or other things.

## **§12 CONTEMPORARY CLASSIC**

At present, the broader audience of art lovers is shifting its focus away from contemporary art museums to museums for art from 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier. From a bird's-eye perspective it is clear that the general excitement for novel art in terms of new socio-political concepts visualized in "novel" materials that by themselves are not profoundly appealing, is gone, while a growing interest is evolving for re-connecting artistic *expression* with artistic *execution*. In immediate context to all that has been discussed about perception, and the experience of as well as the creation of art, what seems to appeal at present is the kinds of art classified as Contemporary Classic. This refers to art that incorporates classic qualities of visual appeal as transformed by an artist who lives in the contemporary world. Throughout the book the reader will find many facts and arguments that support an understanding of why in art we prefer instantaneously to recognize something familiar; our biological perceptual focus is enhanced when such familiarity is displayed in a visually challenging manner – one that calls forth a degree of bewilderment.

## **§13 BRING IT ON HOME**

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. Regarding preferences for and purposes of art, a large change has evolved in the past decade that should concern everyone interested in art, especially art professionals. This change brings a particular feature of the Renaissance back into the contemporary discourse on art.

Building on Aristotle's definition of magnificence as a social virtue,<sup>5</sup> in the Renaissance a discourse developed about distinguishing between magnificence and splendor. This discourse mainly was triggered by the economic successes in Italy that resulted from the extension of international trade and this in turn caused a broader focus on the quality of a person's daily environment and thus on luxury goods. Giovanni Pontano thought that, following Aristotle, personally affordable splendor played an important and positive role for a

person and for the person's guests, at the same time as he emphasizes that the chosen art and artifacts must be of a lasting quality. A person can achieve magnificence by spending large sums on buildings, monuments and spectacles, or on precious gifts identified with grandeur. Splendor, however, relates more to the person's attitude, thus is more personal.<sup>6</sup>

Pontano expresses a social obligation for all of us to reach for splendor within our capacities and to avoid being cheap by buying substitutes or fakes. We all know that this vision is not restricted to the Renaissance, but is timeless. Elaborating on both Aristotle and Pontano, and building on scientific knowledge in combination with logical interpretations and observations, I attempt to clarify why art works so well in the private environment during our normal daily activities and why we have a natural reason to have art around.

#### **§14 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY STANDARD AND ART**

*“Commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores.”*

*Montesquieu*

Since the late 1950s art has been promoted as a luxury article, commodity or, a decade later, as medium for political and critical statements. Times change. People's focus of attention changes. Markets change. Art's potential to respond to and serve the basic interests of larger target-groups offers grounds for why and how corporations can serve their own ambitions and targets. History shows how the right kind of artworks can build bridges for business interests between different countries and cultures. Art may contribute to a corporation's social responsibility standard by physically contributing to the lives of audiences and communities in other countries. Internationally operating corporations should enhance local acceptance in a broader audience by offering appealing artworks in exhibitions and through commissions. This is not the same as sponsoring in the traditional sense, because the perimeters for such art projects serve openly the objective of the corporation. Such activities contribute significantly to the corporate social responsibility standard.

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#### **§15 CONCLUSIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS**

Many features of art presented in this book are what we always sensed about the artworks that we instantaneously find appealing. Though scientific understanding of the complex processes within our bodies merely scratch the surface, the vast amount of data, conclusions and hypothetical 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.

Fré Ilgen, 2022

#### **FOOTNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> I emphasize the importance of experience *instantaneously* evoked by the artwork, because the first glance at a work of art counts much more than is being acknowledged in the traditional analysis of works of art. As is the case when with tasting a good wine, the first taste is decisive to make one interested to continue tasting, or not.

<sup>2</sup> At a given moment the number of impressions, emotions, tension in family or work or politics, may evoke the feeling that the brain is full or overloaded, even so experienced as to become overheated. Various biological processes prevent this, but in general the brain can be strained by considerable stress.

<sup>3</sup> The brain is not separate from the body, but an essential part of the body as a whole.

**The Viewer? The Actual Purpose of Art**  
**Synopsis**

- <sup>4</sup> An artist does not create a work in the mind that only mechanically is executed by the body (hands), but creates works by the complex, continuous and inseparable processes of both mind and body.
- <sup>5</sup> Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 340 BC: “A magnificent man will also furnish his house suitable to his wealth (for even a house is a sort of public ornament), and will spend by preference on those works that are lasting (for these are the most beautiful) and in every class of things he will spend what is becoming.”
- <sup>6</sup> Described by Evelyn Welch, in *Public Magnificence and Private Display – Giovanni Pontano’s De Splendore (1498) and the Domestic Arts*, published in *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 15 No.4, 2002 (free available on the internet), after Pontano: “Thus the base or vulgar man was one who wished to spend as little as possible, potentially disguising this fault by purchasing false goods, fakes that would then be passed off as originals. In contrast, the splendid man has to be prepared to pay an appropriate sum in order to ensure that his goods were copious, rare and elegant. This did not always require great wealth and even a figure of modest means could, with care, afford to be splendid.”
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted from Montesquieu in his *De l’esprit des lois*, in *Montesquieu and Chinese Despotism* in Simon Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2017, ISBN 978-1-138-80927-7) p.162. Kow adds himself on the same page: “Thus commerce for Montesquieu has broader significance than simply the exchange of goods and services: it generates sociability between individuals and peoples.” The overlap with the functioning of art will be clear.