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Magdalena Szubielska*
Agata Sztorc**

The Influence of Extended Contextual Information Provided in a Contemporary Art Gallery on Aesthetic Experience of Art Faculties Students

Abstract: We aimed to investigate whether educational activities in the form of guided tours through an exhibition change the appreciation of art when young experts (i.e. first-years students of artistic faculties) view contemporary art in a gallery. Participants viewed and assessed the artworks presented at the gallery twice – before and after taking part in a guided tour led by a gallery educator. The guide-led tour increased both understanding and ratings (the hedonic value) of the artworks, which is consistent with the “effort after meaning” hypothesis and also with the model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgments. Our results suggest that the reception of works of art by young experts is changed when they are under the influence of extensive contextual information.

Keywords: aesthetic judgment, art experts, contemporary art, gallery context, gallery educator-led tour, hedonic value, understanding

Introduction

In galleries and museums, as well as in catalogues and books about art, we can often see artworks in the company of contextual information containing the artist’s name, artwork title, year of creation, applied technique, and style. Labels sometimes also contain more extensive information – about the motifs incorporated in the artwork, motives behind the creation of a work or containing guidelines to assist in their interpretation. Such contextual information might change the perception of the artworks, especially in people who are not art experts (cf. Belke, Leder, & Augustin, 2006; Cleeremans et al., 2016). Therefore, we may assume that art expertise is a factor moderating the influence of contextual information in the appreciation of artworks.

Art experts are probably less susceptible to the influence of contextual information because their aesthetic experience is more guided by top-down processes than is the case with non-experts. Experts look at composition elements and colour contrasts longer, use top-down visual attention control mechanisms and are characterized by more global visual scanning of works of art. In turn, non-experts

analyze figurative elements more closely and they more often use local viewing strategies (cf. Cela-Conde et al., 2011; Humphrey & Underwood, 2009; Nodine, Locher, & Krupinski, 1993; Zangemeister, Sherman, & Stark, 1995). Furthermore, experts are more concerned with formal analysis, composition, style, while non-experts are more concerned with the content of the work of art (cf. Bhattacharya & Petsche, 2002; Cupchik & Gebotys, 1988; Waligórska, 2006).

The influence of contextual information about works of art has so far been studied primarily in people who do not have professional preparation for responding to art (e.g. Bordens, 2010; Gerger & Leder, 2015; Jucker, Barrett, & Włodarski, 2014; Leder, Carbon, & Ripsas, 2006; Millis, 2001; Russell, 2003; Russell & Milne, 1997; Smith et al., 2006; Specht, 2010; Stojilović & Marković, 2014; Swami, 2013), and only in a few instances in the context of viewing artworks by non-experts in an art gallery (Szubielska, Imbir, & Szymańska, 2019; Szubielska, Ratomska et al., 2018). In general, these studies showed that the familiarisation with contextual information positively affects aesthetic emotions, as well as declared understanding and appreciation for art. However, the

* Instytut Psychologii, Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II

** Galeria Labirynt

effect of contextual information on non-experts might be moderated by its formal characteristics (i.e. information length – cf. Russell, 2003; Smith et al., 2006; Specht, 2010), content characteristics (i.e. coherence with artwork – cf. Belke et al., 2010; Gerger & Leder, 2015; Russell & Milne, 1997; descriptiveness vs. elaborativeness – e.g. Leder et al., 2006; Millis, 2001; Mullennix et al., 2018; Mullennix & Robinet, 2018) or how the information is communicated (i.e. visual vs. audible – e.g. Szarkowska et al., 2013; Szubielska, Francuz et al., 2018). For a detailed description of the moderating factors of the contextual information effect on aesthetic experience, see Szubielska, Francuz, et al. (2018). Showing a contextual information effect in an aesthetic judgment may also depend on the design of the study – for example, due to different strategies for rating set of aesthetic items, the effect of contextual information on the hedonic value is easier to reveal using within-participants methodology than between-participants design (Russel, 2003). Therefore, a within-participants design seems to provide a more sensitive test of the effect of contextual information.

Contextual information toward the work of arts can be interpretative guidelines, and their influence on changing the aesthetic experience can be explained by referring to the cognitive mastering process in the reception of modern and contemporary art – the more we comprehend the art, the higher we evaluate it (cf. a model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgments: Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004). Higher aesthetic judgments of modern and contemporary art on dimensions of appreciation or pleasure caused by knowledge of a work of art's contextual information can be explained by referring to the need for understanding among the viewers (cf. Leder et al., 2004), the “effort after meaning” theory (Russel, 2003) or the aesthetic “Aha!” (cf. Muth & Carbon, 2013). As contemporary art is often marginalized in artistic faculties curricula in Poland, it seems that the rewarding effect of making sense (picking up the artists' message) might be observed even in art experts. In other words, art experts also might benefit from interpretative guidelines (i.e. contextual information) when viewing works by contemporary artists.

As of today, only a few studies have addressed the influence of contextual information on the aesthetic experience of viewers professionally prepared to respond to art and revealed heterogeneous findings. These studies tested the reception of paintings outside an art gallery (Cleeremans et al., 2016; Szubielska, Niestorowicz, & Bałaj, 2016), and the most recently – understanding and appreciation of contemporary art exhibition in the physical context of a gallery (Niestorowicz & Szubielska, 2018). Cleeremans and colleagues (2016) stated that for naive observers (i.e. psychology students), but not for art experts (i.e. art history students), the presence of an artist's name could function as a heuristic cue to denote artworks' value – since knowledge of artists' names did not change the assessment of paintings in students of art history, while this knowledge increases the aesthetic preference in psychology students. Reading short catalogue descriptions

did not change the appreciation of contemporary paintings in young experts – students of art history and art faculties (Szubielska, Niestorowicz, & Bałaj, 2016). On the other hand, the description of contemporary works of art given in the form of a catalogue text and a guided curatorial tour in the art gallery increased artworks understanding and ratings of pleasure and fascination in fine arts students (Niestorowicz & Szubielska, 2018). Divergences in the described results (Cleeremans et al., 2016, Szubielska et al., 2016 vs. Niestorowicz & Szubielska, 2018) may be caused both by the possibility that only extended contextual information changes the aesthetic experience in art experts and the possibility that the impact of contextual information on experts aesthetic judgments differ in laboratory conditions and art galleries (although no such difference was found in non-expert viewers – see Szubielska et al., 2019). As works of art exhibited in museums/galleries have a special aura (cf. Hayn-Leichsenring, 2017), aesthetic appreciation is higher when viewing artworks in the exhibition spaces than in other spaces (Brieber et al., 2014; Brieber, Nadal, & Leder, 2015; Grüner, Specker, & Leder, 2019; Locher & Dolese, 2004; Locher, Smith, & Smith, 1999, 2001; Specker, Tinio, & Van Elk, 2017; Szubielska et al., 2019).

In the current study, we tested whether contextual information about contemporary works of art in the form of a guide-led tour raises the understanding and aesthetic judgments of experts, namely – artistic faculties students, who perceive art in natural conditions. In other words, taking care of the ecological validity of the research (cf. Carbon, 2017; Pelowski et al., 2017; Tschacher et al., 2012), we conducted them in a contemporary art gallery. As far as contemporary art is concerned, it is a characteristic that to understand it one requires knowledge toward a given artist, or even a given work of art – the intentions behind its creation, knowledge of the socio-political situation in which it was created, the artist's worldview. In the case of relatively unknown contemporary artists, the opportunity to acquire this kind of knowledge about the works is provided by, among other methods, workshops in the form of a tour around the exhibition which are organised by many galleries or museums nowadays. The experience of the second author of the article, who is an educator in a contemporary art gallery, shows that the adults willingly participate in guided-tours on contemporary art exhibitions. Usually, during this kind of visit, the viewers listen carefully to the educator, do not interrupt, rarely ask any questions. The audience does not usually read the labels of certain artworks but follows the guide. After the tour, the visitors often come closer to the artworks to get a better view of the details of the work, especially in the situation where part of the exhibition is a video or artwork which consists of many small elements (see, e.g., Carbon, 2017 on returning to artworks after a first encounter and closer distances depending on the work's format). The gallery is often visited by groups of experts, mostly students of the history of art and artistic fields, who come with their lecturers to participate in the guided tour and workshops or presentations of the gallery. Usually, these kinds of

visits have two purposes: to get to know more about contemporary art, and also to convince students to come to the contemporary art gallery more often. Usually, they are visiting the gallery once every two months – as frequently as the exhibitions are changing.

Based on abovementioned studies on empirical aesthetics, and above all – on the recent study on contemporary art reception by experts in the field of visual arts in the physical context of an art gallery (Niestorowicz & Szubielska, 2018), we hypothesized the positive effects of the guide-led tour on art students' artworks understanding (hypothesis 1) and artworks ratings (hypothesis 2).

Methods

Participants

Groups of students of artistic faculties were recruited for this research by the education department of the Galeria Labirynt art gallery. All groups that volunteered to participate in the study took part in it. In the current study participated groups of students of artistic faculties (photography, graphic art, art education, painting) early in their studies (mainly the first-year students) who visited the temporary European Collective Exhibition CreArt 2018 that took place at the gallery. None of the participants had previously seen this exhibition. The final sample involved 49 young experts participants ($M_{age} = 21.14$, $SD_{age} = 3.08$; 20 males; six more participants were initially tested, but during the experiment, they resigned from participation in the study). We named them “young experts” because the research included people who have just started their higher artistic studies.

For organisational reasons (both from the gallery side and that of the organised groups of study participants), not all respondents could be tested during one, longer visit to the gallery, during which the exhibition would be inaccessible to other visitors. Therefore, we controlled for the delay between repeated measures (no delay condition vs. a delay condition). Individuals examined in no delay condition ($N = 26$; $M_{age} = 22.12$, $SD_{age} = 3.82$; 9 males) were tested on the same day. Students examined in a delay condition ($N = 23$; $M_{age} = 20.04$, $SD_{age} = 1.33$; 11 males) were tested during two subsequent days. We obtained written informed consent from all individual participants included in the study before data collection (at the entrance of the exhibition hall, where a group of student participants appeared at a scheduled time under the supervision of their lecturers).

Materials

The materials used in the experiments were eight pieces of contemporary artworks with labels which were presented as a part of the temporary European Collective Exhibition CreArt 2018 entitled *Six Memos* (curator: Branka Benčić) held from 23 November 2018 until 15 December 2018 at the Galeria Labirynt gallery in Lublin. We considered a piece of artwork to be a single object, an installation, or a series of works forming a coherent unity. Labels contained information about the

artist's name, the artwork's title, technique, and its year(s) of creation (see Table 1). As experimental material, we used only those works of art exhibited at the exhibition to which the educational path developed by the gallery's education department referred (the complete exhibition involved 20 artworks presented in two exhibition rooms). Their authors were mostly young, relatively unknown European artists.

Procedure

The study took place at the Six Memos exhibition in the Galeria Labirynt gallery. Participants were tested in groups of 10–15 individuals.

The participants viewed the artworks twice in a consistent order piece by piece (see Table 1) and then assessed each piece of art, firstly before taking part in a gallery educator-led tour (first measurement), and secondly directly after listening to the gallery educator talking about each artwork (second measurement). Participants rated the artworks on four 7-point scales of aesthetic judgment: beauty, fascination, understanding, pleasure (the ends of the scales were described as follows: “ugly – beautiful”, “not fascinating – fascinating”, “not understandable – understandable”, “unpleasant – pleasant”). Scales of beauty and fascination were used in earlier research on the influence of extended contextual information on experts' ratings of contemporary art (Niestorowicz & Szubielska, 2018). Pleasure is tested in many studies of empirical aesthetics (e.g. Graf & Landwehr, 2015, 2017; Russel, 2003) and can be treated as an indicator of the hedonic value (Russel, 2003). All responses were given on paper sheets, in a fixed order.

As was mentioned above, in the case of some groups of participants the repeated measurement was made after the first one during one visit to the gallery, and in the case of others – with a one-day delay between measurements. During the first visit, the participants viewed and assessed the artworks without the gallery educator-led tour, and during the second visit, they took part in the gallery educator-led tour and assessed the artworks again.

The time of viewing each artwork was not limited (however, all members of a particular group had to evaluate a specific piece of art before they could go on to the next one). As during both the first and second measurements the study was conducted in the context of an existing exhibition, participants had access to the labels of artworks that were located in the exhibition rooms. During the experiment, we observed that the participants were approaching the labels, even though we did not mention the labels at all and did not ask participants to read them¹.

¹ To test if the labels availability changes the aesthetic experience, we tested another group of young art experts ($N = 30$; $M_{age} = 19.77$, $SD_{age} = 1.19$; 6 males) when viewing the exhibition with covered labels. The aesthetic experience of participants who viewed the exhibition on their own without the availability of labels and overall participants (both from “no delay” group and “a delay” group) who viewed the exhibition on their own with the availability of labels (i.e. before taking part in a gallery educator-led tour) did not differ significantly.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Artworks Presented at the “Six Memos” Exhibition and Assessed by the Participants

Order of viewing	Label content	Additional information
1	Adam Lee <i>Identity documents</i> Colour photographs, digital print 2013	A series of four photographs
2	Hristina Ivanoska <i>Untitled (I'm searching for myself in history but cannot find myself anywhere)</i> Cotton thread on woollen felt 2016	One object
3	Yane Calovski <i>Compressed minimum</i> Synthetic rubber, organic pigment, metal 2016/2017	Six objects
4	Tjaša Kalkan <i>Dialogues (no. 1 and 2)</i> Colour photographs, digitally printed on archive paper 2018	A series of two photographs
5	Arnaud Caquelard <i>At least as lost as Atlas</i> Paper (contour map), wood, wheels, pins 2014–2018	Installation
6	Fabio Tasso <i>E0BSY18</i> Resin, marble dust and pigments 2015–2018	Four objects
7	Ludomir Franczak <i>Ø</i> Mixed technique on canvas and paper, artbook 2017	Installation
8	Magdalena Franczak <i>The scroll</i> Ink drawing on archive paper 2017	One object

During the gallery educator-led tour visitors were familiarised with contextual information about each piece of the eight artworks assessed. The tour guide did not explicitly inform what was on the labels, i.e. did not read them aloud to viewers. A gallery educator gave an approximately 5-minute talk about each artwork when standing in front of it. The gallery educator talked about the artist, about the context or inspiration for the creation of the artwork, about the technique used, and about how this work related to the whole exhibition. The topic of the exhibition was based on the six concepts (lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency) traced from the collection of essays by Italo Calvino (1992). These concepts were supposed to explain the process of the continuing transformation of the world. More generally, the tour guide drew attention to some aspects to the artworks to explained the artist's intentions (for similar procedure see Russell, 2003).

Results

In the first step, we analyzed Pearson's correlation coefficients between four dimensions of aesthetic experience: beauty, fascination, pleasure, and understanding (see Table 2). All correlations between beauty, fascination, and pleasure were positive and had high strength. Furthermore, these dimensions of aesthetic experience semantically/conceptually matched with each other (i.e. there is a conceptual match in between these dimensions). Therefore, we decided to build a composite score of the hedonic value by averaging these three scales (for similar procedure see, e.g. Szubielska et al., 2019).

Then we conducted two analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with the gallery educator-led tour (measurement before the tour vs. after the tour) as the within-subject factor, delay between measures (no vs. yes) as the between-subject factor and with (1) understanding and

Table 2. Pairwise Correlations Between All Dimensions of Aesthetic Judgments

	Fascination	Pleasure	Understanding
Beauty	.787**	.845**	.547**
Fascination		.732**	.547**
Pleasure			.523**

** $p < .001$.

(2) the hedonic value (a composite score) as a dependent variable. The delay factor was included as a control variable (because the practical implementation of the experiment afforded delayed testing for some participants). Descriptive statistics on the dependent variables are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean Understanding and the Hedonic Value in Four Experimental Conditions. Standard Deviations are Presented in Parentheses

Delay Between Measures	Gallery Educator-Led Tour	
	Before the Tour	After the Tour
<i>Understanding</i>		
No	3.73 (.63)	5.19 (1.06)
Yes (one-day delay)	4.10 (.76)	5.13 (.73)
<i>Hedonic Value</i>		
No	4.54 (.73)	4.73 (.86)
Yes (one-day delay)	4.76 (.56)	5.02 (.66)

An ANOVA with understanding as a dependent variable revealed a main effect of the gallery educator led-tour, $F(1, 47) = 94.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .67$, because participants assessed the artworks as more understandable after the gallery educator led-tour ($M = 5.16$, $SE = .13$) than they did before it ($M = 3.92$, $SE = .10$). The main effect of delay did not reach significance, $F(1, 47) = .61$, $p = .439$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. The interaction effect was non-significant, $F(1, 47) = 2.84$, $p = .098$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.

An ANOVA with the hedonic value as a dependent variable revealed a main effect of the gallery educator led-tour, $F(1, 47) = 11.56$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$, because the hedonic value was higher after the participation in the guided tour ($M = 4.87$, $SE = .11$) than they did before ($M = 4.65$, $SE = .09$). The main effect of delay did not reach significance, $F(1, 47) = 1.75$, $p = .192$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. The interaction effect was non-significant, $F(1, 47) = .34$, $p = .563$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Discussion

As we predicted, the gallery educator led-tour of the exhibition changed the aesthetic judgments of contemporary art by the young experts. This tour increased subjective

understanding – which was in line with hypothesis 1, and ratings (the hedonic value) of artworks – which was in line with hypothesis 2. Our research including young expert participants extends knowledge of empirical aesthetics regarding the impact of contextual information on art reception in general audience (e.g. Bordens, 2010; Gerger & Leder, 2015; Jucker, Barrett, & Wlodarski, 2014; Leder, Carbon, & Ripsas, 2006; Millis, 2001; Russell, 2003; Russell & Milne, 1997; Smith et al., 2006; Specht, 2010; Stojilović & Marković, 2014; Swami, 2013; Szubielska et al., 2019) and replicates results by Niestorowicz and Szubielska (2018) who showed that extensive contextual information increased contemporary art understanding and aesthetic appreciation in young art experts.

Our research is in line with the model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgments, and in particular with the concept of cognitive mastering in the experience of contemporary art (Leder et al., 2004). The successful cognitive mastering process (i.e. the meaning-making/interpretation of the work of art) is considered to be a reason of self-rewarding experience, resulting in the favourable aesthetic judgment. Also, the current study suggests that the “effort after meaning” hypothesis (Russell, 2003) in the reception of contemporary artworks – which prima facie meaningfulness is relatively low, should be extended to a group of art experts (or at least – young experts, i.e. art students). The idea of “effort after meaning” assumes that the hedonic value (pleasure) derived from art contemplation stems from successful interpretations.

The interval between the first and second viewing of the exhibition did not influence the evaluation of works of art, nor was it a moderator of the influence of guided tours on aesthetic experience. The results obtained may indicate that the guided tour of the exhibition changes the understanding and valuation of contemporary art by young experts in a similar way to when such a tour happens directly after the viewers perceived the exhibition by themselves, and when the guided tour takes place on a different day than viewing by students of art faculties on their own.

Our research has its strengths and limitations. As a strength, we consider both the fact that we tested experts (a relatively hard-to-reach group of participants, even if they are young experts) and that the study took place in the context of a gallery – thanks to which our research is characterised by ecological validity.

In turn, the first limitation of the study is associated with the fact that we recognised the students of artistic faculties as experts, not verifying their knowledge of art, including contemporary art, which could be objectively differentiated in a sample of participants (see Specker et al., 2018). Lack of objective control of the expertise of the participants in the field of art resulted from the fact that the research was conducted as part of a visit to the gallery of an organised group of students, which could only take place in a limited time. However, participants who are students of artistic faculties or art history have also been considered to be art experts in other studies without verifying what knowledge of art they actually have (e.g. Francuz et al.,

2018; Fudali-Czyż, Francuz, & Augustynowicz, 2018; Jankowski et al., 2018; Leder et al., 2019; van Paasschen, Bacci, & Melcher, 2015).

The second limitation is related to the possibility of the occurrence of the mere exposure effect (cf. Zajonc, 1968) in the current study. Ratings made after educator-led tour might have been influenced by ratings previously made under the control condition (i.e. before being familiarized with extended contextual information). But if that were the case, the ratings made after educator-led tour should increase more in the 1-day delay condition than in the no-delay condition – because the mere exposure effect is stronger when delay before repeated exposure is longer (cf. Bornstein, 1989). Furthermore, in the within-participants study Russell (2003) showed that the increased second aesthetic rating was due to the familiarity with contextual information, and not to repeated rating.

In summary, a guided tour through the exhibition increased the understanding and evaluation of contemporary art in students of artistic faculties. The young experts make use of guided tours of a contemporary art exhibition, expanding their knowledge of currently working and relatively unknown artists.

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Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The current study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Institute of Psychology of The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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