

PHILOSOPHY  
TODAY





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# A CRITIQUE OF EMOTIVISM IN AESTHETIC ACCOUNTS OF VISUAL ART

Vladimir J. Konečni

One gets the distinct impression that the philosophical and psychological aestheticians who have accorded some aspect of emotion an important place in the domain of visual art (e.g., Peter Goldie, Paul Guyer, Helmut Leder, Jerrold Levinson, Derek Matravers, Jenefer Robinson, Martin Tröndle) have received very little fundamental criticism from scholars who are cognizant of psychobiological emotion theory, laboratory experiments on human emotion, and affective sciences in general. This is quite unlike the relationship of music and emotion, regarding which there has been, in the past thirty years, a great deal of work, controversy, and complex debate both among philosophers and among psychologists, as well as a certain amount of healthy cross-pollination.<sup>1</sup> To put it in colloquial terms, aestheticians with emotivist inclinations in visual art have had an easy ride compared to those working on music.

The likely reason for this state of affairs is easy to discern. Compared to the effects of paintings and sculpture, music's effects are eminently closer to physiological and neural structures, and thus more amenable to controlled scientific study. This attracts to the work on music those psychobiologists and neuroscientists who also have a solid grounding in the scientific study of emotion (an enormous field in its own right). Moreover, one can reasonably surmise that the aestheticians' claim that visual art can induce emotions that are closely linked to physiology would be viewed by emotion scientists with considerable skepticism—as a risky gambit that makes far more sense at a metaphorical, literary, or colloquial level.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of emotion scientists' lack of interest, aestheticians working on visual art have had the luxury to indulge in propounding emotion-related claims at will.

It only appears to be paradoxical that the most likely among aestheticians to ignore the scientific work and evolutionary thinking on emotion are precisely those who can be regarded as de-

scendants of the anti-rationalist theoretical strain in human thought that can be traced to dim antiquity, and certainly to classical Greece. Emotivism of sorts had proponents in the eighteenth century, for example, in David Hume, notably in his 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, but it has thrived especially in the contemporary intellectual or, rather, anti-intellectual climate. In short, it is the emotivists, further encouraged by the current fashion of excessive sensitivity, who are most likely to ignore sound scientific findings about emotion, regarding them as too restrictive and constraining the emoting flights in which they wish to indulge. Moreover, as I shall show later, even when philosophical and psychological aestheticians with an emotivist proclivity attempt to discuss scientific emotion theory or to incorporate it into their work, these efforts are almost invariably cursory or misleading.

The plan of the essay is as follows: there are sections on emotivism, on the *loci* of emotion in visual art, and on a psychobiological view of emotion that is contrasted with some views in philosophical aesthetics. By far the longest section is a detailed critique of three representative studies in psychological aesthetics on the question of potential impact of visual art on emotion. I conclude the article by reaffirming that traditional visual art is not capable of inducing genuine emotions and instead argue in favor of the hypothesis that installations, which skillfully combine psychophysical, statistical, and classical-conditioning properties, are capable of inducing *aesthetic awe*, a component of my Aesthetic Trinity Theory, on which I have been doing work, including experimental investigations, in the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

## Emotivism

Since my chapter about emotion and reason in art-music composers' creative process (see Note 1), I have in two other articles (Note 1) discussed emotivism as the currently prevalent position in

the study of, and talk about, music (but not only music) and, more specifically, as the proclivity for excessive insertion of emotion and “feeling” into both scientific and lay accounts of mental life, needs, and motivation in daily behavior, in matters artistic (especially musical) and non-artistic.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the emotivist attitude, I have argued for the paramount importance of contemplation, analytical and technical skills, problem-solving and planning—in short, reason—as the key features of art-music composers’ (including contemporary ones) daily work, especially when developing large-scale pieces (but not limited to these); and I suggested that the role of acute emotional states induced by life-events was minimal and indirect. Nevertheless, emotivism pervades much talk about music, from pop-psychology accounts to scholarly discourse.

Because it seems likely that these observations are valid with regard to visual art also, emotivism is mentioned early in this article—primarily as an insufficiently recognized backdrop for a number of contemporary debates in aesthetics. Somewhat paradoxically, it seems to be a *cognitive* stance taken by many philosophical and psychological aestheticians, one that reflects their unwarranted, opportunistic acceptance of a quasi-ideological cultural context that has been characterized as deeply anti-intellectual. This current context may further augment the already strong anti-rationalist, anti-cognitivist, neo-early-Humean views shared by certain aestheticians of visual art.

### Where are the *Loci* of “Emotion” in Visual Art?

Without resorting to hyperbole, one can say that writing about emotion in the domain of visual art appears to inspire aestheticians, art theorists and critics, and especially artists, to far-fetched—often wildly romanticizing—claims, and also to a frequent reliance on dubious “folk knowledge,” thesis substitution, and, generally, imprecision.<sup>5</sup> Not just in comparison to claims made for music, but in and of themselves, such ideas often ring false. For this reason, a list of the *loci* of “emotion” in visual art will be provided in

this section and it will be done, for the most part, without concrete attribution. To readers who may think that the list is too elementary, my response is that I agree but that the chosen manner of presentation is dictated by the vagueness and imprecision in many otherwise reputable sources.

 Numerous alleged emotions have been suggested as visual artists’ *stable personality dispositions*, which have been inferred by scholars in one way or another, often arbitrarily, especially regarding the creation of particular artworks. (A subclass consists of dispositions that are allegedly related to the artist being mentally or physically ill, a chronic alcoholic, and so on.)

2. It has been proposed that visual artists’ psychological make-up—somehow inferred, often through no more than conjecture or academic striving—causes them to behave “emotionally” or irrationally in response to a particular kind of *stressful events in daily living*, thus influencing artistic output. (This also has several subclasses.)

3. A scholar or critic manages to locate “emotion” *in the visual artwork itself* and claims it to be a reflection of the artist’s enduring personality dispositions or an acute response to a life-event or a combination of the two.

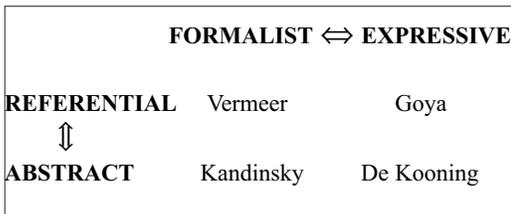
Points 1–3. essentially have to do with visual-art aestheticians’ or critics’ *reading of “emotions” into artworks*, usually by means of what is known as “biographical criticism.”

4. A variety of “emotions” (not the artist’s own) is often said to be *depicted in the artwork* and such artworks, sometimes divorced from the artist, are labeled “expressionist” or “expressive of emotion.” Expressionism can be regarded as a continuum running from extreme referentialism to extreme abstraction in the depiction of emotion.

At the referentialist end, one may place, for example, the anguish of *Laocoön and His Sons* or the fear or courage in the face of being imminently executed in Goya’s *El tres de mayo de 1808 en Madrid*. At the extreme abstract end, one may place works, for example, by Pollock and de Kooning in which reds, blues, and greens are said to be “psychologically standing for” the emotions of violence or chaos, harmony or sadness, rejuvenation or new love, respectively.

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In this analysis, it is useful to regard the referential-abstract continuum of expressive works as having an analogue in formalist works, with the formalist-expressive dimension itself a continuum—which the following diagram renders with the four extreme cells as endpoints of the two continua, each with an artist as an approximate example:



5. An inspiration to some philosophical aestheticians inclined to insert emotion at various loci in visual art has been the following statement made in 1739 by the then twenty-eight-year-old Hume: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (Book II, “Of the Passions,” *A Treatise of Human Nature*).<sup>6</sup> There has been some debate as to whether Hume’s later disavowal of the *Treatise* in his “Advertisement” and the 1748 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* was sincere, but in any case the disavowal has been rejected by those aestheticians who are perhaps permanently young. Hume’s position is often labeled as “sentimentalism,” where “sentiment,” in the eighteenth-century context, as Theodore Gracyk points out, is a “generic label for emotions”; emotions associated with “beauty and ugliness are responses to sensory impressions.”<sup>7</sup> The link to contemporary emotivism is straightforward.

6. The tendency of psychological aestheticians to impute, despite weak or nonexistent data, an emotional substrate to viewers’ reactions to visual stimuli is of long standing. In her 1906 article, one of the first systematic attempts at psycho-aesthetic experimentation in the English-speaking world, the Stanford University professor Lillien Martin tried to answer a question implied by Gustav Fechner’s aesthetic the-

ory: What features must a visual stimulus that has empirically passed the “aesthetic threshold” (Fechner’s *aesthetische Schwelle*) have to pass also the *emotion* threshold? But in Martin’s experiments with about twenty *reagents* (as Martin called research participants), in which forty-one stimuli were used (mostly various lines, straight or wavy, of different length and thickness, and six circles and one ellipse), only the circles seemed to pass the generously defined aesthetic threshold, and no stimuli passed the emotion threshold, despite (the usually careful) Martin’s attempts to over-interpret some mundane (and forced by experimental procedure) like-dislike findings.<sup>8</sup>

Empiricists’ emotivist overreaching has proceeded to this day. When psycho-aestheticians attempt to construct more general theories, allegedly firmly anchored in data (for example, Thomas Jacobsen and Helmut Leder et al.), emotion is habitually given a prominent place with a minuscule amount of concrete empirical or theoretical justification. It would seem that psychologists feel compelled to give emotions major theoretical play. The reasoning seems to be that since emotions are clearly important in human life, they therefore must—somehow!—also constitute an important part of the response to whatever aesthetic visual stimulus an author is discussing.<sup>9</sup>

As was the case with Martin, data by themselves continue, over a hundred years later, not to be able to impose sufficient discipline on psychological emotivists (experimenters as well as journal reviewers).<sup>10</sup> In addition to the expectations that were mentioned above, which are likely to be based on the prevalent emotivist fashion and pseudo-explanatory theoretical convenience, there is in most contemporary psychology departments an incentive to link one’s area of research (especially when it is thought to be “soft”) with biological, evolutionary processes of which emotions are clearly an example.

### **A Psychobiological View of Emotion and Some Contrasting Views in Philosophical Aesthetics**

The following view can be legitimately offered as representing a relatively commonly held, mainstream, psychobiological view of emotion:

Along with mind and behavior, emotion is one of the key concepts in psychobiology. Because the fundamental emotions—anger, fear, happiness, sadness, and perhaps only a couple of others—guide and energize behavior in crucial life situations, those with enormous biological consequences, they have been subjected to considerable selective and adaptive evolutionary pressures. Emotions are psychologically, physiologically, and metabolically “costly” and thus reserved for emergencies; when they do occur, they are major events in human phenomenology. The key attributes of the basic emotions are that numerous bodily systems are involved, simultaneously and in tandem; that they are acute, occurring in “episodes,” with feedback loops; highly pronounced; readily identifiable and reportable by the experiencer; that they flood consciousness and are pan-cultural in terms of experience and expression; and that they have an unambiguous cause or object. They are to be distinguished from moods (such as elation, despondence, serenity), drives (hunger, sex), traits or dispositions (e.g., anxiety, introversion, generosity), and attitudes (hostility, tolerance, etc.).<sup>11</sup>

The above position needs to be contrasted with the views of some leading philosophers-aestheticians who have written at length about emotion. Peter Goldie’s account, for example, is broad, but uncritically over-inclusive, and occasionally imprecise to the extent that would seldom be encountered in purely philosophical discourse.<sup>12</sup> Both Goldie and Jerrold Levinson are on especially slippery ground when discussing the idea of “aesthetic emotions”—in which they are joined by some psychologists, such as Leder and Marcel Zentner. Briefly, because of their insufficient consideration of externally and internally oriented *appraisal*, and the monitoring and integration of information from physiological

processes, these philo- and psycho-aestheticians find themselves having to accept the existence of literally hundreds of “emotions”—in fact, any conceivable “state” for which there is a word in a language (and, to some extent, different “states” in different languages).<sup>13</sup> A special case regarding appraisal are the views of philosophers who favor the idea of noncognitive theories of emotion and, specifically, of “unconscious emotions.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it is not uncommon for philosophers to introduce, on an *ad hoc* basis, without preparation or definition, fuzzy common-language terms, which are then used for theoretical purpose: examples, from Noël Carroll, an otherwise scientifically-minded philosopher, are “feeling,” “feeling-charged,” “feeling-toned”—and in this he has been joined by Levinson.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to his own position on emotions being induced in viewers by *visual* art, Levinson is evasive—and with regard to the effects of *abstract* art completely silent. For example, in the 1998 article that I cited, Levinson opens Section 4 by raising the problem of how absolute music, and a “minimalist sculpture or Abstract Expressionist painting” can produce emotional responses. He then devotes the remainder of the section to discussing the possible mechanisms by which absolute music can induce emotion, but does not return to abstract art even to suggest a single possible mechanism; nor does he do that in the remaining two sections of the article.<sup>16</sup>

It could, I suppose, be argued that I have to some extent eliminated the mentioned philosophers’ positions (including Paul Guyer’s in Note 2) by definitional fiat concerning emotion. However, to put it bluntly, scholarship and, in the case of emotion, science, cannot advance in a common-language quagmire without well-considered definitions defended by sound data.

### **A Critique of Selected Psycho-Aesthetic Work on the Question of Potential Impact of Visual Art on Emotion**

In this section, I shall examine a number of issues that are relevant when contemplating the effect of visual art on emotion. The psycho-aes-

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thetic work chosen for scrutiny illustrates problems that can be found in other studies. In some cases, the voice of philosophical aestheticians can be heard as the background of the empirical work.

1. *The choice of visual art stimuli.* Believing that visual art can induce a “variation in self-reported personality traits,” which, judging by the measurement instruments they used, also includes emotional reactions, Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and Jordan Peterson showed participants images of Giotto’s *Seven Vices*, frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua.<sup>17</sup> Djikic et al. state: “We think it is safe to say that the intention of the painter was to induce in his viewers a repulsion from each Vice he depicted, and a disposition to avoid succumbing to it. An example is Envy, depicted as a woman standing [who] extends her right hand in the shape of a claw, while her left hand grasps a bag of money. Coming from her mouth is a serpent that has turned round and is about to bite her eye.”<sup>18</sup>

Several issues are worthy of mention. First, Djikic et al. clearly believe that the *only possible* active ingredient in the frescoes’ impact on the viewers’ emotions and personality is the *narrative* in the images: no painterly or coloristic or compositional attribute is mentioned. In fact, in order to emphasize the narrative element and to help interpret the meaning of the images for the participants, the experimenters went out of their way to make it clear to participants what they should be paying attention to, and presumably responding to, by showing the title of the cycle, *Seven Vices*, for a full five seconds at the beginning of the session.<sup>19</sup> In addition, each of the images, accompanied by its name, was showed to participants for a full minute.<sup>20</sup>

Second, Djikic et al. leave without any comment a point that is of considerable psychological, if not aesthetic or artistic, significance—the fact that in *Seven Vices* as a cycle, some of the vices are personality traits (inconstancy, foolishness), some are states of the world resulting from human behavioral acts (infidelity, injustice), some are dispositions or attitudes with minimal measurable physiological involvement (envy), some are complex or mixed emotions (despera-

tion = fear + anger + . . .) and one, *wrath* (or anger, Latin *ira*) can be considered a fundamental emotion.<sup>21</sup> This implies a very complex conceptual rendering of the vices, which sets far too difficult a task even for Giotto to execute pictorially. The unsurprising result, noted first in the late fifteenth century by Cristoforo Landino, and later by Marcel Proust and Paul de Man, is that the frescoes fail to have even a naturalistic impact (in part because of the crude appearance of some of the female figures) and fail even more decidedly as founts of allegory.<sup>22</sup>

In summary: several methodologically dubious attributes of their empirical approach suggest that Djikic et al. believe that visual art may have emotional impact by virtue of its narrative content. If so, and in part because they apparently failed to consult art-theoretical and aesthetic sources, which question both the naturalistic and the allegorical impact of Giotto’s *Seven Vices*, the choice of these stimuli was misguided and inadequate. One suspects that the authors’ conclusions are moot.

2. “*Aesthetic emotion*” as the outcome of *aesthetic experience*. In their “model of aesthetic experience,” which is limited to visual art, Leder and colleagues contend that such experience has two outcomes or products, aesthetic judgment and aesthetic emotion.<sup>23</sup> This would appear to be an unexceptional (or unoriginal) restatement of the commonplace idea that all reception of art somehow has to do with both cognition and emotion. In developing this idea, however, the authors make certain unjustified assumptions, and a number of errors of commission and omission, which are instructive when discussing the emotional impact (if any) of visual art.

To understand fully the weakness of the authors’ argument regarding emotion as the habitual (allegedly unavoidable) result of viewers’ exposure to visual art, one must closely inspect the diagrammatic centerpiece of the article, the “model” of aesthetic experience. The model is represented by a dozen “boxes” connected to each other by one- and two-way arrows (“symbolizing the flow of information”). The terms inside the rectangles are members of entirely different categories, including perceptual

processes, artwork descriptors (from complexity and symmetry to style and content), prior experience, and cognitive processes (implicit memory, declarative knowledge, mastering, art-specific interpretation, evaluation). The apparent thoroughness (mostly with regard to mental operations studied in hundreds of experiments by cognitive psychologists uninterested in the arts) is achieved at the expense of a meaningful conceptual organization. What is interesting is that only one box contains an emotion-relevant term, “affective state.” Furthermore, this “state” is claimed for the viewer essentially out of the blue, by simply declaring, *ad hoc*, that throughout the occurrence of all the conceptually heterogeneous processes, events, and states, there is “continuous affective evaluation.” It is not specified whether the object of “affective evaluation” is the artwork or the self. Be that as it may, out of the “affective state” box out pops “aesthetic emotion.”

Unlike the case of the other main outcome, “aesthetic judgment,” which is better prepared, “aesthetic emotion” seems to be an unjustified add-on that was forced by habit and the prevalent emotivism. Nowhere in the article do Leder et al. acknowledge that the idea of aesthetic emotions is a highly controversial one in the published record (especially in the psychology and philosophy of music) or seem to recognize the strangeness of this notion from the perspective of psychobiological emotion theory.

Confusing a careful reader, the authors oscillate in their presentation between a viewer in a laboratory experiment and one in a naturalistic situation, such as a museum. There are numerous puzzling, undefended, and, for lack of a better term, naive statements, such as: “We [assume] that the typical affective state when entering an art related situation, such as an exhibition, is positive.” Why make such an assumption (except for arbitrary model-building convenience) when it is self-evident that people’s museum arrivals and behavior therein depend on all kinds of context, degree-of-connoisseurship, and other factors? “In our model there is a continuous development of changes in the affective state.” This is by fiat only, no evidence is provided. “Moreover, we be-

lieve that the perceiver can continuously access the outcome of affective evaluation.” Why should such self-monitoring for affect be taking place in the “real world”? In the laboratory, such questions can indeed be asked of the participants but would likely lead to meaningless results, because of the participants’s evaluation apprehension, attempts to guess the experimenter’s hypotheses, and other well-documented sources of confounding. “We propose that the result of every processing stage in our model can increase or decrease the affective state.” Again, by fiat only, as no evidence is given. “Ongoing success in cognitive mastering [of artworks] results in positive changes of the ‘affective state,’ leading to a state of pleasure or satisfaction.” It would seem that no single visit to a museum is likely to result in “cognitive mastering” nor to lead to “pleasure or satisfaction,” at least from this source.<sup>24</sup>

Leder et al. continue in the same section: “In everyday life aesthetic experience is a time consuming process.” Yet just a few lines later, they themselves cite the finding by Smith and Smith, previously mentioned in Note 20, to the effect that visitors at the Metropolitan Museum spend less than half a minute per artwork. Leder et al. conclude, without seeming to be aware of the deep water into which they are wading: “and it seems that visual and cognitive judgments are inherent in the processing which results in an aesthetic emotion and, if required, in an aesthetic judgment.”<sup>25</sup> The claim for the existence of “an aesthetic emotion” is utterly unsupported. As for “aesthetic judgment,” it would seem, on the basis of the “if required” proviso, that the viewer arrives at such judgment only when probed by an experimenter.

In line with the emotivist approach, Leder et al. are casual in their use of the terms “arousal,” “mood,” “affect,” and “emotion”—precisely where this domain of inquiry needs precision—even when referring to other researchers’ work. Just one example is their reference to an experiment that Dianne Sargent-Pollock and I conducted. According to Leder et al., we “induced positive or negative emotions [in the participants]” (even though we carefully never used the term “emotion”), and in which experiment “the

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emotional state of the participants was a good predictor for ratings of pleasantness,” when, in fact, no such ratings were collected.<sup>26</sup>

3. “*Heart-pounding art*”: *emotion at an exhibition*. Martin Tröndle and Wolfgang Tschacher have recently claimed to have obtained direct empirical (physiological) evidence for the emotional impact of viewing artworks in a naturalistic setting; this technologically innovative work deserves close conceptual and methodological scrutiny.<sup>27</sup>

Over a period of two months in mid-2009, the researchers randomly recruited 576 visitors (of which 4.3% constituted the control group) at an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen in Switzerland. The participants agreed to wear an electronic glove with measurement sensors and a transmitter that sent physical-position and physiological data continuously to wireless receivers in the research section of the exhibition that contained around seventy modernist and contemporary paintings. There were only two physiological measures, skin conductance (palmar sweat) and heart rate. The participants’ path, length of stay in front of any one artwork, and total duration of stay were all unrestricted. The experimental and the control (gloveless) group underwent the same entry (what are your expectations? demographics) and exit (evaluation of paintings and of the experience) interviews and filled out the same questionnaires.

There are several methodological issues that must be considered in this type of study and they concern both the spatial-positioning and the physiological responses of the study participants (experimental and control)—and *non*participants. Let us dispense first with the spatial behavior aspect. The awareness by visitors that they have been selected for a research sample, even the control, the gloveless one, is bound to alter their behavior in comparison to unselected visitors: the participants are very likely to take longer, to ponder more, especially in front of featured works by “more eminent” painters, and to return to such works—in short to behave like good students observed by their art teacher. This type of effect has been observed in numerous sociological and social-psychological studies. Yet,

significantly, there is no true control in this research by Tröndle and Tschacher of people behaving truly naturally, by virtue of not being research participants at all. Of course, there could not be such controls for the physiological measures, but there could have been for spatial positioning, by means of careful unobtrusive observation and measurement of at least a certain number of nonparticipants.

Turning now to what the study authors had to say about the differences between the experimental and control participants, one observes that their main goal was to demonstrate that wearing a glove did not interfere with the experience. They found this and, unfortunately, more—namely, that wearing a glove made the museum visit significantly more “inspiring” and more “interesting” than not wearing one. This finding (also old and sociological), without the authors acknowledging it and recognizing the adverse inferential implications, clearly demonstrates a major possible source of confounding of the physiological data also. People love being selected, especially for a scientific, “bio-electronic” study, and one would expect analogous enjoyment differences between the study’s control sample and an unselected sample.

Turning now to the evaluative and physiological results that are meant to demonstrate the emotional impact of the artworks, one observes the following weaknesses in the findings and the argumentation:

A. Evaluations of the “emotional” aspects of the artworks were given during the exit interview, long after viewing, and are thus of limited reliability. As for the statistical principal-component analysis of assessments, the only one of five factors that was related to emotion, “Negative Emotion,” had to do with what the work *conveyed*, not the participants’ *own state*. No means or scale ranges or values are provided.<sup>28</sup>

B. In the report, the physiological information that is presented is minimal (there are not even means and standard deviations for heart rate and skin conductance). Any discussion is provided for only five artworks (by Monet, Hodler, Arp, Uecker, and Warhol), which were chosen because they received the highest number of exit-

survey assessments, with the range of 105–232 (so that despite the high number of participants, relatively few assessments were made). The level of the authors' commentary is as follows: "The participants rated the aesthetic quality of Monet's work [the indifferent *Palazzo Contarini*] significantly high . . . yet they did not consider this work as strong or stimulating" (meaning, one supposes, that there were no physiological oscillations from neutral—but no information was actually given); "on the contrary, [Günther] Uecker's *Antibild [Räumliche Struktur, Aggressive Reihung, 1974]* was evaluated as a dominant work, which causes strong negative emotions with its aesthetic quality rated significantly negative." The authors provide no physiological evidence at all for these "strong negative emotions"; there may be verbal ratings (possibly in response to questions, and possibly suggestively phrased)—but even then it is well worth noting that Uecker had the strong descriptor "aggressive" prominently placed in the title of the work.<sup>29</sup>

C. Nowhere in this report is hyperbole more self-evident regarding exhibition viewers' engagement with even "famous" artworks, and the *absence of emotional impact* of such artworks, than in the two psycho-aestheticians' discussion of Kunstmuseum St. Gallen participants' responses to the two Warhols, *Campbell's Condensed Tomato Soup* (1962) and *Flowers* (1966).<sup>30</sup> First of all, there are average viewing times of only nine seconds for *Flowers* and 10.5 seconds for *Soup*—and this is for Swiss people who know that their "aesthetic behavior" is being "analyzed by experts." (Incidentally, one could here raise the big questions of what the importance of art, Andy Warhol, and tomato soup is in human life.) Yet, in the face of such disdain for Warhol, Tröndle and Tschacher state:

It is apparent that the visitors were looking very closely at the works and that they had significant physiological reactions . . . we clearly see the reactions of the visitors reading the label of *Campbell's Condensed Tomato Soup* . . . the physiological reactions are much higher [in front of this work than in front of *Flowers*].<sup>31</sup>

This surely lets the cat out of the bag. The issue here is not "emotion" caused by viewing visual art, but the effect of realizing that one is now, finally, in the presence of a famous (or notorious) piece of "popular culture." If one could only take a photo and post it immediately on Facebook (me with Andy and *Tomato Soup*). More seriously, one does not need a psychophysicologist to realize that a minor change in heart rate does not imply an emotion: please do six knee-bends and report your emotion.

D. Tröndle and Tschacher are careful to avoid using the term "emotion" in the Abstract of their article. Yet the calls of emotivism and of another currently popular but often misguided idea—"embodiment"—overwhelm caution and reason. For example, in their "Conclusion" section, the authors state: "Art reception as sensing an atmosphere is an embodied-cognition process."<sup>32</sup> This startling statement is based on nothing more than the fact that when visitors enter the exhibition space, their heart rate and skin conductance change somewhat (no actual data are given). Certainly, on the basis of other facts that are presented in the report, it is unjustified to claim that there was an emotional impact of encountering "art," such that its magnificence took the visitors' breath away. One is dealing here with minor physiological changes, a result of moving from outdoors to indoors, and of the rules of spatial movement well known to decorators of stores and shopping malls.

E. Despite some moderately expressed claims to the contrary, there is nothing in the study by Tröndle and Tschacher to provide firm empirical support for the idea that visual artworks may produce emotions in viewers. At most, after all the research effort, one finds that moving about and encountering works one has heard of results in minor physiological fluctuations, which have essentially nothing to do with the *emotional* impact of *artworks*—the latter being the claim that the emotivist branch of philosophical and psychological aesthetics has repeatedly insisted on making.

However, even when confronted with concrete physiological findings—or, rather, non-findings—the emotivist media (with a little help

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from the authors), in this case not a tabloid, but the *New York Times*, presented this research under the title “Heart-pounding art” (*sic!*)—despite the fact that in the entire article by Tröndle and Tschacher there is no mention of “emotion” (except heart rate and palmar sweat measurements).<sup>33</sup> This does not prevent the journalist from writing, in the first sentence, that the visitors are “emotionally affected,” and that the solitary visitors, in the second sentence, “experience more emotion.”

If this were reporting about some other branch of scholarship, it would be immediately and firmly challenged. Emotivism, however, as the all-purpose pseudo-scholarly stance, apparently rules unchallenged.

### **Conclusion: Can Visual Art Induce Genuine Emotions?**

It seems clear from the preceding review that, in my opinion, traditionally conceived works of visual art are poor elicitors of emotion. Such art, in general, is incapable of convincingly telling naturalistic stories (or allegories) in rich detail that is necessary for viewers to create a network of mental associations to real-world emotion-inducing events, especially in their own lives. Paintings’ narration is neither broad, nor rich, nor deep enough.<sup>34</sup> Many paintings may attempt to tell stories or allude to real-world or otherworldly events, but few stories, thus told, are able to induce genuine psychobiological emotional responses.

Abstract art is, of course, even less likely, and significantly so, to be able to cause emotion. Symmetry, balance, color, novelty, complexity and many other factors (and their relative or complete absence) contribute to evaluative and hedonic judgments, but are most unlikely to elicit emotions. When one hears, for example, of intense reds in a de Kooning, one must not substitute naive biography-based criticism and folk assumptions about the power of redness for sound science. In fact, there is precious little, if any, empirical proof for a strong effect of color on people, and even if there is any effect, it would be on mood, not emotion; moreover, such an effect

would be dependent on very long exposure to large swaths of color in places like hospitals, kindergartens, or prisons. No wonder that Levinson (Notes 13, 15, and 16) opted out of attempting to describe any reasonable means whatsoever by which Abstract Expressionist works may induce emotion in spectators.

However, one should examine avenues other than paintings’ and sculptures’ narration by which visual art, broadly conceived, may have an emotional impact.<sup>35</sup> Serious candidates are installations, which—to have their potential impact fully understood—should be analyzed in reference to at least three classes of stimulus (artwork) properties that have been long identified by psycho-aestheticians. These attributes to some extent capture the enormous stimulus scope of installations, from the hyper-realistic to the otherworldly to the interactive to the theatrical. Moreover, and significantly, the conscious or unconscious-intuitive use by artists of these three properties also highlight the very important possibility of powerful emotional effects that differ from the fundamental, psychobiological ones—and this is where aesthetic awe, as a part of and defined in my Aesthetic Trinity Theory, may come into play.

The first of the three classes of artwork stimulus properties is *psychophysical*, with its most prominent member *large size* or physical grandeur, an attribute used painstakingly by artists and craftsmen since antiquity to honor gods and kings.<sup>36</sup> The present age of high technology and easy money has changed the methods and the themes. Three illustrative examples of works from the preceding decade that rely on the property of gigantism are the “artificial sun” of Olafur Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* (in Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, London, 2003) and, even more so, Richard Serra’s stupendous abstract metal forms (*The Matter of Time*, 2005) that somehow seem to dwarf even Frank Gehry’s entire Bilbao Guggenheim structure into which they were placed. Serra’s huge steel shapes certainly dwarf Damien Hirst’s *Charity*, the seven-meter-high, six-ton sculpture of a girl in leg irons holding a broken and empty collection box.

The second class of relevant properties is substantively *statistical*, with members such as *rarity* and *complexity*. With regard to rarity, Hirst certainly outdid all competitors (including those using elephant dung on paintings) with his *For the Love of God* (at the White Cube gallery, London, 2007)—a human skull recreated in platinum and encrusted with over 8,500 diamonds. Hirst is also the clear leader in the use of the third, *ecological* (or *classical-conditioning*), stimulus property, which is defined in terms of positive and negative reinforcements associated with works of art. While Jeff Koons's thirteen-meter-high *Puppy* (a floral sculpture of a cute West Highland terrier) may be a favorite on the positive-reinforcement side, Hirst wins on the negative side, the biologically noxious, with his pickled shark and butchered animals in formaldehyde, and especially his *A Thousand Years*, in which maggots hatch in a closed glass vitrine, become flies, feed on a severed, bloody cow's head, and try to continue their life cycle—although many are sadly executed by a Hirst-patented “insect-o-cutor.” New York City public health officials, in a characteristically vigilant pre-emptive move, banned Hirst's *Two F\*\*\*ing and Two Watching* (featuring rotting cow, bull, and calves) allegedly to avoid vomiting by visitors.

I concluded earlier that traditional paintings and sculptures, regardless of their content and form, do not reach far enough into the mental associations and memory systems of the viewer to induce genuine emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy. Installations, even those that skillfully utilize all three of the stimulus properties described above, are also unlikely to be powerful, versatile, and sophisticated enough to connect with the viewers' respective associative net-

works and induce genuine psychobiological emotions. It is not enough to shock—the spectator is always *safe*. And even though, in my opinion, some of Hirst's works address profound issues, their execution is both too profane and sterile to produce anything but disgust—and many psychobiologists, for good reason, do not consider disgust to be a genuine emotion, because it is a reflex-like visual, olfactory, and gustatory response.

Nevertheless, there seem to be installations, such as the previously mentioned Olafur Eliasson's artificial sun, which combine aspects of all three stimulus properties so as to capture the quality of the *sublime*. In Aesthetic Trinity Theory, the prototypical (and independently defined) response to the sublime stimulus is *aesthetic awe*: a state that should not be considered a fundamental psychobiological emotion but rather a mixture (even if primordial) of joy and fear.<sup>37</sup> Judging by the responses of many spectators at the Tate Modern, the artificial sun clearly produced aesthetic awe in them. The effect was evidently facilitated by, or even dependent on, the gigantic space of Turbine Hall.

Aesthetic Trinity Theory incorporates a tripartite hierarchy of aesthetic responses (physiological thrills or chills; being-moved; and the rarest, and most pronounced and memorable, aesthetic awe—the response to the sublime).<sup>38</sup> Aesthetic awe has been successfully used in a discussion of the effects of magnificent absolute music in exceptional performance settings. For various reasons that have been raised here, for visual art to have an emotional effect—though not on the fundamental emotions—one needs exposure to magnificent installations in exceptional performance settings.

## NOTES

1. Jeanette Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Noël Carroll, “Art and Mood: Preliminary Notes and Conjectures,” *The Monist* 86 (2003): 521–55; N. Carroll and Margaret R. Moore, “Not Reconciled: Comments for Peter Kivy,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art*

*Criticism* 65 (2007): 318–22; Peter Kivy, “Mood and Music: Some Reflections for Noël Carroll,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 271–81; Kivy, “Moodology: A Response to Laura Sizer,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007a): 312–18; Kivy, “Moodophilia: A Re-

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- sponse to Noël Carroll and Margaret Moore,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007b): 323–29; Vladimir J. Konečni, “A Skeptical Position on ‘Musical Emotions’ and an Alternative Proposal,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 31 (2008): 582–84; Konečni, “Does Music Induce Emotion? A Theoretical and Methodological Analysis,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 2 (2008): 115–29; Konečni, “The Influence of Affect on Music Choice,” in Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, eds., *Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 679–723; Konečni, “Composers’ Creative Process: The Role of Life-Events, Emotion, and Reason,” in David J. Hargreaves, Dorothy E. Miell, and Raymond A. R. MacDonald, eds., *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance, and Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 141–55; Konečni, “Constraints on Manipulations of Emotions by Music: A Critique of Tom Cochrane’s Assumptions,” *Philosophy Today* 56 (2012): 327–32; Konečni, “Music, Affect, Method, Data: Reflections on the Carroll Versus Kivy Debate,” *American Journal of Psychology* 126 (2013): 179–95; see also various commentaries by philosophers and psychologists on Patrik N. Juslin and Daniel Västfjäll, “Emotional Responses to Music: The Need to Consider Underlying Mechanisms,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 31 (2008): 559–75, and the various interdisciplinary chapters in Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, eds., *Music and Emotion*.
2. For example, in a communication to the author (October 29, 2012), Paul Guyer wrote: “I don’t see why common sense or philosophy gives up the right to define emotions before science can study them—what will science study if there isn’t an antecedent notion to define the field? Of course, that notion may be revised in light of subsequent science, if it turns out to correspond to no phenomenon science can find or [study] precisely.” The point is that a sufficient amount of “subsequent science” (studying the “phenomenon precisely”) has already happened but is often conveniently ignored by philosophers.
  3. The initial statement was in Vladimir J. Konečni, “The Aesthetic Trinity: Awe, Being Moved, Thrills,” *Bulletin of Psychology and the Arts* 5 (2005): 27–44, and one of the more recent elaborations in Konečni, “Aesthetic Trinity Theory and the Sublime,” *Philosophy Today* 55 (2011): 64–73.
  4. Note that I am using the term *emotivism* in a general, quasi-sociological, cultural-politics, sense. This sense is only tangentially related to the “emotivist–cognitivist” dichotomy that has been described by musical formalists, especially Peter Kivy; and it is unrelated to the sense in which the term was used by A. J. Ayer and Charles L. Stephenson in moral theory.
  5. Rüdiger Safranski, *Romantik—Eine Deutsche Affäre* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2007).
  6. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), 415. See Christine Korsgaard, “Scepticism About Practical Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 5–25, for a discussion of early Hume that is instructive in the context of my argument.
  7. Theodore Gracyk, “Hume’s Aesthetics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003/2011): <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-aesthetics/>.
  8. Lillien J. Martin, “An Experimental Study of Fechner’s Principles of Aesthetics,” *Psychological Review* 13 (1906): 142–219.
  9. Thomas Jacobsen, “Bridging the Arts and Sciences: A Framework for the Psychology of Aesthetics,” *Leonardo* 39 (2006): 155–62; Helmut Leder, Benno Belke, Andries Öberst, and Dorothee Augustin, “A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments,” *British Journal of Psychology* 95 (2004): 489–508.
  10. Among many possible contemporary examples, here are two: Helmut Leder, Gernot Gerger, and David Welleditsch, “This is Disgusting! Can Art Experts Really Appreciate Non-Beautiful Modern Art?” *Proceedings of the 22nd Biennial Congress of the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics* (Taipei, Taiwan, 2012), 458–67; see p. 460 for the lack of evidence to do with the authors’ strong claims linking emotions with “aesthetic appreciation.” Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and Jordan B. Peterson, “Serene Arts: The Effect of Personal Unsettledness and of Paintings’ Narrative Structure on Personality,” *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 30 (2012): 183–93—see the “Emotions Questionnaire” (187). In effect, Djikic et al. hold the improbable expectation that their research participants are able to experience up to a dozen emotions simultaneously. An amusing relevant literary example comes from a science fiction story in which Larry Eisenberg describes the demise of a political candidate who tries to please everyone and whose entrails are literally

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- torn apart when he is, at a political meeting, exposed to a large variety of opinions simultaneously: “All the crosscurrents of emotions he felt were tearing him apart, inside.” “The Chameleon,” in Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg eds., *Election Day 2084* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), 281. In a recent article, I discussed this issue at length and referred to analogous criticisms by the composer Paul Hindemith and by Peter Kivy (Konečni, “Music, Affect, Method, Data,” 187–88).
11. This account draws on two articles: Vladimir J. Konečni, “Review of *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research* [ed. Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda],” *Music Perception* 20 (2003): 332–41 (see p. 332); and V. J. Konečni, “Music and Emotion: An Empirical Critique of a Key Issue in the Philosophy of Music,” in Aleš Erjavec and Lev Kreft, eds., *Imagination, Sensuality, Art: Proceedings of the Third Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics* (Ljubljana: Slovensko Društvo za Estetiko, 2006), 81–85 (see p. 82).
  12. Peter Goldie, “Emotion,” *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007): 928–38.
  13. Ibid. 929; Jerrold Levinson, “Emotion in Response to Art,” in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998), see section 6. <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/M018SECT6>.
  14. Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
  15. Carroll, “Art and Mood,” 521, 524, 527–28; Levinson, “Emotion in Response to Art,” for example, section 2.
  16. Levinson, “Emotion in Response to Art,” sections 4–6.
  17. Djikic et al., “Serene Arts,” 183.
  18. Ibid., 185.
  19. The issue of participants’ awareness of the experimental hypothesis was something that Lillien Martin worried about in 1906—perhaps more so than some contemporary researchers. See my analogous comments regarding the work, described later in this section, of Martin Tröndle and Wolfgang Tschacher, “The Physiology of Phenomenology: The Effects of Artworks,” *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 30 (2012): 75–113.
  20. The rather long, one-minute, duration of exposure to each image, with the title present throughout, is significant as indicative of the experimenters’ effort to emphasize the narrative (or symbolic meaning) aspect, because, in the naturalistic conditions at the New York Metropolitan Museum, Jeffrey Smith and Lisa Smith found that the average time that visitors spent looking at a painting was 27 seconds; see J. K. Smith and L. Smith “Spending Time on Art,” *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 19 (2001): 229–36.
  21. According to Douglas Lackey, unlike the list of virtues, in which Giotto followed Aquinas, the list of vices is Giotto’s own, in that he replaced four of the traditional ones by four “new” vices in order to form pairs with the virtues in their respective positioning in the Arena Chapel; see D. P. Lackey, “Giotto in Padua: A New Geography of the Human Soul,” *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 551–72.
  22. For a discussion of these matters, see Joost Keizer, “Leonardo and Allegory,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35 (2012): 433–55.
  23. Leder et al., “A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation”: see especially the diagram on p. 492.
  24. Ibid., 501.
  25. Ibid., 502.
  26. Ibid., 494; Vladimir J. Konečni and Dianne N. Sargent-Pollock, “Arousal, Positive and Negative Affect, and Preference for Renaissance and 20th-Century Paintings,” *Motivation and Emotion* 1 (1977): 75–93.
  27. Tröndle and Tschacher, “The Physiology of Phenomenology.”
  28. Ibid., 83, 85.
  29. Ibid., 88.
  30. Ibid., 97–98.
  31. Ibid., 98.
  32. Ibid., 108.
  33. Dorothy Spears, “Heart-Pounding Art, Seen Solo,” *New York Times* (October 28, 2012): F32 (New York City Edition).
  34. Keizer, “Leonardo and Allegory,” 435–36.
  35. For a more complete framework of this discussion, see Konečni, “The Aesthetic Trinity: Awe, Being Moved, Thrills,” and Konečni, “Aesthetic Trinity Theory and the Sublime” (also see Note 3).
  36. Regarding the relation of the three classes of artwork properties to the sublime, see Konečni, “Aesthetic Trinity Theory,” 68–69.
  37. See Konečni, “The Aesthetic Trinity,” 27, 30–31; and Konečni, “Aesthetic Trinity Theory,” 68–69.

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38. In addition to articles cited in Note 37, the following are relevant and informative in the present context: Konečni, "Does Music Induce Emotion?" and Vladimir J. Konečni, Amber Brown, and Rebekah A. Wanic, "Comparative Effects of Music and Re-
- called Life-Events on Emotional State," *Psychology of Music* 36 (2008): 289–308.

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