

Paintings and Emotion: A Nonemotivist Reevaluation

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Abstract

Arguments are presented that paintings are unable to induce basic psychobiological emotions because they do not powerfully engage with spectators' intimate associative-memory systems. However, it is suggested that art installations containing properties subsumable under the classical concept of the *sublime* (physical grandeur, rarity, novelty, an association with beauty and with biologically significant outcomes), are capable of producing a memorable, though non-basic, emotional response, *aesthetic awe* – the peak aesthetic response as defined in Aesthetic Trinity Theory (Konečni, 2005, 2011). A skeptical view is presented of *emotivism*, defined as a proclivity for excessive insertion of “emotion” into scientific and lay accounts of behavior, especially regarding the arts: The *loci* in the domain of paintings are specified in which emotion has often been unjustifiably implicated. Psychobiological and contrasting viewpoints on emotion are outlined. Several possible routes from paintings' attributes to viewers' emotions are found to be analytically indefensible and psychologically improbable. Implications for empirical aesthetics are examined.

Keywords: Paintings; emotion; emotivism; emotion in painting; Aesthetic Trinity Theory; aesthetic awe; installations.

The goal of the article is to reexamine the status of emotion in the domain of paintings. One of two major claims is that paintings are unable to induce genuine emotions in viewers because their intimate associations and memories are not sufficiently engaged. Paintings may be revered, and found pleasing or interesting, but their constellation of attributes falls short with regard to the induction of genuine emotions. When contemplating any apparent evidence against this claim, one must be aware that viewers' reports of private experiences are often contaminated by stereotypical language habits, which are formed in part by the prevalent scholarly bias about the desirability of emotion and emotionality. The suggestion is made that once aestheticians reject *emotivism* (Konečni, 2012a, 2012b) and adopt a rigorous psychobiological definition of emotion, the discourse about the effect of paintings would become more disciplined.¹

The possible routes from paintings' attributes to viewers' genuine emotions will be examined in some detail and found to be analytically indefensible and psychologically improbable. Also, on the basis of Aesthetic Trinity Theory (Konečni, 2005; 2011), the second major claim will be considered – that *artistic installations* containing specifiable combinations of properties with psychological significance are capable of inducing a powerful and memorable response,

¹ The term “emotivism” is used here in a quasi-sociological, cultural-politics, sense, which is only tangentially related to music formalists' emotivist-cognitivist dichotomy. It is unrelated to the term used by A. J. Ayer and Charles L. Stephenson in moral theory.

aesthetic awe. This state has been shown to be similar to the fundamental emotions in certain respects (including the physiological component) but different in others.

Emotivism

Bottum (2000) wrote convincingly about the pervasiveness of “sensitivity” and “emotion” in contemporary discourse at the expense of logic and rationality. Indeed, phenomenologically, there seems to exist an excess of “feeling” in every crevice of life and the arts have been an obvious entry point for this trend. Emotivism is a culturological fad that is often related to insincere and mawkish social discourse.

Somewhat paradoxically, emotivism seems to be a *cognitive* stance taken by many aestheticians, one that reflects an opportunistic acceptance of a quasi-ideological context characterized by many as anti-intellectual. “Emotion” has been so persistently attached to an entire art form, music, that a thousand-page handbook has been compiled (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010). Critical accounts regarding various aspects of the link between music and emotion have been proposed (e.g., Konečni, 2008a, 2008b). The present article complements an earlier one (Konečni, 2013a) in extending the critique to the domain of paintings.

The emotivist stance includes an often cavalier treatment of method and data: (a) participants' experimenter-guided reports are accepted as evidence of emotion (Konečni, 2008b); (b) minor fluctuations in psychophysiological indices are interpreted as definitive indications of emotion (Konečni, 2012c); (c) an absence of effort to distinguish between emotion and mood (Konečni, 2010); (d) an absence of effort to determine whether participants are rating the emotion expressed by (or depicted in) an aesthetic stimulus or their experience (Konečni, 2008b); and (e) “scientification” of models, by relating them, without sound reason, to basic emotions – perhaps because such emotions' link to biology offers the research a semblance of hard science. Not surprisingly, some researchers' integration of emotivism into their worldview is coupled both with the rejection of a rigorous psychobiological account of emotion and with the frequent alleged discovery and detection of pseudo- and quasi-emotions.

Loci of “Emotion” in Painting

Writing about emotion in the domain of painting inspires some aestheticians, art theorists, critics, and artists to arbitrary and sometimes wildly romanticizing claims. A short list of the *loci* of “emotion” in painting and paintings follows.

1. Basic emotions have been given the attribute of stability and permanence in various painters, implying that emotions, contrary to psychological theory, are akin to personality

dispositions. Traits are arbitrarily inferred from unreliable sources. A subclass of “emotional personality dispositions” is portrayed as inexorably driven by physical handicap, illness, insanity or alcoholism. 2. It is proposed that painters’ psychological make-up (perhaps inherited), often inferred through no more than academic striving, causes them to behave “emotionally” in response to a stressful event, thus influencing artistic output (this has several subclasses; cf. Konečni, 2012a). 3. A scholar or critic locates “emotion” within a painting and claims it to be caused by, or a reflection of, the artist’s enduring personality dispositions, or an acute response to a life-event, or a combination of the two.

Such “biographical criticism” is characterized by aestheticians’ somehow inferring painters’ traits and likely responses to stress, and then reading the presence of the same emotions (though sometimes the polar opposites) into paintings. The recent “psycho-historical” proposal (Bullot & Reber, 2013) is linked to the tradition of biographical criticism and tends to encourage emotivist speculation. A preoccupation with the historical context often leads to excessive weight being given to unconfirmed data (e.g., about the alleged stressful events or sources of inspiration).

To augment point 3.: Claims have been made for many emotions to have been depicted in paintings, whether or not these emotions were said to correspond to an artist’s own. Such paintings are labeled as “expressive of emotion” or “expressionist” and fall on a continuum from extreme referentialism to extreme abstraction in the depiction or expression of emotion.²

Psychobiological and “Aesthetic” Emotions

“Emotion is one of the key concepts in psychobiology. Because the fundamental emotions – anger, fear, joy, sadness, and perhaps only a few others – guide and energize behavior in crucial situations, those with enormous consequences, they have been subjected to evolutionary pressures. Emotions are costly – psychologically, physiologically, metabolically – and reserved for emergencies: they are major events in human phenomenology. The main attributes of the fundamental 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 can be distinguished from moods, drives, traits, and attitudes” (Konečni, 2003, p. 332).

The preceding description can be offered as a relatively broadly held psychobiological view of emotion (cf. Scherer & Zentner, 2001). There are obviously other theoretical positions, but virtually none dispute that emotions involve a major physiological upheaval; and when the upheaval is due to a neutral activity (e.g., climbing stairs), it is seen as

irrelevant for emotion.³ An interpretation of the eliciting event is an important component of a large proportion of emotion theories.

The mentioned basic emotions cannot be rationally denied on either phenomenological or empirical grounds even by scholars who subscribe to abstruse or arcane positions; and since these are the emotions known to all humans in terms of both subjective state and recognition in others, it will not do to treat them as merely “utilitarian” or “garden-variety.” Some aestheticians’ dismissive tone usually demands a loftier status for “refined” (e.g., Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007) or “aesthetic” emotions – alleged states that typically do not contain any or most of the components specified by the psychobiological position. When reading accounts in which key attributes of aesthetic emotions are claimed to be “detachment” and “absence of urgency” (Zentner, Grandjean, Scherer, 2008, p. 515), one wonders why a more appropriate terminology has not been sought instead of muddying the conceptual waters.

Leder, Belke, Öberst, and Augustin (2004) contend that aesthetic experience has two outcomes, aesthetic judgment and aesthetic emotion. To realize the weakness of their argument that emotion is the habitual result of viewers’ exposure to art, one must inspect the “model of aesthetic experience” (2004, p. 492). The terms in the diagram are members of heterogeneous categories, including perceptual processes, artwork descriptors, prior experience, and cognitive processes. Only one box contains an emotion-relevant term, “affective state,” and it is claimed for the art viewer by declaring *ad hoc* that there is continuous affective evaluation throughout all the processes (p. 493). It is not specified whether the object of affective evaluation is the artwork or the self, and whether this occurs only in the laboratory or also naturalistically. Nevertheless, from the affective-state box out pops aesthetic emotion – an emotivist sleight of hand.

Some authors (Bullot & Reber, 2013; Fig. 2, Section 3.1.2., p. 128) claim that paintings can “automatically elicit” anger, fear, and sadness. Also baffling is their claim that these pronounced states, with a strong physiological component, are allegedly induced by “epistemic processes.”

A comment is necessary about disgust as an alleged aesthetic emotion, albeit “negative” (Bullot & Reber 2013; Silvia, 2013). First, many psychobiologists would deny disgust the status of an emotion because of its reflex olfactory-gustatory nature and the notable absence of a cognitive component. In the case of certain “disgusting” artworks, such as Damien Hirst’s pickled sharks, there is undoubtedly an associationist (classical conditioning) mechanism at work.⁴ Second, any response to these works is

³ Of course, situations may arise when people add the arousal due to a neutral activity to an already existing elevation that had been caused, for example, by a provocation.

⁴ Incidentally, in studies conducted in my laboratory, almost no participant reported either disgust or other emotions or “emotions” to Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* – only admiration.

² Depiction of emotion in a painting and a painting being expressive of emotion can be conceptually distinguished, but this is usually of little practical interest.

presumably “aesthetic” only because Hirst presented them as “art” (in the Duchamp tradition). One wonders if a century after Duchamp, the artist’s intention – a hackneyed imitative intention – should suffice to make something “art” (instead of “bluff art,” see Konečni, 2005). And if not art, then the shark is only an object that induces nonaesthetic disgust.

Diverse Empirical Attempts

Psycho-aesthetics has since its beginnings ascribed an emotional substrate to viewers’ reactions to visual stimuli. In her report of one of the first systematic experiments in the English-speaking world, Lillien Martin (1906) addressed a question posed in Fechner’s aesthetic theory: Which features does a visual stimulus, one that has empirically passed the “aesthetic threshold” (*aesthetische Schwelle*), must have to pass the emotion threshold also? Martin’s experiments involved twenty participants and over forty stimuli (lines; circles; an ellipse). Only the circles passed the aesthetic threshold and no stimuli passed the emotion threshold – despite the usually very careful Martin’s overinterpretation of weak like-dislike data.

In a scaling study of paintings (Sargent-Pollock & Konečni, 1977) – informative, in the negative sense, about emotivist claims – participants individually evaluated each of 120 paintings on scales of pleasingness, interestingness, and the desire to own a reproduction. A skin-conductance (SC) measure (response to image over baseline) was obtained for each participant viewing each painting. Sixty works (“Renaissance”) were painted between 1440 and 1570 and the other sixty in the period 1909-1965. Each painting was viewed for ten seconds, followed by a ten-second rating period in the presence of the image. Paintings were seen in six groups of twenty, with interpolated rest periods, during each of which the SC baseline was obtained.

The evaluation data were meaningful, extending Berlyne’s (1971). Of the greatest interest for present purposes was the fact that SC responses were uncorrelated with verbal ratings. Moreover, a clear pattern was observed on both the between- and within-subject basis: In a group of twenty, exposure/baseline ratios initially approached 1.20, then rapidly declined to 1.00-1.05, stabilizing at close to 1.00 for the remainder of the session. Furthermore, in the later groups of twenty, even the initial ratios were as low as 1.08-1.12. This pattern obtained for both the Renaissance and 20th-century works even though there were large differences between the two groups on all ratings. In short, beyond the mundane initial effect of task novelty, there was no physiological effect of the paintings. In fact, the physiological data pattern was replicated in pilot studies in which images of standard kitchen furniture were used rather than famous paintings.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is a dearth of subsequent studies of this type. One possible reason may be researchers’ unwarranted assumption that findings contrary to those obtained by Sargent-Pollock and Konečni somehow must abound – which is emotivist fiction. Another possibility is that these findings have been widely replicated but not

reported, because the absence of paintings’ physiological effects was neither interesting nor pleasing to researchers.

Tröndle and Tschacher (2012) recently claimed to have obtained physiological evidence for the emotional impact of viewing artworks. The authors equipped hundreds of visitors to a museum in Switzerland with an electronic glove with measurement sensors and a transmitter that sent physical-position and physiological data to wireless receivers. There were two physiological measures, SC and heart rate. Participants’ path and length of stay in front of any of the artworks were unrestricted.

A detailed methodological critique of this work is available in Konečni (2013a), so that only a few remarks are in order. Evaluations of the “emotional” aspects of paintings were given by participants during exit interviews, long after viewing. In the principal-component analysis of assessments, the only factor (of five) that was related to emotion, “Negative Emotion,” had to do with what the paintings conveyed, not the participants’ own state. Only five works were discussed in any detail. One of these, described by participants as containing “aggressive emotions,” had the word “aggressive” prominently in its title; no physiological evidence was provided. As for the most prominent works on display (two Warhols), the average viewing times were only nine seconds for *Flowers* (1966) and 10.5 seconds for *Campbell’s Condensed Tomato Soup* (1962).

Tröndle and Tschacher (2012) are mostly careful to avoid using the term “emotion,” yet they interpret the transient increase in arousal when visitors enter the exhibition as being due to an “encounter with art,” ignoring the mundane effects of spatial movement. Despite the authors’ (moderate) claims to the contrary, there is no valid support for the position that paintings produced emotions in viewers. Yet the call of emotivism induced the *New York Times* critic to entitle her piece on this work “Heart-Pounding Art” (Spears, 2012).

From Works’ Attributes To Viewers’ Emotions

This section reports the mostly futile search for the analytically defensible and psychologically possible routes by which paintings – *qua artworks*, by virtue solely of their artistic attributes – may induce genuine psychobiological emotions in viewers.

Nonfigurative Paintings Abstract works from Kandinsky’s *Abstract Watercolor* (1910) to paintings by de Kooning, Rothko, Pollock, and, for instance, Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) are characterized by a complete absence of any kind of narrative. They are constructed so as to eliminate any easy associations to the world outside the painted image (or blank but framed “image”). One surmises that even fervent emotivists do not claim that basic emotions are induced by these works *qua art*.

Note that absolute music, even without narrative content and ready associations (by onomatopoeia or evocative titles), has a broad range of arousal-raising devices. Yet even in the case of pure instrumental music, formalists have justifiably questioned the idea of genuine emotions being induced (cf.

Kivy, 1990; Konečni, 2013b). What does abstract art have? Painterliness, color, symmetry, balance, novelty, complexity (and their relative absence) may contribute to judgments and experience, and even occasionally raise arousal, but are most unlikely to elicit emotions. When intense reds in a de Kooning are brought up, one must not mistake folk ideas about redness for science. There is little proof for an emotional effect of color. If there is some, it is likely to be on mood or attitude and it would be dependent on long exposure to massive swaths of color in institutions.

Figurative Paintings With regard to possible emotion induction, two correlated aspects of figurative paintings must be addressed: (a) the pictorial representation of objects that exist in the real world and (b) story-telling by painterly means (visual non-verbal narrative). Objects may be represented with various degrees of accuracy (degrees of “likeness”). Stories may be told in varying detail, leaving more or less for spectators to fill in; their knowledge may be specialized (the Bible, heroes, battles) or a consequence of daily life in a particular place and time.

One should dismiss from consideration a particular category of paintings, an example of which is a portrait of a loved person no longer living. On perusing such a painting, one may become genuinely sad, which may have nothing to do with the painting’s artistic value or even the degree of likeness. The painting does not induce emotion *qua art* but as a generalized conditioned stimulus. An indifferent snapshot of the person might produce a similar effect, sadness.

How do figurative paintings compare with vocal and “program” music? Even the formalists do not dispute that program music and, especially, vocal music are capable of inducing genuine emotions. The operative ingredient in vocal music is considered to be the verbally narrated story and in program music the movements’ titles may be complemented by associated imagery, episodic memory, and onomatopoeia. Except for a rare textual exhortation, paintings are devoid of words and lack the temporal dimension of songs. They cannot tell stories, certainly not in detail or step by step. All that paintings can do is capture a crucial moment of a story in a static presentation. Realizing this, artists have sometimes attempted to introduce sequence by creating triptychs, but this is rare and weak. A “trick” sometimes employed by painters is to increase the amount of information by including objects with rich associations, such as musical instruments during a boom in music-making in 17th-century Holland. Of course, the most efficient device for increasing the amount of information and showing behavioral intent has undoubtedly been perspective – although even when used in a painting of large size, it is not enough. One can ascertain this by pondering the hypothetical effect on spectators’ emotions – or the almost certain absence of any – of the largest painting in the Louvre (660 x 990 cm), Veronese’s *The Wedding at Cana* (1562-63).

Wullschlager (2013) wrote that “religion as well as philosophy always suspected art’s ability to move” and she is joined by other art critics who hold opinions that run counter

to emotivist platitudes. One can point to numerous superb religious paintings that lend support to the anti-emotivist view. Key examples from the Venetian Renaissance master Giovanni Bellini find the skeptic on solid analytic and pictorial grounds when claiming that the judgment about the absence of an emotional effect is not simply a secular bias.

Figurative Paintings Portraying Emotions In all of the mentioned Bellini paintings the portrayal of emotion, expressed in faces, gestures, and the palette, is essentially nonexistent – and this is not unusual for the Renaissance. However, a philosopher friend wrote that she had to take her eight-year-old daughter out from the Louvre because the girl was scared of “the bloody Catholic martyrdom paintings.” The girl was probably associatively fearing injury as she would also want to avoid looking at a bloody street accident. She was not responding to the paintings *qua art* but to an imagined overgeneralization.

As for blood in the Renaissance, it is not frequently portrayed. In dozens of portrayals of St. Sebastian, between 1450 and 1620, despite numerous arrows – from one in El Greco (1578) to a dozen in Mantegna (1490) – there are few drops of blood. Without exception, St. Sebastian’s face shows a stereotypical pious resignation. Only a few paintings show beholders and their faces are devoid of sympathy and anguish, essentially expressionless.

Minimal emotion is portrayed in Caravaggio’s paintings of *Head of John the Baptist* and *Salome* (1606; 1610), in his *David Victorious over Goliath* (1599), and in Guido Reni’s (1605) work on the same theme. In the 1599 painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by Caravaggio, Holofernes’s face understandably shows horror at the moment of having his head cut off, but there are unrealistic streams of blood and, other than in her corrugator muscle, Judith’s face shows little. From an objective analytical viewpoint, one concludes that these paintings contain an insufficiently detailed narrative and provide few good reasons for viewers to identify with the characters and experience emotions empathetically. In Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), the story is nonreligious, recent, and publicized in a favorable humanistic light. Yet the message is hard to read even with foreknowledge. The chosen formal elements are a dubious cause of any emotion.

What of Goya’s (1814) *El tres de mayo*? The faces of people about to be shot show anguish. Their fate is foretold by the corpses of people already shot. Few do not admire this painting, but do they experience emotion? Even if the context of resistance to Bonaparte is known to viewers, does the portrayal reach their individual memory networks so that empathy would take place and lead to acute sadness or anger? The answer is probably negative.

The same colleague described being “saddened” by the “kitschy” *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (Delaroche, 1833). She knew the story and “was responding to violence against women more than to the painting itself;” her “sadness” was much more a mood than an emotional response.” This retrospectively introspecting account is telling: The viewer framed the story (previously known to

her, not one shown pictorially) as a social issue and responded to it, not to the painting *qua art*.

Paintings are poor candidates for eliciting genuine emotions because they are, as a medium, incapable of convincingly telling stories about the real-world or otherworldly events in the detail necessary for viewers to generate mental links to their own experiences. Paintings' narrative is too thin and remote, and the protagonists too dissimilar to allow identification and empathy.

Art Installations and Aesthetic Trinity Theory

The second major claim of the article, based on Aesthetic Trinity Theory (ATT; Konečni, 2005; 2011), is that installations, with specifiable constellations of properties of psycho-aesthetic significance epitomizing *the sublime*, are capable, unlike paintings, of inducing a rare and powerful emotional response, *aesthetic awe*. The "trinity" refers to the tripartite structure that includes, in addition to aesthetic awe, the less pronounced and more frequent states of Being-Moved and (physiological) Thrills (or Chills), in a hierarchical arrangement (Konečni, 2005; 2011).

In ATT, aesthetic awe is not considered a basic emotion itself, but rather a derived (although primordial) mixture of two basic emotions, joy and fear. Like joy, aesthetic awe requires existential safety, a fair degree of control over fear-inducing danger. Also like joy, and unlike pure fear, aesthetic awe is an emotion that can be easily "switched off." This peak aesthetic response is viewed as a prototypical one to the *sublime stimulus-in-context* (with the sublime external to the observer). The sublime is defined independently of aesthetic awe: Among its attributes are physical grandeur, rarity, and novelty; a complex relationship exists with beauty.

It is proposed that at least some installations are more likely than paintings to induce aesthetic awe in spectators by virtue of their amenability to being constructed such that they contain the sublime – the abovementioned attributes of which can be analyzed on three stimulus dimensions identified by Berlyne (1971): The psychophysical, the statistical, and the "ecological" (classical conditioning).⁵ These properties capture somewhat the enormous scope of installations, from the hyper-realistic to the interactive to the theatrical. The conscious (or unconscious-intuitive) use of these properties illuminates the route by which aesthetic awe may be induced.

Large size is the most prominent psychophysical property, used since antiquity to honor gods and kings. High technology has changed the themes. Two examples of gigantism are Richard Serra's abstract steel forms (*The Matter of Time*, 2005) and Hirst's *Charity* (2002-2003), the six-ton bronze sculpture of a girl with a charity box. Arrogance in Serra, an affected theatricality in Hirst: Large size is not sufficient to result, *qua art*, in aesthetic awe.

⁵ Scholars sometimes use Berlyne's stimulus classes without giving proper credit. An example is "disfluency" (Bullot & Reber, 2013, pp. 135-136): this neologism refers to an unacknowledged derivation from Berlyne's concepts.

The second class of properties is statistically-based. With *For the Love of God* (2007; a platinum skull, encrusted with over 8,500 diamonds), Hirst outdid competitors regarding rarity: it may amaze but not move spectators. Hirst also leads in the use of the ecological property, which is defined in terms of reinforcements associated with artworks. While Koons's thirteen-meter *Puppy* may excel on the positive-reinforcement side, Hirst wins on the side of the noxious, with pickled shark, butchered animals, and maggots feeding on a cow's head. But such works are too sterile to induce anything but disgust – and disgust, as argued above, is neither a genuine emotion nor is it likely to be transformed into aesthetic awe.

However, there exist installations, such as Ólafur Eliasson's "artificial sun" (*The Weather Project* in Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, London, 2003), which combine aspects of all three classes of artwork properties in a sophisticated manner so as to capture the qualities of the *sublime*. The sight of a complex, yet seemingly straightforward arrangement for a stunningly novel, yet vaguely familiar, enormous yellow ball to hover, suffusing the air in the gigantic space with life-giving light, invariably stunned visitors. Many lay supine on the floor, aesthetically overwhelmed. In interviews, "awe" was by far the most frequent term used by respondents for their aesthetic experience.

Implications for Empirical Psycho-Aesthetics

Even a partial acceptance by psycho-aestheticians working in visual arts of the conclusions reached here would lead them to be more cautious in claims regarding emotion. Any discussion of emotion – in the artist, the artwork, the appreciator – should be preceded by a definition which the author espouses. With regard to empirical work, while participants' self-reports of emotion or mood (and their absence) are indispensable, and cannot justifiably be replaced by psychophysiological and fMRI data (Konečni, 2012c, pp. 8-9), an awareness of the various biases with such reports, uncovered especially in the music-and-emotion area, should lead to increased methodological vigilance. Being cognizant of emotivism may facilitate the detection of false positives in emotion data and constrain theoretical overreaching.

Because of their novelty and multifaceted nature, installations present special problems of classification, analysis, and interpretation. But they should prove a rewarding medium for empirical psycho-aestheticians, especially those who are interested in genuine emotional responses to art. ATT provides a useful theoretical milieu, with aesthetic awe, being-moved, and thrills/chills all being reliably reportable and measurable. Artists who specialize in installations have proved to be open to experimentation and input, in part because the creation and setting up of their work are so often collaborative. And there has been a trend to design flexible and often very large exhibition spaces in museums and nontraditional locales.

As for researchers with an interest specifically in paintings, who decide to abandon the pursuit of emotions, they may

instead wish to reinvigorate the formalist approach in psycho-aesthetics. This would be a move away from an interest in expressive and referential aspects to a renewed focus on line, shape, texture, color, balance, particular proportions (such as the golden section), and other compositional issues. At least a branch of empirical aesthetics might be devoted to research inspired by the formalism of Greenberg (1961, 1999), which links artistic value to aesthetic experience, with the latter understood as contemplation of what “strikes the eye” in an aesthetic object. One task of many would be to study the process of self-examination and reduction to the core within art forms.

The research guided by formalist ideas would ignore Conceptualism, with its aesthetics-free cultural and political agendas; and it would be immune to attempts to historicize and contextualize the appreciation and analysis of artworks (e.g., Bullot and Reber, 2013). It would abstain from divining an artist’s motivation and intention – so dominant in the questionable biographical stream of criticism. Formalist analysis is – or can be, when supported by a high level of training in methods – manifestly more reliable than the contextual and the historical. Formalism addresses the artwork as is and shuns *talk* and *reading-in* – so essential to Conceptualism and the historical approach.

One wonders if proponents of formalist analysis did not reject history, context, and artist intention – and were disinterested in expression and representation – because they were introspectively aware of not experiencing emotions while viewing paintings they most admired?

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