



# The effects of visual context and individual differences on perception and evaluation of modern art and graffiti art



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## ABSTRACT

Traditionally, artworks are seen as autonomous objects that stand (or should stand) on their own. However, at least since the emergence of Conceptual Art in the 1920s and Pop Art in the 1960s, art lacks any distinctive perceptual features that define it as such. Art, therefore, cannot be defined without reference to its context. Some studies have shown that context affects the evaluation of artworks, and that specific contexts (street for graffiti art, museum for modern art) elicit specific effects (Gartus & Leder, 2014). However, it is yet unclear how context changes perception and appreciation processes. In our study we measured eye-movements while participants (64 psychology undergraduates, 48% women) perceived and evaluated beauty, interest, emotional valence, as well as perceived style for modern art and graffiti art embedded into either museum or street contexts. For modern art, beauty and interest ratings were higher in a museum than in a street context, but context made no difference for the ratings of graffiti art. Importantly, we also found an interaction of context and individual interest in graffiti for beauty and interest ratings, as well as for number of fixations. Analyses of eye-movements also revealed that viewing times were in general significantly longer in museum than in street contexts. We conclude that context can have an important influence on aesthetic appreciation. However, some effects depend also on the style of the artworks and the individual art interests of the viewers.

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## 1. Introduction

When artworks are exhibited, it is always in a specific context. However, the relation between artworks and their context can be viewed in several different ways. One possibility is to see artworks as unique and autonomous objects (Parsons, 1987). From this perspective, external influences are irrelevant for the aesthetic qualities of the artworks, and aesthetic appreciation does not depend on context. An alternative assumption is that the status of an object as an artwork is relative, and art therefore requires a specific type of context to be regarded as such. From that standpoint, a context which is specifically built to present art, like a museum, would elicit the artworks' aesthetic qualities best, and therefore allow for an ideal reception and maximal aesthetic appreciation. The effects of Duchamp's "ready-mades" or Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes (or of Pop Art in general)—objects become artworks when put in the context of a museum or an art gallery—have often been associated with this hypothesis (Buskirk & Nixon, 1996; McCarthy, 2006; O'Doherty, 1986). However, this view has also been criticized. For instance, Davies (2013, p. 13) states that there are two different views on art museums: A negative one which stresses that in museums art is separated from the context of its creation, and a positive

one which emphasizes the fact that museums provide an environment for the undisturbed contemplation of art. Stressing the negative aspect, Dewey (1934/1980) already argued that artworks in museums and galleries are somehow isolated from the original conditions in which they were created and experienced. Furthermore, De Niemeyer and Loureiro (2012) claim that the match between an artwork and its place of exhibition also depends on the type of artwork. Some objects were intended to be artworks, and are usually also meant to be moved into a museum or an art gallery. Other objects were created for various purposes, often outside the modern Western world, but can be recognized as art by putting them in a museum. In addition, there are artworks, such as frescos and graffiti art, which cannot be (easily) moved into a museum. Therefore, we argue that a classical museum display might not be the ideal context for *all* types of art, and some artworks could require individually appropriate contexts.

### 1.1. Art and context

It is very difficult to find a comprehensive definition of the term *art*. For example, Wartenberg (2006) presents 29 different, often conflicting philosophical views on the nature of art. In the introduction of his anthology, he distinguishes between three fundamentally different approaches to understand art: The first and historically oldest is characterized by the attempt to find a valid definition of art. The second one is skeptical about the very possibility of such a definition and prefers to

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think of art as everything that is exhibited in certain institutions like museums and art galleries (cf. Bourdieu & Darbel, 1997). In these contexts, “a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an aesthetic conundrum” (O’Doherty, 1986, p. 15). Finally, the third approach does not treat art as a unitary phenomenon and focuses rather on the functions of it in specific historical and social contexts. Thus, the (presentational, historical, social, etc.) context might be a crucial factor for the classification of an object as a work of art.

Yet, context is an often underestimated aspect in empirical aesthetics, and most studies present aesthetic objects on a computer screen with some (or even no) accompanying verbal information. However, it is well known that visual context is an important factor in object recognition (Bar, 2004; Oliva & Torralba, 2007). Consequently, in Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin’s (2004) model of aesthetic experiences of art, context is a necessary factor for the classification of objects as artworks (Leder & Nadal, 2014; Leder et al., 2004). This model assumes that the context of a museum or an art gallery “is a strong contextual cue for classifying an object as one that warrants aesthetic processing” (Leder et al., 2004, p. 493). Thus, context can facilitate the expectation of an aesthetic experience (Cupchik, 1994; Leder et al., 2004) that is qualitatively different from everyday life (Marković, 2012). Also, taking the situated cognition perspective into account, Schwarz (2007) argued very generally that “high context sensitivity is a necessary feature of any adaptive system of evaluation” (p. 651), which is in line with recent developments in cognitive science (Clark, 2013). This implicitly suggests that the context of a museum can enable aesthetic experiences.

The design of museums—especially modern art museums—is strongly influenced by the idea of a white cube (O’Doherty, 1986). One of the first white cubes was designed by the Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann for the Venice Biennale in 1934. This Austrian pavilion is a minimalistic building with white walls and hardly any windows; nothing should distract the beholder from the works of art. The concept, as discussed by O’Doherty, places art into a specific context and enables a pure, undistracted art experience. Without this protective context, not only are artworks sometimes unrecognizable as art, in extreme cases they could be endangered or even destroyed. This is what happened in 1973 to a work by the artist Joseph Beuys. The artwork—a bathtub decorated with gauze bandage and a layer of grease—was cleaned and therefore irrevocably ruined (Gamboni, 1997, p. 301). As another example, in 2008, an artwork of Luc Tuymman (a famous Belgian painter) was exposed in a street of Antwerp (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96TyAQ7KnVQ>) without any further information. During 48 h, 2965 people passed by. However, only 107 of them did stop and watch the painting. Apparently, less than 4% did recognize the painting as high art. On the other hand, there are genres of art that, by definition, are created to be placed outside museums. Street art is a recently emerging style that is receiving increasing attention by the art market, and even carries a reference to context in its name (Dickens, 2010).

While some effects of context on art appreciation have been discussed and demonstrated (Brieber, Nadal, & Leder, 2015; Brieber, Nadal, Leder, & Rosenberg, 2014; Gartus & Leder, 2014; Gerger, Leder, & Kremer, 2014; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2011; Kirk, 2008; Kirk, Skov, Hulme, Christensen, & Zeki, 2009; Marković, 2012; Noguchi & Murota, 2013; Swami, 2013), the actual processes that cause contextual differences are yet unclear. Therefore, in addition to traditional rating scales, in the present study we employed the measurement of eye-movements to study whether the perception of artworks differs with context, or even interacts with different kinds of contexts.

There is some research supporting the hypothesis that changing the context of an art presentation can make a difference for the aesthetic experience. For instance, in a study by Kirk et al. (2009), aesthetic evaluations of an image improved significantly when participants thought that it was originally taken from a gallery rather than having been created by the experimenters with a computer. Noguchi and Murota

(2013) manipulated visual and contextual information of artworks. Using EEG, they showed that visual and contextual factors are rapidly integrated in the brain. Similarly, Gerger et al. (2014) found that artworks with a negative semantic content were rated higher when being presented as art as opposed to a reality context. Swami (2013) showed that elaborate, content-specific information can increase the understanding and appreciation of abstract artworks. Hagtvedt and Patrick (2011) presented the same images either as art or as illustrations, which resulted in different evaluations. These studies suggest that the appropriate context improves evaluation of art. But none of these studies compared different styles of art for which specific appropriate contexts exist. However, this is what was done in a recent study by Gartus and Leder (2014). While context is often manipulated by verbal instructions, we chose to change the visual appearance of art presentations in a laboratory setting by embedding graffiti art and modern art into dynamic museum and street images. Subsequently, we analyzed the aesthetic appreciation of the artworks and found that interest in graffiti art had a stronger influence on emotional valence ratings in a street context than in a museum context. However, that study only employed explicit evaluations, thus it investigated how the context can change conscious perception and appreciation of art. In the current study, we employed eye-tracking to more directly find differences in the perceptual processes caused by the context while viewing artworks.

## 1.2. Street art and graffiti art

Street art—complex and skilled visual art practiced in the street—is a highly controversial genre (Iveson, 2010; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). While some regard it as valuable, innovative art, it is regarded as vandalism by many people (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008; Toet & van Schaik, 2012). Street art can be understood as an artistic evolution of graffiti and it is explicitly defined by Riggles (2010) as an artistic style that makes use of the street as an artistic resource. Graffiti, on the other hand, is a broader term than street art and can be simply defined as writing or painting on public walls. As such, it can be even dated back to ancient history (Guthrie, 2005). However, modern graffiti originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Austin, 2001, 2010). To be consistent with Gartus and Leder (2014), we want to keep the somewhat broader meaning of the term graffiti, but focus mainly on the artistic aspects rather than on vandalism. Hence, we will use the term *graffiti art* to refer to either graffiti or street art.

Some of the controversy about street art and graffiti art is apparent in the work of the British artist Banksy. He is known best for his critical artworks that often are a combination of street art and architectural features. While a mural with one of his artworks was auctioned for over \$400,000, another one of his artworks was simply removed from a wall by city cleaners in Melbourne (Gill, 2010).

Nevertheless, the recognition of graffiti as a form of art is increasing and is finding its way into galleries and museums. Regarding its appreciation, it is unclear how much of the appreciation of graffiti art is owed to the street context. Thus, it is not obvious whether graffiti art displayed in a gallery or museum still counts as graffiti art, or whether it is assimilated into high art, once it is placed in a museum. Some researchers (Austin, 2010; Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Riggles, 2010) argue that the context of the street is essential for the artwork to be fully appreciated. So when displayed in a museum, graffiti art might be missing an important component. To some extent, it could be criticized in a similar way than the exhibition of African Art in a western museum taken out of the original context (Jegede, 1993/2006). An exhibition curator of the Museum for Art and Crafts in Hamburg, arguing that graffiti should be documented in a lively and authentic way, puts it in the following words: “A sprayed wall appears almost sterile within the context of a museum exhibition and the photo-documentation of expertly sprayed house sides hung on gallery walls exudes the charm of a meticulously kept photo album” (Jockel, 2002). In the present

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