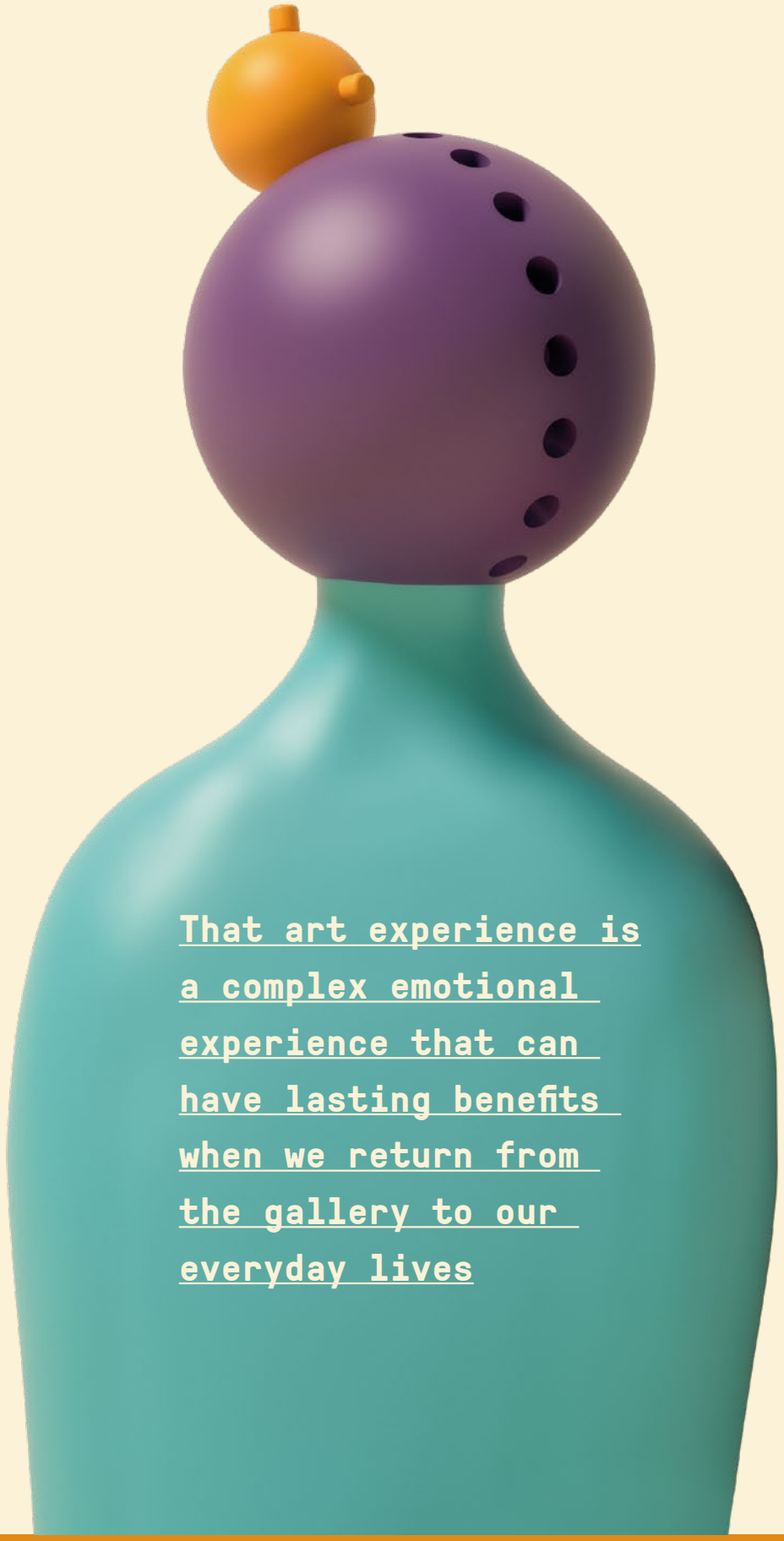


That art experience is a complex emotional experience that can have lasting benefits when we return from the gallery to our everyday lives

HOW CAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE ARTS AFFECT OUR EMOTIONAL LIVES?

Eva Specker and Matthew Pelowski

University of Vienna, Austria

> *"The arts have an incredible potential for expanding interconnectedness, for reaching people, touching them, and increasing empathy and compassion in the world"*
> Olafur Eliasson

One major reason why many people enjoy visiting museums and engaging with artworks is that art can inspire strong emotions in us. Art can make us happy or excited, and it can make us recognize, appreciate, or feel sadness, loneliness, and melancholy. Art is often connected, increasingly so in recent research, to profound states such as awe, wonder, and the Sublime.

When we think of these emotional experiences with artworks, we may be drawn to memories of us standing alone before an artwork and being intensely moved. These experiences may be mainly individual, where the viewer is alone with the artwork. In contrast, when we think of emotions in everyday life, it becomes clear that we often share emotions. We cheer together in stadiums when our favorite sports team wins and friends give each other shoulders to cry on. At first glance this seems like a contrast: a rather internal aesthetic emotional experience on the one hand, and a shared social emotional experience in everyday life.

But, we think otherwise, we believe that art can serve as a communication tool to express feelings and thoughts, as well as to deliver messages, that are difficult to articulate in other ways, such as face-to-face or verbally (see also, Fraser & al Sayah, 2011). People seem to be connecting and communicating through the artwork. It is this emotional impact of art that is the focus of our chapter.

HOW CAN EMOTIONS BE SHARED THROUGH ART?

As the artist Eugène Delacroix (in Goldwater & Treves, 1958, p. 230) put it: an artwork is a "bridge between the mind of the [artist] and that of the spectator."

But, how does this work? What does such a bridge look like? Before diving into a detailed discussion of the studies we did in this direction, it is worth taking one step back and talking about some of the arguments around this topic:

First, we would note that recent models have suggested the importance of the presence and acts of the artist, specifically, The Mirror Model of Art (Tinio, 2013). This model proposes that artistic creation and aesthetic reception "mirror" each other. Though a full explanation of the model is outside of the scope of the current chapter, the connection that is made between the creation and reception process is not only an extension of the Mirror Model on previous models that have only focused on either the perception or creation

side, but also offers a gateway to understanding how emotion sharing can happen through art. Though the artist is not physically present, they are present in the artwork and so the artwork acts as a communication tool through which the artist and the viewer can share an emotional experience. Theoretically, there are in turn several options, which range in their intentionality, whereby artist and viewer might connect.

Though the artist is not physically present, they are present in the artwork and so the artwork acts as a communication tool through which the artist and the viewer can share an emotional experience

EMOTION SHARING AND EMPATHY

1 **Starting from a perspective of the artist explicitly trying to communicate emotions through their art**
In this option, the assumption is that viewers can guess what emotions the artist is trying to convey. This represents a rather cognitive approach and is grounded in the idea that there are certain signs in artworks (e.g., people smiling) which the viewer can "read" as the artwork portraying a happy emotion. As such, the viewer is able to "read" the artists intentions (see also Gombrich & Saw, 1962, for an art historical argument). Though this can be paired with the viewer also feeling the emotion portrayed (e.g. happy) in the artwork, this not necessarily has to be the case. We can recognize emotions in others (or in art) without necessarily feeling the same. This is what is classically called *cognitive empathy*: the ability to recognize emotions in others.

2 **Starting from a perspective of the artist trying to make the audience feel certain emotions**
In this option, the assumption is that an artist can make the audience feel the desired emotions through their art. Much like the previous case, this does not necessarily mean that the viewer can also guess which emotion(s) the artist wants to communicate. The idea would just be that the audience feels the emotion(s) that the artist wants them to feel. This would typically be called *emotional empathy*: the ability to feel into someone or something else.

3 **Assuming a parallel process to emotion sharing in everyday life**
In this option, the assumption is that artists and viewers spontaneously share emotions, much like people cheering together in a stadium. This is generally referred to as *emotion sharing*.

None of these three options is exclusive, rather, they represent different kinds of emotional processes. The first two both require intentionality, on both the part of the artist as well as the viewer: the artist must try to communicate an emotion and the viewer must try to pick up this emotion, either cognitively (first option) or emotionally (second option). The third is spontaneous emotion sharing and lacks intentionality. It does not require the artist to try to communicate emotion nor of the viewer to try to pick up this emotion, it assumes that people will spontaneously do this without conscious effort or awareness. As noted, these three processes are not exclusive, but rather are complementary emotional processes. We know these differing processes happen when people interact with other people. Now, we propose that they also happen when people interact with other people through art.

PUTTING IT TO THE TEST

We tested this idea in Pelowski, Specker, et al. (2020). Though we were definitely not the first to propose the possibility for emotion sharing through art, nor the first to attempt to test it—

though only a few brave souls have attempted this task, see Kozbelt (2006)—our study can be considered as the first adequate test of this idea due to several limitations of previous work such as not including the artist in the design (all limitations outlined in detail in Pelowski, Specker, et al., 2020). We wanted to investigate the three main options outlined above: 1) Can viewers guess which emotion the artist wants to communicate?, 2) Do viewers feel the emotions the artist wants them to feel?, and 3) Do viewer and artist spontaneously share emotions?

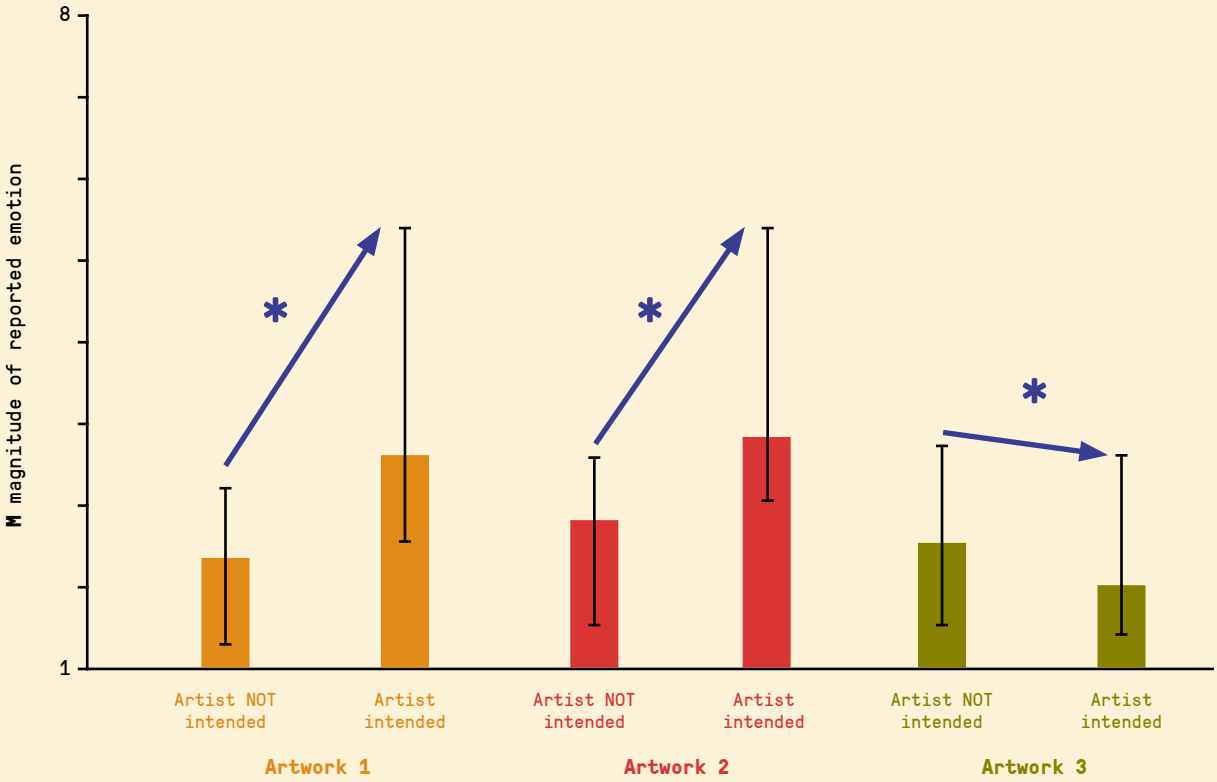
To test this, we asked three Master of Fine Arts (MFA) students of Florida State University (1 male, 2 female) to create one installation piece for a designated gallery space. When they finished the creation of the artwork, they filled out questionnaires on their own felt emotional experience when producing their artworks. Furthermore, they were also asked to identify which emotions they wanted the audience to feel. The artists reported different emotional intentions for their artworks. Artwork 1's artist suggested that they wanted others to feel happy, absorbed, moved, and awe. Artwork 2's artist noted stimulated, absorbed, moved, as well as anxiety, self-awareness, sense of being overwhelmed, chills, need to leave, loss of awareness, and shock. Artwork 3's artist noted a desired loss of awareness and a sense of brightness.

Afterwards all installation pieces were exhibited in the gallery space. During the exhibition, volunteers (37 in total) were recruited that reported on their felt emotions while interacting with the pieces, as well as their understanding of the artists intentions using the same questionnaire as was used to assess the artists. This procedure made it possible for us to match and compare the emotional experience of the artist to that of the viewer.

1 **Can viewers guess which emotion the artist wants to communicate?**
Yes! We assessed if viewers were able to correctly guess the emotions the artist tried to convey. As a first descriptive look at the data we looked at how often viewers guessed correctly: in this case meaning that both the artist and viewer indicated that the emotion was intended as well as that both the artist and the viewer indicated that the emotion was not intended. This led to a correct guess rate of 89.4% for Artwork 1, 73.4% for Artwork 2, and 89.6% for Artwork 3. To assess this statistically we used a sensitivity index (d') derived from signal detection theory, for each artwork and for each viewer. This measure (e.g., Dubal et al., 2014) accounts for participant differences in tendency to use "yes/no" as well as for differences in the number of artist-identified emotions between artworks. A d' score of 0 would represent total random guessing, meaning that a higher d' would indicate being better at guessing the artist intention. This analysis showed that viewers were good at guessing which emotions the artist tried to convey: mean d' for Artwork 1 = .78, mean d' for Artwork 2= .62, and mean d' for Artwork 3 = .63.

2 **Do viewers feel the emotions the artist wants them to feel?**
Yes! We assessed if viewers also felt the emotions the artist intended, apart from being able to guess the intended emotion. To do this we created an index of the magnitude of felt emotion (combined mean) for artist intended and artist not intended emotions per artwork. The results are illustrated in Figure 1. As can be seen, for Artwork 1 and 2 viewers felt intended emotions more than not intended emotions, however, for Artwork 3 this is not the case. This also nicely shows that being able to recognize an emotion does not mean that you also feel the emotion, since we know from the previous analysis that viewers were able to correctly guess the intended emotion of Artwork 3. Most likely, this suggests that making viewers actually feel emotions is rather hard to do and may be a marker of artwork quality.

GRAPH 1



3 **Do viewer and artist spontaneously share emotions?**
Yes! We assessed if besides being able to recognize and feel the intended emotions, viewers also spontaneously shared emotions with the artist. To do this we correlated the artists felt emotions while making the art with the viewers felt emotions while viewing the art as a proxy for similarity of emotional experience. This showed significant correlations for Artwork 1 (r=.574) and Artwork 2 (r=.378), and a smaller, non-significant correlation for Artwork 3 (r=.300). This indicates that artists and viewers most certainly spontaneously share emotions through artworks, however, it also shows that the degree to which artist and viewer share emotions depends on the artwork, which, again, may be a marker of artwork quality.

In general, our findings show that all three emotional processes happen when viewers are looking at art: viewers can recognize the emotions artists are trying to portray, viewers feel the emotions that artists are trying to make them feel more than other emotions, and viewers and artists spontaneously share emotions through art.

WHAT ABOUT PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS?

One caveat to our study is that the art used was made by art students rather than by professional artists, and therefore of lower quality than art shown in big museums or renowned galleries. This may make the art "too obvious" in its emotional intention which could mean that our findings would not be generalizable to a "real" museum setting. For this reason, we set out to repeat our experiment in a world-renowned setting: the Venice Biennale.

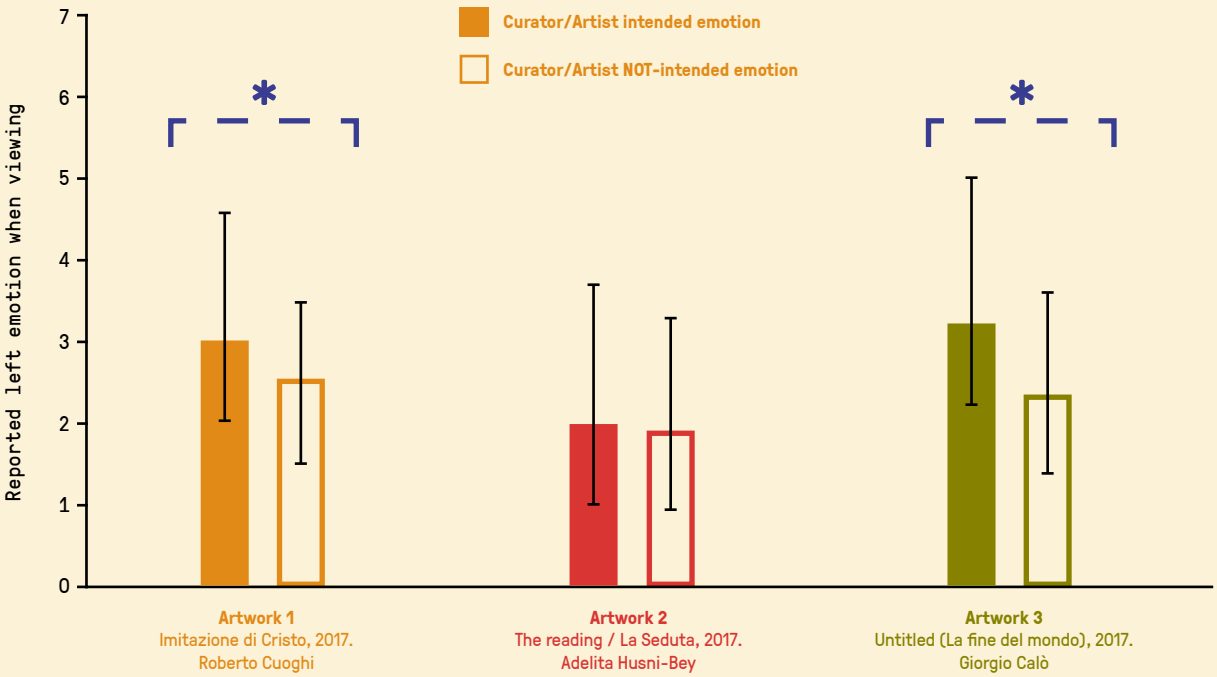
In this study (Pelowski, Specker, et al. 2022) we used three artworks exhibited in the Italian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2017. Unfortunately, we did not have access to the artists for

this study and, therefore, did not assess spontaneous emotion sharing. However, all three works— created by Giorgio Andreotta Calò, Roberto Cuoghi, and Adelita Husni-Bey—were commissioned for the Biennale to fit within a larger theme created by the curator (Cecilia Alemani). The exhibition was titled "Il Mondo Magico" (The Magical World), after a book with the same title by Ernesto de Martino, and had an overarching theme of magic and imagination. As written by Alemani (Biennale website: https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2017/italian-pavilion): "For the invited artists, magic is not an escape into the depths of irrationality but rather a new way of experiencing reality: it is a tool for inhabiting the world in all its richness and multiplicity. [...] Like the rituals described by Ernesto de Martino, the works of the three artists stage situations of crisis that are resolved through processes of aesthetic and ecstatic trans- figuration." Furthermore, in the catalogue, the specific emotional intention of each artwork was outlined in detail, which we used as our basis to identify which emotions were intended by the artists. Artwork 1 was intended to arouse feelings of mysticism, reverence, and fear. Artwork 2 was intended to arouse feelings of empowerment, self-awareness, and unease. Artwork 3 was intended to arouse feelings of vertigo, melancholy, and calm. The possibility of being able to identify the intended emotions, allowed us to assess if viewers could correctly guess the intention and also if they felt the intended emotions more.

To this aim, we recruited 113 participants (52 male, 60 female, 1 of non-binary gender identity) who were all visitors to the Biennale. Our results were comparable to our previous study. Again we found that viewers were able to correctly guess the intended emotion (d' = 0.487, correct guess rate = 79.2% for Artwork 1; d'=0.535, correct guess rate = 80.5% for Artwork 2; d'= 0.702, correct guess rate = 84.4% for Artwork 3). In addition, viewers also felt the intended emotions more (see Figure 2) than not intended emotions, though, again, only for two out of the three artworks.

Together, these two studies show that we can engage with art emotionally on varying levels creating a complex and rich emotional experience. However, in what other way can art engagement influence us? Can it also affect our emotional lives outside of an art context? Can it increase empathy and compassion in the world

GRAPH 2



as the Olafur Eliasson quote at the beginning of this chapter would have us believe?

CAN ART AFFECT OUR EMOTIONAL LIVES OUTSIDE OF THE ART CONTEXT?

Some preliminary findings would say: "Yes!". A recent study by Kou, Konrath, and Goldstein (2020) using data from nationwide surveys that are collected from representative samples in the US showed that consuming art (such as viewing visual art but also e.g. watching a dance performance) makes people more pro-social.[1] Even more impressively, they found that the amount of time people spent consuming art (at timepoint 1) could predict how pro-social people were 6 years later.

The authors did not find an influence of the type of art that people consumed (visual art, dance, literature, etc.) on pro-sociality. However, they did find that viewing art makes people more pro-social than making art. This may, at first hand, seem rather surprising: why would this be? We believe that the answer can be found in the previously discussed studies. Making art may require the artists to "dig into their soul" and then find a way to translate these emotions into art which can be an internally focused process. Viewing art, on the other hand, is necessarily a social process. It requires the viewer to try to understand the artist's message on a cognitive, emotional, or even unconscious level. This social act of viewing art may therefore lead to an increase in pro-sociality.

But, are there more ways in which art can "make us a better person"? Since this is a relatively new line of investigation, there is basically a lack of studies systematically investigating this question. A gap we have started to fill with a study conducted at the Dom Museum in Vienna in the summer of 2019 during the "Show me your wound" exhibition (Specker, Cotter, Speidel, Leder, & Pelowski, forthcoming). This exhibition focused on both physical as well as mental wounds. We assumed that this theme of vulnerability may be especially suited to test if art can make us better in terms of empathy, pro-sociality1, and reduced xenophobia. Though at the moment of writing we are still in the midst of analyzing the data, our preliminary results show that viewing the exhibition made people less xenophobic, but not more empathic or pro-social.

To conclude, we have tried to show in this chapter how art engagement can affect our emotional lives, inside and outside the gallery. Showing empirical support for the fact that art experience is a complex emotional experience that can have lasting benefits when we return from the gallery to our everyday lives.

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1 Pro-social behavior is defined by Wikipedia as "intent to benefit other people or society as a whole [..] such as helping, sharing, donating, co-operating, and volunteering."

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