

Art galleries as potential wellbeing centres of the future

How flow and perceptive experiences can improve negative emotions through slow looking at art

Maria Büter¹ & Rebecca Chamberlain²

Abstract

This research focuses on the effects of mindfully looking at art in a gallery setting, which was specially designed for taking time in front of artworks and slow-looking. The aims are to test whether a relationship between meditation, in the form of deep engagement through guides (printed guide or audio guide), and aesthetic experience persists and whether aesthetic experience, including flow and mindfulness, can predict emotional states. To investigate this, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire, including measurements of the named variables, after spending time in the “And Breathe” exhibition in Manchester Art Gallery and making use of potential guides. The retrieved data reveals no significant relationship between the use of guides and aesthetic experience, nor a significant link of mindfulness predicting positive emotions. However, results show a significant prediction of positive emotion change by two domains of aesthetic experience, perception, and flow. The present study provides theoretical implications for an elevated understanding of engagement with art in a museum setting and its possible benefits for well-being. Further research should investigate the potential prosperities which aesthetic experience and flow experiences may provide for a clinical setting.

Keywords: slow-looking, wellbeing, flow, mindfulness, art gallery, aesthetic experience

Kunstgalerien als potenzielle Orte des Wohlbefindens der Zukunft.

Wie Flow und wahrnehmende Erfahrungen negative Emotionen durch achtsames Betrachten von Kunst positiv beeinflussen können

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Studie befasst sich mit den Auswirkungen des achtsamen Betrachtens von Kunst in einer Galerie, die speziell für das Verweilen vor den Kunstwerken und für das langsame Betrachten („slow-looking“) von Kunst konzipiert wurde. Ziel ist es zu prüfen, ob eine Beziehung zwischen Meditation, welche durch zur Verfügung gestellte Guides (schriftlicher Guide oder Audioguide) unterstützt wurde, und ästhetischer Erfahrung besteht. Ferner stellt sich die Frage, ob ästhetische Erfahrung, einschließlich Flow und Achtsamkeit, emotionale Zustände vorhersagen kann. Um dies zu untersuchen, wurden die TeilnehmerInnen gebeten, einen Fragebogen auszufüllen. Dieser enthielt Messungen der genannten Variablen, nachdem sie Zeit in der Ausstellung „And Breathe“ in der Manchester Art Gallery verbracht und von den verschiedenen Guides Gebrauch gemacht hatten. Die gewonnenen Daten zeigen weder einen signifikanten Zusammenhang zwischen der Nutzung von Guides und der ästhetischen Erfahrung, noch einen signifikanten Zusammenhang zwischen Achtsamkeit und positiven Emotionen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen jedoch eine signifikante Vorhersage positiver Emotionsveränderungen durch zwei Bereiche der ästhetischen Erfahrung: Wahrnehmung und Flow. Die vorliegende Studie liefert theoretische Implikationen für ein erweitertes Verständnis der Beschäftigung mit Kunst in einem musealen Umfeld und deren möglichen Nutzen für das Wohlbefinden von

¹ Sigmund-Freud-PrivatUniversität Berlin, Fachrichtung Kunsttherapie

² Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London

BesucherInnen. Weitere Forschungen sollten die potenziellen Vorteile untersuchen, die ästhetische Erfahrungen und Flow-Erlebnisse in einem klinischen Umfeld bieten können.

Schlüsselwörter: Slow-looking, Wohlbefinden, Flow, Achtsamkeit, Kunstgalerie, ästhetische Erfahrung

Museums and galleries represent a vital part of our culture, providing cognitive stimulation and an opportunity to connect with diverse creative output, and are thus indispensable for entertainment and the education of citizens. For centuries, art exhibitions have been used to engage with the imagination and inspiration of artists and spectators, whilst simultaneously creating a peaceful environment, allowing us to step out of everyday life. Current figures from the British government indicate that 50.2 percent of the British population of 16 years and above has visited a museum at least once in the past year (“Visits to Museums and Galleries”, n.d.), suggesting that it is one of the most popular cultural activities. Art galleries and museums have long been acknowledged as a resource for stress reduction and relaxation. Already in 1903, the Artfund contributed to equip museums with additional art, as it was acknowledged as vital for society’s wellbeing. Recently, the UK government approved funding for general practitioners to arrange “social prescribing”, making it now possible for patients to be supported with seeking help in the community, to improve their wellbeing and mental health (NHS England > Social prescribing and community-based support, June 2020). Through social prescribing patients can now be referred to charitable services in the arts sector. With the growing demand for therapeutic interventions and spaces for wellbeing improvement, museums and art exhibitions of a varying kind could represent a new mental health resource.

Benefits of cultural engagement

Previous research indicated that visiting museums and engaging in cultural activities regularly has various benefits to health (Wheatly & Bickerton, 2017). Researchers drew data from the English Analysis of Ageing, which measured memory and semantic fluency from a baseline point and observed it over a ten-year period with adults over the age of 52 (Fancourt, Steptoe & Cadar, 2018). Results showed that visiting museums, galleries, or exhibition and engaging in other cultural activities predicted the preservation of cognitive functioning, with even annual visits being beneficial. Given that the sample was derived from a nationally representative study, the generalizability can be estimated as relatively high. Similar conclusions can be drawn from related studies using a large sample size from the same data, following adults over a ten-year

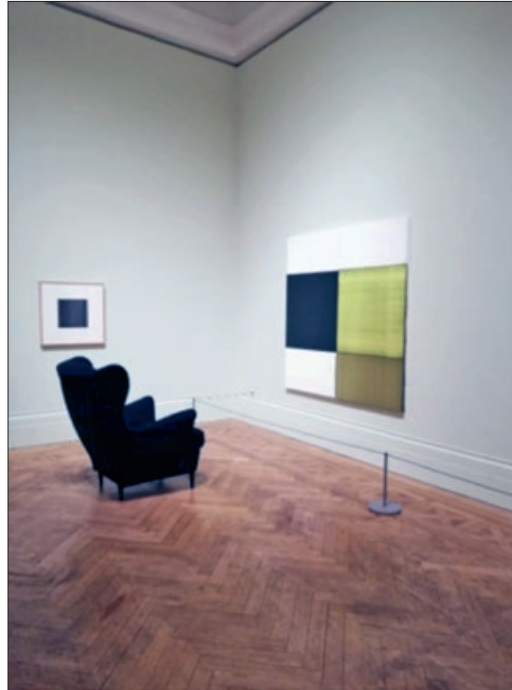


Figure 1

period. Cultural engagement seems to be an independent risk-reducing variable for developing depression in older age, with a lowered risk of astonishing 48 percent for adults who engaged with culture at least once a month and 32 percent lowered risk for adults who engage every few months in cultural activities (Fancourt & Tymoszuk, 2019). Cultural attendance additionally appears to lower the incidence rate of dementia compared to less-frequent visiting museums and galleries (Fancourt, Steptoe & Cadar, 2018). Findings even indicate that a link between regular engagement with receptive art activities and a 31 percent lowered early mortality risk exists (Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019). A recent study investigated the differences of short-term, repeated, and sustained engagement with visual arts in museums and found evidence for sustained engagement being associated with greater wellbeing and frequent and sustained engagement being associated with higher reported happiness, life satisfaction, self-realization and self-control in adults over 50 (Tymoszuk, Perkins, Spiro, Williamon & Fancourt, 2020). The relationship is independent of social and cultural capital and socio-economic status and partly but not wholly explainable through health-related and social time-varying factors (Wang, Mak & Fancourt, 2020). Furthermore, the health benefits of engaging in cultural activities can be explained through risk-reducing and health-promoting