



Role of Context to Perceive or Understanding Art

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ABSTRACT: ‘Context’ in your drawings and artwork provide visual links that helps us to fully understand what your art is about. A drawing or painting may be beautiful without us knowing its context – we can enjoy the emotive colour, the energising mark-making, the lyrical shapes and patterns, etc. However, its full meaning will not be fully appreciated without us being able to ‘read’ the visual links or clues you have included. Knowing something about the making of the drawing can also help. If you are a beginner don’t even think about context as it will get in the way. Too much thinking inhibits creative flow – draw first, make art, experiment, try things out, find out what you love to draw, have fun. Understanding and building the context within your art comes with time, with reflection, through talking and discussing, with making links between your art and everything else that is going on in your life. Keeping a sketchbook is important and can help you to develop a deeper awareness of the contextualisation of your art. These are the visual clues in your drawings and paintings that help us understand its deeper meaning. Not every kind of context is relevant to every artwork, but the kind of things that are useful to know about are;

- The impact the artist’s feelings, emotions and physical abilities had on the making of the drawing.
- The wider influences of location, landscape, weather, geography, etc that influenced the making of the drawing.
- The wider set of beliefs that the artist shares with their community; their heritage, faith, culture and the influence this may have had in the making of the drawing.
- The influence other creative artists, authors, musicians, thinkers have had in shaping the ideas held by the artist that may have influenced the drawing.

As an artist, you don’t need to be bothered by these things – they can find their way into your drawings and art automatically. But to enable your art to develop and grow you need to deepen your awareness of what it is you are trying to say as an artist. What is your art about? If you begin to question why you make your drawings, paintings and sculptures more deeply, you may start asking yourself, “What are the contextual links in my drawings that will guide people to having a deeper understanding of my art

KEYWORDS: context, art, perceive, understanding, drawing, painting, artist, creative, sculptures, shaping

INTRODUCTION

Drawings that only have visual links to your personal experiences – remain isolated from the wider world – they remain personal to you, the artist that made them, and although everyone is able to enjoy and appreciate your art, it is difficult for people who do not know you to fully understand your art.

- These artworks have a narrow context.¹
- This isn’t a problem if you are making art just for yourself for enjoyment and a hobby.

Artworks that have visual links to things beyond your own personal experience, to the things in your life that have influenced what you do – are outward looking. They connect your personal experience to wider culture, politics, creative ideas of other artists and thinkers, etc! It makes your personal experience more understandable to other people because they are able to piece together the visual links and clues you have provided in your drawings, either consciously or unconsciously, to gain a deeper understanding of what your art is all about.²

- These artworks have a richer or wider context.
- More people will more deeply understand, enjoy, and appreciate what your drawings, paintings and sculpture are all about.³



Specific to artwork, context consists of all of the things about the artwork that might have influenced the artwork or the maker (artist) but which are not actually part of the artwork. Contextual information can deepen and/or improve our understanding of an artwork. With some additional contextual information about the time, the culture, and the maker/artist of an artwork, we can become more informed. All artworks exist in a context—more accurately, all artworks exist in multiple contexts.⁴

Historical context

Time is the most basic and first context we consider. When we say, “When in time?” the question is also related to where in time.

Artist Context

Though this kind of context is often ignored in more recent trends of visual research, the context for the artist or creator includes:⁵

- Their culture (where they grew up; family values; etc.).
- Their place; geography (e.g., city, rural, home, traveling).
- Their personal perspective or “worldview,” aspects unique to their identity.⁶

Viewing context

Context also has to do with the viewing experience. The context of display or where we encounter an image or artwork is crucial to the meanings it accrues (Rose 127). Consider, how is the experience viewing a masterwork, like a painting by Caravaggio, hanging in a museum versus seeing a digital representation of the same painting on a personal computer in one’s home—different? You go to a museum specifically with the intention to view artwork. Are their specific social practices you engage in a museum that impact your experience? For example, we typically comport ourselves quietly in a museum, looking intently as we move from one artwork to the next. Presumably, this social practice is intended to encourage contemplation. There are also texts on the walls of museums like an artwork’s title, and sometimes captions. Reading these may direct our experience of the artwork. Being in front of the actual work, rather than a copy, imbues the work with certain aura as the object the artist actually touched and created. At home, we are in a more casual setting without specific conventions of behavior. Though we are looking at the same artwork, we know we are looking at a copy. The context of where and how an image or artwork is received can impact what affect it has on us.⁷

Art has the ability to stand on its own with little need for description or explanation. It can have a profound impact on the viewer, who interacts with the artwork in the context of his or her own experiences. But while art has this ability, how much more powerful is it when you understand the story behind the piece? Curating an art collection within its context allows for a unified experience for the viewer. Whether you’re in public, an office or a hotel, understanding the broader context gives new meaning to pieces that can begin to speak to one another and play off of the larger story of the space⁸. For the newly opened H Hotel in Los Angeles, context is everything. Far from your typical LAX airport hotel, H Hotel is distinctively modern, with an art collection, curated by NINE dot ARTS, that embodies the spirit of aviation. Rooted in fun and nostalgia, the art applauds the magnificence of air travel, what it means to our culture and possibilities for the future. Exploring air travel through both historical and contemporary lenses, the collection examines the science, fashion, work, and adventure aspects of flight, and features work from Los Angeles-based artists as well as others around the country. For instance, photographs of iconic Los Angeles buildings such as Fred Segal, La Brea Psychic, Century Plaza Towers and Valentino by Denver-based photographer⁹ Paul Brokering line the seating area in the north lobby. Known for his aerial photography, L.A.-based artist Jeffrey Milstein documented a series of airports from coast to coast. Haunting and gorgeous, his LAX 4, in the library, shows a terminal at one of the nation’s largest airports. San Antonio-based artist Patti Ortiz’s rose gold paper airplanes, which resemble a flock of birds, gracefully lead visitors from the lobby towards the restaurant and bar¹⁰. Commissioned after a piece at Denver International Airport, this is the only other planes work by this artist in the world. In the coffee bar, the art by L.A.-based Jim Darling features abstracted landscape scenes through the windows of a plane. Spaced similarly to those on an actual jetliner, the works, made through layers of carved wood, imitate the through-a-portal view of a passenger. The



collection even incorporates found historical objects from the golden age of aviation. The resulting art program creates a modern, chic experience that is at once approachable and refined for hotel guests and staff alike.¹¹

II.DISCUSSION

The various lenses—ethical, political, sexual, religious, and so forth—through which we may view art are often instrumental in giving us an appreciation of the work. In *Art in Context: Understanding Aesthetic Value*,¹² philosopher David Fenner presents a straightforward, accessible overview of the arguments about the importance of considering the relevant context in determining the true merit of a work of art. *Art in Context* is a systematic, historically situated, and historically evidenced attempt to demonstrate the importance of considering contexts that will, in the vast majority of cases, increase the aesthetic experience. While focusing on distance, detachment, aestheticism, art for art's sake, and formalism can at times be instructive and interesting, such approaches risk missing the larger and often central issue of the piece. Based on the findings of philosophers and critics¹³, and on artwork throughout history, *Art in Context* provides a solid foundation for understanding and valuing a work of art in perspective as well as within the particular world in which it exists. It is well-established that context affects aesthetic experience and that investigations in authentic and ecologically-valid settings such as art museums are important in empirical aesthetics. Since the seminal work studies in empirical aesthetics conducted in naturalistic settings have proliferated, afforded by new methods and techniques that have become available.¹⁴ Furthermore, in recent times the way we engage with art has changed dramatically, owing to the proliferation and accessibility of digital information sources and online art repositories. According to art institutions nowadays use digital platforms as the main place of information distribution about exhibitions and other art events. Museum websites and image repositories of their collections have become an extension of the museum, thus allowing people from around the globe to have access to images of the artworks. It argues that technology also provides solutions to contemporary issues, such as art gallery exhibition and storage space limitations by creating virtual environments with an infinite exhibition and storage capacity¹⁵. In fact, museums have not only created repositories of their collections visitors can scroll through when looking at works of art in the traditional way, but virtual exhibitions, where avatars mimic navigation in real museums, have become popular in recent years. For example, museums such as the Louvre, the Guggenheim (NYC), and the British Museum, among others, provide 3D tours of temporary and permanent shows on their websites. The University of Hamburg developed a virtual replica of Alt-Segeberg Bürgerhaus museum that enables people to visit the museum by using a virtual reality headset remotely, which aims to provide a more “real” experience that includes body movements in the tour. Finally, the Google Art Project (GAP) is an ambitious long-term venture that aims to digitize at the highest possible resolution museum collections from all over the world.¹⁶ In 2011, Beth Harris, the director of Digital Learning at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, argued that the GAP will help make the art experience more pleasant by avoiding “crowds, physical fatigue and self-consciousness”. In summary, it is clear that digital availability of artworks has a substantial presence in the art field, making it important to continue investigating contextual factors in aesthetic experience and engagement with artworks in contexts ranging from museums and laboratories to tablets and cell phones.¹⁷

A comprehensive review of studies comparing the experience of museum-based art to that of digital reproductions in the laboratory noted a number of important contextual effects. For example, artworks are rated as more “immediate” and “pleasant” when viewed in museums and, conversely, viewers perceive artworks displayed on computer screens as less interesting, less arousing, more ambiguous and less memorable than the same works exhibited in the gallery.¹⁸ Different presentation contexts have also been reported to result in different viewing behaviors. Empirical studies utilizing mobile eye-tracking have reported longer viewing times, as well as more widespread distribution of fixations, for artworks viewed in the museum context compared to the digital reproduction in laboratory.¹⁹ However, the differences in art experience in different contexts are not always as pronounced. For example, found significant differences across different contexts evident in only four of the 16 rating scales (sparse-dense, distant-immediate, similar-contrasting, and unpleasant pleasant). The evaluations related to physical, structural and compositional characteristics of artworks were virtually indistinguishable across presentation formats. In subsequent studies, and found that the ratings of symmetry, heterogeneity,²⁰ randomness, complexity and clutter were very similar across the original and different reproduction formats (ranging from slide projections to postcards) and did not differ between naïve and more sophisticated viewers. Based on these results, proposed the notion of “pictorial sameness” and argued that under some conditions, the reproduction can be as perceptually valuable as the original, with the viewers exhibiting “facsimile accommodation” and the ability to “look beyond” the limitations of the medium.²¹ The facsimile accommodation hypothesis notwithstanding, were careful to emphasize that the reproduction of a painting is not the same as the original, and that the authentic art context certainly has the potential to enhance the art appreciation. Though extremely plausible, this assertion was tested by who noted that in most of the studies of contextual effects on art experience, the effects of genuineness (authenticity or originality) and context were confounded in that participants always view the genuine artworks in museums and the reproductions in the laboratory.²² In an attempt to dissociate the



effect of genuineness from the physical context they tested liking, interest, arousal, valence and understanding of both genuine and reproduced artworks in both gallery and laboratory. Surprisingly, they found that neither physical context, nor genuineness had an effect on participants' evaluations of artworks and argued that the inconsistencies across studies could be related to the differences in the nature of materials used across different studies (i.e., photographs vs. conceptual installations; thematic focus of the entire exhibition etc.) and personal relevance of the work to the observer (not always high or meaningful to often used psychology students).²³

What Causes Difference in Art Experience and Viewing Patterns in Different Contexts? The many reported differences in the experience and engagement with art between the museum and laboratory contexts play an important role in recent claims regarding the gap between empirical aesthetic science and aesthetic experience. Given that most aesthetic research is still conducted in laboratories without access to real artworks, overlooking the contribution of context in which art is typically experienced and appreciated,²⁴ it is becoming increasingly important to be able to identify the most influential factors associated with different contexts. Of course, this is not an easy task, since a myriad of particular characteristics define different contexts and differences between them. In a comprehensive review of the characteristics of museum experience, there are three broad groups: (1) features of the artwork; (2) characteristics of the viewer; and (3) characteristics of the presentation context. Features of artworks comprise both physical (size, texture, physical presence, and remnants of the artist's touch and effort) and perceived features (seeing objects as "art" and perceived authenticity).²⁵ Characteristics of the viewer include personal characteristics such as age, wealth, art expertise, motivations and expectations and group characteristics such as group size and between group differences. Finally, characteristics of the presentation context include physical and cultural aspects of the museum, display/hanging, frame, lighting, art labels, furniture, movement, viewing distance, viewing time and museum fatigue. While all of these factors might be contributing to differences between art experience in museum and other contexts, to date,²⁶ the majority of them have remained underexplored. In addition, the majority of studies to date have compared museum and laboratory contexts by aggregating the measures of art experience and viewing behavior across all artworks under consideration, even though the artworks may vary in a number of important physical characteristics, without providing a finer-grained analysis of the role these characteristics play in both the museum and laboratory contexts.²⁷

III. RESULTS

The museum component of this study was conducted in a room containing 20th-century Australian artworks at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Sydney, Australia. The two important issues that we aim to explore in this study are the effect of the context on viewing behavior (i.e., museum vs. laboratory) and the influence of characteristics of the artwork on viewing behavior in both contexts.²⁸ While studies considering the experience of artworks in different contexts often utilize the explicit ratings of artworks to directly measure various aspects of aesthetic experience, we opted to focus on the viewing behavior as an index of spontaneous engagement with such objects. Preferential looking at artworks in an exhibition space is not only a defining feature of an art museum visit but, arguably, can be taken as an immediate and objective index of our engagement with such objects. This idea is not only central to the preferential looking paradigm in general, but has also received support in the aesthetics domain.²⁹ The fine-grained analysis of precisely what and how participants look at art exhibits still remains a topic of enormous theoretical and practical interest, especially for visitor-centered art institutions such as art museums and galleries. While it has been well-established that allocation of attention in any physical context is a complex interplay between "top down" (viewer-centered) and "bottom up" (stimulus-driven) factors, our approach is aligned with the attempts to explore the role of physical, statistical properties in the perception of and interaction with images, including artworks. The physical characteristics of the artworks considered were physical size, and image statistical properties such as Fourier amplitude spectrum, fractal dimension and entropy. All these are general physical characteristics of objects and images known to be effective in capturing attention. The present study explores the viewing behavior of gallery visitors freely viewing paintings with a particular focus on how the aspects of viewing behavior, including viewing distance and eye gaze measures such as fixation count, total fixation duration and average fixation duration are affected by the artworks' physical characteristics including physical size and image statistics properties. While the studies of visitor behavior in museums have acknowledged that larger artworks are generally more effective in attracting and holding attention relatively few studies have systematically investigated the effect of physical size on aesthetic evaluation.³⁰ One of the rare exceptions is a recent study by who found that merely altering physical scale of a painting (small vs. large) influenced aesthetic judgment. Participants evaluated larger reproductions more positively, regardless of whether the painting was high in complexity (Picasso's Three Musicians) or low (Joan Miro's Blue II). The physical size of artworks has also been found to affect viewing distance. Painters varied the size of projected art images and asked their participants to choose the distance from which either the artworks "look best" or felt the most comfortable. While there was considerable variability in the preferred viewing distance, all participants chose to view the larger artworks from a



greater distance, regardless of instruction. Moreover, Clarke et al. also found that viewing time increased with the projection size but there was no effect of either stimulus size or viewing distance on ratings of how pleasant or interesting the artwork appeared. More recently, in a real art gallery setting, Carbon confirmed a high positive correlation between the artwork size and viewing distance: the larger the artwork, the greater the viewing distance observed.³¹

Despite the apparent heterogeneity and even randomness, artworks, like natural scenes, have characteristic, and regular structure related to the degree of spatial redundancy they exhibit. The spatial redundancy is related to the extent to which the surface properties at any locations can be predicted by the known values at nearby locations, and is intimately coupled with the notions of both spatial information and the scale-invariant, fractal-like properties of both artworks and natural scenes (. Here we use three widely-known indices of spatial redundancy: the Fourier spatial frequency amplitude spectrum ($1/f_a$), fractal dimension (FD), and Shannon Entropy (SE).³²

The Fourier amplitude spectrum measures the relative contribution of different spatial frequencies in an image as whole. In particular, the slope “alpha” of the $1/f_a$ amplitude spectrum quantifies contribution of coarse spatial structure (low spatial frequency) vs. fine spatial detail (high spatial frequency) in an image and has a value of approximately 1 for both natural scenes and artworks . This particular property of natural scenes and artworks is taken to reflect the scale-invariance of natural scenes, or the notion that approximately equivalent amount of spatial structure exists at different spatial scales. Images with high values of a contain a higher degree of similarity in luminance intensity across image regions and thus a higher degree of spatial redundancy and predictability of intensity variations across an image. Conversely, images with low values of a are associated with a higher degree of intensity variations and thus lower predictability of intensity variations across an image.³³

The scale invariance of spatial patterns can also be expressed by a geometric scaling parameter known as the fractal dimension (FD) which can be used to describe and quantify patterns which exhibit self-similarity in geometrical-spatial structure at different levels of magnification . Fractal dimension (FD) measures the degree to which a pattern is broken up (or fractured) into a finer and finer spatial structure. Images containing coarse spatial structures with lack of fine spatial detail are associated with low FD values, whereas images with high levels of intricate and fine spatial detail would have high FD values. FD is inversely related to the slope a of the Fourier amplitude spectrum (higher a values are equivalent to low FD values and vice versa) and the relationship between them has been both established mathematically and validated empirically .³⁴

Shannon entropy (SE) measures the degree to which an image or a spatial form vary unpredictably, or randomly and is inversely related to the notion of spatial redundancy .Those images which vary highly unpredictably (or randomly) have a high SE value (or low redundancy), or conversely, images with similar intensity values across the spatial extent would have a low SE value (or high redundancy).Our selection of these measures of statistical structure was motivated as follows. Firstly, these measures have been used to investigate and characterize the spatial structure of a wide range of different artworks with findings indicating a remarkable similarity in Fourier-based image statistics of artworks from different regions or time periods . Most recently, a longitudinal statistical study by showed that FD and SE remained relatively stable over a period of 500 years, from the 14th–19th century, with marked variations coinciding with the beginning of the Modern Art movement.³⁵

More importantly, all three measures exemplify the objective measures of complexity, a notion that belongs amongst the most influential in empirical aesthetics: from concept of the aesthetic middle to the Birkhoff (1933) definition of beauty as the ratio of an object’s order (simplicity) and its complexity, and modeling of the relationship between complexity and preference as an inverted U-shape. Our own work and that of others has established that variations in fractal dimension and/or Fourier amplitude spectrum characteristics are highly correlated with the perceived complexity of both synthetic and art images as well as preference for those images . However, there has been a relative paucity of investigations into the influence of image statistics properties on engagement with artworks in museum settings.³⁶

IV.CONCLUSIONS

Artworks are often analyzed or classified as belonging to a particular style, typically based on a period, country, cultural group, or art movement. In addition to these predominantly art historical considerations, different art movements are often associated with distinctive visual qualities, which in turn can be associated with their physical features and statistical properties . Our study location, a single room in the 20th-century Australian Art section of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney afforded the opportunity to consider painting styles, non-Indigenous and



Indigenous Australian, as an additional characteristic of interest to our study. However, we want to emphasize that these groupings are based on the available sample of artworks, and do not intend to suggest that either group is homogeneous in style or symbolism. For example the Indigenous grouping includes famous works from the Western and Central desert regions and styles and non-Indigenous includes figurative and abstract works.³⁷

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