Values vs Emotions: How Artworks 'Move Us' to Change

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ABSTRACT. While there is a widespread assumption that exposure to artworks such as literature, visual art, film or theater tends to broaden people's perspectives regarding certain issues, how artworks move us to reconsider our beliefs is under-theorised. This paper assesses three explanations. 1) The Cognitive Processing Theory claims that artworks change people's minds by presenting unfamiliar or complicated information in a palatable manner. 2) The Emotion Inducing Theory proposes that artworks arouse emotions that make people receptive to new ideas, thus inspiring them to reconsider prior beliefs. 3) The Engaged Values Theory asserts that people are likely to reconsider ideas they might otherwise reject so long as artworks engage their core values, even those that have yet to be specified. This problem resembles our wondering why we aesthetically appreciate some artworks, though not others. Is it: the reasons offered for appreciating an object, concurrent emotions, an object's particular aesthetic properties, or something about it that appeals to our values? Such situations also resemble "moral education," such that artworks influence morality. However, my focus here is not how artworks prompt us to appreciate them or to do good, but rather how artworks get us to think differently, thus motivating us to modify our actions so that our future actions reflect our newfound beliefs. If we can grasp how artworks change our minds and alter our behaviours, perhaps we can begin to understand how philosophy stands to change our minds.

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Of Practical Concern

Although an artwork's success as art hardly depends on its capacity to change people's minds, we must admit that many art-historically significant artworks have done just this. Universities and communities host galleries because exhibitions proffer forums that grant diverse audiences access to perspectives they may not encounter otherwise. I have in mind anti-war images such as the hundreds of paintings exhibited in "1917" (2012) at Centre Pompidou-Metz. While these artworks, all created in the waning years of WWI, cannot be credited with having ended WWI, they certainly convey war's atrocities, as well as the fatigue brought about by incessant distress. Moreover, museums are filled with artworks that have succeeded in getting visitors to reconsider what counts as fine art. Here I have in mind artworks ranging from Duchamp's readymades and Dada *objet trouvé* to Pop Art, Flux kits, conceptual art, feminist performance art, and land art. Since the 1990s, artworks have energised people to empathise with people suffering from HIV/AIDS, handicapped people, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous people, as well as existential threats such as racism, sexism, power grabs, and economic inequity. No doubt, Guerrilla-Girls campaigns have persuaded gallerists and curators to include more women artists in their programming.

Moreover, art exhibitions organised to address climate change have flooded museums across the world. To name a few, there was "Climate Change" (2008) American Museum of Natural History, New York, US; "Rethink: Contemporary Art & Climate Change" (2009), National Gallery of Denmark plus two others, Copenhagen, DK; "Expo 1: New York" (2013) at MoMA/PS1, Long Island City, US; Søren Dahlgaard, "Maldives Exodus Caravan Show" (2013-present); "Hybridizing Earth: Discussing Multitude" (2016), Busan Biennale, Seoul, KR; "Sublime: The Tremors of the Earth" (2016), Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, FR; "Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capability to Destroy: Mare Nostrum" (2019), Chiesa di Santa Maria della Penitenti, Venice, IT; Ocean Space (2019-present), Venice, IT; "Weather Report: Forecasting the Future" (2019), Nordic Pavilion, Venice, IT; "Seeing Climate Change: Diane Burko, 2002-2021" (2021), American University Museum, Washington, D.C., US; "Reclaim the Earth" (2022), Palais de Tokyo, Paris, FR, "Still Present!" (2022), Berlin Biennale, Berlin, DE; "Our Ecology" (2023), Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, JP, among scores more.

In fact, TBA-21 Academy "successfully lobbied the European Commission to allocate 300 million euros of their climate budget proposal for the EU towards funding relevant cultural initiatives, successfully making the case that facts are unfortunately not enough to inspire both structural and behavioral changes and that culture has an important role in educating and motivating people, government and big business" (Reymann, 2021).

What do institutions that mount exhibitions of artworks to address climate change aim to achieve? Is it sufficient that members of the public experience the novel genre known as "eco-art" a merger of land art and eco-feminism? Is it simply that museums are finally exhibiting eco-art, having neglected this genre for decades due to its obviously "purposeful" aims? Are museums attempting to change people's habits? If so, how do they envision this transpiring? Rather than strategise how exhibitions can be used to manipulate people's actions, I aim to correctly assess how artworks motivate people to alter their perspectives. Aesthetics ought to be able to accurately depict how art moves people to shift their attitudes. I next explore three possible explanations for how this happens.

Cognitive Processing

1) Artworks change people's minds by presenting unfamiliar or complicated information in a palatable manner.

Originally, it was thought that people simply lacked accurate information. If only there were more science writers to explain climate change, evolution or vaccines, then people would naturally "fall in line," and accept scientifically-proven truths. As it turns out, climate-change deniers are more likely to identify carbon dioxide's role as the source of global warming than climate-change believers (Kahan, 2015). Similarly, people who don't believe in evolution are typically capable of explaining how evolutionary processes work. Despite deniers capably explaining ideas, they still don't accept them as true. Even when people have their facts straight, their beliefs don't change unless they realize that the new situation aligns with their values. Similarly, beliefs about what

counts as beautiful or a degraded site's potential for remediation remain intact until people realize that their beliefs and their values are incoherent (Spaid, 2020b, p. 170).

Psychologists are especially interested in why people deny climate change, despite the evidence. One study has shown that white, conservative "confident" males are most likely to be climate skeptics (Pyper, 2011). A second study suggests a correlation between climate denial and the denial of racism (Kendi, 2019), while a third found that the "endorsement of free-market economics and a propensity for conspiratorial thinking are contributing factors to the rejection of science" (Lewandowsky, 2014). Incidentally, *Frontiers in Psychology*, which published Stephan Lewandowsky peer-reviewed 2013 paper that described the relationship between climate denial and conspiracy-theory acceptance, was forced to take down his paper due to libel threats from climate deniers (McKewon, 2014).

More recent research challenges a psychological mechanism known as "motivated reasoning," such that "individuals bend facts to maintain a positive self-image especially when faced with the guilt of contributing to climate change through actions like frequent flying" (Study Finds Staff, 2024). Florian Zimmerman, the economist who led this study remarks, "Our data does reveal some indications of a variant of motivated reasoning, specifically that denying the existence of human-made global heating forms part of the *political identity* of certain groups of people" (Study Finds Staff, 2024, emphasis added). This outcome affirms the three earlier studies. If our political identities motivate our reasons, then our personal identities (the sum of our core values) drive our actions. Values are known to "shape factual beliefs across an array of phenomenon" (Pyper, 2011). Eager to point out that cognitive mechanisms are hardly unique to conservatives, Donald Braman adds, "If it's conservative white males on global warming, pick a different issue and you'll find another group [with different values] that has trouble thinking in a way that agrees with experts" (Pyper, 2011).

There is yet another aspect of cognitive processing that deserves scientific attention, since it could explain why visual art, though not scientific papers, is especially suited for engaging people whose political identities prevent them from accepting climate change. Researchers working on hate speech have coined the term "hate reading," such that reading online comments prompts angry responses. It thus seems that written words are a terrible way to transmit controversial information.

I imagine climate deniers responding better to visual experiences free from information or emotional baggage. When German children were shown a short silent video of a snowman melting under the warm afternoon sun, they had the greatest galvanic response (skin sensations) and rated it the most pleasant, whereas they remembered the video accompanied by an emotionally-charged soundtrack. By contrast, the video featuring factual information had the greatest response in terms of heart-rate and breath, yet the children rated it least pleasant and barely remembered it (Massumi 2015, pp. 83-84). This suggests that people get more pleasure from images, while words pump them up; a point that might also explain adults' heated reactions to websites that invite them to read and/or contribute commentary (Spaid, 2024).

Perhaps the very act of assessing what others have written or said triggers negative responses. It's thus rather fortunate that ambiguous artworks serve as terrible editorials. According to Markus Reymann, director and co-founder of Ocean Space in Venice, IT, "Experiences—not facts or data—are more likely to challenge and change our behavior. Hard facts are important but what matters most, in terms of affecting change, is what moves us on a personal level" (Reymann). While I concur with him, I still wonder which aspect of the experience changes people's minds: nonlinguistic formats, induced emotions or engaged values.

Emotion Inducing

2) Artworks arouse emotions that make people receptive to new ideas, thus inspiring them to reconsider prior beliefs.

Once people realised that information fails to alter people's perspectives, they started focusing on art's capacity to trigger emotions, thanks in part to Jesse Prinz's Affective Theory of Appreciation, which states "When we appreciate [art]works, the appreciation consists in an emotional response" (Prinz, 2011, p. 71). His two-stage model includes "response" and "assessment," both of which engender "pop-up thoughts." Not only is his view uncontested, but it seems to have spurred a cottage industry in aesthetics focused on art's emotional punch. One reason he focuses on emotions is that he considers measuring people's emotions (eye tracking, skin conductance, heart rate and

brain activity) easier than knowing what they believe. Prinz remarked how "Differences in taste are easier to pin on differences in *passions* rather than difference in beliefs – it's far from clear what the related beliefs would be" (2011, p. 74, emphasis added). And indeed, the surfeit of neuroaesthetics labs has made pinpointing emotions remarkably easy.

I worry, however, that lab research tests tend to over-emphasise emotions, since they conflate subjective responses with aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, people's positive emotional responses rather reflect familiarity, priming, and preferences, though not necessarily aesthetic appreciation, which takes years, not seconds. To demonstrate emotion's limitations, I cite the results of Volker Kirchberg and Martin Tröndle's research project *eMotion* (2015), funded by the Swiss government. Following this five-year-long research project, they identified three "exhibition types": social, enthusing, and contemplative. Apparently, only enthusing spectators exhibit emotional responses. In fact, the contemplative types, those most likely to control and organise the artworld, fail to display any emotional responses to art, which definitely downplays the significance of emotion for appreciating art, though perhaps not remembering. But as the climate- and evolution-denier examples show, remembering is not enough.

According to Bruun et al. (2009), "It might be the case that although emotions do not themselves represent or present values, they are nevertheless associated with some sort of intentional relation to values…. Emotions should therefore be described as reactions to *felt* danger, injustice or other values or to what seems to be the felt danger of objects, the felt injustice of situations, etc.." This view sounds right, since emotions seem to *signal* values (Spaid, 2020a, p. 123). Just as our personal identities (sum of core values) drive our actions, our values motivate our emotional responses. For example, it seems that people who spontaneously flare up fail to value harmony.

Engaged Values

3) People are likely to reconsider ideas they might otherwise reject so long as artworks engage their core values, even those that have yet to be specified.

During the fall of 2022, the National Academy of Sciences in Washington D.C. (in collaboration with Leonardo, the International Society for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology) hosted a zoom conference titled "Art, Empathy, and Climate Change," whose goal was to figure out how artworks such as panelist Diane Burko's "glacier paintings" convince people that climate change is real. Given this symposium's title, the organisers' working assumption was that art's capacity to provoke empathy inspires people to take climate change seriously. In framing art as provoking empathy, the organisers presumed emotional responses cause people to change.

While the panelists on screen chatted confidently about the role of emotions, I was busy in the chat room, drumming up conversations regarding how artworks inspire people to identify their values, what Noë terms the "reorientation," which "changes *what* we are" (2023, pp. 33-34, emphasis added). Moreover, artworks *surreptitiously* expose people to alternative values. Moreover, values drive emotions, though not the other way around, as those focused on emotions have claimed. For example, Burko's paintings that depict shrinking glaciers over time invite people to think about climate change's impact on the environment. I would imagine that people who don't care a whit about nature or are climate-deniers are unlikely to give either Burko's "glacier paintings" or her "melting iceberg" paintings the time of day. But let's say climate skeptics incidentally find her painting technique curious or her imagery mysterious, so they stop for a few minutes to explore what's going on. If their minds are "already made up," they are likely to have a negative emotional response once they assess what's happening. However, if this experience leads them to admit that glacier shrinking is occurring more rapidly than they initially thought, they may feel compelled to alter their beliefs to reflect their family values. Should they adopt an environmental value, they may find themselves opting to fly less or relying more on public transportation. As Noë puts it, "[T]he act of thinking, looking, and talking about what you see changes what you know and see. After this labor, now you can finally see" (p. 106). "The real work of aesthetics is precisely the adjustment of the values" (p. 109). Moreover, "We enact values in bringing the world into focus; we change our values as we struggle to do so" (p. 110).

More often than not, our actions *alert us* to our values. According to Quassim Cassam (2014), our beliefs remain opaque to us until we act on them. The *eMotion* survey suggests that appreciative attitudes track core or emergent values. For example, some people are driven to

construe otherwise ineffable artworks, while others believe that creativity itself must be protected at all costs. As Kevin Melchionne notes, thoughts can be disconnected from objects under reflection (Spaid, 2020a, pp. 129-130). In "Emotions and Empirical Aesthetics" (2020), I proposed that emotional responses signal values, but they are not *sine qua non*. For sure, appreciative attitudes prove key, yet it remains unclear what drives them. Is it beauty, priming, familiarity, emotions, reasons, or values? (Spaid, 2020a, p. 129). Not only did I conclude that "What people go to bat for is what they truly value, and thus appreciate" (Spaid 2020a: 130), but I recommended that researchers track the connection between aesthetic appreciation and values, which motivate emotions. I wrote, "Rather than look for a connection between appreciative attitudes and 'strong positive emotions', researchers should track the connection between aesthetic appreciation and values, which coheres with eMotion's findings." In that same paper, I suggested that people's beliefs change either because their values have changed or their beliefs no longer cohere with their values. As a result, people act differently (Spaid, 2020a, p. 130).

My 2020 view was shaped by Kirchberg and Tröndle's 2015 paper. They seemed to attribute visitors' evaluations to core values, though not necessarily emotional responses; otherwise it wouldn't make sense to create indices by averaging people's assessments of ten extremely different artworks (presumably our values stay the same, though each artwork prompts different emotions). "For each visitor, we then calculated nine emotional and eight cognitive index variables by averaging the personal assessments of all artworks" (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 180). The researchers remarked, "Heart-rate variability was found to be generally associated with 'aesthetic quality' (the work is rated pleasing, beautiful; emotionally moving; well-done with respect to technique, composition, and content; artist and importance in art history) and 'surprise/laughter', but weakly associated with 'curatorial quality'" (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 184). Moreover, skin conductance variabilities are described as indicators of emotional processes. Tröndle and Tschacher (2012) had found correlations with the factor "dominance" (the work is experienced as dominant; stimulating) (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 184). They conclude, "The physiological responses of visitors are significantly related to their aesthetic/emotional assessments" (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015, p. 184). As already noted, cognitive types, for whom learning matters most, fail to exhibit emotional responses.

Concluding Remarks

Recent scientific research confirms my 2020 recommendation that researchers track the connection between aesthetic appreciation and values. “According to ‘appraisal theories of emotion,’ emotions arise when value concerns are at stake; according to ‘theories of value,’ a value that is threatened or supported gets infused with feelings” (Conte et al, 2023). Moreover, three recent experiments demonstrate “that values are indeed antecedents of emotions when emotional experiences arise in response to value-relevant stimuli” (Conte et al, 2023). And finally, “Individual differences in biospheric values predicted the intensity of emotional responses toward positive and negative information concerning nature and climate change, both when measured via psychophysiology and via self-report” (Conte et al, 2023). Only time will tell if climate-change exhibitions capably motivate changed actions. In the end, I find 1) sound advice, 2) a recipe for inaction, and 3) our best explanation.

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