

Art and VR museums: About the aesthetic experience in different contexts

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Art experience is mainly about experiencing art in original art-related contexts, mostly art museum and galleries. This so-called “Path #1” (real-world context), according to Carbon’s (2019) terminology of measurement strategies of art experience, is problematic as we lose a lot of experimental control when testing in the field: for instance, we lack the power of randomization to prevent order effects, the artworks interact with the physical environment as well as the social context. Recent developments of digital technologies in the field of virtual reality (VR), especially VR galleries and museums, gave us the opportunity to study art experience in strongly controlled but still very naturalistic context. In the present studies we tested the experience volunteers had with paintings from a wide range of Western art epochs in a simulated 3D Virtual museum context compared to experience of the same paintings presented on an ordinary computer screen or in real gallery context. Half of the participants first assessed their aesthetic experience plus multidimensional qualities of the paintings in VR and then in an ordinary computer screen setting, the other half assessed the paintings in the opposite order of contexts. The results showed that aesthetic experience of paintings was similar in different presentation modes, however, different contexts influenced some aspects of art experience. Aesthetic experience of paintings was more intense in VR than in the computer screen setting, artworks were experienced as being more impressive, less familiar and respondents expressed higher motivation to know more about artworks. There were no differences in the experienced quality and artistic value of the artworks. Linear combination of three dimensions of affective experience explained 84.6% of variance in aesthetic experience of artworks in VR. The VACe model showed to be good predictor of aesthetic experience of artworks in both settings, but a slightly better for computer screen compared to VR museum setting. In VR context the role of arousal in aesthetic experience appeared to be stronger, while the role of familiarity appeared to be weaker compared to other art-related settings. Results of the qualitative analysis suggested that experiencing art in VR museum is for participants enjoyable, exciting and realistic experience. Studying art experience in realistically-simulated contexts like Virtual galleries can assist the aim to bring us closer to the real phenomenon of art experience without losing scientific control. Next important steps will be to directly compare VR with completely parallel real-world settings to test the VR for ecological validity.