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Is This Art? An Experimental Study on Visitors' Judgement of Contemporary Art

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Abstract

'Is this art?' is a question often raised by museum visitors when encountering contemporary artworks. But what factors influence museum visitors' judgement on contemporary art? To what extent do visitors' prior knowledge, socio-demographic background, emotional experiences, and specific aspects of the artwork itself, influence their judgements? In the context of the Swiss National research project *eMotion – Mapping Museum Experience*, we investigated these questions experimentally. The site specific intervention created by the renown artist Nedko Solakov in the St. Gallen Fine Arts Museum allowed us to conduct such a concrete experiment. We interpreted the findings by statistical analyses of the data gathered from entry and exit questionnaires (n=291) in view of sociological art theories dominant in the last few decades. Against theoretical expectations, we found that the judgement art/non-art was driven by several factors not anticipated by those theories.

Keywords

art, art experience, psychology of art, sociology of art, empirical aesthetics, aesthetics judgements, audiences, art galleries, art reception, cultural consumption, experimental methods

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Introduction

Upon entering the St. Gallen Fine Arts Museum (Switzerland), visitors may have been perplexed: on the perfectly white, pristine walls of this neo-classical building were small scribbles and annotations in black marker. The graffiti-like interventions by artist Nedko Solakov were intended to confront (and possibly confound) visitors with the question ‘Is this art?’ – or did some delinquent tagger decide to comment on the artworks, labels, and frames?

Entitled ‘A Label Level, 2009’, Solakov’s work was invited by the museum to contribute to the research project *eMotion – Mapping Museum Experience*. The artwork was composed of scattered one-liners and drawings, often humorous and all easily accessible. However, creating a sophisticated and subtle relation with their contexts using simple means of articulation, they achieved a profundity not to be underestimated. In more than 30 small tags (‘labels’) handwritten in black marker – some visible, some almost hidden – Solakov commented directly on some of the exhibited artworks, artists and styles of hanging, as well as on contextual issues such as the setting of the exhibition room, the view out of the window, or small bumps in the otherwise flawless white wall.

Solakov’s tags were drawn directly onto the ‘sacred’ walls of the museum, yet they took on no appearance of being established or canonized artworks in the exhibition halls. After the exhibition, ‘official works’ returned to the climate-controlled museum depot, whereas Solakov’s work was destroyed by repainting the walls for the next show. Without doubt, Solakov’s works thus stood in strong contrast to the conventional exhibits. The directors of the art museums in Bonn, St. Gallen and Darmstadt, in their joint preface to the exhibition, characterised Solakov’s works as a ‘gross attack on the pursuit of perfection, ultimacy and unambiguity’ (Beil et al., 2008: 6) (see Figure 1).

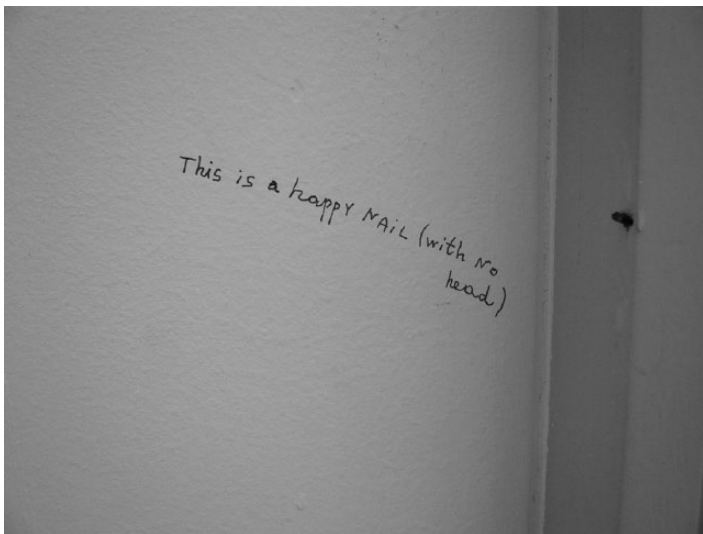


Figure 1. ‘This is a happy NAIL (with no head)’. Courtesy Nedko Solakov.



Figure 2a. Nedko Solakov: 'A Label Level, 2009', 'I love you'– 'I love you too'. Courtesy eMotion.

At first glance the comment on the nail in the wall seems to refer to the imperfection of the current exhibition. But the nail without a head had been there a long time – is this a metaphor for headless (or unintelligent) artworks in general?

During the tour of the exhibition, the visitors directly approached the label 'I love you' – 'I love you too', which was written on two iron columns facing one another. The drawings were of two tiny figures walking towards one other with raised canes in their hands separated by the gap between columns. The intervention captured more than the apparent contradiction between the fighting gestures and the 'spoken' words, but – looking contextually behind the columns – one spots the correspondence between Hans Arp's sculpture 'Entre Lys et Défense' ('Between Lily and Tusk') and the work of his wife, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, 'Gelbe Form' ('Yellow Shape'). As a result of this contextual relationship – and most likely also with the knowledge that Hans Arp lost his wife in 1943 in a tragic accident – the two steadfast iron columns that Solakov intervened upon take on more elaborate significance: 'I love you' – 'I love you too' (see Figures 2a, 2b).

The next label comments on the work 'Schwarz-rot Gleichgewicht, 1922' ('Black-and-Red Balance') by László Moholy-Nagy, depicting a stick figure struggling with three crosses. Solakov's caption reads: 'an exhausted artist is carrying a constructivist cross'. This can be understood as a humorous but equally scathing commentary on the self-imposed constructivist austerity of the work hanging next to it (see Figures 3a, 3b).

In the art field it is deemed a particular quality of Nedko Solakov that he adopts a 'post-conceptual' (Bitterli, 2008: 48) stance, from which he satirizes the over-seriousness of the arts. His satire plays out as his tags enter into a conversation with the objects and walls; a conversation that initially may appear naive, yet gradually proves to be profound, demonstrating expertise. (For further examples, see the documentation of the work on Solakov's website.¹)



Figure 2b. View in Space 5, Hans Arp *Entre Lys et Défense* (sculpture), Sophie Taeuber-Arp *'Gelbe Form'*. Courtesy eMotion.

Solakov is not, by any means, himself excluded from the expert system in the art field as a consequence of his practice. His works and interventions have been exhibited on numerous occasions, including the Venice, São Paulo, Istanbul, Kwangju and Lyon biennials, as well as Manifesta in Rotterdam and documenta 12 in Kassel. From the perspective of international art institutions, there is no doubt that Nedko Solakov's works are artworks. But what do museum visitors think about his scribbblings? And what factors influence their judgement as to the question 'is this art?'

Some Sociological Theories on the Judgement of Art

Nowadays, it is no longer questioned whether works by van Gogh, Picasso, Duchamp and Warhol, for example, constitute art or not. However, all of them at one point, when they were still 'contemporary', also had to struggle to get their work recognized as art.



Figure 3a. Nedko Solakov: 'A Label Level, 2009', Exhausted Artist. Courtesy Kunstmuseum St. Gallen.



Figure 3b. Nedko Solakov: 'A Label Level, 2009', Constructivist Artist and Moholy-Nagy. Courtesy Nedko Solakov.

The judgement of art/non-art was not just relevant to the late 19th century but particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, and it even continues to be a driving factor in the development of the art system itself (Luhmann, 2000). Even the notion of being 'post-modern' does not change this. In particular, with the rise of modern art in the 20th century, the question of what is art was heatedly debated. But even the transition from 'modern' to 'postmodern' art did not invalidate the statement in the Encyclopaedia

Britannica (2005: 'Aesthetics'): 'Indeed, it could be said that self-definition has been the major task of modern aesthetics.' One might say that one of the characteristics of modern and postmodern art is to steadily overcome the boundary of what is currently accepted as art (Tschacher and Tröndle, 2011).

In his artworks, Nedko Solakov plays with the perpetual transgression of these boundaries. His objects and performances provoke irritation in museum visitors encountering them, thus constituting the basis of a perfect empirical case study for the question 'Is this Art?'. His creations continue to highlight the ambiguity of objects as art and/or non-art that became particularly acute with Marcel Duchamps' ready-mades, later followed by Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, Andy Warhol and others who expanded the idea of what an artwork could be through its material, form or fabrication. They not only alienated museum or gallery visitors but also generated perturbations in the field of art sociology. In contrast to the traditional disciplines dealing with aesthetics (philosophy and psychology), sociologists did not try to define features of 'the artwork' (as performed in empirical aesthetics) or the concept of art in general (as intended in the philosophy of aesthetics). Rather, sociologists focused on either the context of production and dissemination – variously named for example as 'art field', 'art system' or 'art world' – or the beholder and her socio-demographic characteristics, to gain insight as to what constitutes art. Several of these theories will be sketched in the following.

As early as the 1960s, theorists such as Arthur Danto, Howard S. Becker and George Dickie posed the question as to who is qualified to recognize art as art, who has the power to distinguish between art and non-art, and on what basis. Danto assumed that this decision was carried out via an art-theoretical, philosophical discourse: 'What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo Box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is' (Danto, 1964: 581). Nevertheless, Danto tried to find relevant predicates (e.g. object, style, novelty) which constitute artworks. He suggested that through these classes of predicates artworks could be compared to one another (1964: 583) and that the decisions about whether or not to address something as an artwork would be feasible. In this process, the theoretical reflection about art and its production constantly produces more diverse predicators of what art could be (1964: 584).

In respect to Danto's art world, which is created by a 'theoretical atmosphere', Howard S. Becker (1982) emphasized the network of actors in multiple art worlds. According to Becker, art cannot be created by a single person (the artist), but evolves through the interactions of a collective (artist, collectors, galleries, museums, critics, visitors etc.), both constituting and constituted by a mutual understanding of an artwork's significance. Under this perspective, art is not only a social construction, it is also a social product. While Danto sketched out the interplay of theoretical reflection and the making of art, Becker put a much greater range of social actions in focus. Both authors theorize under which conditions art is constituted.

As a representative of institutional theory, on the other hand, George Dickie (1984) was convinced that the judgement of whether something is to be considered as art could only be made via the acknowledgement of certain qualified experts (an 'art world system'). Dickie proposed that the definition of art would be a question of the power and authority of the art system's institutions. For Dickie, the decisions about artworks are made by gate-keepers.

Conceptualizing art as a social system, Niklas Luhmann (2000) worked on the dichotomy of 'art/non-art'. In line with his general social theory, Luhmann followed a strictly communication-based perspective in *Art as Social System*; that is, an individual - for example, a museum visitor or a museum director - does not make the decision about what is art. This decision is instead taken by the art system via communication where, by being cited in catalogues, journals, and critiques, a work can reach the status of an artwork, and via this enduring communication become part of the art system. This 'decision process' is, importantly, a polyphonous and depersonalized discourse, in which new communication acts connect to already existing ones and enable an ongoing communication about an artist or her work. It is only via this communication that she can be recognized as an artist (or an object can be recognised as an artwork), and therefore as part of the art system.

In his book *The Rules of Art* (1996), Bourdieu views the art field as a power field that creates its own reality characterized by discourse. This leads to a unique logic within the field ('*illusio*'), safeguarding the field's preservation and autonomy, since it characterizes its means of production and ascription of meaning. Furthermore, this logic constitutes the legitimacy of the entire field in relation to its environment. In Bourdieu's understanding, power is not conceived of as a threat of violence, but rather as a strategy that creates an ideological consensus through habitualization and patterns of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1996). In this conception, representatives in a field who influence behaviour and lines of thought through habitualization create the decision about what art is.

Prior to *The Rules of Art*, in their book *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) coined the term 'art competence'. The authors connected art perception to an information-theoretical notion of coding/decoding, i.e. they assumed that artworks carry a message within them, which can be decoded and understood. Only if the beholder is capable of 'understanding' the artwork can she enjoy it: 'The artwork ... only exists as artwork at all for those who possess the means to acquire it, that is, to decode it' (1991: 38). According to the authors, the 'love of art' arises from 'cultural capital'-education and knowledge about art-accumulated by, for example, frequently visiting museums (1991: 37ff.).

This brief overview demonstrates how the sociological perspective on art has led to various hypotheses, in claiming that either institutions, knowledge, communication, habitus, gate-keepers, or specific aspects of the artwork itself play a central role when it comes to the question of what constitutes art. It is surprising, then, that these hypotheses generated by the sociology of art have rarely been put to the test in an empirical study observing museum visitors' judgements on artworks. The socio-economic classes art museum visitors belong to (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991) seem to have been the dominant observation angle. Although the field of 'visitor studies' boomed in recent years focusing on 'learning in the museum', 'recreation' and marketing issues such as visitor satisfaction (overview in Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012), we found no empirical sociological study on the judgement of contemporary art. Although several studies in empirical aesthetics have attempted to uncover consistent attributes of artworks, these studies did not focus on factors influencing the judgement of art as art (overview in Tschacher et al., forthcoming).

Given the importance of the question 'Is this Art?' and the ongoing discussion in art sociology about how art is constituted, it appears worthwhile to shift the research focus to the study of museum visitors. How do visitors deal with the challenge of forming their own opinions? Do they rely on the expertise of museum curators and acknowledge their

opinion unquestioningly, as one may conclude from Dickie's writings? Or is it the artwork and its properties that shape their judgement? What relevance has educational background? Is it all about Bourdieu's '*compétence artistique*'? Or does the communication about the artworks' and the artist's success in the art system create such a self-evident legitimacy that they do not even question the artworks' status, as Luhmannians would suggest? Or is their judgement driven by their expectations and their experience of the artwork itself? These questions operated as starting points for the following analysis, which was undertaken in the context of the research project *eMotion – Mapping Museum Experience*.² In this five-year research project we investigated various aspects of art reception, such as the effect of single artworks on museum visitors (Tröndle and Tschacher, 2012), the effect of specific curatorial settings (Tröndle et al., 2013), the embodied reactions of museum visitors evoked by artworks (Tschacher et al., 2012), and the effects of sociality on the reception of fine art (Tröndle et al., 2012). In this article we will focus on the question of how and why museum visitors judge something to be art.

Methods and Procedure

Solakov's interventions took place in the exhibition 'Eleven Collections for One Museum' ('11:1') at the St Gallen Museum of Fine Arts (Kunstmuseum St Gallen), which presented paintings, drawings and sculptures from the collection of the museum. The curatorial concept was to showcase the donations made to the museum, in order to introduce donors and their dedication to art to a broad audience. Artworks were displayed more or less chronologically, from 1890 to 2006, including pieces by Claude Monet, Edvard Munch, Ferdinand Hodler, Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, Le Corbusier, Paul Klee, Günther Uecker, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and many others, which formed the framework for Solakov's interventions.

Between June and August 2009 every visitor who entered the Museum of Fine Arts was invited to take part in the project. Visitors who agreed had to be 18 years or older, speak German or English and not have participated in the project before. Due to technical reasons only single visitors and groups of up to three people were allowed to participate. Altogether, 576 people participated, which roughly accounted for every second person of the target population. (For the reasons given by non-participating visitors, as well as detailed reliability tests on the procedure, see Tröndle et al., 2014.)

Each participant received an individual 'subject ID' through which we could merge individual visitor data with the data from the entrance and exit surveys. A project assistant conducted a structured interview with the visitor prior to seeing the exhibition, in order to assess her expectations and demographic information. The visitor's responses to this 'entrance survey' were immediately entered into an individual database, which was anonymized by the visitor's subject ID. Subsequent to this entrance survey, carried out in the foyer of the museum, visitors could freely wander throughout the exhibition halls.³ After the exhibition visit, we executed a second survey with each participant, addressing the exhibition they had just experienced. This 'exit survey' repeated some of the questions from the entrance survey, thus allowing a comparison of pre-visit expectations and post-visit experiences with respect to core dimensions of the exhibition experience. In the exit survey, 291 out of the total of 576 participants were randomly chosen and

Table 1. Sample composition.

Means	Total sample	Visitors questioned about Solakov?		
		YES	NO	p*
Age (years)	45.9	47.87	43.88	.004
Gender (proportion of women)	62%	61%	63%	.619
Residence (percentage Swiss)	74%	75%	74%	.809
Art professional	31%	31%	32%	.662
Annual art museum visits	15.2	15.3	15.1	.902
Sample size	576	291	285	

*tests used to compare the YES and NO samples were t-test (age, annual museum visits) or chi² (gender, residence art professional).

Visitors were asked if they were a professional in fine arts. Affirming this they were further asked for their specific profession: "I am ... an artist (professional); ... teaching fine arts, an art critique; ... gallery manager; a museum director or curator; ... a student of the fine arts; ... working in another area connected to the fine arts (like conservator or else)."

specifically asked about the intervention 'A Label Level, 2009' by Nedko Solakov. The other 285 visitors were queried about other artworks (cf. Tröndle and Tschacher, 2012). In the following, we will refer to the data of the 291 participants.

The framework for the following analysis was given by the aforementioned theories: looking at socio-demographic factors, the knowledge of the museum visitors, the museum as institution, aspects of the artwork itself, behavioural aspects, and also the emotional reactions of the museum visitors towards Nedko Solakov's interventions, in order to investigate what influences the art/non-art decisions of the visitors. In order to test the influence of receiving information about Nedko Solakov's interventions, we also conducted an experiment where one group of visitors was left uninformed whereas another group was specifically informed about this work.

Results

Sample Composition

Out of the 576 participating visitors, 291 were questioned about Solakov, while 285 visitors were not questioned about Solakov (YES and NO, see Table 1).

The sample of visitors questioned about Solakov differed from the sample of visitors not questioned about Solakov by one characteristic: visitors participating in the Solakov survey were older.⁴ With the exception of age, there were no differences between the two subsamples, so that the Solakov sample appeared to be representative for the complete sample of the eMotion study.

Is This Art? Responses of Visitors in the Mirror of Socioeconomic Characteristics

One may assume that the dichotomy 'art/non-art' may take on two separate meanings for the respondent. It may either refer to the observation that certain works are generally

Table 2. Solakov's drawings – Is it art?.

	N	(%)	Valid (%)
No, it is not art	96	33.0	37.5
Yes, it is art	160	55.0	62.5
Paid no attention	35	12.0	–
Total visitors	291	100.0	100.0

considered to be art (canonical categorization), or to the evaluation whether a certain work deserves to be called art in one's personal opinion. In the project it was made clear that we addressed the visitor's personal opinion. Directly after the museum visit, the participants were asked several questions in the exit survey, where the respondent was presented with a representation of one of Solakov's tags on the computer screen and asked: 'There are comments and little scribbled drawings on the walls throughout the exhibition. Is this art in your opinion?' Possible answers were: 'yes, I considered them to be an artwork', 'no, I did not consider them as art' and 'I did not pay attention to them' (see Table 2).

More than every second visitor expressed the opinion that Solakov's interventions were art (55%), whereas every third visitor did not consider Solakov's tags and drawings to be art (33%). Approximately 12 per cent of the visitors interviewed ignored the tags. These visitors were not considered in the following analysis of the art/non-art classification (see valid percentages in Table 2).

Socio-demography and Arts Familiarity

Who were the visitors denying these scribbling or tags the status of art, despite their inclusion in an exhibition in an art museum? A logistic regression analysis examined the extent to which standard socio-economic characteristics (i.e. gender, age, place of residence, educational attainment, and profession) influenced the visitors' art/non-art classifications. According to the canonized idea in cultural sociology that education and art knowledge highly influence art reception (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991 [1966]), we assumed that visitors with lower education and visitors who do not frequently visit art museums would not consider Solakov's tags as art (see Table 3).

Socio-demographic variables have, in their entirety (whole model in Table 3), a significant influence on visitors' considerations of Solakov's interventions as art. Additional analyses were performed using single tests of the relationship between the art/non-art assessment and each of the predictors (single models in Table 3). Age, the frequency of art museum visits and type of occupation/vocation had significant effects on the art/non-art assessment. These analyses showed that higher age increased the probability of denying Solakov's interventions the status of art, whereas frequently visiting art museums was correlated with viewing Solakov's work as art. Type of occupation/vocation was also related to this assessment, with a higher proportion of those seeing the works as art among the group of visitors who were retired. Surprisingly, the visitors' relation to art and their education level had only trend-level impact. Education

Table 3. Impact of socio-demographic variables on the visitors' assessments of Solakov's interventions as art or not (n = 256). Logistic regression analysis (whole model) and single tests.

	Test statistic	df	p
Whole model	chi ² = 31.2	17	.02*
Single models:			
Age	t = -3.57	253	.0004***
Gender	chi ² = 0.25	1	.62
Education level	chi ² = 10.72	5	.06
Place of residence	chi ² = 1.34	1	.25
Frequency art museum visits	t = 2.16	254	.03*
Relation to art	chi ² = 6.35	3	.10
Type of occupation/vocation	chi ² = 12.34	5	.03*

chi², test statistic used in logistic regression; t, test statistic used in means comparisons; df, degrees of freedom; p, probability; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; **** p < .0001.

Education level: six levels of school/academic education; Place of residence: Switzerland or abroad; Relation to art: five levels – no special relation/interested/interested expert/professional; Type of occupation/vocation, six categories: working, employed/middle management/free-lancing, artist/student/teacher/retired, working at home. Positive t-values indicate that high value of the respective variable is linked to assessing Solakov as art.

level was connected to the assessment since a majority of academics (68%), but a minority of visitors without a *Matura* (A-level equivalent) (47%), considered Solakov's work as art. Neither place of residence nor gender showed significant correlations. In reference to our research question, we can state that in the evaluation of contemporary art, the factors of age and frequency of art museum visits seem to have a considerable impact on visitors' judgement.⁵

Assessing the Different Types of Artistic Media with Reference to Solakov's Interventions

One item of the entrance survey was: 'Which of the following art forms do you like?' Participants were presented with five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (very much dislike the art form) to 5 (very much like the art form) to assess the art forms of painting, drawing, photography, video, performance, sculpture, installation, and sound art. We assumed that the assessment of Solakov's work would correlate with the preference or rejection of these different types of artistic media: participants who liked 'newer' art forms, such as installation and performance, would also appreciate Solakov's interventions.

Again, we used logistic regression analysis as an appropriate statistical instrument to test this hypothesis. We found a marked relationship between visitors' appreciation of Solakov's work and their assessments of art forms in general (whole model in Table 4). The appreciation of video, performance and installation was significantly higher in the group of those who considered Solakov's work as art (single models in Table 4).

None of the theories laid out in the introduction considered such correlations. Nevertheless, these findings on specific art forms and the finding on the negative influence

Table 4. Impact of appreciation of different art forms on visitors' assessments of Solakov's interventions as art or not (n = 256). Logistic regression analysis (whole model) and single t-tests.

	Test statistic	df	p
Whole model	chi ² = 30.5	8	.0002***
Single models: Appreciation of...			
Painting	t = -1.08	254	.28
Drawing	t = -1.04	254	.30
Photography	t = 1.64	254	.10
Video	t = 4.16	253	.0001****
Performance	t = 3.56	250	.0004***
Sculpture	t = 0.30	253	.76
Installation	t = 4.26	252	.0001****
Sound art	t = 1.62	253	.11

chi², test statistic used in logistic regression; t, test statistic used in means comparisons; df, degrees of freedom; p, probability; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001; **** p < .0001. Positive t-values indicate that high appreciation of an art form is linked to assessing Solakov's interventions as art.

of age have been reflected in cultural sociology (Schulze, 1997) and the sociology of music (Frith, 1992; Gembris, 2011). These authors state that the liking of specific music styles (e.g. swing, beat, hip-hop, classic symphonies, jazz, etc.) is formed in early adulthood (approximately 14 to 25 years) and then remains rather stable. One might assume a similar effect in the field of art. If a piece belongs to an art form which one was socialized to be familiar with, then one would consider this piece to be art. This finding will be further analysed in the following section.

Conventional versus Conceptual Style

We assumed that visitors who enjoyed more "conventional" art (e.g. the paintings of Monet and Hodler which featured in the exhibition) would enjoy conceptual art less (such as in this case Solakov's wall scribbles, or, for example, Uecker's disturbing installation of protruding nails). In order to answer this question, we surveyed the assessment of eight aspects of various works in the exit survey. The aspects were 'content', 'artistic technique', 'composition', 'beauty', 'artist's reputation', 'his/her significance in art history', 'presentation (hanging, scenography)', and 'reference to other artworks in the exhibition'. We constructed a 'composite work aspect assessment grade' for each surveyed work by the mean value of these aspects on the five-point Likert scales used (1 = very poor, to 5 = very good) (see Table 5).

The top ranks of the list, with assessments exceeding 4.0, were indeed the most conventional paintings, such as Monet's painting of the 'Palazzo Contarini' or Hodler's painting of the 'Thuner See mit Stockhornkette'. The more unconventional works, for example by Uecker, Virnich, Rosenquist and also Solakov's 'A Label Level, 2009', received assessments closer to 3.0 (see also Tröndle and Tschacher, 2012). The assessments varied considerably when assessing the more unconventional and disturbing

Table 5. Summary work aspect assessment of selected artworks.

Work aspect assessment	N	Mean (1 = very poor 5 = very good)	standard deviation
C. Monet, Palazzo Contarini, 1908	374	4.3695	.494
F. Hodler, Thuner See mit Stockhornkette, 1913	286	4.0958	.694
H. Arp, Entre Lys et défense, 1958	117	3.7376	.899
J. Rosenquist, Bild mit Glühlämpchen, 1962	193	3.2582	.858
G. Uecker, Antibold, 1974	102	3.3267	.977
T. Virnich, Treibriemen-Skulptur, 1989	121	3.0033	1.040
N. Solakov, A Label Level, 2009	241	3.2940	1.139

works, as can be seen in the higher standard deviations for those works. Visitors who judged 'A Label Level, 2009' as non-art did not assess other unconventional artworks positively either. This finding on art-form specific preferences supports the assumption made above.

The Effects of Visitors' Expectations on the Evaluation of Solakov's Interventions

Visitors' *expectations regarding the exhibition* were measured before entering the exhibition. The following expectations were also measured on 5-step Likert scales: 'I would like (1)... the exhibition to be thought-provoking; (2) ... the exhibition design to be convincing; (3) ... to enjoy the silence of the museum space; (4) ... to improve my understanding of fine arts; (5) ... to have a nice time with my family or friends; (6) ... to be part of the exhibition with all my senses; (7) ... to experience a deep connection to the art; (8) ... to see something familiar which I already know; (9) ... to experience the beauty of the artworks; (10) ... to be entertained; (11) ... to be surprised; (12) ... to see famous artworks (see in detail Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012). A logistic regression analysis of all 12 exhibition expectations (independent variables) on the decision of regarding Solakov's interventions as art (1) or non-art (0) (dependent variable), was highly significant ($p = 0.0006$). In particular, expectations (1), (6) and (12) were significantly associated with the art/non-art decision.

Against the background of Danto's theory of art, we assumed that the expectations towards specific features of 'A Label Level, 2009' would differ for the visitors who judged the work to be an artwork and the ones who did not. In order to test this assumption, in the entrance questionnaire participants were asked with Likert scales ranging from 1 (very important) to 5 (unimportant) to assess the artwork's (1) composition; (2) importance within the context of art history; (3) beauty; (4) artistic technique; (5) content; (6) presentation inside the exhibition space; (7) the artist; (8) connection to other artworks in the exhibition; (9) and also liking the artwork in general. When assessing the

Table 6. Assessment of the eight artistic, art historical and curatorial components of Solakov's work on the classification of his work as art (1) or non-art (0). Again on a five-point Likert scale, 1 = very important to 5 = unimportant.

means	Solakov as art?		difference	t-value	p
	no	yes			
Artistic components:					
Content/topic	3.5	2.0	-1.5	8.152	.000
Artistic technique	3.7	2.5	-1.2	6.713	.000
Composition	3.6	2.0	-1.6	8.947	.000
Beauty	4.0	2.6	-1.4	8.235	.000
Art historical components:					
The artist	3.8	2.4	-1.4	5.989	.000
Its importance in art history	4.6	3.0	-1.4	8.139	.000
Curatorial components:					
Presentation of the artwork	3.2	1.7	-1.5	7.768	.000
Connection to the other artworks	3.3	1.9	-1.4	7.777	.000

artworks in general, these nine variables generated a significant impact on the art/non-art decision ($\chi^2(9) = 23.2, p = 0.006$).

With regard to these results we can say that both the general expectations about the exhibition as well as the specific expectations about the artworks from visitors considering Solakov's interventions as art strongly differ from those who did not consider them art.

The Influence of Specific Aspects of the Artwork 'A Label Level, 2009'

In order to gain more insight into the relationship between the visitors' assessment of the specific aspects of the artwork (work components) and their classification of 'A Label Level, 2009' as art or non-art, we asked: 'What do you personally think of the following aspects of this artwork?' The visitors evaluated these eight artistic, art historical and curatorial components of Solakov's work on five-point Likert scales (1 = very important, to 5 = unimportant) (see Table 6).

The statistical t-tests showed that the judgement about the status of Solakov's work as art is significantly different for each of these components. The higher the t-value, the clearer the difference in the assessment of Solakov's interventions between those who classify them as non-art and those who classify them as art. All differences in the assessment of artistic, art historical and curatorial components were significant on a very high level ($p = .000$ means that the error probability for stating the differences is less than .001). Looking at the column 'difference', all aspects – the works' immanent components, art historical components and the curatorial components – are clearly

Table 7. Reaction (emotional components) to Solakov. 5 = absolutely agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

means	Solakov as art?		n	t-value	p
	no	yes			
Pleased me, I liked it.	3.7	1.9	252	11.239	.000
Made me laugh.	3.1	2.1	248	5.336	.000
Surprised me.	2.7	1.7	250	5.530	.000
Made me think.	3.3	2.2	249	6.816	.000
Moved me emotionally.	4.0	3.1	248	5.239	.000
Frightened me.	3.9	3.9	138	.691	.493
Made me angry.	3.4	3.8	138	1.836	.071
Made me happy.	3.5	2.2	142	5.516	.000
Made me sad.	3.8	3.9	138	1.289	.203

more positively evaluated by visitors who regard the interventions as art, with content, composition and presentation being the most pronounced aspects.

Assessing the Emotional Experience of Solakov's Interventions

The next question investigated the emotional reaction to Solakov's interventions, i.e. '[it] pleased me, I liked it', 'it made me laugh', 'it surprised me', 'it made me think', etc. Again, the scales ranged from 1 (absolutely agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) (see Table 7) and most of these emotional reactions were correlated. Therefore, a factor analysis of the reactions to all artworks was computed (Tröndle and Tschacher, 2012).

The emotional reactions to Solakov's works differ – with three exceptions – between the 'Solakov art' and the 'Solakov non-art' groups. (The exceptions are: 'it frightened me', 'it made me angry' and 'it made me sad'.) Generally, visitors who classed Solakov's work as art were much more positively affected by Solakov's works in this exhibition: They were more likely to like the interventions, to say that it made them happy, to understand their humour, to be surprised, to be inspired to think and to be moved emotionally by them. These results mean that it is in fact the emotional responses that are decisive for the judgement as to whether something is art. Since the declarations of the gate keepers do not seem to have an influence, it is quite reasonable to assume that it is in fact the emotional experience that determines the judgement.

The Influence of the Museum on Visitor Judgements

In view of theories favouring institutional validation, we asked the museum visitors: 'How would you characterize the importance of the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen?' The possible answers were 'international', 'national', 'interstate', 'regional' and 'local'.⁶ We found no correlation between the judgement of Solakov's work to be art or not and the assessment of the reputation of the museum ($\chi^2 = 4.59$, n.s.). Furthermore,

considering the results presented in Table 2 – demonstrating the fact that Solakov's artwork is presented in a well established fine art museum has no significant impact on the visitors' judgements – institutional validation does not seem to be an influential factor on the visitors' judgements.

Results of Experimentally Testing the Influence of Information on Visitors' Judgement

One essential research question for us pertained to the influence information might have on the reception of Nedko Solakov's artwork. To analyse this, we conducted an experiment: 59 visitors were specifically prompted about the artist's interventions by the museum staff. Subsequent to answering the entrance survey and prior to entering the exhibition, written information (on one sheet of paper, letter size and in colour) was shown to the visitor. The information displayed the museum logo and four figures of Solakov's tags and drawings, together with the following text:

Dear Visitor, we are very pleased to present to you the work 'A Label Level, 2009' by Nedko Solakov, which was created on the occasion of his solo exhibition in the museum. '11:1 = Eleven Collections for One Museum: From Impressionism to Contemporary Art' provided the ideal set-up for Solakov's witty interventions. We have displayed here a few figures [four pictures]. We hope that you will enjoy your search for the works by Nedko Solakov. Kunstmuseum St. Gallen.

The Influence of Information on Recognizing the Work

In the experiment, we were interested in how this information stimulus, together with the implicit instruction to search for Solakov's works, would change the visitors' art reception. The results of our comparison between the answers of the visitors not informed about Solakov and of those prompted about his work are represented in Tables 8 and 9.

Of the visitors who were not prompted, 87% nevertheless said they noticed his works when asked in the exit survey. The figure for those who were prompted was only slightly

Table 8. Cross-tabulation of visitors informed about Solakov by Solakov recognized by visitors.

		Solakov recognized?		total
		no	yes	
Information on Solakov and his work?	no	30 12.93%	202 87.07%	232 100.0%
	yes	5 8.47%	54 91.5%	59 100.0%
Total		35 12.03%	256 87.97%	291 100.0%

Table 9. Cross-tabulation of visitors informed about Solakov by Solakov recognized as art.

Informed about Solakov	Solakov is art			total
	no	Yes	not seen	
No	76 32.76%	126 54.31%	30 12.93%	232 100.0%
Yes	19 33.90%	35 57.63%	5 8.47%	59 100.0%
Total	96 32.99%	160 54.98%	35 12.03%	291 100.0%

higher, namely 92%. This difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(291) = .950$, $p = .33$, $df = 1$). Thus, explicitly pointing out Solakov before the visit had no influence on whether or not his works were noticed during the exhibition visit.

The Influence of Information on Recognizing the Work as Art

We also tested if being previously ‘informed’ had an influence on the judgement of ‘A Label Level, 2009’ (see Table 9).

The instruction process (i.e. informing the visitor by the specific text) did not have the desired effect of making the visitors more inclined to appreciate this type of art. Instructing visitors generated no difference of opinion regarding Solakov’s interventions as art or non-art: 8.5 per cent of those visitors who had been instructed by the aforementioned text did not even pay attention to Solakov’s works. Visitors’ art vs. non-art judgements were largely unaffected by the instruction; this is reflected by the corresponding insignificant χ^2 -test ($\chi^2(291) = .956$, $p = .62$).

The Association between ‘Informing’/‘Non-informing’ and Visitors’ Assessments

Did the pre-visit information on Solakov’s work ‘A Label Level, 2009’ influence the specific assessment of at least some of the substantial aspects of his work? We compared the ‘informed’ and ‘non-informed’ visitors with respect to their assessments (see Appendix Table A1). All in all, the pre-visit information about Solakov almost never influenced the assessment of the aspects of his work. Out of 17 items (work immanent components, art historical components, curatorial components, and emotional aspects), we found only three correlations of informing visitors and their assessments: informed visitors were less surprised by his interventions ($p = 0.03^*$) (this is indeed no surprise), they were less emotionally moved by his works ($p = .01^*$), and the work was less likely to make them think ($p = .09^*$) (see Appendix Table A1). At least the last two findings are astounding and might be of relevance for museum pedagogy. This result illustrates also quite clearly that it was not the framing of Solakov’s work as art by the museum and its gatekeepers that determined visitors’ judgements.

Discussion and Conclusion

Because we are well aware that the experience of art cannot be simply reduced to the problems of some sort of 'rationalized' decision-making alone, we tried to triangulate as well. We applied entrance and exit surveys to assess visitors' expectations, socio-demographic data, prior knowledge, artwork immanent art historical and curatorial components, as well as emotional aspects. We also conducted an experiment to test the impact of art pedagogical information on art reception. To our knowledge this was the first time that such a multidimensional, experimental in-depth field study was conducted to analyse what constitutes art in the eye of the beholder.

After mapping out sociological theories at the beginning of this paper, we tried to complement the art sociological perspective on what constitutes art with an experimental study on visitors' judgement of contemporary art, putting the individual beholder in focus. By doing so we found differentiated results on art perception and the judgement of artworks.

In contradiction to theories which emphasize institutional validation (Bourdieu, 1996; Dickie, 1984) or art theoretical discourse (Danto, 1964; Luhmann, 2000) as the driving factor for a work to become an artwork, we can state that for the museum visitors who were studied these factors seem to make little difference. Although Solakov's work was displayed in a fine art museum, only 55 per cent of visitors regarded the intervention as art (see Table 2). In a similar vein, the assessment of the fine art museum and its reputation had no impact on the judgement of the visitors. Informing the museum visitors and the emphasizing of the relevance of Solakov's work by museum staff also did not influence their decisions. While our findings do not necessarily invalidate the institutional-theoretical and power-critical approaches, they strongly relativize them. In defence of the above-mentioned authors, one must note that they were more interested in a sociological conception of the 'professional' art world, art field or art system and not as interested in the museum visitor herself.

However, we found various other factors which influenced the judgement of art/non-art of the museum visitors. The older the museum visitors were, the higher was their probability to deny Solakov's interventions the status of an artwork. Corresponding to this result, we found that the appreciation of newer art forms (such as performance, video and installation) positively influenced the pro-art judgement of the visitors towards Solakov's interventions. This finding could explain our further finding that museum visitors who liked this artwork would also like other contemporary artworks in the exhibition better. With respect to these findings we conclude that age and the preference for specific art forms can be considered as predictors for the judgement of museum visitors.

In their book *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu and Darbel (1991 [1966]) claimed a strong correlation between education and art affinity. But while we found that the frequency of art museum visits had a considerable impact on the visitors' judgements, surprisingly visitors' relations to art and their educational level had only a minor impact on their judgements. With respect to these findings we conclude that theories based on the visitors' social status or class categorizations should be handled in a more differentiated, nuanced manner than they often have been (cf. Falk, 2009). Instead, we found that the museum visitors' expectations of the museum visit and also of the artworks in general



Figure 4. Nedko Solakov: 'A Label Level, 2009', 'Art? Yes, yes!'.

The exclamation mark states that this is art, but it also stands for Solakov (the little man) fighting for recognition as an artist. Again multiple interpretations of his scribbling can be made.

had a pronounced influence as to whether they considered 'A Label Level, 2009' to be art or not. Even more surprising was the finding as to the assessments of the artistic, art historical and curatorial components of his work – each of them demonstrated a strong impact on the art/non-art decision.

To sum up, we may state that, besides age, the preference for art forms and the expectations towards the museum visit in general, and more specifically the artwork itself (content/topic; technique; composition; beauty), its art historical importance, its placement and presentation, as well as the emotional response instigated in the beholder, are the driving factors for the judgement of museum visitors. These are the essential factors that implicitly influence the museum visitors' opinion as to whether something should be considered art or not. It is noteworthy that the prior informing of visitors (informed/not-informed) had no influence on the evaluation of 'A Label Level, 2009' as art or non-art. Surprisingly, this pedagogic instruction even had a negative influence on experiencing the artwork.

Our goal was to complement theoretical approaches to the 'becoming of art' in cultural sociology, which have been predominantly focused on the art world(s), the art field, the art system or the artwork, but so far rarely on the museum visitor per se until now. Through a visitor-orientated field study we hope to evoke a broadened understanding of the question 'What is art?' – one that is not just based on the 'professionals' in the art field but also on the 'amateurs', the art lovers, and the museum visitors.

We are well aware that these findings are based only on one artwork in one museum in Switzerland and therefore there is limited scope for generalizations. Nonetheless, we demonstrated that the judgement of the museum visitors studied here is driven by several unexpected factors. Thus, from the perspective of cultural sociology, the most astounding and provoking conclusion of this investigation is that in this case institutional

validation, education, information, and the relation to art carried far less weight than assumed.

Finally, Nedko Solakov's intervention itself gives us the artist's answer to the ubiquitous question 'Is this art?' in one of his labels: 'Kunst? Ja, ja!' [Art? Yes, yes!] (see Figure 4).

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Notes

1. See: http://nedkosolakov.net/content/emotions__a_label_level/a_label_level/index_eng.html
2. For more information, please see www.mapping-museum-experience.com/en
3. Since we will not report on the position, time tracking and physiological data, this methodology is not introduced here (see in detail Tröndle et al., 2011, 2012).
4. To put our sample into a general perspective: The average age in Switzerland is 40.1 years; the average age of our general sample was 45.9 years (but only visitors of 18 years or older were allowed to participate). In Switzerland, 48.5% of the population are females (<http://www.welt-in-zahlen.de>); 62% of the participants in our study were female and only 38% male. As is common in many art visitor surveys, a majority of visitors are women. Of the participants, 74% were living in Switzerland; 21% in Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein; the other 5% were from various other countries.
5. A detailed analysis of the influence of socio-economic status, art knowledge and art reception is found in Tschacher et al., forthcoming.
6. 'Local' means that the museum is only recognized within the city of St. Gallen, 'regional' that it is recognized within the region of St. Gallen, 'interstate' means the museum is recognized not just in St. Gallen and its region but also in other regions of Switzerland. 'National' means it is recognized all over Switzerland.

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Volker Kirchberg received his Diploma and PhD in sociology from the University of Hamburg. His graduate work consisted of urban studies at Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, Maryland). While Assistant Professor at William Paterson University (New Jersey), he received a habilitation degree in sociology from the Free University Berlin. Since 2004 he is professor for arts organization and arts facilitation at Leuphana University Lüneburg. His research interests include museums, and urban and arts policies in a comparative perspective.

Wolfgang Tschacher studied psychology at Tübingen University, receiving his PhD in 1990. He undertook psychotherapy training in systemic therapy at the Institute of Family Therapy, Munich. He received a habilitation in psychology at the University of Berne in 1996 and became an Associate Professor in 2002. He currently works at the University Hospital of Psychiatry, where he is head of the Department of Psychotherapy Research. His main interests are in empirical psychotherapy research and experimental psychopathology, with an emphasis on dynamical systems approaches, complexity science, embodied cognition, and phenomena of cognitive self-organization.

Appendix

Table A1. Association between visitors being informed about Solakov's work and visitors' assessments of different aspects of Solakov's exhibited art.

Assessment of aspects of Solakov's artwork	Informed about Solakov?	N	Mean	t	p
			1 = poor, to 5 = excellent		
Evaluation of contents	no	172	3.54	.38	.71
	yes	46	3.62		
Evaluation of technique	no	170	3.21	1.34	.18
	yes	48	2.92		
Evaluation of composition	no	168	3.59	1.81	.07
	yes	48	3.21		
Evaluation of beauty	no	170	3.01	1.43	.16
	yes	45	2.69		
Evaluation of artist	no	118	3.15	0.03	.97
	yes	35	3.14		
Art historical value	no	127	2.43	-0.03	.98
	yes	30	2.43		
Evaluation of presentation	no	180	3.89	0.7	.49
	yes	51	3.75		
Reference to other artworks	no	175	3.63	-0.71	.48
	yes	48	3.79		
It pleased me	no	203	3.44	-0.18	.86
	yes	54	3.48		
It made me laugh	no	199	3.45	-0.73	.47
	yes	54	3.61		
It surprised me	no	201	4	2.21	.03*
	yes	54	3.57		
It made me think	no	200	3.45	1.68	.09*
	yes	54	3.11		
It moved me	no	198	2.68	2.59	.01*
	yes	54	2.13		
It frightened me	no	87	1.07	-1.29	.2
	yes	53	1.15		
It made me angry	no	87	1.34	0.16	.87
	yes	53	1.32		
It made me happy	no	90	3.26	-0.96	.34
	yes	54	3.5		
It made me sad	no	87	1.13	-0.72	.47
	yes	53	1.19		