

Discussion with Karin Götz about VAST

A conversation with [Peter Tepe](#) | Section: [Interviews](#)

Abstract: This interview complements the article [Karl Otto Götz as psychologist](#), published at the same time, in which Karin Götz explains the Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (VAST). The editors recommend reading this article first.

Karin Götz, on the basis of your article and the discussion we are about to have I am seeking to encourage specialists - in particular psychologists who are professionally concerned with the aesthetic dimension - to participate in making a contribution to w/k by clarifying whether the test developed by Karl Otto Götz is still relevant to present-day psychology - and should this be the case, in which respect. In preparation for such a debate, I - together with the peer review group responsible for your contribution - have come up with a few questions which we expect or imagine scientists in general, and psychologists in particular, would ask. The answers to these questions might then already help to clear up certain misunderstandings in the run-up to the debate.

The first group of questions relates to the clarification of the concept of visual judgement ability used by you and Karl Otto Götz. What did Götz mean by this and why did it fascinate him? Did he at any point elaborate more precisely on this ability - for instance, in conversation with Berlyne or Eysenck?

As a painter, through natural disposition and learning, he knew that the viewer's gaze could perceive formal elements in paintings in two ways. In the case of a visually successful scheme the gaze glides effortlessly over the painted image. With a formally more muddled composition the gaze moves more haltingly, stopping wherever it touches on the more dubious formal elements in the picture. An ability to judge is apparent if one can tell these two possibilities of visual perception apart.

When it comes to psychological tests specialists often ask after the *theoretical premises* on which the respective test is based. Did Götz refer to this in any published or unpublished texts or spoken statements?

No.

In terms of the *measurability* of a visual judgement competence did Götz entertain any ideas that he incorporated in his concept of the test?

He never spoke to me about this.

You and Götz presume that certain improvements are possible in regard to acquiring visual judgement ability. In your view, what concrete measures could be taken in the context of artistic training in art schools, but also within art teaching in schools, so as to make headway in this?

On the walls of quite a few homes I have seen pictures hanging lopsidedly. When I pointed out that "this picture's not straight" people would give me an astonished look and say, "I hadn't noticed". So their ability to look more closely was either not given by nature or hadn't been taught.

Looking more closely would be the first step towards recognising simple visual structures and how they correlate. But that frequently has to be learned and practiced. And when it comes to more complicated structures the eye has to balance more visual elements, against and in combination with each other. Here it gets increasingly difficult for those who are *untalented* or untrained in visual perception to succeed. And this is still a far cry from anything related to a seriously complex painted picture.

Does the concept you and Götz advocate directly engender criteria for judging urban and landscape planning? What things should one pay closer attention to than before?

You might think something like this would be possible today. But I am simply realistic enough to see that there is little hope in expecting beauty in places that are permeated with cost-cutting and badly kept old buildings. And Germany – whether in villages or towns – is full of them.

In the case of landscape planning, a talented landscape gardener can in isolated cases – slotted into a badly built city – perhaps conjure up a beautiful garden. But it immediately becomes difficult when you consider the egos of the many top architects who insist on presenting their *special artwork* in a usually very restricted space in the midst of cities. They rarely have that much space that they can bring their new edifice into harmony with its immediate surroundings. So, in my opinion, given the proliferation of competing egos today we can no longer achieve a consistently harmonious architectural development.

And then you have to remember that average architectural projects always have to work on very economical budgets. You might expect good architects to uphold their classical visual training when they are designing new buildings. Except that I have got to know architects in the countryside who for all their excellent visual ideas are still prepared to design kitsch buildings, because that is simply what their clients ask for. Nowadays, if one is lucky enough to find new and beautifully designed flats or houses this is mostly because architects are experimenting with new materials and using new building plots with building permission recently granted by the authorities or else gained by demolishing old fabric.

Before I get to my last question I need to digress somewhat. In the *instructions* appended to the VAST brochure Götz distinguishes between the question “which motif *do you like more* ?” and the question “which motif is more balanced?” In your comments – which probably reflect Götz’s view as well – you distinguish between an “aesthetic cognition judgment”, in which the harmony or disharmony of a visual structure is ascertained, and an “aesthetic pleasure judgement”. Not being a psychologist, I can only argue here as a philosopher. In my view, the terminology used by Götz and you can lead to misunderstandings which could be avoided if other terms were adopted instead.

What is usually understood by *cognition judgement* is a judgement that determines a certain fact without evaluating it. One example of an elementary cognition judgement is: “This is a black dining table made of oak”. By contrast, a *pleasure judgement* undertakes an evaluation which is also termed a *taste judgement*. For example: “I like this dining table more than that one over there – I like *a* more than *b*.” Now if you consider the usage of words such as “balanced” and “imbalanced” – or “harmonious” and “disharmonious” – in everyday speech one can observe that, generally speaking at least, these words are also associated with value judgements. “The composition of the curtain fabric *a* is balanced, while that of *b* is imbalanced” *implies in most cases* an evaluation to the effect of “I like *a* more than *b*”. The difference here from a simple pleasure or taste judgement such as “I

think *a* is prettier than *b*” is that a *reason* is given for the judgement which could be formulated thus: “I think *a* is prettier than *b* because the composition of *a* is balanced, while that of *b* is not.” The answer to the question “which motif is more balanced?” thus represents a pleasure judgement of a special kind, but not a cognition judgement, which simply determines a fact without evaluating it.

One could avert this problem and defend the distinction so crucial to the VAST between a cognition and a pleasure judgement if the polarities of balanced/imbalanced and harmonious/disharmonious (which in general are associated with evaluations that also involve a normative component) were replaced by ones that are *unambiguously descriptive*, enabling one to determine the respective fact without evaluating it. For now, I would like to make a preliminary suggestion - one that probably has room for improvement - that goes in this direction: the 50 image pairs should be kept as they are but in the *explanation* of VAST the question “Which motif is more balanced?” would be replaced by the question “Are the elements of the image wholly or only partially in a state of balance?” One can determine a state of balance without evaluating it. Or to put Götz’s proposition differently: sometimes image *b* can be more pleasing than image *a* even though its elements are only partially in a state of balance, if in one way or another it appears to be more interesting than image *a*. Can you agree with this proposition which implies the use of unambiguously descriptive words or terms in the explanation of VAST?

That was why Götz and I at that time decided to use *balanced/imbalanced* instead of *harmonious/disharmonious* because we were worried that as terms *harmonious/disharmonious* would set off a whole range of philosophical viewpoints. With this I mean the infinite possibilities of interpreting these two terms. For me, *balanced* and *imbalanced* almost have the same degree of neutrality as the search for equilibrium - especially since with the word “balance” Götz’s *informel* schemata are even harder to differentiate. As I said, at that time the test was still being developed.

Karin Götz, thank you for answering our questions and I hope that those psychologists who share an interest in the aesthetic dimension will also participate in the planned debate on the relevance of VAST.

Picture above the text: Rissa with K.O. Götz in the Wolfenacker studio (1986). Photo: Brigitte Hellgoth.

Translated by Matthew Partridge.

Tags

1. Daniel E. Berlyne
2. Hans-Jürgen Eysenck
3. Karin Götz
4. Karl Otto Götz
5. psychology
6. Rissa
7. Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (VAST)