

VAST Discussion, Round 1

Text: [Editorial Team](#) | Section: [On ‚Art and Science‘](#)

Abstract: The first round of the discussion on the Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test developed by Karl Otto Götz includes texts from Gerhard Stemberger, Herbert Fitzek, Nils Myszkowski, Riccardo Luccio, Thomas Jacobsen/Barbara E. Marschallek/Selina M. Weiler and Roy R. Behrens.

Preface

As outlined in [Vast-Discussion: The Plan](#), only psychologists and psychology-related scientists participate in the first round. The six statements will be published in the order chosen by Brigitte Boothe. To ensure a level playing field for all, these statements were not shared with the other participants before publication. All texts should be in the form of a direct reaction to the VAST as well as to the two w/k articles published in March: [Karl Otto Götz as Psychologist](#) by Karin Götz (as the painter Rissa) and [Discussion with Karin Götz about VAST](#), a conversation with Peter Tepe. After publication, the participants are encouraged to use the comment section to react to each other's texts. Of course we would also like to encourage readers who are interested in joining the discussion to do so.

The publication in the German section of w/k also contains English texts; the core editorial team allowed this by way of exception. On the other hand, the publication in the English section — which appeared at the same time — consists only of English texts.

Participants were given the following task: We are curious as to whether today, after so many years, there is renewed interest for the *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test*, and whether the discussion around it as well as the idea it pursues could become fruitful. w/k aims to evoke a technical discussion in written form surrounding the test, the questions it poses and its implications, and to review its relevance and potential. Is Götz' test, developed in the 1970s, still relevant to psychology today and if yes, how so? The scientists' texts should be short and concise, meaning no more than one A4 page. w/k aims to make its articles as accessible as possible to the general public. Therefore, the submitted texts should also be accessible to a broad readership. Any essential technical terms should be accompanied by a short explanation.

Several statements mention the revised VAST (VAST-R) developed by Nils Myszkowski. Its main focus is to try to modify the application of VAST in such a way as to clarify what the test actually measures. The second round will take place in August 2020: Karin Götz will react to the statements from round 1. [VAST-Discussion: The Plan](#) explains what will happen in September and October.

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1. A Problem of Order

Text: Gerhard Stemberger

Abstract: The original intention and the basic assumptions on which Karl Otto Götz based the development of the VAST are opposed to aesthetic relativism. The central assumption that visual things have an inherent, inner order which may or may not be perceived in a given situation, will outlive the fate of VAST in the narrower sense.

In her interview Karin Götz points out that some people apparently do not even notice when a picture is hanging crooked on the wall. In doing so, she addresses one of the irritations that inspired the creation of VAST many years ago. In my opinion, the questions involved with this go far beyond the field of aesthetics. They touch on existential issues of mankind. It is not merely a question of crooked pictures on a wall. Why is it that people can live apparently undisturbed in an environment full of tastelessness, injustice, and mistreatment of the most basic requirements of surviving in their own living conditions?

In the area of aesthetic image perception, Karl Otto Götz apparently proceeded from several assumptions that also form the basis of the VAST idea: The first is that to clarify such questions, one must first determine the perceptual capabilities of people with regard to certain aspects of the things that they encounter. To put it simply: Does the person even notice when something is *wrong* with a picture, that it is not balanced, or is inharmonious?

Götz connects this question with the postulate that one should distinguish such “cognitive judgments” from judgments that are based instead on feelings of pleasure. It makes a difference whether someone is pleased by an inharmonious motif, even though he or she perceives *disturbances* in the motif (is possibly even pleased by them), or whether he or she likes it without even being aware of those *disturbances*.

This postulate implies a basic assumption by Götz that I would consider decisive: Namely that the *good order* of a motif, which a person may or may not perceive in a given case, does not originate in the preference of the viewer, but in the nature of the motif itself. Karin Götz speaks here of the concern “to enhance the visual-aesthetic dimension and to emphasize elements of *objectivity* in the visual-aesthetic area.”

The term “objectivity” may seem objectionable to many in this context because it is ambiguous, in the past having been misused too often. I myself don’t have that much of a problem with it. The meaning is sufficiently clear: If we have in front of us a harmonious, balanced motif, are its harmonious qualities in the design of the motif itself, or have they been introduced by our individual preferences and inclinations? Götz’s question about a person’s ability to perceive the harmony or disharmony of a motif only makes sense on the basis of the former assumption, and I consider it well founded.

With the assumption of an internal order of our perceptual content (Gestalt psychology speaks of *praegnanz*) and his skepticism towards relativism even in aesthetic matters, Götz shows himself in fundamental agreement with central positions of Gestalt psychology.

To the extent that I am familiar with the literature about the VAST in our own time, I share Karin Götz's judgment that Götz's intentions and original questions were later largely misunderstood or ignored. This may well have been due to the question of "objectivity in the visual-aesthetic field", which was seemingly eliminated in the further applications, modifications, and interpretations of VAST.

If one perceives that a picture is tilted, there is at play a frame of reference that the viewer may not be aware of. The inner order of other percepts also has to do with their being embedded in reference systems. In the case of the VAST motifs, the assessment of balance or imbalance is contingent on their relationship to the borders of their image plane. In other circumstances, including most works of art, the larger context which influences whether we see a thing as balanced or imbalanced (harmonious or inharmonious) is not limited to the boundaries of the image, but encompasses dynamic aspects of the entire environment, including the various viewers themselves. This explains the enormous diversity of *objective* responses, but it does not make them arbitrary. With this as its starting point, VAST might have the potential to survive its fate in the narrow sense, as a test, for a long time to come.

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Picture above the text: Test image from the VAST (1970—1981). Photo: Till Bödeker.

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2. K.O. Götz and the Psychology of Gestalt Perception

Text: Herbert Fitzek

Abstract: The history of gestalt psychology shows us that we can present visual stimuli for various purposes: to determine perceptual errors, personality traits and the psychological processes that characterise both art production and reception. K.O. Götz had a firm opinion on this: for him it was about assessing the capacity for visual-aesthetic judgement. However, the visual material he conceived opens up a wider perspective.

K.O. Götz is a world renowned artist. He is neither well known nor trained as a psychologist, but his interests in the perception of abstract figurations directly coincide with the core interests of academic psychology, whose historic beginnings lie in the study of perceptual processes. Whilst in the beginning translation *errors* of simple optical stimuli played a role (the so-called optical illusions), it was Christian

von Ehrenfels at the latest who realised that perception is more than a more or less correct interpretation of stimuli; it is a productive activity and creates meaningful forms with a specific psychological quality (“gestalt qualities”). Beyond point and line constellations, we suddenly see “similarity”, “duration”, “progression”, “contradiction” in figural formations (Ehrenfels 1890). It became less well known that Ehrenfels later assessed these productions according to their “height and purity” (Ehrenfels 1916).

In the 20th century, the question surrounding the rules of the interpretation of sensation (“gestalt laws”) became the main focus in various schools of psychology. Perception conflates that what is similar, goes together, develops itself, describes a shared fate and finds a fitting ending. The holistic psychologists of the Leipzig School focused on the question of the more or less successful process of forming. The main question shifted its focus from general psychology to personality psychology and from the collective perceptual structure to the structural type of the perceivers. Visually gifted viewers do not stop at a vague overall picture (holistic “G-type”); however, they do not lose themselves in the multitude of the perceptible either (atomistic “E-type”). Rather, on the basis of constructive synthesis they reach visual formations of a high gestalt complexity and quality (“GE-type”; cf. Sander 1960). The Leipzig School designed a visual personality test which requires participants to complete simple line formations through drawing and assesses them according to aesthetic criteria (Wartegg test, cf. Roivainen 2013).

Wilhelm Salber also followed this tradition in his approach to gestalt perception and, like Sander and Wartegg, focused on aesthetic relationships — all three psychologists were in constant exchange with artists of their time. In an early work, Salber presented viewers with a Rembrandt sketch, both the original version and a slightly different version, and found that its artistic impact was impaired even through seemingly insignificant changes (Salber 1957). However, Salber was not interested in the gestalt level of perception or of the observers, but rather in the interplay of the seen and experienced constellations in art reception (“the pictorial structures and the structures of perception”). Taking into account another, almost forgotten gestalt concept (of *Russian Formalism*; cf. Erlich 1973), this led to a morphological art psychology which sees harmony and concision in contrast to tendencies of variation and violation of *good form*. In analogy to Goethe’s morphology, art stands *between* gestalt formation and gestalt disruption. Salber thus also defines art as a “disruptive formation”, as a form as well as a disruption (Salber 1977).

The three questions of gestalt perception (perceptual psychology, personality psychology, art psychology) also play a role for K.O. Götz and his visual sensitivity test. It would be most interesting to extend the relevance of his test procedure to other psychological traditions. Even more important is the question of its integrability in the extremely broad field of current test practice. Based on the analogies of his approach towards the psychology of gestalt perception, this question seems to me to be open to discussion: not only methodological questions but also the objectives of assessment — upon which Götz, as we know, clearly expressed himself — determine the test’s usability. The question of recognising objectively more or less balanced stimuli goes back to the Ehrenfels criteria of high or pure forms. It is consistent with classical perceptual psychology and its interest in the sensorium’s sensitivity for differences, but this is not his main focus.

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3. Is the Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (still) relevant to psychology researchers?

Text: Nils Myszkowski

Abstract: The Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test proposes to capture the extent to which individuals are able to form judgments of aesthetic value that are in line with external standards, as determined by art experts. In this article, we discuss why, in spite of its flaws, this test is still relevant to psychology research, by explaining both how useful and pertinent the aims of the test are, and why the VAST is currently the test that is the most capable of achieving such aims.

As a psychology researcher, I have been studying the *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* (VAST) for several years. I have especially investigated its relations with personality, intelligence and creativity (Myszkowski et al., 2014, 2018), proposed a revised version for it (VAST-R; Myszkowski & Storme, 2017),

studied response times in the test (Myszkowski, 2019), and discussed the importance of aesthetic sensitivity research on several occasions (Myszkowski et al., 2016, 2020; Myszkowski & Zenasni, 2016, 2020).

Is the VAST relevant to psychology researchers? I would argue that it certainly is. First, its *aim* is relevant. Several prominent researchers have, early on (e.g., Binet, 1908; Thorndike, 1916), noted that aesthetic sensitivity – the ability to make aesthetic judgments that agree with aesthetic standards (more pragmatically, experts' judgments) – is a critical aspect of human ability in of itself, as well as a useful construct, notably for vocational guidance. Being able to study aesthetic sensitivity requires being able to measure it, which, although challenging, comes with the reward of allowing researchers to study (for example) when, how, and under which conditions individuals develop such expertise – when exposed to art, when discussing art, when creating art themselves, etc. It further allows to understand a variety of behaviors: Does aesthetic sensitivity allow to be more creative? To be more performant in or to find more enjoyment in certain tasks (e.g. designing objects) and occupations (e.g. architecture)? Is it involved in social skills, such as empathy? All of these questions are undoubtedly important, and make aesthetic sensitivity an important ability, especially now that artificial intelligence research challenges what makes human abilities so unique.

Still, for the VAST to be relevant, we do not only need its aim to be relevant: We also need to consider whether it achieves it. The VAST has been largely criticized (e.g., Gear, 1986), and I will here briefly discuss why these criticisms are somewhat unfair and mainly inherent to psychological measurement in general. First, VAST items are pairs of paintings that vary in aesthetic quality, and it is often argued that aesthetic quality can only be context-/culture-specific. A valid point, certainly, but one should note that there still are a number of studies comparing the VAST across cultures (e.g., Iwawaki et al., 1979), and, while they certainly need updating, they overall suggest that the VAST is invariant across cultures. In addition, the problem of cultural invariance is not specific to aesthetic sensitivity: It is just as much relevant regarding other constructs, such as personality traits. Second, it has been pointed that the items of the test mainly come from the agreement of eight experts over the *correct* answers. A valid point again, but, in general, using a panel of judges is standard in all domains where a *true* answer is impossible to determine (for example, in creativity research). Further, developers of psychometric tests in general are less conscientious about studying the validity of the content – the norm (for example, for personality questionnaires), is instead to skip any empirical investigation of the content of tests, unfortunately. The VAST is therefore quite a positive example in this respect. Third, it is often pointed that the content of the test is not representative of visual art in general, as it is exclusively composed of paintings by K.O. Götz, and operationalizes aesthetic quality only in terms of certain features (notably balance). This is true, but, do intelligence tests represent how humans use their intelligence in their daily lives? Do (dis)agreeing to statements represent how our personality manifests itself? Not at all. In fact, the consensus among psychometricians, as evidenced by the widespread use of statistical techniques like factor analysis, is not that items of a test are representative samples of a domain, but that they should be manifestations of/caused by individual attributes (Borsboom et al., 2003). In this respect, our research has showed that item responses in the VAST(-R) are, plausibly, manifestations of the same attribute (Myszkowski & Storme, 2017), and that the correlations observed between the test scores and other measures – such as measures of openness to aesthetics, figural creativity, and general mental ability – are in line with the definition of aesthetic sensitivity (Myszkowski et al., 2020). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the VAST(-R) measures one single ability, and that this ability is likely a form

of aesthetic ability – its very aim.

The VAST is certainly divisive among researchers in empirical aesthetics and psychology. It is however important to look past how controversial *measuring good taste* sounds, and to see instead that better measuring aesthetic sensitivity is a challenging and incremental process that allows a better understanding of human potential in all of its breadth.

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4. Discussion on VAST

Text: Riccardo Luccio

Abstract: VAST can be important for a theory of perception, demonstrating the existence of a specific mental ability for the perception of figural goodness. Secondly, it shows that for a figure to be pregnant it need not be simple.

What can VAST say to a general theory of perception? These reflections, however, turn to VAST-R, the recent revision of VAST made by Myszkowski and Storme, an instrument, in this form, psychometrically completely reliable and valid. It is in particular to the validity of the VAST-R, given by its more than satisfactory one-dimensional nature, that we turn our attention. The validity of a test must be considered the criterion of existence of the mental ability that it measures. One-dimensionality indicates that the test measures one and only one skill. This ability is called Eysenck's T, but what T actually is must be discussed.

Now, contrary to what aesthetics scholars may think, the most interesting aspect of VAST is given by the fact that in the instructions to the subjects any reference to the *beauty* of the observed table is specifically eliminated. The subject must instead choose in each couple the “superior from the point of view of design”, “more harmonious”, “better balanced”, and so on. These are expressions that all refer to that property of perception said *Prägnanz* in the tradition of Gestalttheory? [in the Gestaltist tradition *Prägnanz*]. It should therefore be stressed the importance that VAST demonstrates that a specific mental ability for the appreciation of this property exists, and with its own uniqueness. And therefore that this property should not be confused with *beauty*, a very difficult concept to study empirically, linked as it is to social factors determined historically and culturally.

But another aspect must be underlined. Whatever the definition we can give to the expression “perceptual simplicity”, the VAST tables are far from simple. This is important theoretically, because

contemporary scientific psychology, especially cognitivism, has shown a marked tendency to identify Prägnanz with simplicity. VAST is a further empirical demonstration of the erroneousness of this identification: a perception can be *prägnant* even if complex, provided it is balanced, harmonious, *good* in the Gestalt sense – *goodness* is very difficult to define, by admission of the Gestalt scholars themselves, but patently clear to recognize when faced with it.

In conclusion, I believe that scholars of perception would make a serious mistake if in future research the opportunities offered by VAST were missed. Among the many possibilities, I indicate at least three directions in which VAST could effectively support other empirical research tools: 1) research on the coding of visual forms, such as in research on the so-called *descriptive length*; 2) evolutionary research on perceptual maturity and neuropsychological impairment of perception – it is extraordinary that many psychometrics manuals are still on certainly more imperfect instruments such as the Bender Gestalt test, and not even mention the VAST; 3) the VAST-R, unlike previous versions, is one-dimensional – but what are the dimensions it has excluded? However, it is clear that each of these points should deserve a long discussion.

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5. The VAST in Psychology today

Text: Thomas Jacobsen, Barbara E. Marschallek, Selina M. Weiler

Abstract: Der VAST und seine revidierte Fassung sind auch heute noch als Beispiel für ein Fähigkeitskonstrukt in der ästhetischen Verarbeitung und deren Unterformen relevant. Dennoch muss die grundlegende Konzeptualisierung der ästhetischen Sensitivität, und damit auch des VAST, diskutiert und von ästhetischen Präferenzen differenziert werden.

The *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* (VAST; Götz, 1985) is one of the very few instruments available to psychologically assess inter-individual differences in mental processing pertaining to aesthetic appreciation. Its underlying idea is to gauge the ability of an individual to detect or judge the objective aesthetic goodness of a pictorial composition. It uses 50 pairs of black and white drawings differing in their composition, more or less slightly. The VAST, therefore, has a scope that is limited to visual displays, and, at that, to aspects of its composition. Of course, there are many more relevant features in visual aesthetics, and in non-visual domains of aesthetics as a whole.

Being a rare instrument to measure the construct aesthetic sensitivity, some authors have criticized its weakness of unidimensionality and structural validity (Myszkowski & Storme, 2017). To overcome these limitations, the authors have revised the instrument. Based on a subset of items of the VAST, the VAST-R has an improved internal consistency and structural validity (Myszkowski & Storme, 2017). In recent years, the VAST has seen a revived interest. For one, it has been reassessed in a number of psychometric studies. For example, the instrument, including its revised version, have been used in a study investigating the correlation of need for uniqueness, i.e., the desire to achieve uniqueness, and visual aesthetic sensitivity (Marschallek et al., in press). Finding an inverse relation, the results suggest that participants who strive for individuality exhibit lower visual aesthetic sensitivity since they tend to violate norms in order to assert their uniqueness. Interestingly, no better psychometric properties were observed for the revised version.

Yet, the fundamental conceptuality of aesthetic sensitivity, and thus also of the VAST, has been questioned in the past months. Myszkowski and Zenasni (2016) share the idea of Eysenck (1940; 1983) to define it as “good taste” (“T”). The same authors also propose shifting from “single-content measures” (2016; p. 1) to comprehensive assessments of an “Aesthetic Quotient” (AQ), which would include other facets of aesthetic ability—like artistic knowledge, sensitivity to complexity and aesthetic empathy. Corradi et al. (2019) on the other hand, define aesthetic sensitivity as the “degree to which a person’s aesthetic valuation is influenced by a certain sensory feature” (p. 13). This leads the authors to the idea, that aesthetic sensitivity relies on aspects such as learning, experience and cognitive processes and therefore must be seen a preference construct, rather than an ability construct.

Further, a differentiation between descriptive and normative approaches needs to be taken into account. Eysenck (1940; 1983) seemingly intended a normative approach: The VAST can tell what good taste is and what’s not, based on implying what is good taste. In our view, external criteria would be required for it. Such a conception may be distinguished from approaches acknowledging the subjective, self-referential nature of aesthetic processing, as seen for example, in applications of judgment analysis for judgment policy capturing (e.g., Jacobsen & Höfel, 2002). Using unambiguous symmetric and asymmetric stimuli, Leder and colleagues (2019) found in their study, that experts have a preference for the latter, whereas laymen prefer the former. Yet, these results by no means imply that laymen have the ability to detect an underlying symmetry. That is, aesthetic sensitivity needs to be disentangled from aesthetic preferences.

In sum, the VAST is relevant today in itself, either through the revised version and even the original version as an example of an ability construct in aesthetic appreciation, or aesthetic processing as a whole, that could be extended to other features of the visual domain as well as other domains sites (Jacobsen, 2006).

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6. A designer’s view of (and qualms about) the VAST

Text: Roy R. Behrens

Abstract: The author is a designer and teacher whose quest for objective criteria for visual esthetic

design *predates his contact with Hans-Jürgen Eysenck in the early 1970s. He describes his interest in the VAST, while also expressing his lingering doubts.*

I first became acquainted with VAST in the late 1960s, when, as an undergraduate art student at an American university, I earned a degree in Art Education, with a primary focus on painting. A few years later, after teaching grades 7–12 for less than one year, then serving in the military, I completed a graduate degree in art education at a prominent school of art and design. I then went on to teach at universities and art schools for more than 45 years. Throughout those years, my primary goal in visual art (both in practice and in teaching) was to arrive at what I considered to be *strong compositions*. That end result could be achieved just as readily in abstract compositions as in those comprised of pictorial imagery. It was equally applicable to works of *fine art* (studio painting, printmaking, sculpture, and so on) and to *applied art* or design (graphic design, illustration, typography, and so on). Over the years, the art that I made and the courses I taught increasingly shifted toward graphic design.

In my last year as an undergraduate, I became intensely interested in gestalt organizing principles (e.g., similarity, proximity, continuity, and closure) because I thought they might provide an objective understanding of inherent (hard-wired) tendencies in human vision, and, to follow, the process by which one develops *strong compositions*. At the time, I was especially influenced by the writings of Gyorgy Kepes (*Language of Vision*), Rudolf Arnheim (*Art and Visual Perception*), and zoologist Hugh B. Cott, in whose work I saw the link between gestalt principles and animal camouflage. I recall that a pivotal book at the time was Lancelot Law Whyte, ed., *Aspects of Form*. But I was also interested in the writings of Abraham Moles, Daniel Berlyne, Karl Otto Götz (his VAST), and in other science-based research about art and visual perception. At the time, I wrote to Hans-Jürgen Eysenck, asking his permission to reproduce (using my students as subjects) the visual-spatial abilities test in his book, *Know Your Own IQ* (Penguin Books, 1962). Over the years, I have sometimes said to students (only half-facetiously) that the process of designing (arranging components in art and design) has much in common with *sorting socks*. Eysenck kindly approved my request, but I failed to complete the experiment.

In the mid-1980s, I wrote two college-level textbooks for use in courses on art and design. The first, titled *Design in the Visual Arts* (Prentice-Hall, 1984), was an illustrated overview of what I referred to as *visual esthetic design*. This textbook was intended for courses in generic basic design at the freshman level. The second was a sequel titled *Illustration as an Art* (Prentice-Hall, 1986), which fostered the idea that the three paramount concerns in illustration were esthetic design, invention, and representation. An essay titled *How Form Functions: Esthetics and Gestalt Theory*, which I later published in *Gestalt Theory: Journal of the GTA* (2002) is a reasonable summary of the point of view of those two books. An amplified version [can be accessed here](#).

Today, as I read the provided sources about VAST and its originator, I realize how tauntingly close I came (at least in intention and language somewhat) to Karl Otto Götz's idea of *visual aesthetic sensitivity*. To a degree I was surely influenced by him. At the same time, when I now read the descriptions of VAST, I am reminded of reservations I had more than forty years ago. In particular, I still have misgivings about using the concept of *balance* as the chief criterion in assessing esthetic arrangements. If nothing else, the term is far too likely to be confused with the simple weighted equivalence that we associate with a teeter-totter on a children's playground. Equally perilous is the word *harmonious*. Both terms are one-sided, in the sense that they only stress *order*, *consistency* and *connectedness*

. As a designer, artist, and teacher, I understand *esthetic form* as a mediation between *order and disorder*. To me, disturbances are a vital part, and imbalances are legitimate tools.

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