

VAST-Discussion: Silvia Bonacchi and Ian Verstegen

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

Abstract: After [round 1](#) of the discussion about the Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test developed by Karl Otto Götz, Karin Götz responded in [round 2](#) to the various statements. In this article Silvia Bonacchi and Ian Verstegen discuss the state of the discussion so far.

Making the beautiful tangible

Text: [Silvia Bonacchi](#)

The *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* (VAST), as developed by Karl Otto Götz and now a lively discussion topic in w/k, is a test designed to examine individual sensitivity for the aesthetic nature of visual figurations. The test presents the choice between two images that show minimal differences: a line, the slope of a surface, a speck of colour. Those who take the test will discover the importance of *looking closely*. In terms of gestalt theory, this is an experience of *Prägnanz* (i.e. of good form), *Imprägnanz* (Stemberger 2009: 15) or even of *Disprägnanz*: Something fits and is coherent, or something is missing, incomplete, *positioned badly*, doesn't fit, etc. Not only visual perception, but also other sensory areas allow us to experience a "fragile" beauty that can tip over: for instance in the acoustic and kinetic-acoustic field, where we experience rhythmic attraction, the beauty of a voice or the enchantment of a poetic verse. A small change is enough to replace the euphonic effect with cacophony. It is enough for a person to have a sore throat or a cold, or to suddenly speak too loudly for their voice to become unpleasant. It is enough to change a word or even a syllable to break a verse. Behind judgements such as "a pleasant voice", "a pleasant sound" or an "enchanting verse" lies the phenomenal evidence of a harmony made of a combination of different factors: the colour of the voice, its intensity, the speech tempo, the differences in pitch, breaks and pauses, accents and sound quality. It is thus a gestalt experience; in the wake of Kant and Locke an experience of tertiary qualities, or rather — as Locke wrote in Chapter IV, 26 of his essay *Concerning Human Understanding* — an experience of "natural powers" that trigger perceptible objects.

I remember a passage from Robert Musil's essay *Literati and Literature* (1931) that is dedicated to the creation of form as a gestalt problem. Here, the Austrian writer recalls the beautiful verses of Goethe's poem *St. Nepomuk's Eve*:

"From an idea no more beautiful than dozens of others, that children walk singing across a bridge under which the lights of boats and reflections from the bank are swimming (itself immeasurably superior to the banal: children are singing on the bridge, lanterns swim on the stream), Goethe forms two most magical lines by a transforming twist: <<Lichtlein schwimmen auf dem Strome / Kinder singen auf der Brücken>> [Lanterns swimming on the stream / Children singing on the bridge]. If one observes the rhythm here, which the fingers can tap out on a tabletop, it does not have much more meaning than a supportive accompaniment. The sound picture that is palpably part of the changed impression cannot

be separated from it, and has no more of the quality of self-sufficiency than one side of a geometric figure would. Thus one could analyze such a line for other changes, but would not find nothing but details that, by themselves, are as good as meaningless. One can only explain that it is from all these details taken together, and through their mutual interpenetration, that the whole arises in a way that remains mysterious.” (Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul*, 77–78)

Petrarch’s verses, Shakespeare’s sonnets (cf. Gambino et al. in print), Pindar’s odes, the dactylic hexameters in the Greek tragedies impress us above all with their mysterious beauty that unfolds in their sound, where an original order, from which we cannot escape, seems to resonate. Every tiny disruption to this secret order, in which the different elements reveal their respective unity, is an experience of *Disprägnanz* and cacophony of the senses.

Whoever takes the VAST must be alert and attentive: every distraction leads to disorientation, the lines blur into one another and the figures turn into incomprehensible specks. To perceive images we need light, to perceive figures we need a background, to perceive sounds or voices and rhythm we must not be blinded by noise and clamour. Alertness and concentration can then evolve into a state of devotion or contemplation that sharpens and *broadens* the senses; and so the beautiful becomes tangible. Especially today, in a world that is quick, loud and oversaturated, we need such forms of experiencing *Prägnanz*. The VAST reminds and warns us of this, proving its relevance even fifty years after its conception.

References

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A Humanist’s View of the Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (VAST)

Text: Ian Verstegen

The presentation by Rissa and the responses by a number of psychologists and artists is most welcome for thinking about the concept of aesthetic sensitivity. From the point of the humanities, such a formerly aspirational ability – the achievement of aesthetic sensitivity – is all but discredited. A long-supported valorization of popular or *low* culture not to mention a deep antipathy to social hierarchies (“aren’t only

rich people concerned with aesthetics?") puts the measurement tool in deep suspicion.

This is an ironic situation because while avant-garde artistic practices seek to overcome traditional aesthetic concerns, a monumental industry of digital media is based precisely on such principles. The more we in our artworld practices state that we are not interested in aesthetic sensitivity the more in practice we are.

A failure of early tests of visual *goodness*, or visual *preference* was that they were too vague. They indeed packed cultural assumptions into their discussions. In an earlier article on the measurement of the Gestalist's *Prägnanz* – discussed by Luccio and others – I argued that when we say “good” we really imply an instrumental answer, “good for x” (Verstegen, 2009). Admirably, Götz separated evaluative from descriptive features (Götz, 1979). Furthermore, his instructions did not presume implicit assumptions. The 1979 version of the test asked for a judgment of which of two design is “more harmonious in its configuration than the other”. That is extremely explicit and easy to respond to.

Stemberger suggested in his response that we cannot turn our nose up at aesthetic sensitivity because it is allied to ethical beliefs that are equally based on intuition. As I noted briefly, we are as concerned with aesthetic sensitivity as ever, though our official pedagogy does not support it. That is the humanities' problem and not psychology's. It is the current task of the humanists to get over the limitations of its pseudo-liberating and pseudo-democratizing doctrines that actually reinforce hierarchies.

What if the VAST, or a tool like it, marked the attainment of aesthetic sensitivity by students, in a state supported way that suggested full participation in a culturally rich and rewarding life? In that case, Götz's test would have served its purpose.

References

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Previous articles on VAST (from old to new):

- [Karl Otto Götz as Psychologist](#)
- [Discussion with Karin Götz about VAST](#)
- [VAST Discussion: The Plan](#)
- [VAST Discussion, Round 1](#) (by Gerhard Stemberger, Herbert Fitzek, Nils Myszkowski, Riccardo Luccio, Thomas Jacobsen/Barbara E. Marschallek/Selina M. Weiler and Roy R. Behrens)
- [VAST Response to the 6 Statements](#) (by Karin Götz)

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

Tags

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4. psychology
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