

## VAST Response to the 6 Statements

Text: [Karin Götz](#) | Section: [On „Art and Science“](#)

*Abstract: In the second round of the VAST debate Karin Götz responds to the statements by Gerhard Stemberger, Herbert Fitzek, Nils Myszkowski, Riccardo Luccio, Thomas Jacobsen/Barbara E. Marschallek/Selina M. Weiler and Roy R. Behrens that were published in the [first round](#).*

### Preliminary remarks from w/k's editorial team

On the basis of Karin Götz's article [Karl Otto Götz as psychologist](#) and the [discussion with her](#) about the *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* (VAST), the w/k editorial team planned a four-part debate with a number of specialists about the *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* which Karl Otto Götz developed in the 1970s (see: [VAST discussion – The plan](#)). The [first round of the VAST discussion](#) brought forth trenchant statements by the participants Gerhard Stemberger, Herbert Fitzek, Nils Myszkowski, Riccardo Luccio, Thomas Jacobsen/Barbara E. Marschallek/Selina M. Weiler and Roy R. Behrens. All are closely involved with psychology in general and in particular with test psychological studies in relation to the aesthetic dimension. In the second round, Karin Götz (as the painter Rissa) has responded to these texts. The quotes are drawn from the six statements in the 1<sup>st</sup> round; since w/k is not paginated in a classical sense the quotes are not referenced to page numbers.

### Karin Götz

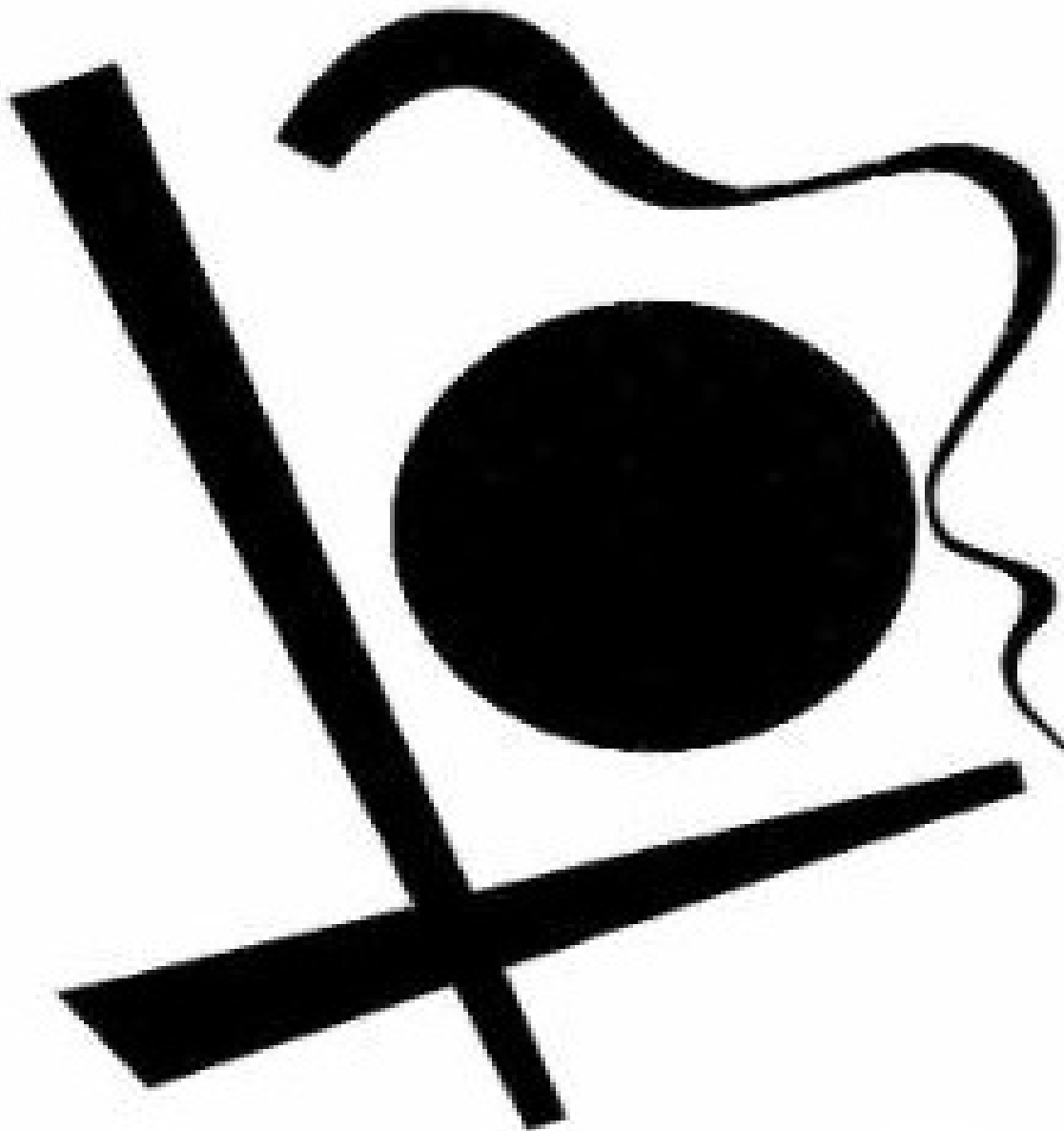
I wish to offer my thanks for the six statements in response to my two articles and the *Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test* (VAST). They show that people have worked with VAST in a variety of ways. First of all, I will look at some of the aspects discussed in the statements. To some degree they raise objections to VAST. I will then go into greater detail about the reasons Karl Otto Götz had for developing the test.

Gerhard Stemberger correctly observes that with VAST Götz was seeking to challenge aesthetic relativism. This is often manifested quite matter-of-factly vis-à-vis people's visual-aesthetic experience with the remark "it's just a matter of taste". In addition, Stemberger points out that in his search for a single characteristic – good (i.e. balanced) artistic form – Götz was maybe treating the complexity of aesthetics in an overly one-dimensional way.

Herbert Fitzek raises an important question:

"What happens when the images are presented and in what processes of correlation and decision-making do the candidates find themselves in their dialogue with the pictorial material?"

And he also mentions that nowadays Götz's endeavour to identify the varying visual sensibilities among people no longer enjoys much popularity. I agree with him, since in my opinion we are now living at a time when any emphasis placed on disparate levels of human ability is frequently considered objectionable. This view prevails so as not to endanger the generally desired social harmony.



In his discussion of VAST, Riccardo Luccio makes reference to VAST-R, which the psychologists Myszkowski and Storme extrapolated from Götz's VAST. I myself am not familiar with this version of the test. In addition, he draws attention to the fact that VAST has nothing to do with a concept of beauty – which I would qualify with “idealistically influenced” – but is concerned one-dimensionally with

measuring a single ability. That is probably the Eysenckian T. This T wasn't part of Götz's thinking. As Luccio continues in words to that effect, contemporary psychology has shown a distinct tendency to identify *Prägnanz* (a concept in Gestalt theory meaning overall perceptible simplicity) with simplicity alone, and he states:

"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."

The psychologist team of Thomas Jacobsen, Barbara E. Marschallek and Selina M. Weiler likewise criticises that the evaluations of aesthetic sensitivity undertaken by VAST are excessively one-dimensional. Instead they propose an aesthetic quotient that covers other facets of aesthetic ability – such as artistic knowledge, sensitivity for complexity and aesthetic intuition.

In a further criticism, the art teacher, artist and designer Roy R. Behrens observed that in VAST Götz was inquiring only into balanced form and harmony. Figures which, while disharmonious, would nonetheless play an artistic role were not taken into consideration.

The psychologist Nils Myszkowski distilled a VAST-R version from the original VAST. To me it is still not sufficiently clear what his reasons were for changing VAST by reducing the number of image pairs. Before Götz died we had no contact with Myszkowski, making it impossible for me to form an idea of the kind of change he was proposing. But I certainly think it is worth considering his suggestion for omitting certain questionable image pairs.

Beyond this, Myszkowski also focuses on the question of response times in VAST, a point I find interesting. Up into the 1980s I tested many candidates with VAST, and by and large the quick response also proved the right one. At the time I wondered whether the speed in giving the right answer might also have something to do with aesthetic sensitivity.

In addition, Myszkowski writes:

"It is often pointed out 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 operationalises aesthetic quality only in terms of certain features (notably balance)."

Later, he continues:

"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 what conditions individuals develop such expertise – when exposed to art, when discussing art, when creating art themselves, etc."

The reactions to VAST by seven psychologists and one art teacher, and the story of its origins I compiled gave me great pleasure and reminded me that the test was still being used in psychological research with a variety of different questions – even if Götz was not being consulted on this. What I'm also

unaware of is how these researchers first became acquainted with the test.

Since Götz was no longer able to explore further issues concerning the test with Berlyne and Eysenck it is now up to the perceptual psychologists and personality psychologists to state their views about the value of VAST – maybe also in modified form – for their own research. Here one should also ask how the different personality profiles relate to the varying aesthetic sensitivities. An intelligence test serves to provide a quicker measure of a person's intelligence; correspondingly, one can also test the sensory perceptual capacity of someone.



In the following I will present some of the thoughts Götz was pursuing in the period between 1959 and

1985 about VAST, art and aesthetic education, while also drawing on my own experience teaching art as a professor at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the years from 1969 to 2007.

As far as the connection between fine art and psychology, in particular test psychology, is concerned, Götz surely deserves a special status. At the time of developing VAST he was internationally recognised as a leading exponent of *informel* painting. As an autodidact he acquired detailed and differentiated knowledge of scientific psychology, familiarised himself with the current state of research, became knowledgeable in mathematics, statistics and experimental psychology. In the 1970s Eysenck once told him in jest, “Right now, you are the only visual artist in the world who can achieve something for scientific psychology.”

Yet in a certain respect the test remained uncompleted. Götz had still intended to test a sufficient number of candidates to better validate his conjecture that people show incremental differences in aesthetic sensitivity. However, the tests undertaken at that time revealed several things: first, there are some people – and they don’t always have to be visual artists – who without any training possess, as it were, a naturally given high level of aesthetic sensitivity (understood as a visual and aesthetic capability). Second, training can enable most people to acquire a higher degree of aesthetic sensitivity. Third, a small number of people will always remain “obtuse” regarding aesthetic sensitivity.

Götz rarely concerned himself with humanistic art criticism and aesthetic philosophy. Whenever the question of form or the aesthetic dimension in art (particularly in painting) arose he then trusted in his own (or my) visual powers of perception, in those of outstanding contemporary artists, or in the judgement of architects and graphic artists. He was of the opinion that in any cultural milieu there are probably a number of individuals who, without being specifically trained, possess a high level of aesthetic sensitivity. They could include housewives, workmen, electricians, florists, confectioners, tailors, etc. Otherwise, up until Götz’s generation, learning and training artistic sensitivity was the be all and end all at colleges of applied arts and art schools. Up till then it was still seen as the unquestioned task of art teachers to remind students as they were painting or drawing to pay particularly close attention in their artistic work in order to achieve a certain balance in the graphic compositional proportions of their two-dimensional artwork. In the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf at that time there were still courses in drawing from nature. As one could well ask, how many people who paint reveal this sensitivity elsewhere in everyday life? Is it manifested in some painters only in terms of their two-dimensional artwork, whereas otherwise in their studio or the places where they live all you find is chaos?

In relation to this kind of disorder Jacobsen/Marschallek/Weiler make an interesting observation. In the case of people tested using VAST-R they say:

“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.”

That means that in these candidates the pleasure judgement probably predominates. Because the balanced image they are being asked to look for does not manifest to them any visual aesthetically irritating “mistakes” (as I would term it), they don’t even select it in the first place. But what this doesn’t tell us is whether *in spite of* or *because of* their personal disposition they actually recognised that they

had chosen the “wrong” image according to the rules of the test setup. In the course of testing we were able to ascertain that this differed from case to case of deviation from the norm. These questions are and remain interesting, and from experience I have also learned different answers. In its combination of dispositions and capabilities human nature is highly variable and inventive.

Götz took aesthetics to mean the doctrine of perception. In terms of the visual aesthetic dimension of flat, two-dimensional images (artistic image, naïve image or photograph) he was not concerned with beauty or good taste – an idea that at some point maybe Eysenck brought into play, but it certainly wasn't Götz's problem. As a non-figurative painter, his tests were always about the perception of visual aesthetics in two-dimensional images. He was concerned on the one hand with the search for – once again to use old-fashioned terminology – ugly, disharmonious structures or –expressed in modern terms – imbalance, and on the other, by comparison, with the search for beautiful or harmonious structures, for balance.

Although the words *beautiful* and *ugly* were replaced by *balanced* and *imbalanced* in VAST's pictorial comparisons, I nonetheless mention them again in the same sentence as *balanced* and *imbalanced*. This ambivalence is intended since the two time-worn concepts are still employed today in everyday speech. Usually, beauty is preferred over ugliness. However, VAST is not about evaluation but about perception. I am in a position to select the balanced image even if I like the imbalanced one more. Götz could have instructed the candidates to name the image from each image pair that seems to have a disharmonious design. But he decided differently and asked for the harmonious image, while the disharmonious image was also included as a comparison.

Let me repeat: in VAST Götz used the image pairs designed à la Götz not as works of art but as visual figurations within two-dimensional images that were arranged in a more complex manner than a lenticular form. Hence the objection that Götz was presenting his own works in VAST does not hold since in the test they function as visually complex two-dimensional images; the issue in VAST is not the intricate terrain of fine art but how variously designed formal structures in image pairs are perceived, in which one of the two images always harbours formal defects that disturb the eye's saccadic movement. But I would also like to add something about visual art. Because in two statements this profession is ascribed the most far-ranging power for conveying aesthetic sensitivity. In this respect, Götz's thinking was that in the research into visual aesthetic sensitivity it would be better to start precisely by not using works of fine art. Instead he wanted to develop an ABC of different simple visual aesthetic formal structures. This is why he didn't begin VAST with the multiple complexity of fine art.

In our opinion, four dimensions come into effect in the judgement of works of art: the aesthetic dimension; the semantic dimension (in figurative works of art); the motivational dimension; the artistic dimension.<sup>[1]</sup> Having been a teacher, Götz knew – as I do too – that works of art can be described only partially with these four categories. But in terms of visual aesthetic experience, what is actually generated in the processing zone in the mind of a person viewing a complex work of art remains a highly individual activity. So we felt that it was the wrong approach to begin our research into aesthetic sensitivity by inquiring into an aesthetic quotient – that would represent a semantic overload. Ask artists what they consider, say, “artistic knowledge” to be. You will get the shock of your life. Especially today in this period of eclecticism in visual art and the tendency to judge works of art predominantly on the basis of their semantic dimension. This is why present-day judgements on works of art end up being so

very heterogeneous, if not even muddled.

In relation to VAST, I still assume that quite a few candidates with a certain level of aesthetic sensitivity will be able to perceive a disturbance in one of two similar images presented to him or her as a comparison and, when asked, will be able to identify the balanced one of the pair. It was with such simple steps that Götz wanted to begin. Starting first of all on a very basic visual level struck me too as the right path.

Have I maybe now written enough about learning aesthetic sensitivity, in particular by means of visual art (in contemplating it, speaking about it or actually making it oneself)? All I can say is that people of a more or less good-tempered disposition who practice visual art as painting will thereby gradually learn a certain degree of aesthetic sensitivity, and do so through continuous training. We told averagely talented students that they would need about two years before they learn to walk by themselves. But I have also known artists and art collectors of many years, all with visual experience, who were not able to improve their works visually and aesthetically, or to choose the best one from a number of paintings on offer.



Standing at the other extreme of art history are the painting artists of exceptional vision and creativity who by nature possess outstanding aesthetic sensitivity. Let us call to mind the painter Pablo Picasso (1881-1972) and how he has gone down in the history of art as the genius of destruction. For him, a test like this would have been too banal – he would probably have left the forms blank and hung them out on the washing line. In the sense of birdseed for a lion. The power of Picasso's formal thinking lays precisely in balancing disharmonious with harmonious formal elements. This is seen best in his Guernica painting. Here, the will to invent formal elements was his strongest impetus. In order to meet the quota for female artists I can also cite Georgia O'Keeffe (1889-1986) and Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) in this context. There are probably, loosely speaking, two types of visual aesthetic sensitivity: micro-sensitivity,



as manifested by the likes of Georges Seurat (1859–1891), and macro-sensitivity, as in artists like Picasso.

To conclude, taking Picasso as an example, I once again return to the correspondence between the formal elements of balance and imbalance. It was just chance that made Götz decide against asking candidates to single out the imbalanced image. They were given the opportunity to choose between balanced and imbalanced, between relative order and disorder. That's all it was about.

In Picasso's best works you get to know his sublime play of balanced and imbalanced formal structures. And it is only from the mysterious counterpoise of both poles that outstanding art has ever emerged. It's the equivalent of hot coffee, black and unsweetened. By contrast, lukewarm art is never more than tepid latte. Some people enjoy that taste too.

Summing up, I return to several lines of thought. As Stemberger clearly observed and emphasised, with VAST Götz was seeking to counter aesthetic relativism. He approached this at a time when it still seemed a meaningful thing to do. With VAST he began researching people's visual judgement. Using the image pairs, he started with simple formal elements which he didn't consider to be art. Had it been possible to further develop VAST, Götz, together with Berlyne, would certainly have set his sights on "broader perspectives" (as Herbert Fitzek puts it) of visual aesthetics in the direction of visual art, crafts, architecture, messed-up forms, successful forms, etc.

As a prominent painter, Götz was of course aware that in a certain sense aesthetic relativism also offers people a kind of freedom. You only need to think of all the tattooed images that now adorn the skin of millions of people the whole world over. Yet too much of this aesthetic relativism by no means manifests a broadening of culture, but rather its decline.

Translated by Matthew Partridge

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

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[1] Cf. K. O. Götz and Karin Götz (1972): *Probleme der Bildästhetik*. Concept-Verlag: Düsseldorf.

## Tags

1. Barbara E. Marschallek
2. Daniel E. Berlyne
3. Gerhard Stemberger
4. Hans-Jürgen Eysenck
5. Herbert Fitzek
6. Karin Götz
7. Karl Otto Götz
8. Nils Myszkowski
9. psychology
10. Riccardo Luccio
11. Rissa
12. Roy R. Behrens
13. Selina M. Weiler
14. Thomas Jacobsen

## 15. Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (VAST)