

TO PROVOKE IS TO PLEASE

essay on art by Esther Viersen

(....) Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view argument differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently (....)¹

I belong to generation X, I grew up in the transition period between the analog and digital era, the time of automation and digitization, in which computers already existed but there was no internet and social media. Phone calls were still made with analog telephones and the smartphone had yet to be invented. Generation X, also known as the Generation Nix or the Lost Generation in Belgium and the Netherlands, as we, then young people lived through the period of economic crisis after the second oil crisis. If you went to university or college and made it through graduation, it was difficult to find suitable work. Generation X, Nix or the MTV generation. MTV, a television channel with a then-new concept based on broadcasting video clips, was introduced in the period that coincided with the teenage years of much of Generation X. We started to be flooded with videos and images.

The movement of pop art, performance & site-specific art found its way in mass media & mainstream culture and stirred up the question of the meaning of art with critics and the public. The expansion of art into culture, which started in the sixties, took a lift with the rapid development of mass media.

In the family I grew up in art was seen as a hobby, in the best case. Art was not something you do, as in doing something useful, like work for money to obtain the status of being someone in society, with a house a car, property, you know.

And if you do, do art then it must be nice, beautiful, pleasing, logical, it must make sense, have meaning; for society and the result must be tangible and clear, for the people.

Susan Sontag wrote in her renowned essay 'against interpretation'², that it is thanks to Plato who ruled that art had a dubious value, since ordinary materials were in his vision an imitation, art was an imitation of an imitation and therefore useless, a lie. It is fascinating to discover how this framework of thoughts, perhaps unintentionally, still holds up in the 20th and 21st century, so nearly

¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphors we live by

² Susan Sontag, against interpretation

2,5 thousand years later, it is still in the collective minds of the public of western society, the heritage of the Greek philosophers.

We saw the discussion of the purpose and definition of art arise a few times in recent Dutch history, around 2010 when the government announced a devastating cutback on the arts & culture system and again during the pandemic of Covid-19.

In the first case the art world tried to speak in the economical political language and pleased the system by defining art as an economical profitable sector. During the pandemic it was revealed that the foundation of our political and economical system was eroded. The luxury of spending time on a higher order, called art, was not done, our money had to be spend on important things, basic necessities like healthcare, economy. As often in times of crises, art & artists seemed to awaken, and they applied their skills for the greater good of society in need. Art became meaningful and appreciated if applied in society. A lot of artist re-assessed their role in society and were confronted with less or no work and asked themselves the question of what use is my work. My job as an educator in art provided a secure income for me and my family. I cycled to school through empty streets, arriving in an empty school and trying to get a hold of the crises by managing education online. Since art was under pressure so was education in arts.

This essay is an attempt to unravel the purpose of art through analyzing the viewing of some artworks. I will do this by evaluating three site specific art spaces, installation ruins/location by Hans op de Beeck, exhibition Wo-man Cave by Hester Scheurwater and exhibition wonderful things by Tim Walker and Shona Heath. I will make a small detour with the painted visual art spaces of Rosa Peters.

During this unraveling I will uncover the meaning of provocative and pleasing in definition and connect it to art. I will take in account some ruling in definitions of art in art history, on aesthetics and meaning.

This writer in her act is aware of a white, western, manlike perspective of a woman, who looks at the constant struggle between pleasing & provoking, between being an educator, a designer or being an artist, playing the role in the framework that society has made or deviating from that path.

'The struggle is to see from both perspectives at once'.³

Before discussing some works, I will take you along some common definitions of the meaning of the words pleasing and provoking as mentioned in the Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries. This is a mere a step to my main topics, not an etymological survey.

Pleasing, general meaning: 1. satisfying or appealing. "the pleasing austerity of the surroundings"⁴. 2. Giving a feeling of satisfaction or enjoyment; a pleasing performance; the music was very pleasing to the ear, it was pleasing to know that the presentation went so well.⁵ 3. Synonyms:

³ Donna Haraway, the Haraway reader

⁴ Oxford Languages

⁵ Cambridge dictionary

giving pleasure and holding your attention; good: It's a good film overall; enjoyable: We had an enjoyable time with Bob and Helen; pleasant: The weather is pleasant but not too hot; interesting: The history of the place was really interesting; nice: Have a nice day!
'Satisfying, pleasing to look at, the visual parable of someone who tickles your back or ruffles through your hair.'⁶

Pleasing in psychology, if we look at the words, satisfaction, and enjoyment we see that in psychological research 'to enjoy is useful for the living being, it is closely connected to food and reproduction and therefore crucial to our survival. The cognitive development of our species made it possible to elevate feelings of pleasure to the 'higher order' of art & science (.....) and in that way to happiness.' The absence of pleasure is anhedonia, a sign of depression.⁷

Pleasing as a verb, something that happens to our senses. Something one does to become wanted, respected, seen, valued, liked. But what makes a work of art a sensuous pleasing work of art.

Provoking, general meaning: 1. causing thought causing anger or another strong reaction, especially deliberately. 2. The program will take a detailed and provocative look at the problem of homelessness; "a provocative article". 3. synonyms: Annoying, irritating, exasperating, infuriating, but also, exciting & interesting.

How does this make sense in relation to the viewing, experiencing art.

As a viewer of art, if you pay attention, on the condition that you open yourself and your senses, then in the best case, something happens, you smile, feel nice, maybe happy even for a short while, comforted, inspired, this is a pleasing, satisfying experience. Or you could start to think, get irritated, angry, upset, feel resistance. In any case something happens. Maybe even you become able to change your perspective. It always provokes something of the senses and thoughts.

In general, we can say that pleasing refers to the positive side and provoking to the negative side of an experience of the senses. I will address both further in the text.

'Art is the domain of sensation, not to confuse with aesthetics'

Defining art, conditions & aesthetics

In the essay 'the end of art' by Danto, Danto makes a defense on his definition of art, the concept of artistic quality, the role of aesthetics, the relation between philosophy and art and how to answer the question 'but is it art?'. Danto believes there is an essence of Art, a definition of art everywhere and always true. The essence of art as a laying out the necessary and sufficient conditions for

⁶ Volkskrant 11 februari 'en nog maar een filmpje dan'

⁷ Dick Schwaab 'wij zijn ons brein'.

something to fall under a concept. He mentioned three conditions, aboutness, embodiment and presentation.

Regarding aboutness; by treating art works as representation, they possess aboutness, the artist can say what his artwork is about. Or we, the viewer, ground an interpretive hypothesis. Aboutness then embodies its meaning when it is seen interpretively. *'The artist can say what his work is about'* is something Sontag pointed out as a trap for artists. In her essay she marks that through Plato and the Greek mimesis theory we have a need or maybe even habit of defending art by separating form from content. The artists are pressured by trending norms in art & society of defending, their own art. In *against interpretation* Susan Sontag makes a plea for form & aesthetics, against interpretation to ensure the act of pleasing as part of experiencing art. Not to say that this pleasing cannot be an act of provoking.

On the conditions embodiment and presentation; the embodiment must be presented in a sensuous form (Hegel's view) without an intellectual effort. Danto interprets Hegel's view of art "(i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation", as that Hegel spoke of art in its prime as presenting "the highest realities in sensuous form (....). It must be conceded that something must embody the content the way the face embodies feelings (....) (view Martin Seel). But in this embodied feeling, experience and sensing adventures, Danto argues that there is a problem if we say that a purpose of art is to produce aesthetic pleasure in viewers. Hegel marks that it is the end of art if art becomes an object rather than a medium through which a higher reality made itself present.

What about aesthetics and beauty; Marcel Duchamp (1917) specifically separated aesthetics from art with his ready-mades. He wanted to go beyond good or bad taste. 'Duchamp was endeavoring to exclude aesthetics from the concept of art.' But why and so what if aesthetic and pleasure are the purpose of art. During the pandemic this element of pleasure, pleasing & comforting became an important factor of daily life. Sensing art, viewing art, became an essential, through art we entered imaginative (digital) spaces, we wondered around, we stepped outside ourselves and broke our routines, art elevated us. Art did not give us false sense of security but danced with us in our vulnerability. It showed us our weak spots and comforted us. Art became a useful product, an object, an instrument to use for the greater good of experience, for staying well, being human. A book, a poem, an online performance, a theatre play on the streets. Because of the uniqueness, the rare moments that we could share, theatre and art became so rare and unique it became valued again.

Art can provoke something that takes part outside itself. A cliché is that art brings us comfort and joy in times of crises, off course this is true, but art also provokes and shows us what we don't want to see or find difficult to see.⁸

Art must *do* something with an audience, not just present it, embody something and in this embodiment, there is aboutness. Martin Seel's view is that a reference to the sensuous properties of art works is essential.⁹

⁸ Ramsy Nasr de fundamenten

⁹ Danto, the end of art

The division between thought and sensation is our heritage from romanticism (Danto) and from the enlightenment French revolution. Today art is not merely mimetic and not merely sensuous, it has become its own subject. How and where it (artwork) is presented, how it is embodied and what it is about, together form a new narrative.

In 'on beauty in art' (2018) Alastair McDougall describes how the quality of the beauty (aesthetics) of a work of art is judged on a rational, technical scale (colors, composition, techniques, materials) and on a sensory intuitive scale (do I like it or not, what do I experience, feel with my body and with my emotions, see, hear, smell). In the text he explains a small history of looking at beauty in art. He points out that David Hume argued that beauty in things exists in the mind which contemplates them, or that beauty is felt rather than perceived. Rousseau, similarly, presented sensationalism, or the sensist view that the key factor in judging art is the spectators sensory encounter with it and that aesthetic judgements are not the same as those on matters of fact. MacDougall also point out that 'the obvious question has to be about the way the frameworks for judging art are a reflection of wider society'; referring to the well-known example of the impressionist rise through their salons des refuses.¹⁰

Art is judged by the framework society makes for the artists. During the pandemic art was judged by society on merits of a pleasing sensing experience. This was the purpose of art, being pleasingly provocative in a positive way. During this process, new narratives are created by the artists and their works of art.

Pleasingly provocative spaces

Miwon Kwon puts it like this in her essay 'one place after another'; 'In site-specific art (from 1970 – now) art questions art itself, art institutions, concepts, spaces. It causes interventions in spaces but also in structures and in experiences. It causes paradigm shifts, rattles expectations, pleases and immerses the audience. ¹¹ 'The idealism, of modernist art, in which the art object *in and of itself* was seen to have a fixed and transhistorical meaning, determined the object's placelessness, its belonging in no particular place..... site specificity opposed that idealism – and unveiled the material system it obscured – by its refusal of circulatory mobility, its belongingness to a specific site.'

¹²

It is because this I chose to use a few site-specific works to make my point on the account of pleasing.

¹⁰ https://www.academia.edu/37492718/On_Beauty_in_Art

¹¹ Miwon Kwon, one place after another

¹² Douglas Crimp, on the museums ruins

Scenic spaces

June 2008 the exhibition 'location 6' by Hans op de Beeck (1970), a monumental installation intended for the Westergas fabriek in Amsterdam. A site-specific work. 'The installation "Location (6)" based on this principle: the viewer is inside a building and is looking out at the wider world – in this case, a vast expanse of land stretching out as far as the eye can see. The exterior space has once been created in the form of a monumental landscape sculpture with an incrementally manipulated perspective (perspectival trompe-l'œil). Through a hallway, the spectator reaches an observatory with a panoramic window offering a view of an imaginary desolate snowy landscape. Everything basks in white light and is shrouded in a fog. The whole place has an ephemeral, almost immaterial feel about it that invites viewer to gaze into the near nothingness.'



13

This artwork was presented as site specific on location in Amsterdam. It was about 'a fascination with melancholic barren spaces devoid of human life'. And in its form, it embodied the aboutness. I as a viewer experienced this overwhelming beauty of the artwork (the quality) itself but also its impact on my mood, my senses. I felt overwhelmed, with the beauty of the space(s) with the incredible demonstration of craftsmanship in creating this large-scale model of memory, an atmosphere of diffused light with fog. It made me sit and dwell and remember my own daily life experiences of inspiring lights, foggy morning walks and uneasy moments in *unheimische* places. I sat there and was in awe of what I saw. It was perfectly pleasing to me; sensuous aesthetically pleasing.

In the introduction of the book 'on vanishing' about the artist Hans op de Beeck, the writers make a statement in approaching the book, the works and the artist; 'a work of art is always articulated by recourse to other context, in the form of examples, references, comparisons, analogies,

13 <https://hansopdebeeck.com/exhibitions/2008/hans-op-de-beeck-location-6>

allusions and the like. Invariably, the interpretation of the work resides outside it, it could be said to circulate around it, in a place that is borrowed for the occasion'. The writers of the book refer to Michael Baxandall patterns of intention:

'the (...) problem is that so many of the thoughts we will want to explain are indirect, in the sense that they are not pointed quite directly at the picture. (...) Most of the better things we can think or say about pictures stand in a slightly peripheral relation to the picture itself.'

If an interpretation of the work of art resides outside it, then the experience or effect of the work of art, the provocative or the pleasing also does. It is in the experience of the viewer. Something happens outside the artwork. The aboutness is in the mind of the viewer; the viewer takes in account information of the artist (if given) their own perspectives and the aboutness leads to an interpretation.



Location 3 sculptural installation

'The work 'ruins' of Hans op de Beeck looks a particular aspect of remembrance and its inverse, oblivion, that is, the ability to forget. These themes are developed through architecture and the depiction of the human form. Both refer to decay, to ruination, reminding us that *making*, and *viewing* are different temporal propositions. Lived historical time is also brought into question by the alterations in scale, where, in the case of the miniature, everyday life becomes absolutely anterior and exterior to itself'.

Painted spaces

I live in Rotterdam, the North part of the city, a neighborhood which grew from a working class district to a modern hip one, with a local brewer, nice shops and a ground for many artist to settle. My neighbor Rosa Peters is an autonomous artist who lives and works here. She has her atelier at the Zwaanhal. We met there and we spoke about her working space, which became a permanent one recently; an atelier & salespoint for her and her art. She makes abstract paintings with using the medium oil paint.

I was familiar with her work, proud owner of a small work and impressed with the big ones which I could see clearly when wandering through the neighborhood. I told her what I saw & felt. That the first thing that happens was not my intellect being addressed, but my senses, my imagination starts to work, I see, sense, feel, intuitively. I feel and when I take the time I can dwell in her paintings as I can dwell in the spaces of Hans op de Beeck. Vast landscapes of colors and vague shapes.

Being an artist myself I also see her craftsmanship, the patience in the layering of her work, I admire the beauty in this artistic competence.

She told me that all her paintings are made from memory of a space. Some of early memories of her childhood in her native village in Portugal, where she was bored a lot of the time and played with rocks. All her memories of a specific space are in this abstract painting. Her painting is almost the result of a meditative experience. She relives the spaces during painting them, and each painting comes out in a different way.

The subjective experience of a memory ultimately determines her work. She pictures a space she visited and starts painting; during the work on a painting all her senses are used from memory, taste, feeling emotion, smell, sight, sound. It all comes out in an abstract oil painting.

She feels she could do this forever, it's an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

I asked her if the work must always be aesthetically pleasing. That is certainly what she is aims for, an aesthetically pleasing picture, but it can differ in mood, it doesn't always have to be nice or positive, it can also be an angry or negative visual translation of the space.

Pedra do Campo I

2021, oil on linen, 200x170cm



Provoking spaces

The contrast with the socially provocative work of Hester Scheurwater couldn't be more eminent. This is a conflict in aesthetics versus aboutness and presentation. The artwork provokes something else, provokes other senses and thoughts, has a different purpose. The purpose here is not to please in an aesthetic way, but to shake the grounds.

During Rotterdam Art Week, February 2023, work by Hester Scheurwater, L.A. Raeven, Lara Verheijden and Itziar Okariz seen in the private studio next to the BRUTUS Garden in Rotterdam; The pin-up is an integral part of the traditional man cave. In this exclusively masculine space, women are objectified in an almost abstract way – until the door opens again to a wife, girlfriend, and a domesticated existence. The images of women in this exhibition are quite the opposite. These are works by outspoken, strong-willed female artists. The space they fill is therefore not a man cave, but more she-shed or wo-man cave.



"Under the guise of self-portraits, Hester Scheurwater investigates and critiques the role of woman as a sex object." "What happens when a woman takes on the role of representing herself and other women?"

The work of Hester Scheurwater causes inconvenience, we don't want to see the raw image of the flesh of a woman or the menstruation blood. When showing the work of Hester Scheurwater in a presentation it causes reaction as 'you don't have to make a point like this'. It is not pleasing for the eye, viewers don't want to be confronted by this through art. Some viewers don't feel this is the purpose of art. I disagree, it is one of the purposes of art, art should be uneasy, ugly, shocking and must confront us with a reality we do not or don't want to see in daily life.

I make a note here on which I will not further elaborate in this essay, but could it be that a work of a woman has to be nice and gentle and pleasing, could it be that not merely the work but also the artist herself disrupt by making this type of art. She the woman, the object woman, the loving mother, partner, must connect, not divide.

Hester Scheurwater has a strong vision and purpose to disrupt with her work of art. To show that what some don't want to see, to tell the other narrative, to question the image, framing of women in western society by social media. Mass media. The work of Hester Scheurwater is confronting and disruptive, it is a story that doesn't fit in. It doesn't please the image of a woman according to how women are positioned nowadays. It causes resistance and is not pleasing. Although the artworks provoke a lot, the exhibition space, called wo-man cave provoked nearly nothing, it was a poor substitute of a man-cave, there was nothing womanish about it.

“The mirrored self-images are my way of reacting on the imitated and fake media images, which are constantly calling upon our imagination, without intending to be taken too seriously, ”

‘Scheurwater’s work is sexually explicit, and therefore well known. The explicit images in her work are shocking and prompt discussion about the purported sexualisation of society. At the same time, her works also share links with international feminist art’.¹⁴

Fairytale spaces

The work of Tim Walker, explicit as well, but in a totally different manner. Tim Walkers work is characterized by a rich imagination and is full of fairytale stories. Tim Walker draws inspiration from surrealism and romanticism, something that we see reflected in his choice of themes such as childhood, nature, emotions, and his praise of the individual. It is Walker's talent to draw the viewer into his elaborate dream worlds.¹⁵

I visited in January 2023, the exhibition ‘wonderful things’ by Tim Walker (1970) at the Kunsthall, showing the collection of the V&A Hall in London, the exhibition space was designed by Maison de Faux, Shona Heath, set designer.

An exhibition is temporal architecture, in which you as a visitor can have an ephemeral experience. This time you could make a journey through many spaces, an odyssey like the one the artist has made himself. There are two artists at work here, one is Tim Walker, the artist photographer and second is Shona Heath, the set designer who designed a mesmerizing exhibition space. The exhibition is a completely positively pleasing event for mainstream audience. The kunsthall is the institution that programmed this exhibition and did it according to their mission which is to make art accessible to a broad audience. The public

¹⁴ Hester Scheurwater

¹⁵ Tim Walker wonderful things

experienced an immersive event of aesthetically beautiful things, theatrical settings, landscapes of colors, forms, props as well as costumes & treasures from V& A in London. The many different spaces were spatially well designed, strong in contrast and in depth and perspective, every space a different sense was being addressed.

It was indeed an escape from reality outside, into the colors and surrealistic landscapes of Tim Walker into vivid other worlds, made accessible by Shona Heath.



*'the stained glass gallery is like a slideshow of glorious colors. There is something special for me about transparent color and I have an immediate emotional response to color.'*¹⁶

"I'm interested in breaking down the walls that society has built so we can celebrate a greater variety of beauty and the amazing diversity of humanity." In his work there is a need for provoking change through beauty, aesthetics.

Pleasing through storytelling, pleasing by making a new narrative, one of inclusion and otherness. We see space after space with the most aesthetically pleasing pictures and sculptures. There is no escaping the aesthetics, the colors, the craftsmanship. Nostalgic memories of childhood and love of nature are important themes for Tim Walker, but identity and emotions are also central to the exhibition. Walker wants to embrace diversity through his work. The purpose of these artworks is to inspire, to show and to encourage.

One of the words to add to this sensuous experience is excitement. You can feel the excitement of the process behind the work in the exhibition.

¹⁶ Quote Tim Walker wonderful things

In conclusion

*'We are pleased if art is provocative.'*¹⁷

When I look at art, experience art, something happens, I start to think, change, smile, cry, laugh, get excited, inspired, or feel the opposite, get angry, irritated. My body undergoes a sensuous response. This is an essential for me as a viewer of art. I am undergoing art. Whether provocative in a pleasing or disturbing way. I need both.

As a maker of art, as a designer, I design temporal spaces, spaces in which you can be, as an actor (sets) or as an audience member (event spaces). These spaces have a purpose, namely either you imagine yourself in a different world or you imagine what you see a different world, not your own. The spaces are meant for imagining. I work from concept, an overarching idea, with elements of space, composition, color, context, which presents itself in a form and leads to aboutness, it has to communicate with the audience. The design must have aboutness, a concept, from that I choose the form and the means of presentation on basis of the idea.



Design draft model & presented work Uitmarkt 2011 Amsterdam

The content is an essential for the form, the aesthetics and the result, the presentation. But the other way around without form, the concept or idea has no shape, it is not embodied. And thus had no presentation means. With the presentation it reaches out to the audience, the viewer and they make their own narrative of this work.

Baxandell says: 'the how derives from the why, they are not separate areas, there is reciprocity between the two'. This is also the case with form & context & presentation, they together form the narrative.

As Susan Sontag already noted, modern times, modern people, have a need to understand something. When we interpret, we understand, we make it pleasing, acceptable, manageable. This is true whether we date 1966 or 2023, we, the people want to understand. If we don't, we feel uneasy and start to give meaning ourselves. If we have an answer, we stop using our senses because, case closed, on to the next narrative.

¹⁷ Frank Mineur, quote from class

The purpose of art is, to provoke the viewer, the audience, the public, with all that you have in you as an artist. Please them, make them doubt, irritate them, but do provoke, because if they are not, they will stop thinking, feeling, sensing, and then society gets ill, depressed, and will fade to black for the absence of pleasure is anhedonia, a sign of depression.¹⁸ And for experiencing pleasure we need to be provoked. If we are not, we simply cannot enjoy the vibrant colors of Tim Walker, or dwell in remembrance in the spaces of Hans op de Beeck, and Rosa Peters or get triggered in thought about the framing of woman and girls in (social) media.

By being provoked we enter a new world, a new narrative is created, that make us capable of changing perspectives; for this I believe very strongly is of essence in society, in art and in life.

The elements of pleasing and of provoking revolve around each other, they alternate as does my mood and desire. I learn to dance with all the elements of art, pleasing or provocative.

Esther Viersen

Rotterdam, March 5, 2023

¹⁸ Dick Schwaab ' wij zijn ons brein'.