

What would art look like if we started seeing what it did to people as data to be analyzed? Would we treat it differently? Understand it more deeply?

Equally—if not more—important, what more would we know about the people who had been affected by it? Would we be able to say, with any kind of reliability, that some works of art caused some groups of people to respond in shared, socially recognizable ways? And, would that help us understand the mechanics of those interactions, revealing some of the ways that art works in the world: one-on-one, to be sure, but also collectively, defining and describing human behavior in ways that elucidate the nature and texture of their behaviors and beliefs, particularly as they take shape in relationship to what we usually think of as ineffable—the beauty and the mystery and the confusion that art often compels us to come face to with?

These are some of the questions that Stefano Mastandrea and Mario Ceppi raise in their ingenious exploration of art's power to move viewers. Simultaneously, their inquiry reveals and elucidates the variously creative ways in which viewers interact with art.

They began their study by planning to shadow various visitors as they made their various ways through the National Gallery of Contemporary Art in Rome, looking at some works and passing by others, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs, and sometimes in small groups, usually family and friends. After getting permission from the museum's directors, the artist and the social scientist set to work: Ceppi taking black-and-white photographs with a handheld camera and Mastandrea joining in as they sorted through thousands of images, arranging them in groups, and drawing some preliminary conclusions about the ways people interact with art, architecture, and the people around them, both acquaintances and strangers.

The photographs capture a wealth of expressive information: Concentration, wonder, befuddlement, distress, and awe can be read on many faces, along with delight, joy, and boredom. Many of these emotions carry over into the body language of most visitors, especially the children, who leap, dance, and get down on all fours (all the better to see the art) far more often than the adults, whose postures may be more restrained but are no less revealing of the feelings they are experiencing. Adults, both young and old, also display the desire to share their responses with others, gesturing with their arms and shoulders as they explain their inner sentiments as fully and faithfully as they can. In a surprising number of images, visitors strike mimetic poses, unselfconsciously arranging their bodies in postures that mimic the sculptures they are looking at, whether those works are abstract or figurative, life-size or small-scale. Similarly, a

good number of visitors seem to have lost themselves in reverie, their imaginative transport into the landscapes and abstractions before them more potent than the physical facts of their existence and the unrelenting tug of gravity. Perhaps most remarkable, the attentiveness elicited in the visitors from the works of art they behold spills over into the ordinarily overlooked things around them: A modern bench, an unadorned stairwell, and an elevator's closed door attract the interest and rivet the attention of visitors whose senses seem to have been heightened by the art but not limited to it.

That kind of productive surplus animates "The Visitor in the Art" (*Il visitatore nell'arte*), an exhibition of Ceppi's digitally printed pictures that was held in September 2017 in the National Gallery of Contemporary Art in Rome (the same museum in which the photos were made). A smaller version of the self-reflective exhibition, titled "Framing the Visitor," was presented at Claremont Graduate University in May 2018 as an integral part of the Commencement Forum, "Re-Imagining the University Through the Arts, Design, and Innovation," which was organized by Andrew Vosko, director of the Transdisciplinary Studies program.

If, as is often said, God works in mysterious ways, art is not far behind. In Mastandrea and Ceppi's far-reaching study, art's influence and its effects are visible and verifiable and all the more significant because such visual data is rarely measured or assessed by social scientists, who more often bring their attentiveness and the tools of their trade to more mundane, and quantifiable, subjects, such as, say, the consequences of various teaching strategies on pre-school children's eventual career paths, or the relationship between healthy diets, real estate value, and fast-food restaurants.

In contrast, Mastandrea and Ceppi begin by gathering data artistically—by setting up an experiment whose terms may be more fluid than we might expect from such studies—but, because of that openness, manages to generate an abundance of data that not only invites scientific—and creative—analysis, but compels it. The data they have gathered does not take the form of spreadsheets filled with numbers that can be compared and contrasted, but of black-and-photographs that depict the physical relationships various people have with various works of art in a museum in Rome. These images are jam-packed with evidence of the visitors' psychological states, evidence of their full-bodied responses to works of art, and evidence of the art's immediate bodily consequences.

All of that information is gleaned without words or numbers—without the subjects of the experiment being interviewed or quantitative forms of accounting being undertaken. And that may be the most radical aspect of Mastandrea and Ceppi's experiment: the fact that they treat visual evidence

as if it were as important as the evidence social scientists usually gather and convey linguistically and numerically. The subjugation of visual reality to more abstract (and academic) measures—long-held by scientists (both social and physical), by historians, and, perhaps surprisingly, by artists and critics—is nowhere to be found in Mastandrea and Ceppi’s study, which treats visual experience as nothing more glamorous—or ignorable—than data: disparate bits of info that might be formulated (or forged) into a deeper understanding of reality.

Like all data, the evidence they have gathered invites interpretation, analysis, and further data gathering. And like any scholarly inquiry, the more sophisticated the terms by which that data is analyzed—and transformed into knowledge—the more profound is the understanding it leads to. The same goes for the experiment’s capacity to describe the world we live in: the more sensitive the terms that we bring to it, the more insightful the results. And that may be the most exciting aspect of Mastandrea and Ceppi’s endeavor. The former’s expertise as a social psychologist and the latter’s talents with a camera have combined to produce a body of data that is itself a work of art: a set of complex documents that not only records events that happened in the past, at a certain time and in a specific place, but also draws all who see it in the present into the picture, where we participate, actively and attentively, in an open-ended exploration of those charged moments when objectivity and subjectivity work in concert, when art and science collaborate happily, and all sorts of magic happens.

To look at the data Mastandrea and Ceppi have gathered is to enter into a physical, emotional, and intellectual relationship to an object that both describes someone else’s relationship to a work of art and engages us in the very same relationships: looking and pondering and wondering as we experience a wide range of bodily and psychological states, including surprise, amazement, and enjoyment, as well as uncertainty, doubt, and ambivalence, not to mention intrigue, mystery, and awe. “The Visitor in the Art” could very well be titled “The Art in the Visitor,” because when we study the photographs we not only observe others entering into intimate relationships with works of art, we simultaneously experience the images entering our minds and our bodies, both of which respond and react in ways equally elucidated by art and science. That’s a great place to visit—and an even better one to live in. It’s where Mastandrea and Ceppi do their best work, inspiring us to see more than usual and share it with others.

David Pagel

