

# A SPEC- TATOR IS AN ARTIST TOO

HOW WE  
LOOK AT ART,  
HOW WE  
BEHAVE  
AROUND ART

FOREWORD BY  
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# ONLOOKER VERSUS PARTICIPANT

## FOREWORD

The art world used to see engaging the audience as beneath them. Any effort to encourage 'participation' was a cheap trick – pandering to the masses. Artists and museums that actively sought audience participation were seen to be tacky. They were accused of chasing popularity and the approval of the uneducated crowd instead of maintaining the reverence and respect owed to their select artworld peers.

It may have taken a while, but museums have seen the light, and perhaps to some extent they've even been blinded by it. At a time when the evaluation is, 'if it isn't on social media did it even happen?', museums and art institutions in general are going to extraordinary lengths to involve people even more with the art they display. It's no longer enough just to get audiences through the door. Now museums must also maximise audience involvement. They spend countless hours and allocate huge budgets to fund research and marketing departments, test panels, focus groups, activation specialists, social media gurus, and social engagement strategies. Idema's latest book shows, with stunning simplicity, that engaging the audience isn't terribly difficult. All museum professionals need to do to understand how an audience interacts with art is, ironically enough, to take time to do exactly what museumgoers are supposed to do in the first place – to observe.

When you look a little closer at museums these days, you'll notice a delightful dichotomy. The vestiges of traditional ways of looking at art are competing with new ones: onlooker versus participant. Museums have always erected carefully considered barriers as a means to enforce a 'safe' distance between the art and the audience: watchful security guards ready to reprimand anyone who gets too close to the art, the 'Please do not touch' signs, glass dividers, velvet ropes, and elaborate security

systems. And then they invite: 'Step in,' 'Press here,' 'Stand there,' 'Look here,' 'Use this hashtag,' 'Share your photo,' 'Vote for your favourite'. Museums have realised that they can't stop people interacting with the artwork, so they may as well try to shape how this interaction occurs, in as much as that's possible.

Today Art Criticism is no longer an elitist sport. Audiences are savvier than ever before; they know all the tricks being played on them. People go to museums to explore, not just to see. They don't like being told what to do, where to walk, or how to look at things. Rather, every visitor entering an exhibition is an artist in disguise. Art is something to be discovered, questioned, re-contextualised, and appropriated. Engaging with art should be an intuitive experience, not a logical one. Art should evoke a reaction, a response that should be allowed to happen organically and spontaneously, not directed by a panel of experts. Museums pay a lot of money to try to predict how audiences will react and interact with an exhibition, but human behaviour, particularly emotional behaviour, is notoriously unpredictable. No matter how hard museums try, they can never curate an audience's opinion, and that unpredictability is, in itself, art.

The ubiquity of the 'sharing culture' continues to blur the line between artist and audience. Audiences interact with an artwork, which they document and then share with their own audience, adding their own context, perspective, and creative insights to the original work. Idema not only proves that art lives through interaction, but that this form of communication between art and the audience has the ability to connect generations and societies separated by conflict, language, politics, distance, or even hundreds of years. In documenting these behaviours, Idema engages in a form of artistic anthropology that is arguably as valuable as the original artwork. This book is a perfect showcase of 'natural' audience participation. Art should be a conversation between the art(ist) and the viewers. Audiences will participate in the art, even if they break the strictures of etiquette, and so the art should be curated and exhibited in a way that encourages it to 'talk' to the observers. Then the best work will speak for itself by how the audience responds.

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# A RISKY ACT

## INTRODUCTION

There are many books about art. They describe how it's created, by which artists, and the ideas they celebrate or challenge. But there might be only one book – indeed, the one you're holding – that shows how art is actually received, digested if you will, by the spectators standing directly in front of it. This is quite remarkable if we realize that, ultimately, it's never the object itself, but always our reaction to it that determines whether an artwork will or will not be meaningful. Art in itself means nothing, changes nothing. For it to mean something, art requires not only our gaze but our behaviour. The famous painter Rothko knew this all too well. He observed that 'a picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer, but it dies by the same token.' Rothko thus called it 'a risky act' to send an artwork out into the world.

## WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Art historians only study objects, but how these objects are received requires just as much of our attention. This attention is exactly what *A Spectator is an Artist Too* pays. This book presents a visual essay about the way humans behave around art: how do we look at art, how do we interact with art, what happens when we are confronted with something immensely beautiful, challenging, or puzzling? Thus, *A Spectator is an Artist Too* shows and analyses what museum spectatorship in the 21st century looks like.

The book presents sixty cases and more than two hundred photos of museumgoers reacting to works of art. These cases observe the many ways of responding, whether it is viewers imitating an artwork, photographing themselves with it, protesting against it, or making themselves 'part of the art'. Ultimately, art is – when presented publicly – about communication: a message from the artist to us, the audience. Even if the artist's message may sometimes entail a 'simple' idea or even an undefined feeling, it's often worth asking ourselves if we have understood it properly.

## ARTIST NEED OUR EYES

*A Spectator is an Artist Too* stems from one simple yet essential idea: art requires an audience to be able to deliver on its promise. In other words, an artwork only has value when confronting an observer. If we approach art with closed eyes, nothing will be revealed; artists need our eyes. They require us as their accomplices, to participate in their work. Or, as artist Marcel Duchamp noted in 1957, 'The creative act is not performed by the artist alone.' He claimed that we, as spectators, contribute to the work as well. This makes the moment when we stand face-to-face with a painting, sculpture, or other artwork crucial, if not magical. Whether we feel touched, inspired, dumbfounded, lost, irritated, or even called to action – these responses are undeniably part of the artwork.

## NEW MEANING AND PERSPECTIVES

Observing works of art and their viewers together offers a fresh and more complete way of interpreting art. Seeing how people respond to an artwork and noticing (possible) relationships between the two often leads to discovering new meanings of the work. 'It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors', writer Oscar Wilde noted. When we become aware of the distinction between art as a physical object and the experience of it, we will start to observe differently. We will notice the vital role of the spectator in art: how an audience can make an artwork shine, or can, just as easily, ignore or even dismantle an artist's intentions.

see a snapshot of their behaviour but we're not certain to know what exactly goes on in the heads and hearts of those portrayed.

Nonetheless, many photographs, and especially the ones examined in this book, largely speak for themselves. They capture the remarkable correlation between works of art and their observers. Most of them clearly portray museumgoers' motivations and reactions, either intentionally displayed or unconsciously revealed. Where this book presents identical photographs of different visitors acting alike or taking the same kind of pictures, it does so to show patterns of typical museum behaviour or typical reactions to a specific artwork.

The texts accompanying the images offer essential reflection on what we see, interpret what they may mean, and challenge the reader to form his or her own opinion. The texts are written by an author who, as an arts consultant, has extensive experience with strategic museum planning, curating exhibitions, and audience research. The author is an avid museumgoer, has visited many of the works of art included in the book himself, and has studied the behaviour of his fellow museumgoers to those works in person.

Where pictures are described as 'selfie', this book employs a broad definition: an image that includes oneself (or with another person or as part of a group) that is often, *but not necessarily*, taken by oneself.

## **WE COMPLETE THE WORK**

Is there anything more entertaining, inspiring, and instructive than observing art? Yes, it's watching an audience interact with it. This book will hopefully forever change your approach to art, urging you to always consider both the work itself and the response to it. It proves that art often shines brightest when in the presence of an observer. Because, ultimately, artists create, but we – the audience – complete the work.

## TOUCH

Look at this brave girl! Carefully she's sticking out her hand into the yellow glow, checking if the cornered space is real or an optical illusion – a painting perhaps, framed by fluorescent light beams. Beautiful, isn't it? We may consider this toddler's curiosity a big compliment for Dan Flavin, artist of *untitled*. He thought of light as 'a matter of fact'. The girl is verifying exactly that, as open and directly as Flavin wanted his art to be.

This 'scene' reminds of what we should do more often when looking at art, and what in fact this book is all about: take a step back and see how others take in the work. Because for us, onlookers, this child's boldness is a gift. It creates a powerful image that will probably stick with you and enrich your perspective. Flavin's light sculptures are straightforward but exciting and this little spectator reminds us of that in her own brilliant way.





## PART OF THE ART

Museums have long assumed – and still do – that the single reason people visit them is to see things that are there. But there is one behaviour that disrupts this belief: self-insertion. Many visitors demonstrate their longing to *be* the thing. With considered stagings of their photographs, younger museumgoers often display their desire to be part of the art. They do so by posing alongside an artwork in such a way that it looks as though they and the work are one. 'It's my way to feel closer to the art, like you're part of the piece', one self-inserter tells researchers.

How seriously should museums take this behaviour? Museum researcher Elizabeth Hunter considers self-insertion an outlet for museum visitors 'whose sensory access has been restricted to the visual by multiple protective barriers, but who still crave embodied engagement with artworks.' And she's right. The results may vary from amazing to banal, from creative to doltish, but everyone who makes an effort to feel closer to the art should be taken very seriously. Their movements toward connection should be encouraged, not the least by museums.

## CHEAP MIMICRY?

Wayne Thiebaud is famous for his mouth-watering cake paintings (see page 120). But with *Supine Woman* he turns to his 18-year-old daughter, to disturbing result. Is she in danger? Is she dead? Or is there a sexual nature to it, her short skirt and legs slightly apart.

Art history features many women posing lying, but *Supine Woman* may be the only one that strongly elicits imitation. Coincidence or not, its imitators are also short skirted with eerie expressions on their faces. It's only cheap mimicry, one could argue, at the expense of the many psychoanalytical meanings of this painting. But is it? *Supine Woman* offers several (conflicting) messages, but there are no definite answers. Painted at an odd angle, Thiebaud knew how powerful perspective can be. But so do museumgoers. Lying down and sensing the woman's pose may be a strange yet insightful experience leading to additional views on her state of being. Art is not only a head puzzle; it requires sensual intelligence and playfulness as well. Perhaps the museum should invite everyone to 'Understand this painting through imitation'.





## THE SELF HAVING ART EXPERIENCES

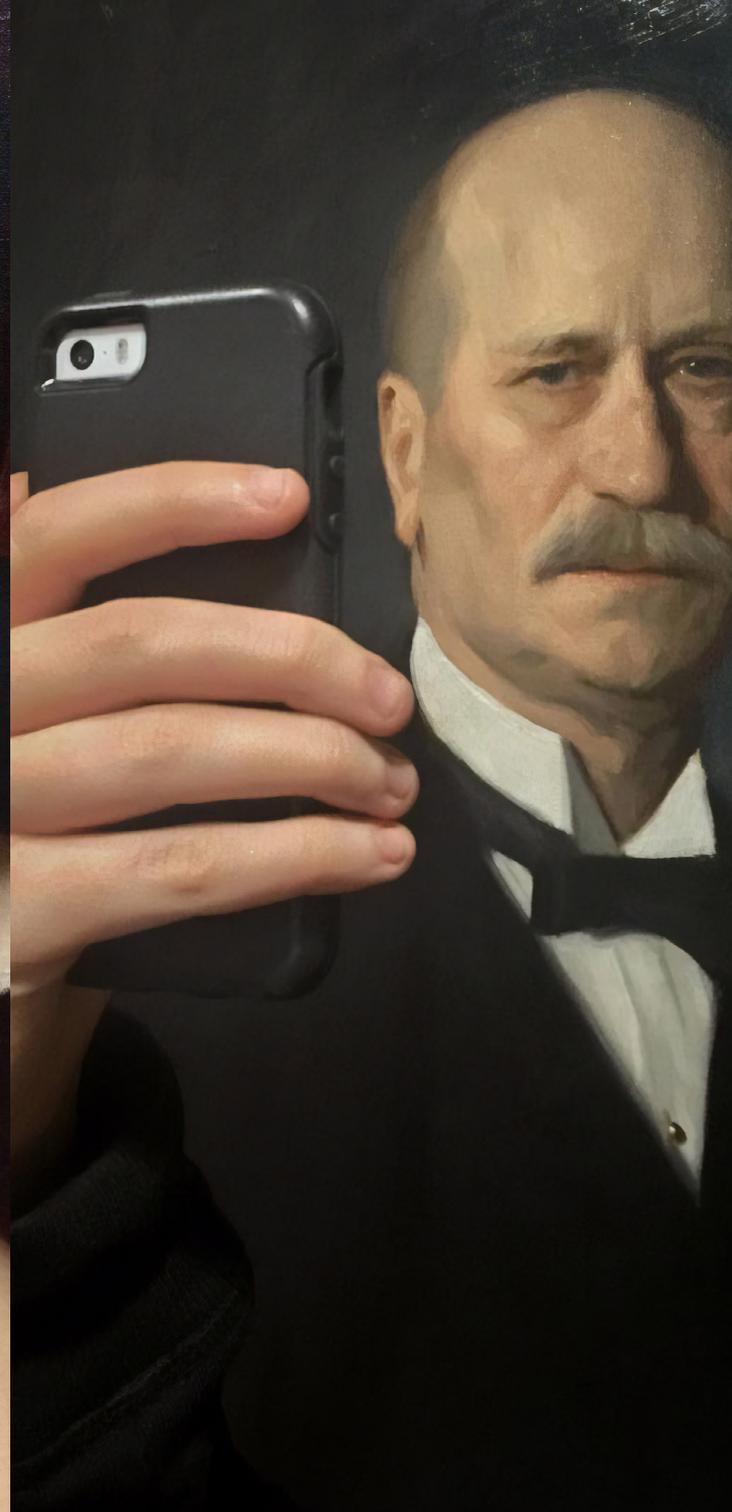
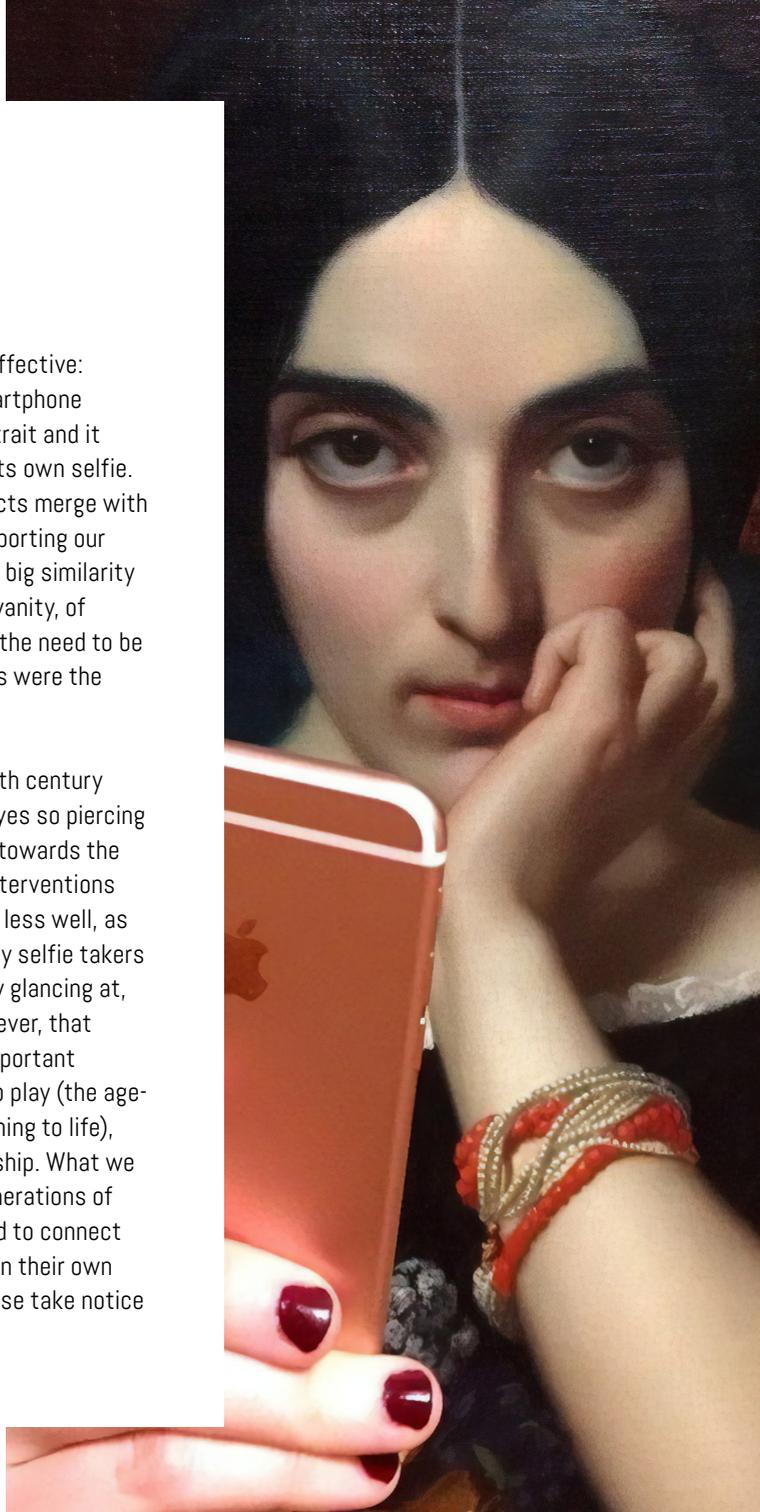
Standing in front of the enormous neon circles of *Voltes IV* blinking on and off in merciless white can be quite overwhelming. Its bright light drains away all other colour and depth, and reduces the presence of viewers into sharp, black silhouettes that are nonetheless still recognizably them. Obviously, this scene makes *Voltes IV* a photogenic artwork.

*Voltes IV* is often classified as optical art, a movement from the sixties that pursued optical illusions. Artist John Armleder, however, created the piece much later (2004). It's rather impossible, in fact, to consider this work, and in particular its spectators, as not being part of today's art world. 'Museums are no longer spaces in which to experience art', critic Rob Horning says, 'but rather spaces in which to perform the self having art experiences.' What's particularly striking in *Voltes IV* is how Armleder has created a piece in which observer and artwork seamlessly coincide, resulting in imaginative compositions of museum spectatorship. Coincidence or not, this is the ultimate work for museumgoers who want to show (off) their art experience.

## A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

The act is as simple as it is effective: place your hand holding a smartphone strategically in front of a portrait and it looks like the head is taking its own selfie. Instantly, centuries old subjects merge with today's visual culture, even sporting our latest mobile technology. The big similarity between then and now? The vanity, of course; the performance and the need to be seen. After all, these portraits were the selfies of their day.

It's the virtuosity of nineteenth century portrait painters – painting eyes so piercing and glances focused directly towards the viewer – that makes these interventions work so well. What may work less well, as the critique goes, is that many selfie takers are photographing, but merely glancing at, the art. Let's not forget, however, that these selfies are driven by important underlying needs to create, to play (the age-old fantasy of an artwork coming to life), and to gain a sense of ownership. What we actually see here are new generations of museum visitors working hard to connect with nineteenth century art, in their own beautiful way. Museums, please take notice and help them move forward!



'The creative act is not performed by the artist alone', artist Marcel Duchamp noted. He claimed that we, as spectators, contribute to a work by interpreting it. This makes the moment we stand face-to-face with a painting, a sculpture, or other work of art a crucial, if not magical, one. Touched, inspired, dumbfounded, lost, irritated even, or perhaps called to action – these responses are undeniably part of the artwork.

*A Spectator is an Artist Too* is a visual essay about the way humans behave around art: what happens when we are confronted with something immensely beautiful, challenging, or puzzling? Observing artworks and their viewers lets us discover new perspectives on creativity and better understand how humans interact with art. This book also captures how art museums are changing, as they draw increasingly diverse audiences. The way museumgoers respond to art is becoming more casual, creative, and yes, perhaps also more superficial.

Is there anything more entertaining, inspiring, and instructive than observing art? Indeed, it's watching an audience interact with it. This book may forever change your approach to art, urging you to always consider both the work and the response. Because, ultimately, artists create, but we – the audience – complete the work.

'Like an anthropologist, Johan Idema studies the remarkable species, 'the art viewer', which – partly due to social media – has rapidly evolved over the past ten years. The result is moving, funny, occasionally vulgar, often surprising, and always extending the understanding of both familiar and lesser known works of art.'

Sacha Bronwasser, writer and art journalist



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