

# Visiting an art exhibition can make you think more socially and openly—but for how long?

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Members of the curatorial staff at Dom Museum Wien and researchers from the University of Vienna, Faculty of Psychology examine artworks from the exhibition "Show Me Your Wound" (Zeig mir deine Wunde; J. Schwanberg and K. Speidel, curators; Dom Museum Wien). Credit: M. Pelowski

A new study by an international team of collaborators led by researchers at the University of Vienna, and in collaboration with the Dom Museum Wien, aimed to address the questions of whether art exhibitions can

make us more empathic or even change our attitudes and behaviors?

The researchers were able to show that, indeed, looking through the exhibition reduced xenophobia and increased acceptance of immigration. Even more, by employing a new cellphone-based experience sampling method, they could track how long these changes last. The study was [recently published](#) in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*.

"The question of how art might make us more conscious and empathic citizens or modify people's responses towards societal challenge such as [climate change](#), refugees, is a growing interest for art institutions, artists, and for municipalities and cultural policy makers," says Matthew Pelowski from the Faculty of Psychology, University of Vienna, lead author of the project.

Klaus Speidel, one of the curators of the show adds, "In recent years, there has been a shift in how we view art in our societies. The arts are no longer seen as purely recreational, but rather as a powerful, and often untapped, resource for health, learning, and personal or societal well-being."

However, Pelowski also suggests, "Despite high interest, there is surprisingly little data on whether visiting an exhibition or viewing an artwork really does anything, especially regarding its effect on how we think and behave. How long effects might last or what kind of effects we might find are entirely unknown."

To answer these questions, the research team assessed visitors' experiences for the exhibition, "Show Me Your Wound" (Zeig mir deine Wunde), curated by Johanna Schwanberg and Klaus Speidel at Dom Museum Wien. The exhibition used a blend of contemporary and historical art to focus on the topic of vulnerability. Through the

exhibition, the curators aimed to "encourage visitors to reflect on a crucial issue of humankind" and to "bring about positive change."

These aims were tested in two ways: Researchers first stopped people walking by the museum and asked if they would like to participate in exchange for a free ticket. Visitors were asked to report on their thoughts and feelings regarding their empathic concern for others and their feelings of xenophobia or willingness to accept refugees into their country—both immediately before and after the visit. This showed that, indeed, the exhibition reduced xenophobia and increased acceptance among visitors.

At the same time, this acute effect also opened further questions for the research team regarding how effects might impact the everyday life of museum visitors after they leave, and how long the impacts might last.

Therefore, the research team also used an experience sampling method (ESM) technique with the same exhibition, in which a second group of 41 people installed an app on their mobile phones and reported on their thoughts and actions each day. Researchers tracked responses for two weeks, with the visit to the exhibition at the mid-point.

When comparing the period before the visit to the period after, the results showed that participants reported that they had tried to think and act more socially and openly and to help others more following their visit to the exhibition. Most of these changes lasted for the rest of the day. However, people also reported "trying to consider others feelings" and "reflecting more about themselves" for the following week.

"These results provide some of the first evidence that even a brief visit to an exhibition, especially one using contemporary art to target an emerging societal challenge, can make a detectable, lasting change,"

noted Pelowski. Even when the impact has a shorter duration, it is still positive.

Pelowski adds, "If we think about all of the thousands of people who might visit an exhibition, if everyone thinks a little bit more of others or tries to be more open and accepting for that day, that can lead to a powerful, cumulative effect."

The fact that people did try to think of others and were more reflective for up to a week is also exciting evidence for the kind of role that the arts might indeed play in society and for why this needs to be a topic for future investigation.

The project also provides important evidence on the topic of arts as a tool for addressing attitudes about immigration and refugees, which is an emerging focus as curators and artists try to respond to worldwide geopolitical events.

"The current Venice Biennale, for example, which has the title of 'Foreigners Everywhere,' has been the topic of a large number of recent discussions around the impact of arts on people's mindset regarding immigration. Our study now strongly supports the idea of exhibitions being a reliable tool to shed light on social issues," says Pelowski.

The project, in which curators and researchers worked together to develop the study, also represented a new type of collaboration bridging researchers and art institutions.

"Previously, it has really been rare to have the opportunity to have such amazing access and to work collaboratively with art institutions and to bring together a diverse group of perspectives," noted Pelowski. "Dom Museum Wien, as well as several institutions in Vienna, really represents an exciting new approach to the arts and to [collaborative research](#)."

Currently, the research- and curatorial team is planning another study involving a new exhibition, "Being Mortal/Sterblich sein," which considers how individuals and society deal with mortality, and how the arts may provide a powerful opportunity for insight and reflection on this topic. The [exhibition](#) is on view from until August 25, 2024 at the Dom Museum Wien.

**More information:** Matthew Pelowski et al, How lasting is the impact of art?: An exploratory study of the incidence and duration of art exhibition-induced prosocial attitude change using a 2-week daily diary method., *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/aca0000670](#)

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