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Slow Looking at Artworks in the Museum Context—Exploration of the Viewers' Observations with Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Art can serve as a contextual element and promote wellbeing. Meanings derived from artworks are related to, for instance, cultural backgrounds, languages, mood and viewing technique. This study focused on art viewers' experiences, and the participants were picked with different cultural backgrounds, mood settings and spoken languages in mind. The study was conducted with the Western Finland health care services and executed at the Kuntsi Museum of Modern Art in Vaasa. Nine volunteers contributed to the study by slowly viewing artworks alone or with a companion, taking 5–10 minutes each work, photographing them, writing down thoughts, or discussing them on an audio recorder. Three people visited 4–6 exhibitions, while the rest visited one. Participation was unrelated to anyone's studies, work, healthcare or other arrangements. The data was analysed with reflexive thematic analysis, and its suitability as a method was also tested to uncover people's thoughts during the slow looking experience. Results show that viewers make individual connections with artworks that touch upon their interests. Viewing artworks also helps individuals to discover novel ideas on various topics. Viewer's background and personal conditions, such as mood, language, culture, affect interest and the ability to notice details in artworks. Understandably, language has a role in how people organise their thoughts and create a platform for creative cognition. Spending time with artworks can have a positive effect, especially on mood; thus, art can counterbalance the fast-paced lifestyles and contemporary anxieties of people in the 21st century, leading to possibilities for better wellbeing.

Keywords: Slow Looking; Museum; Visitor Studies; Wellbeing; Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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1. Introduction

1.1. Influence of Art on Wellbeing

It is essential to support wellbeing in different ways in daily life. Cotter and Pawelski [1] bring up in their literature review many ways in which visits to art museums can be beneficial, for example, increased feelings of cheerfulness and happiness and reduced anxiety when visits are frequent. The positive effect on mood was also presented by Larsen et al. [2] and Cuypers and Krokstad [3], the latter also note the importance of creative cultural activities on good health and life satisfaction. Art's impact on wellbeing was also demonstrated by Schindler et al. [4] in their study, where art evaluation and production practices were shown to improve cognitive abilities.

Feeling good or bad in general is caused, according to Beck [5], by the balance or imbalance of viewing oneself and one's possibilities positively or negatively (positive/negative self-schemas) in relation to the social environment and the future. In negative mood variations, like anxiety, low mood, and depression, self-help guides and more structured guidelines are proven effective [6]. However, these guidelines seem to leave some things unresolved, such as people's personal views of things happening around them. Harmonious mood can be reached, for example, with mindfulness exercises when there is a need to enhance emotional regulation [7], and art can produce feelings of mindfulness [8]. Trupp et al. [9] discuss eudemonic wellbeing (sense of purpose and deeper meaning instead of short-term pleasures) in art experiences, explaining that it is often overlooked in studies on art's effect on the viewer, as they often focus more on experiencing instant pleasure. Busch et al. [10] state that art can serve as a contextual and cultural element and offer symbolic and aesthetic content to people's lives through its emotional influence.

It appears that it is beneficial to consider possibilities of visual content in language-based support and therapeutic discussions to maximise positive effects. Visualisation creates images in one's mind and helps express one's verbal thoughts more effectively. According to Holmes et al. [11], in low mood and especially in depression, there seem to be fewer positive mental images and memories of different life events and experiences, but viewing art can advance positive imagery and thinking.

1.2. Slow Looking at Artworks

Lorenz-Spreen et al. [12] studied the collective attention span of social media users on different topics and found it narrowing. The downside of a vastly connected world and increased availability of content is that our attention is more thinly spread. The slow movement, including viewing art slowly, counterbalances fast lifestyles, especially in cities [12] where people often feel particularly stressed. Lindner and Meissner [13] wrote about the urban rhythm being crucial to understanding slowness as a "strategy of creative interruption".

Brieber et al. [14,15] discovered that people generally spend more time viewing artworks in museums than in laboratory conditions and concluded that the context is important in the relationship between art experience and viewing behaviour. These results indicate that the museum context enhances cognitive and affective processes involved in art appreciation and that museums enrich content embedded in emotional experiences and long-term learning.

Brown [16] hypothesised that slow looking can improve alertness and attention to detail in all aspects of life and help develop descriptive language skills by teaching more ways to describe what is seen. Art viewing clearly benefits experiences akin to mindfulness, acting as a balancing element and alleviating stress [8]. As McNiff [17,18] pointed out, art as such can serve as a health-promoting therapeutic tool. Still, it should also be appreciated on its own merits, not merely as an instrument for achieving wellness.

In slow looking, according to Tishman [19], the objective is to move past first impressions by observing the subject in different perspectives and making careful perceptions while being aware of one's subjectivity. In museums, many practices, such as wall texts, audio guides, and minimal seating, keep the visitors in motion, complicating slow looking [19]. The visitor's experience depends on the internal and external conditions during the museum visit, such as the visitor's current mood and whether the museum is noisy or peaceful. This also impacts the art experience: if the conditions are poor that day, it may be more challenging to focus on the artworks and find them enjoyable.

Some visits to an art museum will result in a shallow experience with the artworks; others may be highly aesthetic or transformative. Looking slowly at artworks may encourage viewers to make more associations from their various elements. These associations will then connect to one's own learned thinking patterns (schemas [20]). An increased number of associations, especially creative ones, tends to enhance convergent/divergent thinking in a person, where divergent thinking is a key element in creativity [21]. This can lead to creative cognition in addition to normal cognition [22]. According to Benedek and Fink [22], creative cognition includes processes that build novel ideas, support active imagination and implement memory and attention processes for achieving goals.

Zare Ramesthi [23] brings up divergent thinking in connection to artworks, explaining how being in contact with art can increase creativity in problem-solving and help viewers to explore multiple routes in their thinking instead of only focusing on one single "truth". Art's subjective nature will also encourage the viewer to interact with the world in non-traditional ways. According to Zare Ramesthi [23], these processes will lead to higher cognitive flexibility and increased attention, memory and problem-solving skills. Moreover, learning new skills, such as discussing and analysing artworks, affects the brain's ability to reorganise itself by forming new neural connections. This adaptability is called neuroplasticity [23]. Various positive experiences can increase psychological flexibility overall [24].

1.3. Making Meaning of Artworks

Art viewing is a highly personal process; some prefer figurative artworks, others more abstract art, reflecting different processing styles. This is also emphasised by neuroscientist Eric R. Kandel [25], who brings up the two styles, bottom-up processing (from basic sensory inputs, such as the line and colour, to more complex perceptions), and top-down (prior knowledge and experience affecting interpretations). There are individual differences in how art is processed, from top-down to bottom-up, but the artwork's technique and style will also influence this process.

Visual observation and perception occur by light reflecting from the surface of an object and mediating it to the visual system, as stated by perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson [26]. At the same time, several senses are activated while viewing objects (stated by Goldstein [27], on sensation and perception). Sight naturally is the strongest sense when viewing visual art, but other senses can also be activated, such as being able to "taste" with one's mind the food depicted in an image.

When looking at artworks, for example, art historian Ernst Gombrich [28] emphasises the observer's role in constructing perceptions from the seen information through their own experiences and learned interpretations. Language is the primary tool used when forming personal interpretations. Together with facial expressions, etc., language is used to communicate sensations and feelings to others. Linell [29,30] posits that language develops and works in a dialogical process in the physical and social environment, where each participant interprets content individually, meaning it is a two-way process between the individual and the environment. People bring their background to the current context, like cultural settings such as the museum, and on the other hand, are influenced by it. Paivio's [31] "dual coding theory" expands the interpretational field where language and visualisation, as the two main areas of observation and meaning making, are in support of each other – thinking of a dog is both a verbal and an imaginary operation. We use sense perception to observe artworks and language to form concepts of what is seen, as underlined by Kandel [25]. Despite all our efforts, it can be difficult to verbalise what is being sensed, especially when the situation is new.

Carrell [32] sees schemas as essential in language comprehension because our background and previously learned knowledge affect how we construct interpretations of written and spoken language. This view can also be extended to other observations, such as the interpretation of images. Markus [20], and Markus and Cross [33] emphasise the importance of schemas as a reflection of the self in relation to one's social experience and background. Beck [5] highlights three self-related schema-areas when discussing different conditions concerning the self-image: relationship to oneself, environment/other people, and the future. These are defined with more detail on an individual basis [5]. When comparing Beck's ideas with Markus and Cross' self-related schemas, they are in concordance with each other, but there are also some different varieties – as a doctor and

therapist, Beck emphasises the aspect of hope and prospects for the future [5]. Pelowski et al. [34] use the concept of schemas as a central cognitive factor when analysing experiences from visits to art museums – in their study, the research team generated different schema areas from art viewers' personal observations, which highlighted the various stages an individual may experience while looking at art.

Beck [5] and Markus's [20] schema concepts emphasise the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviour, leading to self-related schema-areas, i.e. self-schemas – can also be called emotional schemas. Pelowski and his group [34], on the other hand, emphasise schemas more from the point of view of perceiving observations. Both views are taken into consideration in this context.

1.4. Reflexive Thematic Analysis for Personal Observations

This study applies reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as a method. RTA can be used to analyse various forms of data but has mostly been used in textual analysis. In thematic analysis, coding a text is the first step. According to Braun and Clarke [35], a code captures a singular idea, and coding is meant to parse out the diversity of interesting meanings. With coding, one can start to see repetition of meaning throughout the data. Coding happens in multiple phases, where each time a text is coded or the existing codes are checked and altered, the meaning of the text becomes clearer and easier to interpret. Themes, created by the researcher to accurately find areas of importance and interest across the dataset, capture shared ideas in a wide range of data [35].

In reflexive thematic analysis, it is understood that codes and themes are produced and formed by the researcher's observations and interpretations of the material. Byrne [36] highlights that reflexivity and subjectivity are seen as assets rather than something that is not welcome. According to Ayton [37], coding in RTA is less structured than in Applied Thematic Analysis, and themes are deduced from the data instead of being data-driven, which differs from other thematic analysis approaches. According to Braun and Clarke [38], it is misleading to claim that themes emerge from the data independently and without the researcher's interactivity and positionality. Ayton [37] brings up the challenges of thematic analysis approaches, explaining that when misapplied or done poorly, the flexibility and accessibility of the method can lead to limitations and challenges, which is why applying the method requires precision.

One aspect of RTA is that it involves critical reflection of one's role as a researcher in all parts of the research practice and process [35]. When the researcher builds themes, those themes are also part of a broader context and influenced by the researcher's own history and culture [39].

1.5. Aims of the Study

The psychological welfare project in Ostrobothnia was planned to discern how different environments enhance wellbeing by discovering positive and/or negative influences on mood and health and focusing on increasing the positive elements. Another aspect of the project was to examine art's meaning as a health-promoting element, for example, in the context of building hospitals and other healthcare service facilities.

This study concentrated on analysing art viewers' comments made during visits to the museum, and it had an educative role in introducing aesthetic experiences to people's lives. Museum visitors were instructed to view artworks slowly and to talk or write about anything that came to mind while viewing the artworks. It was hypothesised that art viewing would transfer the viewer momentarily from their ordinary frame of mind and grant them new viewpoints and inspiration.

The welfare project started in 2018 and finished in 2023, while this separate study took place between 2019–2023. However, developmental work continues in other projects in the healthcare area. This study is made from an art historian's perspective, focusing on observations and perception formation, with the main focus on cognitive flexibility and flexibility in thinking. When talking about wellbeing in the context of this study, it should mainly be understood as psychological wellbeing, less so as somatic wellbeing, even though these two areas are connected.

The research questions were:

1. What themes, categories, and subthemes can be identified from viewers' discussions of artworks in various art exhibitions when they use the slow looking technique?

2. How do people with different life conditions, such as mood variations, cultural and language backgrounds, age, and gender, discuss artworks during a slow looking exercise?
3. How are art observations understood by different cognitive and emotional processes, and how are art discussions visible in the participants' language use, schemas and thinking, also what creative associations are possibly present in these discussions?
4. Can visiting art exhibitions in a museum while exercising the slow looking technique increase flexibility in thinking and positively influence wellbeing?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Exhibitions

2.1.1. Participants

Participation was voluntary, and the participants were sought among those interested in wellness questions: university students, healthcare workers and laypersons. Word was spread from person to person about the possibility of participating in the study, and nine were selected based on their willingness to contribute and present their thoughts. Contributions were unrelated to anyone's studies, work, or guided welfare plan, and all participation happened during the partakers' free time. See the main characteristics of the participants in **Table 1**.

These groups were created to differentiate participants from each other: students and workers with unspecified low mood, workers with some other reported life stressors, such as relocation and a new job, and psychological healthcare workers with no specified conditions. It felt necessary to create a separate group for the psychological healthcare workers, because it was thought that they would most likely approach the exercise through their work – they were acquainted with analysis making in their profession, even though they were unfamiliar with art analysis. Spoken languages in the groups were Finnish, Finland Swedish and Russian, representing the three main languages spoken in Finland. Some people had more interest in the arts than others, but none of the participants had formal training in visual art. The art exhibition visits took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was an additional life stressor for everyone. This had no visible influence on the participants' art discussions. The pandemic, however, affected the number of people participating in the study and the data collection process, which took more time than initially planned.

Table 1. Participants in main groups of interest.

Group	A	B	C
Status	3x students, workers	4x healthcare workers	2x workers
Age	20–40	20–50	20–40
Gender	2 males, 1 female	1 male, 3 females	2 females
Life Conditions	Unspecified low mood	No extra conditions	Some life stressors

The participants visited the Kuntsi Contemporary Art Museum in Vaasa, Western Finland, at least once during the data gathering period. They were offered an opportunity to visit several exhibitions during the period, thus maximising their contribution to the study. This led to one person per group (named A1, B1, C1) visiting multiple exhibitions: A1 six, B1 five, and C1 four. The researcher does not live in Vaasa, but she has carefully been acquainted with each exhibition, seen related photographs and exhibition booklets of the artworks, and deepened her knowledge of the artists by researching their profiles. In addition, she visited the exhibition Dimensions of a Line. The museum was not affiliated with the research project in any way.

2.1.2. Art Exhibitions

Below is a list of art exhibitions at Kuntsi that were used in the study. The 2nd and 5th mention on the list show two simultaneous exhibitions that were curated in different rooms of the museum. These were both considered as one exhibition in the study. The visited exhibitionswere:

1) By nature, 22.2. –19.4.2020. Collection of works from nine contemporary artists (e.g., Dragos Alexandrescu, Robert Back, Heidi Katajamäki) in the Ostro-

bothnia region. The artists' works discussed how nature is experienced and interpreted, containing horror elements, political statements and visually direct interpretations of nature. Some works used digital technologies.

2a) 1868–2021–2068, 12.6.–24.10.2021. The exhibition contained works from seven Finnish contemporary photographers (e.g.,, Touko Hujanen, Paula Humberg, Jaakko Kahilaniemi). The photographs examined social structures and issues on a wide scale that influenced people's lives in the past and continue to influence them in the future.

2b) Places Beyond, 12.6–24.10.2021. The exhibition presented Swedish artist Erik Johansson's large surrealist photographs. Johansson connects seemingly realistic photographs with strange elements and surprising perspectives. His works belong in the realm of magic realism. He is strongly inspired by the works of M.C. Escher, Dal*í*, Magritte's surrealism and Elsa Beskow and Sven Nordqvist's fairytale worlds.

3) Gösta Diehl More than a Cubist, 20.11.2021–20.3.2022. This exhibition presented Diehl's full production, consisting of oil paintings, aquarelles, and drawings. Diehl is best known for his cubistic style and colourist paintings, but the exhibition also included his earlier experiments from late impressionism to neoclassicism and expressionism. He had a significant part in advancing international modernism in Finland, being part of the Prisma art group from 1956.

4) Markku Hakuri, Jan Kenneth Weckman, The Magic Mountain, 14.4.–11.9.2022. The exhibition borrowed its name from Thomas Mann's 1924 novel, Der Zauberberg. It was the premise of the two artists' collaboration, where conversations with one another and writing letters had an important role. Weckman creates mostly abstract and graphical works, while Hakuri often uses mixed media and creates atmospheric, dream-like landscapes, small- and large-scale sculptures and drawings [40].

5a) Emma Jääskeläinen, At Her Fingertips*,* 1.10.2022–29.1.2023. Jääskeläinen is known for her massive and monumental stone sculptures made from classical stone types, such as granite, marble, and travertine. Her works also used sheep's wool, glass, chilli peppers, and fake fur. Bodily elements are important in Jääskeläinen's sculptures, as well as tactility, which is achieved with material choices.

5b) Kristian Krokfors, Forever Young, 1.10.2022–29.1.2023. The exhibition celebrated Krokfors's long career and included paintings and lithographs. The central part of the exhibition consisted of multiple works depicting beach balls in a pool made between 2018–2020. Other works depicted cityscapes and hills. Krokfors's works are often made with bright colours, stark contrasts and repeating motifs.

6) Dimensions of a Line*.* 18 artists (e.g., Katriina Haikala, IC–98, Juhana Blomstedt), 9.9.2023–14.4.2024. The exhibition examined how artists work with the line. Both Finnish and international contemporary artists' works that study the line were presented, from charcoal to digital drawings, and unconventional material uses, such as strands of hair being shaped into portraits.

Longer descriptions of the exhibitions could be found from https://www.vaasa.fi/en and https://vaasankaupunginmuseot.fi/en/ while the exhibitions were still active.

2.2. Procedure and Analysis

2.2.1. Procedure

The visits to the museum were intended to be educational, showing the value of art and the museum environment as an interesting place to visit on occasion. The group members visited the museum alone or with a companion, took photos of artworks on their mobile phone, recorded art discussions on a voice recorder or wrote down their thoughts on paper or phone applications. No names or personal information were written down, only the gender, age range (20–30, 30–40, 40–50, 50–60, 60+), language and occupation were asked, and what participants wanted to reveal about their wellbeing status. They were informed that the idea was to study what viewers found meaningful in art and what thoughts and feelings the artworks would evoke. They were free to choose which contents they wanted to discuss, and they could withdraw their participation if they

wanted to. The project manager functioned as the contact person for the participants. The data was anonymous to the researcher, who was entirely blind to the participants' identities and did not meet any of them personally. Aside from the recoded and written discussions and photographs of artworks, no other material was received or used, and the study material was not preserved any longer than was necessary for the analysis purposes.

The participants were requested to walk through the exhibition and glance at all the artworks, then to choose 5–6 works for more thorough examination. Each artwork was observed for 5–10 min or more, photographed and discussed with a companion on a recorder or by writing about the artworks at home.

2.2.2. Analysis of the Data

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) [35] was used as the primary method to analyse art viewer comments made during visits to the Kuntsi Museum of Modern Art and followed mainly Braun and Clarke's [35] views. The researcher's interpretations of the material affected which viewer comments received more emphasis and were highlighted in the results. The data was checked with the participants' cultural background and language in mind.

Complementary analyses were carried out adopting Benedek and Fink's [22] concept of creative cognition and Pelowski et al. [34] and Beck's [5] views on schemas, and the connection between creative cognition, flexibility and wellbeing was looked at, following Zare Ramesthi's views [23]. The top-down vs. bottom-up processing model [25] helped broaden understanding of how perceptions and cognitions were formed among participants.

A deliberation of emotional schemas was made following the guidelines in Beck's original work [5], stating that data should be used to identify self-schemas, and schemas should be named individually based on the data. There is also a newer version of emotional schema identification in which schemas belong in five predetermined schema areas [41], but this would have been too structural and strict for this study and would not have supported the freedom that came from the main analysis method.

The epistemology that fits the study can be said to be contextualist and interactionist in nature, emphasising context where an action or verbal expressions take place [29] (the museum). RTA, in turn, stresses that the researcher's own values and practices affect the interpretations of the participants' views [35]. It is important, however, to try to capture the meanings in a way that is recognisable to the participants. The basis for building themes and finding points of interest within the data in this study was the researcher's educational background in art history, but also her interest in psychological aspects, such as the viewer's involvement in making interpretations and telling personal stories through the artworks.

The study was interested in the participants' perspectives and experiences, which is why an inductive, or data-driven, orientation was used. It can also be said that the analysis followed the hermeneutical circle [42], where individual parts of the text, codes, categories, subthemes and themes helped understand the full text and vice versa. A new theme was also added after reconsidering the data. One part of the study was to test the applicability of the chosen analysis technique to the context of art discussions. Because the conclusions were fully dependent on the participants' art discussions without a possibility for a follow-up, an extensive reflexive thematic analysis was conducted and used to inspect and hypothesise the given contents thoroughly.

2.3. Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity of the findings were checked together with the project manager, and possible inconsistencies were discussed. The data was analysed by different means to support the conclusions and take up diverse viewpoints in the analysis (especially with themes and schemas). The findings were reflected against views on perception-forming, considering especially Benedek and Fink's [22] model for cognitive processing. Findings are only indicative as generalisation was not possible due to the small group sizes. This study can be seen to serve as a preliminary example regarding art's possibilities for increased wellbeing. It is connected to prevailing discussions concerning art's role as an aesthetic element in health care settings. Trustworthiness in reliability and validity was based on careful and transparent handling of the written and recorded notes on the artworks, and a transcript of the data was made for analysis purposes. The content analysis regarding cognitive psychology was discussed with a psy-

chologist, who was not part of any of the three groups.

2.4. Ethics

The study was executed with agreement from The Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia. It was an individual part of the psychological welfare project carried out in the area. The status of the project was reviewed with yearly follow-ups, and the project was carried out with permission from the leading medical authority of the healthcare organisation. The work was led by the project manager, who worked at the area's healthcare organisation in the position of psychological care planning.

This study was accepted after review to the project in the summer of 2019. The participation was voluntary, and the procedure was carried out with consent of agreement, anonymity, distribution of research information and free willingness, and other ethical rules stated by the healthcare organisation. The project manager was responsible for taking care of the group participation. The participants were ordinary adults working or studying in Vaasa at the time. A procedure in the psychological welfare project included that in case of sensitive or other questions, the project manager would discuss them with the participants or guide them to discuss issues with appropriate parties. In this study, there were no identifiable vulnerability issues. A consulting team from the healthcare organisation commented on and took care of research and professional matters regularly and when necessary. The researcher of this study was completely blind to the participants' identities and never met the participants. The rules were checked by the project manager's contact university, Åbo Akademi, in studies of education, welfare and therapy.

The gathered data was based on the participants' freedom to distribute what they wanted; no other data or any identifiable information was used. There was also a possibility to withdraw one's participation whenever they wanted to, also afterwards. This did not happen. After the final analysis, the collected research data is deleted.

The artworks in the museum were not related to the subject of wellbeing or healthcare planning.

3. Results

3.1. General Findings

The analysis followed the steps of RTA, where the researcher became familiar with the data by revising it multiple times, and then created codes (523) from parts of the data that were found interesting. Coding was done in Microsoft Word using the side margin comment function, which allowed the data to be viewed alongside the codes. All similar codes were grouped together with colour highlights to simplify the construction of themes. Both semantic and latent coding were used in this study. Byrne [36] explains that semantic codes are produced from explicit meanings of the data (e.g., "description of the mood: sorrow, anxiety"), whereas latent codes identify underlying assumptions or ideas that can shape the semantic content (e.g., "interpretation of the subject: presentation of nationalism").

Additionally, nine categories were created to represent the codes and to organise them better to form themes. Braun and Clarke [35] define categories as topics or domains of the data. They are larger by their content than themes, because different themes can be applied to them, and they are often labelled with just one word.

Six themes were created and named through carefully reviewing the codes and their categories. Themes require a more nuanced labelling than categories because they carry complex meanings that are unified by a central concept and can be difficult to define with just one word.

To communicate even more information from the data, 48 subthemes were added, presenting additional information that the main themes cannot convey. Subthemes clarify main themes with respect to categories and bring more nuance to them. They also illustrate the topics that participants discussed in more detail. How subthemes are connected to categories and themes depends on the context of the viewer's discussions; several subthemes are linked to multiple categories and themes based on their context (e.g., subtheme 1: "Expressions of war", which had connections to two categories "Atmosphere" and "Interpretation" and is also connected to Theme 1: "Reflections important to self").

Categories formed from codes and their definitions are listed in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Categories and examples of codes in them.

1.	**Evaluation of the artist's work – codes that evaluate the artworks in different ways (e.g., thought-provoking, influential, conflicting emotions → success of the artwork).**
2.	**Exhibition specific** – codes that describe the exhibition in some way (e.g., influence of sounds in the artwork → artist's presence is felt, distance between artwork and viewer affects how the artwork is seen, effect of lighting on the artwork).
3.	**Atmosphere** – codes that describe the atmosphere of the artwork (e.g., panic of fire, fear and aggression → two sides of the coin, colours create hopefulness).
4.	**Description** – codes that describe the content and technique of the artwork (e.g., rooted and steady lifestyle, technique makes the artwork glow and breathe).
5.	**Interpretation** – codes that interpret the artwork (e.g., balancing life can be difficult, associations to war / death / casualties of war, nature is more powerful than technology).
6.	**Analysis** – codes that further analyse the artwork (e.g., humans' limited ability to understand the world outside their own frames, comparison to DaVinci and Escher).
7.	**Personal** – codes relating to the viewer's personal life / opinions (e.g., video games → The Witcher / Super Mario, own mother → annoyance, connecting the artwork to personal experiences).
8.	**Topical** – codes that relate to current world events (e.g., lowering emissions isn't enough, references to Ukraine war, unfairness and wrongness → cruelty of Putin).
9.	**Other** – codes that do not fit into other categories (e.g., ideas for alternative uses of the artwork, good art has a message and an idea).

The categories are mostly self-explanatory. While "Interpretation" and "Analysis" are quite similar, they have slightly different nuances. "Interpretation" refers to the meaning made directly from the content or technique of the artwork, while "Analysis" takes it further, outside the frames of the artwork, connecting it to something more than its own content.

3.2. Detailed Thematic Findings

The chosen themes in the study were: 1. "Reflections important to self", 2. "Life's joys and hardships", 3. "Societal problems", 4. "Technical properties", 5. "Magic of childhood", 6. "Thoughts relating to the artist". These themes could be created from the participants' comments in each art exhibition, although not every theme came through every time. It was important to choose themes that were general enough that they could be discovered in most participants' descriptions, especially when the exhibitions were all very different from one another. None of the themes were considerably more present in just one group. The categories and subthemes crafted for this study are generalizable and thus may suit the analysis of other comparable art exhibitions. This said, exhibition notes should always be coded individually because art experiences depend highly on the viewer and the conditions of the viewing. It is also clear that another researcher may focus on other parts of the data and create their own themes that suit their research interests.

The top three themes in each exhibition were the following:

1) By Nature*:* "Reflections important to self" (x7), "Technical properties" (x5) (only two themes).
2) 1868–2021–2068/Places Beyond*:* "Magic of childhood" (x6), "Reflections important to self" (x5), "Life's joys and hardships" (x5).
3) Gösta Diehl More than a Cubist*:* "Reflections important to self" (x26), "Thoughts relating to the artist" (x25), "Life's joys and hardships" (x20).
4) The Magic Mountain*:* "Technical properties" (x17), "Reflections important to self" (x14), "Societal problems" (x10).
5) At Her Fingertips/Forever Young*:* "Technical properties" (x42), "Reflections important to self" (x38), "Life's joys and hardships" (x18).
6) Dimensions of a Line*:* "Reflections important to self" (x33), "Technical properties" (x22), "Life's joys and hardships" (x7).

The themes that appeared the most were "Reflections important to self " and "Technical properties". Connections between categories (boxes) and subthemes (smaller

circles) within a theme are shown in **Figures 1** and **2**. The numbers after subtheme names indicate which exhibition they refer to, and numbers in parentheses indicate the number of the subtheme.

Figures 1 and **2** demonstrate how the two most prominent themes are linked to subthemes and categories. The emphasis of these two themes in the participant responses is understandable, because technical properties of artworks elaborate personal observations, which intrinsically tackle personal understandings and own reflections (e.g., black colour interpreted as something negative).

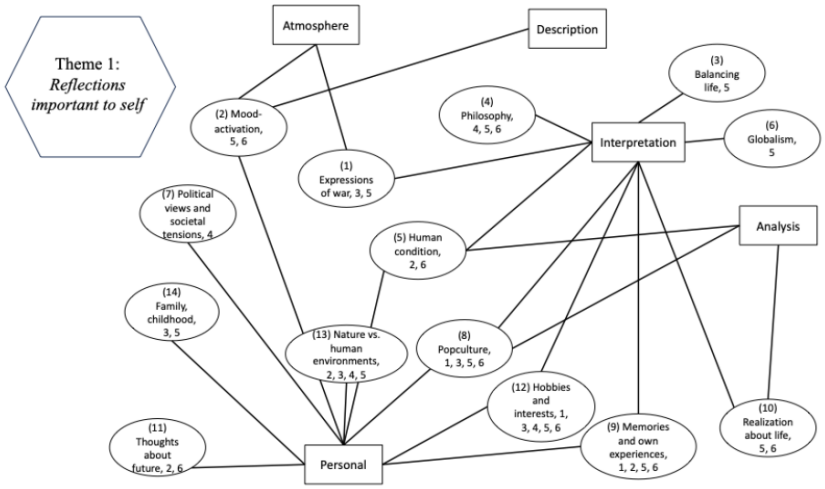

Figure 1. Analysis of Theme 1: "Reflections important to self".

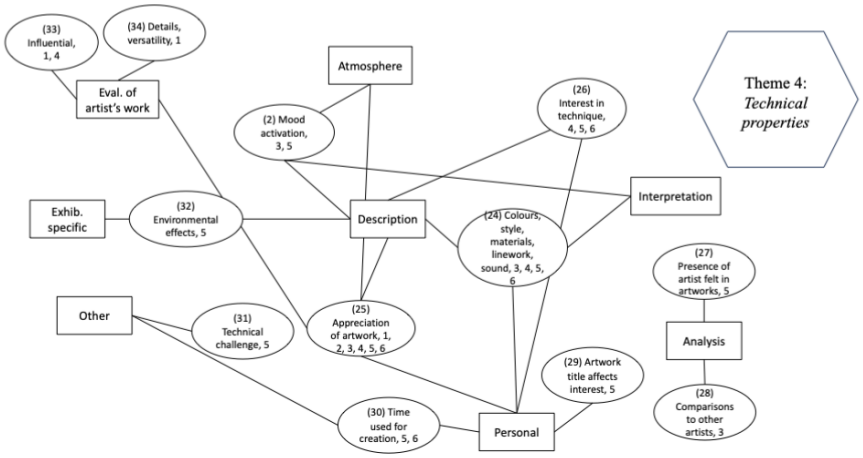

Figure 2. Analysis of Theme 4 "Technical properties".

The observations showed that artworks can offer possibilities to reflect on one's personal situation and world events through their symbolic meanings and help visualise one's thoughts. Art viewing can provide new points of view and ways to describe one's own perceptions and thoughts about the world to others. Repeated visits to exhibitions make it possible to expand one's observations.

A variety of subthemes and categories (refer **Table 3**) were identified for each theme in different art exhibitions, and a total of 42 subthemes (e.g., expressions of war, mood activation, environmental effects on humans, artists' thoughts and feelings, political views and societal tensions) and nine categories were formed. The most repeating subthemes were "Mood activation" and "Human condition" in connection to the following themes and exhibitions: 1) Mood activation connecting to theme 1 "Reflections important to self" (in

exhibitions 5, 6), theme 2 "Life's joys and hardships" (in exhibitions 2, 3, 4, 5), and theme 4 "Technical properties" (in exhibitions 3, 5); 2) Human condition connecting to theme 1 (in exhibitions 2, 6), theme 2 (in exhibitions 3, 4, 5), theme 3 "Societal problems" (in exhibitions 3, 5). The categories that grouped the subthemes together were: Atmosphere, Description, Interpretation, Analysis, Personal, Topical, Other, Exhibition Specific, Evaluation of Artist's Work. The categories helped to understand connections between the subthemes and the themes.

Table 3. Summary of subthemes under each theme and categories in different exhibitions.

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6
Subthemes					
1. Expressions of war (e3, e5)	2. Mood activation (e2, e3, e4, e5)	5. Human condition (e3, e5)	2. Mood activation (e3, e5)	9. Memories and own experiences (e2, e5)	37. Preconception about gender vs. material (e5)
2. Mood activation (e5, e6)	5. Human condition (e3, e4, e5)	17. History repeats itself (e2)	24. Colours, style, materials, linework, sound (e3, e4, e5, e6)	35. Appreciation of childhood (e2, e6)	38. Change/ development of style (e3, e5)
3. Balancing life (e5)	9. Memories and own experiences (e5)	18. Nationalism (e3)	25. Appreciation of artwork (e1, e2, e3, e4, e5, e6)	36. Mind's limitations (e2)	39. General information (e3)
4. Philosophy (e4, e5, e6)	15. Environmental effect on humans (e5, e6)	19. Ethical questions (e4)	26. Interest in technique (e4, e5, e6)		40. Comparisons to other works (e4)
5. Human condition (e2, e6)	16. Reflections of human life (e3, e5, e6)	20. Pop-culture (e4)	27. Presence of artist felt in artworks (e5)		41. Imagining being the artist (e3)
6. Globalism (e5)		21. Negative world image (e4, e5, e6)	28. Comparisons to other artists (e3)		42. Artist's thoughts and feelings (e3, e5)
7. Political views and societal tensions (e4)		22. Contemporary issues (e2, e3, e4, e5, e6)	29. Artwork title affects interest (e5)		
8. Pop-culture (e1, e3, e5, e6)		23. Ukraine war (e3, e4)	30. Time used for creation (e5, e6)		
9. Memories and own experiences (e1, e2, e5, e6)			31. Technical challenge (e5)		
10. Realisation about life (e5, e6)			32. Environmental effects (e5)		
11. Thoughts about future (e2, e6)			33. Influential (e1, e4)		
12. Hobbies and interests (e1, e3, e4, e5, e6)			34. Details, versatility (e1)		
13. Nature vs. human environments (e2, e3, e4, e5)					
14. Family, childhood (e3, e5)					
CATEGORIES: Atmosphere (1, 2, 9, 25, 35), Description (2, 5, 15, 24, 25, 26, 32), Interpretation (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 35, 42), Analysis (5, 8, 10, 16, 22, 27, 28, 36, 40, 41), Personal (2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 35, 41), Topical (5, 21, 22, 23), Other (17, 31, 38, 39), Exhibition Specific (32, 38, 42), Evaluation of Artist's Work (25, 33, 34, 37)					

Note: Numbers in parentheses after each subtheme indicate exhibition number (e#), numbers in parentheses after each category indicate subthemes in the category.

3.3. Longitudinal and Cross-Sectional Observations

3.3.1. Longitudinal Findings

Table 4 shows the longitudinal data observations from A1, B1 and C1 from the visited art exhibitions.

A1 was experiencing low mood, especially when the project started, but the condition improved during this period. B1 and C1 had not reported any low mood during this time. Individual differences in art discussions were apparent. However, only A1's discussions significantly lengthened and became more analytical and thoughtful as more exhibitions were visited. In the first exhibition, By Nature, A1's discussions were the shortest, which was also reflected in the number of themes that could be made from this data. In general, the number of themes from each participant also reflects the size of their data, indicating the volume of interest for the exhibitions.

Table 4. Themes that came through in exhibitions from longitudinal data observations.

Art Exhibition	Participants / Themes#		
	A1	B1	C1
By Nature	1, 4	-	-
1868–2021–2068 / Places Beyond	1, 2, 4	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	-
Gösta Diehl	1, 2, 4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 6
The Magic Mountain	1, 3, 4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	2, 3, 4
At Her Fingertips / Forever Young	1, 4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	1, 4, 5, 6
Dimensions of a Line	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

The evolution of A1's art discussions should be noted here, as it can signal various changes. Improved mood during visits to the museum may have affected how much the person was willing to put time into analysing the artworks. Becoming more familiar with the exercise of talking about art most likely also had a role. B1 and C1 had reportedly been interested in visual art before the exercise, so they were likely familiar with talking about art. A1 used artworks to discuss personal interests more than B1 and C1, who generally focused more on interpretations and analysis, with some reflections on their personal lives. The difference in interest areas may explain why A1's discussions had more variation in length – some exhibitions inspired more personal discussions than others. The art exhibition displaying sculptures (At Her Fingertips) seemed more challenging for A1 to discuss, perhaps because the medium differed from the other artworks they saw.

3.3.2. Cross-Sectional Findings

Table 5 show themes, categories and subthemes in each group from the 5th exhibition, At Her Fingertips/Forever Young.

There was a difference in group A between A1 and the other two group members (A2, A3) regarding how many themes were found. This was related to the fact that A1 had visited several exhibitions already. It may be said that in group A, where people reported low mood conditions, the increased number of art-viewing exercises had a connection to the increased details in observations and the willingness to discuss them in length.

In group B's data from exhibition 5, there were slightly more categories and one more theme than in the other groups' data. Compared to other groups, categories that were in B's data and were missing in the other groups were "Analysis" and "Topical". This group's participants were psychological healthcare workers, so they were used to talking about things in an analytical manner, even if they were not used to analysing artworks. B also found connections to current world events in the artworks, while the other groups did not tie the works to these issues. The categories that can be found in all the groups' discussions are "Evaluation of the artist's work", "Description", "Interpretation", "Personal" and "Other". Like the longitudinal data, the cross-sectional data showed that the main topic was anything personal life related (theme 1). Similarly, the second largest discussion topic was the artwork's technical properties (theme 4) in most exhibitions. These observations can also be seen in the number of subthemes linked to the two main themes in this exhibition (theme 1: 11 subthemes, theme 4: 8 subthemes).

Table 5. Themes, categories and subthemes from cross-sectional data observations from exhibition 5.

Exhibition 5: At Her Fingertips / Forever Young			
Groups	**A**	**B**	**C**
Themes	1, 2, 3, 4, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 4, 5, 6
Groups	**A**	**B**	**C**
Categories	Evaluation of artist's work, Description, Interpretation, Exhibition specific, Personal, Other	Exhibition specific, Evaluation of artist's work, Atmosphere, Description, Interpretation, Analysis, Personal, Topical, Other	Evaluation of artist's work, Atmosphere, Description, Interpretation, Personal, Other
Groups	**A, B, C**		
Subthemes	Subtheme name (main theme #): Artist's thoughts and feelings (6), Artwork title affects interest (4), Balancing life (1), Change/ development of style (6), Colours – style –materials –linework –sound (4), Contemporary issues (3), Environmental effects (4), Environmental effect on humans (2), Expressions of war (1), Family – childhood (1), Globalism (1), Hobbies and interests (1), Human condition (2, 3), Interest in technique (4), Memories and own experiences (1, 2, 5), Mood activation (1, 2, 4), Nature vs. human environments (1), Negative world image (3), Philosophy (1), Pop culture (1), Preconception about artist's gender vs. material (6), Presence of artist felt in artworks (4), Realization about life (1), Reflections of human life (2), Technical challenge (4), Time used for creation (4)		

In group C, one exception in the findings compared to the other groups was that theme 3, "Societal problems", was absent. Interestingly, an emphasis on theme 5, "Magic of childhood", was found in groups B and C but was absent in group A. This is certainly due to individual differences. Perhaps the innocence and bright colours of Krokfors's art depicting beach balls and balloons evoked childhood memories or ideas in some participants, but not in those experiencing low mood.

The participants' age did not seem to influence the results, but it could in other contexts have this effect because lived experiences are influenced by age. There was no indication in the current study that gender would impact art preferences in the groups, although it is possible (for example, Polzella's [43] study on gender's role in Rococo, Impressionistic and abstract art preferences). Cultural and language backgrounds had some varying emphases, especially considering the Russian speakers' discussions regarding the invasion of Ukraine.

Some participants' opportunity for art discussions with a friend made the data different from written notes – audio-recorded reactions were spontaneous, but written texts more thoughtful in general. Photographing artworks helped, especially those participants who had written about their experiences at home. Although it did not serve as any form of art therapy, photography was still a valuable tool for recollection and improved understanding.

3.4. Processes in Art Observations

The following analysis is based on the observations made of the participants' art discussions that align with Pelowski et al.'s [34] points of view on perceiving observations. This reflects meaning making through cognition formation, especially creative cognition, featured in Benedek and Fink's [22] research: Attention – perception and perceptual conceptualisation (interpreting sensory information and organising it into meaningful concepts) ←→ Memory – memory functions and cognitive schema formation ←→ Cognitive control – language and divergent vs. creative thinking. Creative thinking has been defined as a central element in cognitive flexibility and wellbeing [23]. The concept of self-schemas (the relationship between self, environment/other people and the future) by Beck [5] is the complementary viewpoint, which affects cognitive functioning. The points highlighted here are detailed observations from the data. The conclusions are reflected against the researcher's own interest and education in art history.

3.4.1. Attention

The exhibitions mostly presented figurative art, which, according to Kandel [25], lead to more bottom-up processing. This was not clear from the data, but individual differences could be seen, such as in B1's case, whose art analyses focused on building interpretation through careful

description of formalistic details. According to Kandel [25], thought-provoking art activates top-down processing and higher-order cognitive functions such as attention, imagery, expectations and learned visual associations. Following Kandel's logic, Gösta Diehl's cubistic art, which contained elements of abstraction, could have been processed mainly with the top-down style, but this cannot be said with certainty.

The participants in the study were untrained in art history, and much of contemporary art was unfamiliar to them. This inexperience allowed the viewers to freely create novel ideas because they were not bound by the restraints of art historical knowledge.

3.4.2. Memory and Schemas

Memory

Memory builds some of our permanent cognitive structures that guide perception-formation, observation-making and other conscious and unconscious actions. During art viewing, people can retrieve memories from their past that influence the artwork's interpretation and emotional impact. The participants in this study often approached art discussions through personal memories, such as water-balloon fights at work and garden parties with the family. The artworks discussed through personal memories within the groups were mostly viewed in a positive light.

Schemas

Cognitive schemas are formed through a person's learning history and development and are thus connected to memory functions. Schemas can be understood from the position of perceptual psychology as interpretations of perceived objects in the environment (e.g., a tree in a painting is perceived as a tree when enough elements of a tree are present) [44]. In the context of this study, schemas are also understood as learned mindsets for thinking and attitudes [5,20]. Group B and C's schemas get highlighted more in the data (refer **Table 6**), which can be explained by group A's challenges in verbal expressions, perhaps due to low mood (especially A2 and A3). The schemas in group A appear more hidden because the linguistic expressiveness was not as generous as in the other groups. Linguistic expression may be narrower when experiencing low mood, especially depression, because thinking is then often more focused on the inner world [45]. It is advisable, therefore, to offer external influences and activities such as art exhibition visits that can stimulate the mind and increase flexibility in thinking to promote wellness [24]. This is realised especially when art is viewed in a slow, peaceful, and mindfulness-increasing manner with focused attention.

The personal meaning of thoughts can partly be observed through Beck's [5] concept of emotional schemas (thoughts, emotions and behaviour). **Table 6** presents some noteworthy examples of schemas from the data organised into different main schema areas related to self, social environment, and the future.

The findings can be seen to reflect the internal and external schema areas of the "self" (interest, longing and values) and the "environment" (feel-good, negative memories, empathy). When considering Beck's [5] third schema area, the "future", it can appear in relation to such content as "family", "possible scenarios" and "hope", but these can vary between people and situations.

Table 6. Main notes on schema-areas.

	Schemas		
Self-related	**a) Interest**	**Longing**	**Values**
	Various artworks: A1 - video games, music, movies. Dielh's *Spiderwebs* (1958): B1 - photography as a hobby.	Photographs by Johansson: B1 - longing for childhood.	Krokfors's lithography depicting figures on a high building: C4 – balancing between values and everyday life.

Table 6. *Cont.*

Socially related	Feel-good	Negative memories and associations	Empathy
	Krokfors's beach ball monotypes: B2 - water balloon fight at work. Jääskeläinen's sculptures depicting mouths: B3 - social experience of eating. Diehl's painting, *Landscape from Cagnes* (1927): C1 - garden parties with family. Jääskeläinen's rock sculptures: C2 - rocks as travel souvenirs.	Cubistic painting by Diehl: A1 – some unidentified memories of childhood home. Krokfors's beach ball monotypes: B1 - sarcastic joke. Jääskeläinen's sculptures: C1 - associations to biological waste.	For B1, B3 and C2 in various artists' works - feelings of empathy toward Ukrainians' suffering.
Future	**Family**	**Possible scenarios**	**Hope**
	Jääskeläinen's sculptures: B4 - becoming a grandparent.	Weckman's painting, *Settembrini* (2022): B1 – destruction of nature by climate change.	Krokfors's artworks: C1 - impermanence of everything.

Note: This table lists examples of different schema areas according to Beck's [5] specification.

3.4.3. Cognitive Control

Language

Language is the main component in cognitive functioning, giving ways to form our understanding of the world around us and allowing us to express ourselves. Language develops and is enhanced in interactive contact with the physical and social environment, as stated by Linell [30].

As found in the data, artworks offered viewers possibilities and reasons to discuss personal life events and memories freely. Some viewers wanted to bring up their interests through artworks more, while others focused on discovering the artist's intended meaning. Those with a personal approach seemed to describe the content of the artworks with fewer words than those interested in the artist's intention. This indicates that familiarising oneself with the content of the work is not too relevant for finding connections to personal life events or interests.

Some viewers used more analytical and interpretative language than others. For those viewers who started their discussions by describing the artwork's denotative elements, interpretations of the subject and theme seemed to come more naturally. The artwork's interpretations and analysis could then advance in either direction: toward the impersonal and more artist-focused or toward personal memories and/or values.

We can consider that the current world situation and people's diverse cultural backgrounds guided the language use and associations when discussing artworks. This appeared most clearly in discussions about current world events, such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which impacted art experiences especially for the two individuals whose cultural background was in Eastern Europe. One of them brought up the war on multiple occasions, while the other referred to it more subtly and indirectly, never mentioning any specific wars. Of Diehl's painting made in 1945 during WW2, depicting a giant fireball, they said that current world events appeared before their eyes, which made it hard to relate to the content. Additionally, one Finnish speaker alluded to the invasion of Ukraine when discussing Krokfors's artwork called Etäisyys ("Distance", made in 1986). This is one of the artist's darker-themed works, depicting soft red cones and small light vertical lines on a dark background. The viewer saw in it confrontational themes, inequality and power imbalance leading to associations of war and especially the suffering of civilians. Colours are one of the easiest elements to describe in artworks, and the viewers were familiar with finding and articulating meaning through colours. Colours carry strong emotional weight, affecting the viewers' mood and interpretations (dark colours seemed to be perceived more negatively than bright ones). Another Finnish speaker interpreted short columns on a dark background in Krokfors's 1984 work, Erämaa ("Wasteland"), as gravestones in a battlefield. It can be deduced from the comments that

this could be a reference to Finland's Winter War and Continuation War against the Soviets. These discussions were placed for the most part under the themes "Life's joys and hardships" and "Societal problems".

Interestingly, some differences in art discussions between language groups could be found. Sociability (family, friends, social activities) was especially observable in Swedish speakers' responses. This can also be said about the two participants who were originally from Eastern European countries, but it did not have as much emphasis for them. This was the least noticeable in the Finnish speakers' responses, who were more focused on individualism (personal interests, etc.). Perhaps this can be explained by differences in cultural communities – Swedish speakers in Finland's coastal areas live in more tightly-knit groups, having their own communal activities and generally being more social than many Finnish speakers [46].

Divergent and Creative Thinking

Thinking as a central form of cognition can be understood by convergent and divergent thinking. Convergent thinking is the way of applying existing thinking patterns to interpret an object, while divergent thinking is the process of trying to find new possible viewpoints for our observations [44].

Popular culture, such as TV series, films, music, and video games, occurred in many interpretations, especially for A1. This participant discussed how being artistic presents itself as aesthetic choices in one's personal life – in clothing style, music taste, and even creating one's character in a video game. Appreciation of artworks for A1 and C1 came from their careful construction and the perceived time used for their creation. For A1, thinking about the creation process sparked interest in making their own artworks.

Kristian Krokfors's artworks created strong emotional discord. B1 described them as a "sarcastic prank on the viewer". This person criticised the artist for making many similar artworks that "have no substance" and are not challenging. This was related to Krokfors's various beach ball monotypes, which differed from many other works B1 had seen at Kuntsi's exhibitions, being bright, cheery, and "too simple". B1's interests were generally roused by artworks that were understood as having more substance and were thematically more serious. Perhaps the formalistic nature of Krokfors's works created a dissonance where the viewer could not find a "story" or a personal narrative. C1, on the other hand, enjoyed these same artworks and wanted to spend time viewing them because they gave a feeling of calmness and inner peace.

C1 experienced strong negative associations to Emma Jääskeläinen's sculptures and Katriina Haikala's Synthesis (2021), which presents multiple portraits layered on top of one another. The dislike for Haikala's work was caused by associations to a dystopic Orwellian society, while Jääskeläinen's art was associated with biological waste. Even though there was dislike, C1 appreciated the artist for inspiring such strong emotions.

Jääskeläinen's art seems to have challenged many viewers with its ambiguity. Some viewers were unable to find anything to grasp at, and the experience felt unsatisfactory. These same viewers found Krokfors's artworks easier to interpret and considered them more influential. It appears that ambiguity can lead to negativity because the viewer cannot connect with the artwork. This is also indicated in Pelowski et al.'s [34] study, where they demonstrate how negative emotions can arise if the art viewer cannot find meaning or understanding in the work, leading to a negative hedonic appraisal and the wish to abort/escape the exhibition. If the viewer stays and gives the artwork a second chance, their thoughts can transform into a new understanding (re-examine expectations → schema change → self-transformation → epiphany) [47]. This transformation is, according to Pelowski et al. [47] a highly emotional experience. It cannot be said that any participant in this study experienced such a transformation, but on a smaller scale, the emotional discord that some of the artworks created became a positive experience for some participants upon realising how strongly art could make them feel.

3.4.4. Flexibility and Wellbeing

As stated by Zare Rameshti [23], cognitive flexibility has the potential to lead to a better wellbeing. The data shows that the flexibility of expressions and thoughts increased at least for some of the participants. This was especially true for those who visited more than one exhibition. With more points of reference, attention can be directed more widely to different environmental aspects than when excessively focused on one's own situation. When a per-

son with a low mood starts to gain new perspectives, their thoughts, at best, can evolve into wider reflective processes. Sometimes this appears as more detail-oriented contemplations, which can later expand into larger ideas.

These points were also referenced by A1, who wanted to highlight that, while feeling down, one is less likely to notice details in artworks, for example, and they do not evoke many thoughts. Once a person's mood improves, they can focus on more details. Despite sometimes lacking attention, A1 believed it to be beneficial to visit art exhibitions because they activate and elicit new thoughts even when experiencing a low mood.

Visiting the museum and viewing artworks could be said, at least momentarily, to have lifted the participants' mood. Participants were happy to do the exercise, and their discussions of the experience were positive. The visits to the museum allowed them to step back from the daily routines and the ordinariness of everyday life. The participants who visited the museum the most seemed to benefit the most. By the end of the exhibition visits, the researcher could see that artworks tended to enhance positive thought associations and influenced participants' wellbeing. One conclusion is that it may be beneficial to walk through the exhibition rooms first, not stopping to spend much time with any artwork, but to pick out interesting artworks and then view them more carefully with time. It can also help to revisit and study the same artworks more than once, because repeated viewing can deepen or alter the viewer's reflections on the work [48].

3.5. Summary of the Findings

The results show that slow looking as a technique can help viewers immerse themselves in artworks in a way that a quick viewing might not allow them. This makes the processes needed for creative cognition easier because there is more time allocated for observing and retrieving earlier perceptions from one's memory, and the viewer's focus is more clearly directed towards the actual artwork instead of the surrounding museum environment or other distractions. Considering that the art viewer's thinking gains new points of view and meaning during slow looking, this technique has an apparent impact on increasing cognitive flexibility. It is essential, however, that the content of one's thoughts is directed towards a balanced and positive direction. For this part, communicating thoughts can help the viewer address topics that might not otherwise come up in everyday conversations.

The longitudinal results from three participants, A1, B1 and C1, show the development of art discussion and analysis skills that the participants received during the exercise. This development was the easiest to detect in A1, who was in the low mood group. Once the reported mood improved, discussions lengthened, and this person started to analyse artworks through various topics, from technique to personal interests. The longitudinal and cross-sectional results show that talking about technique and connecting the artwork to the viewer's personal life were generally the most popular ways to reflect on art. Worry about world events, most importantly Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, followed in the background in many discussions, and was strongly emphasised, especially in B1's responses.

The participants had different starting points in viewing art, which was also reflected through their identified schemas. Schemas can bring more depth into themes by focusing on personal life issues, memories, hopes and values. Cultural differences were understandably not significant since everyone lived in Finland. Differences in language-related health observations could also not be confirmed, but it is a possible question worth examining in the future. In Reini and Saarela's study [49], Swedish speakers' sociability was shown to have a positive effect on wellbeing compared to their Finnish-speaking counterparts. Sociability can also impact individuals' language use and the formation of schemas. This is expected to happen because language relates to cultural context, as stated in Linell's interactional language theory [30]. This point also came through from the data, showing how Swedish speakers more often recalled personal memories of social events through which they discussed some of the artworks.

When the subject of the artwork is simple and self-explanatory, or based on repetitive patterns, it can be difficult to see beyond what is being represented – this is where interest can wane. Ambiguity can similarly affect the viewer, but ambiguous artworks can also present possibilities for interpretation and a positive challenge. For the participants, initial impressions transformed and became more profound the longer they viewed the artworks,

demonstrating some of the benefits of slow looking. It seems that art exhibition visits can stimulate the mind and increase flexibility in thinking to influence wellbeing, especially when the visits are done with focused attention on the artworks, taking note of every detail from the formal aspects to the artwork's connotative meaning – this can enhance creative cognition.

All participants had one theme in common, and it appeared in all the exhibitions: "Reflections important to self", meaning that the artworks allowed the visitors to contemplate issues that felt personally significant to them in some way. This was expected but also a welcome result, showing how artworks can function as channels for personal observations. The data from A1, B1 and C1 shows much interest, analytical pondering, and openness to connect artworks to deeply personal topics. This connection allowed them to process memories, feelings and beliefs and find more flexibility in thinking, which positively affected their wellbeing. B1, a psychological healthcare worker, was the keenest to analyse artworks by their content, which may have resulted from the analytical approach familiar to them through their work.

4. Discussion

Cultural activities can affect life by influencing thought patterns and mood in a positive way, as well as promoting wellbeing [10]. Some viewers may enjoy resting their eyes on figurative forms, while others enjoy abstract art that challenges the imagination, which is also what Kandel [25] writes about regarding different processing styles. Museums can help their viewers slow down and spend time discovering various artworks by organising the layout of the rooms and thinking up new ways to give information about the artworks to encourage slow looking instead of a faster-paced rhythm.

The participants in this study deemed the slow looking exercise positive and stimulating, even when some of the artworks evoked negative feelings and thoughts. People normally navigate towards art that is immediately enjoyable to them, but art that appears unenjoyable or too challenging at first can become interesting when the viewer is open to its challenge. Challenging artworks can enhance positive emotions through the enjoyment gained from problem-solving. Slow looking techniques in general have been used to educate viewers about art and to encourage them to spend more time with artworks, thus increasing art enjoyment [19] and deepening the art viewing experience.

Upon visiting several exhibitions, museum visitors' thoughts about art tend to become more reflective and deeper. This indicates an increase in familiarity with art discussions, but more importantly, it can unlock different content areas and associations, allowing the possibility to look at art from diverse viewpoints, especially when viewing art slowly and deliberately. The viewer's creativity can increase, affecting flexibility in thinking and wellbeing when the experience is positive. Visiting several exhibitions and observing different art movements, styles, and genres provides educational content with which viewers learn to appreciate a great variety of art. It is therefore valuable to invest in culture and art education, which promotes cultural welfare in society, as Song and Kim [50] suggest. The value of art exhibitions is that they can help reflect issues through personal views and make follow-up discussions possible based on one's own background, cultivating discussions and providing more nuances to reflections. Viewing artworks can thus improve the skills needed for finding mindful ways to observe the present moment and the surrounding environment in a multifaceted way.

When a person's social context and language use are narrowed and not very associative, it can lead to a vicious cycle, limiting perspectives, sometimes even cognition, and vice versa. The problem may also be that some observations that appear positive initially can take a negative turn when interpreted with a not-so-open mind. This phenomenon can be seen in low mood and even depressive conditions [6]. If a person needs welfare guidance or even therapy, receiving instructions on how to make positive reflections related to one's life situation through different means is helpful. This can support the wellbeing and general welfare aspects of the person. One important observation of this study was that mood conditions, for example, low mood, did not necessarily appear in the art discussions. This should be considered a good thing, especially since art can stimulate alternative thought patterns and override problematic ones.

Linell's [30] interactional language theory shows how cultural and social interactions with others and the envi-

ronment influence our observations of the surroundings and how we structure those observations in our thoughts with the help of language. Even though it is difficult to say whether different languages, per se, had any impact on art discussions, they surely affected how participants articulated their observations. More importantly, the data showed that the cultural and social backgrounds (especially for those who had moved to Finland at a later age) and existing social environments influenced what felt meaningful to them in the artworks. Reflexive thematic analysis as a method functioned well, as it made these viewpoints visible in the data. As Gombrich [28] presented in his seminal work, we construct perceptions using available visual information and bring our experiences, learned opinions and views to the situation.

This study showed that artworks created thought associations, emotions and verbal narratives, which themselves are thought-provoking and at best promote wellness. The outcome, that art has wellness-enhancing functions, is in concordance with McNiff's [17] views on art's curative nature. By increasing art experiences, individuals can find ways to enhance their living environments with aesthetic elements and engage in art-related activities.

5. Conclusions

Artworks can spark various associations between people in conversations, which may evoke surprising discussions that would never surface otherwise. Art discussions allow viewers to link the content of the work to their personal lives, give viewers a break from their daily worries and can sometimes even increase societal consciousness. Awareness of the environment, and interesting attractions, such as art exhibitions, can be applied for wellness promotion by guiding observations with signs or advertisements, for example, or a therapist can suggest visiting exhibitions.

Talking more broadly, slow looking and free associations that spring from these exercises can lead to a better individual understanding of different issues regarding the artwork's subject, personal life, society or something else for museum visitors.

This study wanted to highlight the experiences and thoughts visiting art exhibitions could rouse in people coming from different backgrounds. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for its potential to allow the researcher to reflect on the data and to find the themes most important to the aims of the study. This opens the possibility of directing future research by offering tools for more specific research questions. One area where the observations and research technique could be applied is when new hospitals or rehabilitation centres are planned by taking up the views of visitors, workers, and service providers.

This study aims to present a roadmap for researchers interested in questions relating to viewer experiences when looking at artworks. The number of subjects could have been bigger, but it was essential to find volunteers interested in the exercise, especially those willing to express their views and thoughts in a multifaceted way. One reason for the lower turnout was undoubtedly also the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the study. It is obvious that the small group sizes affected the generalisability of the results. Nevertheless, the study can be expanded in the future, and the existing database can be used as preliminary research. This study placed emphasis on the methodology and the development of the study procedure, which can be said to have been successful.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Vaasa Central Hospital and the Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia (ID 1706/102005; 14.6./13.9.2019). The study was an individual part of the psychological welfare project, which was approved by the above-mentioned board in 2018 (ID 3091; 10.4./27.6.2018). The Board for Research Ethics at Åbo Akademi University gave additional advice on the publication of this study on 29 February 2024. The project and the study were conducted in accordance with rules of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the patients to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data is not available for free distribution due to the consent agreement between the research group, researcher, and the participants. General comments and feedback can be requested from the researcher.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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