



Nan one month after being beaten, Nan Goldin (1984)
Photo: © Tate, London [2026]

Perception of violence against women in art

Selina Zimmermann, Stella Meng, Vera Eidenschink, Bela Müller & Oliver Neitzke



Introduction

Art depicting **violence against women** is often **displayed** in a way that **objectifies** and **dehumanizes women** (Peral Jiménez, 2020).

Distancing-Embracing model: explains the increased acceptability and enjoyment of negative content in art (Menninghaus et al., 2017).

- Studies have found that **people accept** and even **embrace** more **negative emotions** such as anger (Wagner et al., 2016) and disgust (Wagner et al., 2014) in the **context of art**.

We therefore ask:

Are depictions of violence against women perceived differently when labelled as art?

Methods

- 14 photographs** (7 including violence, 7 neutral) from the artist **Nan Goldin**. A short description presented each picture as either art or non-art.
- Online study:** 79 Participants (66 females, 13 males, mean age 24.39, age range 18 to 76) were randomly assigned to either the art or the non-art condition. They rated their emotional response and perceived distance to each picture and the picture's aesthetic value.

Example pictures:

Violent:



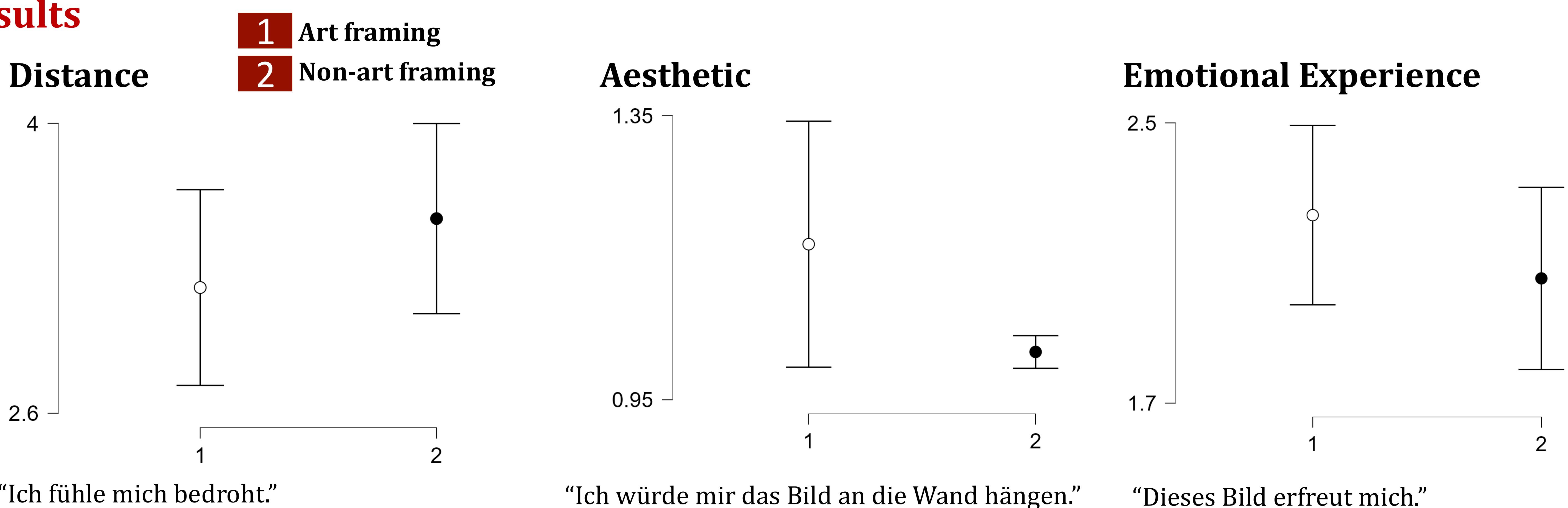
Heart-Shaped Bruise, Nan Goldin, New York City (1980)
Photo: http://www.moma.org. [2026]

Neutral:



Self Portrait in Blue Bathroom, Nan Goldin, London (1980)
Photo: © Tate, London [2026]

Results



- Participants responded to the **same violent images** with **no significant difference in distancing** when the images were presented as art, compared to non-art.
- Participants rated the **same violent images** as **more aesthetic** when the images were presented as art, compared to non-art.
- Participants rated their **emotional experience** of the **same violent images** **not significantly different** when the images were presented as art, compared to non-art.

Conclusion

The **art label** seems to influence the **perception of aesthetics**.

Distance did not seem to play a role in the **perception of violence against women**. This might be due to the **limited amount of items**, **underdistancing** or even **sociological factors** that require more research.

Implications & Future Research

- Is the Distancing-Embracing model too theoretical?
- Which factors play a role in perceiving violence as such?
- Is distancing different for different forms of art?
- Is violence against all genders perceived this way?
- Replicate the study with a larger and more diverse sample size.
- Test the validity of the items used in this study.

References

Goetz, I., Bernhardt, L., Karg, F. M., Pastukhov, A. (Sasha), & Carbon, C.-C. (2025). Art for art's sake? The influence of art framing and context on the evaluation of immoral behaviour. *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, 1655343. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1655343>

Menninghaus, W., Wagner, V., Hanich, J., Wassiliwizky, E., Jacobsen, T., & Koelsch, S. (2017). The Distancing-Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 40, e347. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X17000309>

Ozbay, Y., Stamkou, E., & Oosterwijk, S. (2025). Art promotes exploration of negative content. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 122(5), e2412406122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2412406122>

Peral Jiménez, C. (2020). Museums and Violence Against Women. Raising Awareness of Symbolic Violence. In A. Alonso Tak & Á. Pazos-López (Hrsg.), *Socializing Art Museums* (S. 214–227). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110662085-012>

Wagner, V., Klein, J., Hanich, J., Shah, M., Menninghaus, W., & Jacobsen, T. (2016). Anger framed: A field study on emotion, pleasure, and art. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 10(2), 134–146. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000029>

Wagner, V., Menninghaus, W., Hanich, J., & Jacobsen, T. (2014). Art schema effects on affective experience: The case of disgusting images. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 8(2), 120–129. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036126>