

Elemental Essence: Clairvoyance and Crowdsourcing
The Thought Forms Test
at the 14th Istanbul Biennial: SALTWATER: a theory of Thought Forms
ThoughtForms and Brainwaves: Neuroscience and Art Public Program

This talk contrasts intuitive clairvoyance and crowdsourced testing as explored in a specially formulated test of the link between language, emotions and colors. The Test used visual forms as its basis of investigation, which were derived from the book 'Thought Forms' by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. The Test extends previous research into the link between protolanguage and shapes.

The Thought Forms Test was initiated as a result of a conversation between Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and Marcos Lutyens in the fall of 2014. The Test stems from Ramachandran's interest in the bouba/kiki effect, which was first discovered by psychologist Wolfgang Köhler in the 1920' (Köhler).



Figure 1 Wolfgang Köhler

The effect mirrors the relationship between spoken sounds and the visual contours of objects.

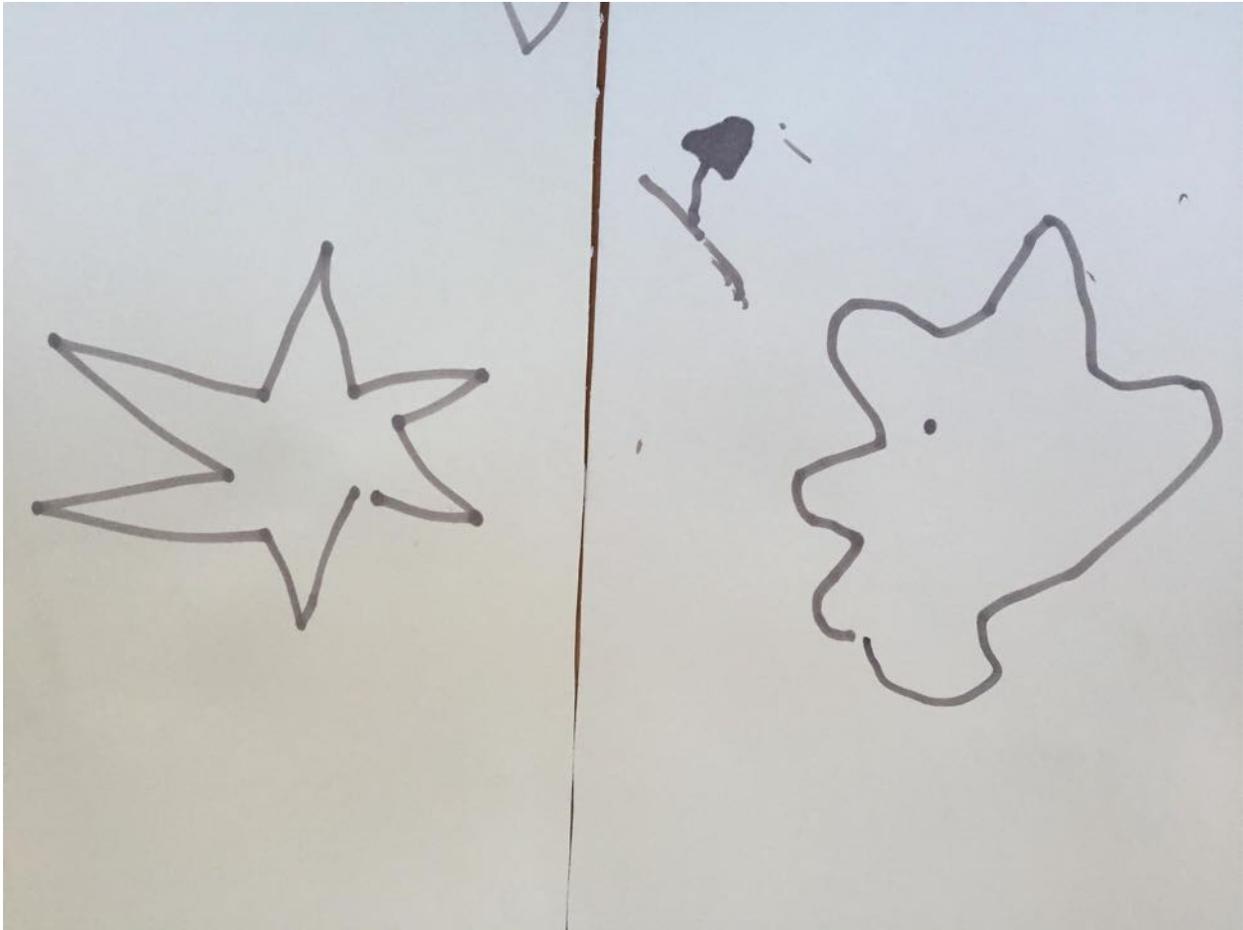


Figure 2 Kiki and Bouba

In Ramachandran's 2001 repeat of the test (Ramachandran), both in a Tamil speaking part of India and English speaking US, 95 to 98% of respondents coincided on the relationship between the word 'kiki' as a jagged shape and 'bouba' as a soft-contoured outline. This correlation allowed Ramachandran to surmise that there is indeed a propensity to link certain shapes and sounds in the brain across different cultures. The effect also sheds light on the way the mind processes different sensory cues simultaneously, especially in the context of synesthesia, which is an involuntary condition in which the brain has excess connections between two or more brain centers.



Figure 3 Professor Ramachandran illustrating bouba/kiki effect

The Thought Forms Test has sought to extend research into the connection between shape and language, by introducing color and texture in addition to outline. To add to the complexity of the Test, the words used were not derived from a kind of proto-language as in 'kiki' and 'bouba,' but rather from clusters of emotion descriptors. The source of these word clusters, such as 'definite affection,' 'selfish ambition' and 'sustained anger' is the book 'Thought Forms,' (Besant) by Theosophists Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, first published in 1905.



Figure 4 Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater

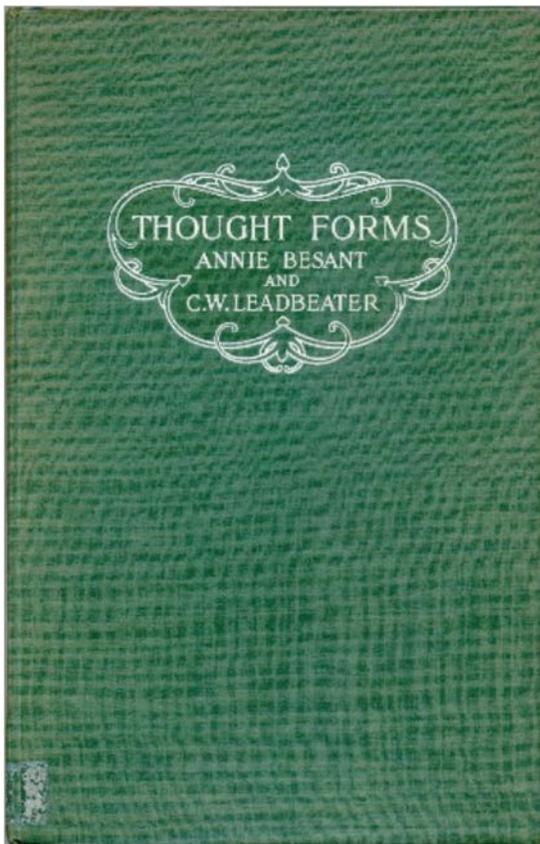


Figure 5 First edition of Thought Forms.

In the book, three artists by the names of Mr John Varley, Mr Prince, and Miss Macfarlane were commissioned to render colorful shapes as described to them by Besant and Leadbeater. These shapes which aimed to link color, shape and texture to emotion were 'seen' by the two authors through a process that they described as clairvoyance.

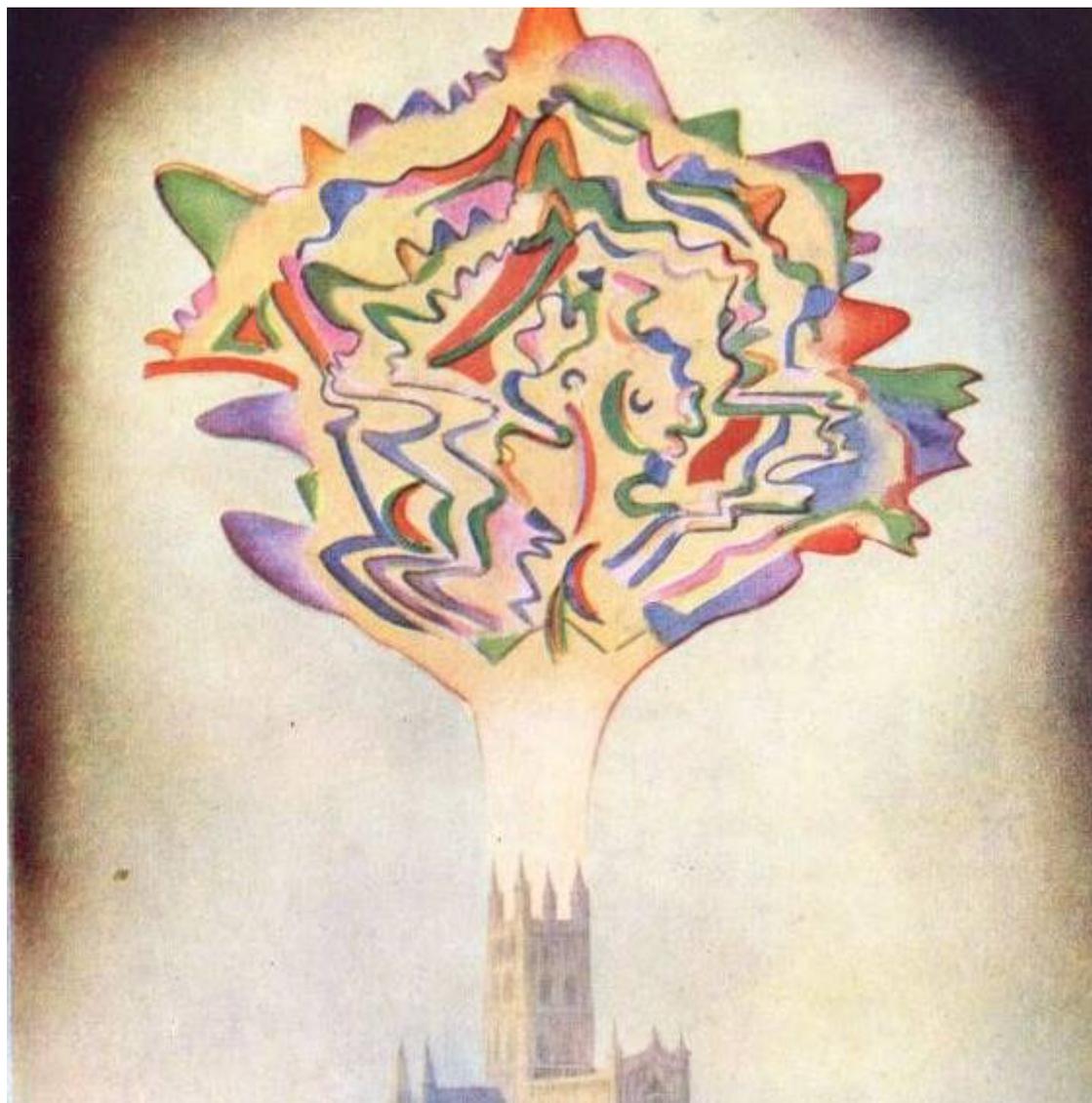


Figure 6 A thought form 'Music of Gounod'

They based their method on what they termed “Elemental Essence,” which in their own words is “that strange half intelligent life which surrounds us in all directions, vivifying the matter of the mental and astral planes.” The book certainly has a great deal of merit,

among other aspects it has been unofficially credited with inspiring the Abstract Painting movement in the 20th Century, including painters Piet Mondrian and Kandinsky, which not many people know was founded in spirituality. However, the process by which Besant and Leadbeater designated these colorful ‘Thought Forms’ as having particular emotive qualities stands out as being quite unusual, especially in the context of our perhaps overly scientific present day culture, having said that, the Theosophy symbol places ‘Truth’ ahead of Religion and one of its three main tenets was to ‘To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.’



Figure 7 The Theosophist symbol

Clairvoyance nowadays is usually considered a pseudoscience and is explained away as expectancy bias, self-delusion or hallucination rather than the result of scientifically verifiable processes to do with augmented sensory perception.



Figure 8 A subject undergoing a Ganzfeld test

Many experiments have taken place such as the Ganzfeld (or 'total field') experiments that stemmed from German Psychologist Wolfgang Metzger's work in the 1920's and 1930's to establish the existence of clairvoyance, but generally the rigorous experiments involving isolation rooms bathed in red light and isolated with white noise to test subjects for telepathic abilities, did not pass the test. Even so, the idea of clairvoyance was often related not to the paranormal but to a heightened state of awareness and was termed as 'psi' in these investigations.

Psi being explained as an 'anomalous processes of information or energy transfer, processes such as telepathy or other forms of extrasensory perception that are currently unexplained in terms of known physical or biological mechanisms. The term is purely descriptive: It neither implies that such anomalous phenomena are paranormal nor connotes anything about their underlying mechanisms.' (Bern)

In other words this was a kind of agnostic position to see whether or not clairvoyance existed rather than whether it was derived from let's say esoteric rather than physiological or biological mechanisms.

However, perhaps within today’s culture, the root of designating specific color-shapes as ‘thought forms’ could be described within the context of a heightened intuitive process. Just as the bouba/kiki effect is the result of a complex process in different brain centers, why should the brain also not be able to ascribe shape, color and texture to certain emotion words in a kind of reverse-engineered process?

The psychologist Carl Jung speaks of intuition as a process that lies beyond the scope of conscious thought, rather as ‘clairvoyance’ could be considered by practitioners to be outside the realm of everyday conscious processes. As Jung notes: “because, in the main, intuition is an unconscious process, the conscious apprehension of its nature is a very difficult matter. In consciousness, the intuitive function is represented by a certain attitude of expectation, a perceptive and penetrating vision, wherein only the subsequent result can prove, in every case, how much was 'perceived-into', and how much actually lay in the object.”

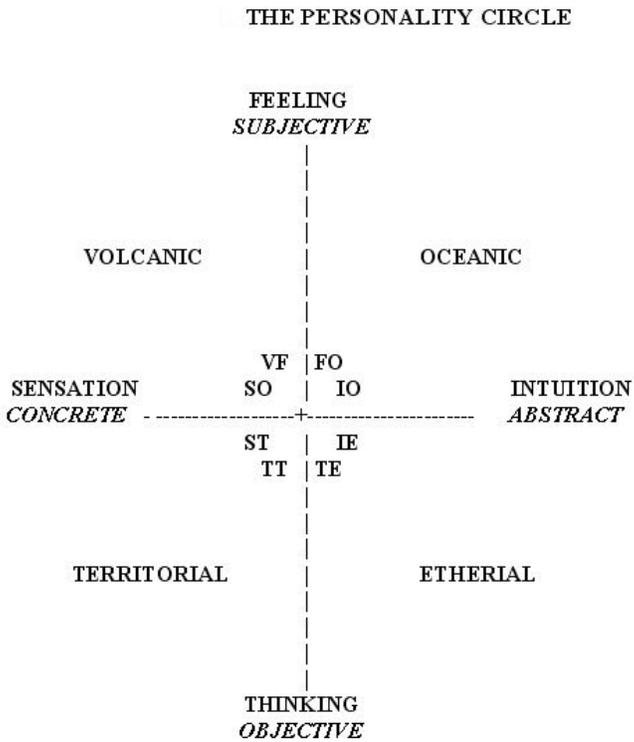


Figure 9 Carl Jung's personality theory placing intuition opposite sensation. (Jung)

Jung also states:
 “Just as sensation, when given the priority, is not a mere reactive process of no further importance for the object, but is almost an action which seizes and shapes the object, so it is with intuition, which is by no means a mere perception, or awareness, but an active,

creative process that builds into the object just as much as it takes out.” Which would imply that Besant and Leadbeater’s ‘clairvoyant’ process was not a passive one of just ‘seeing clearly’ as the etymology of the word implies, but rather actively ‘looking and forming ideas clearly.’

Keeping in mind the issues surrounding the process of 'clairvoyance,' this Thought Forms Test attempts to understand if there is a correlation between the top-down designations of Besant and Leadbeater and the grassroots intuition of many.



In the introduction of the book ‘Wisdom of the Crowds,’ author James Surowiecki describes how Charles Darwin’s nephew, Francis Galton (who also first described the condition of synesthesia), noticed that a crowd guessing the weight of an ox at the West of England Fat Stock and Poultry Exhibition in England, the middlemost vote came to within 0.8 per cent of the actual weight of the animal. Coincidentally this happened just a year after the publication of the Thought Forms book.

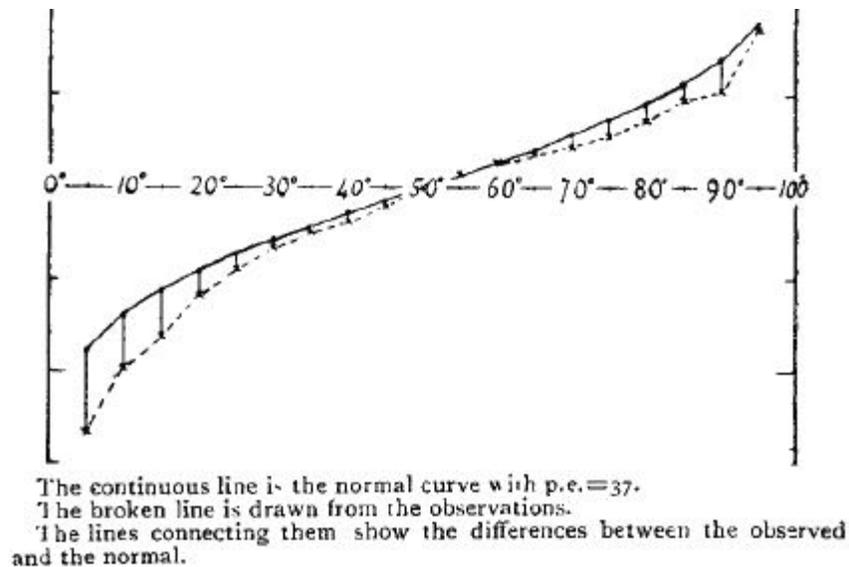


Figure 10 From Francis Galton's notes on crowd wisdom and vox populi

The 'Wisdom of the Crowds' book also describes other instances of the accuracy of this collective intuitive thinking, such as an instance in 1968 when a group of individuals guessed, when all suggested locations were averaged, the site of the lost submarine U.S.S. Scorpion to an accuracy of 220 yards.

This intuitive intelligence seen in groups of people before the advent of the Internet is now harnessed through crowdsourcing. This is also technically sometimes known as Distributed Human Intelligence Tasking, which involves analyzing a set of information by many, or Broadcast Searching where an answer is being sought with the help of a large number of people to solve a scientific problem.

In our case, we set this forced choice Thought Forms Test up with JotForm, which automatically tallies answers that are filled in through our simple online questionnaire and delivers data sets that can then easily be analyzed. The 'forced choice' refers to the fact that the person tested must answer one or other of two options per response.

The Test parameters met with Surowiecki's list of four requirements:

- **Diversity of opinion.** Each person should have private information even if it's just an eccentric interpretation of the known facts.
- **Independence.** People's opinions aren't determined by the opinions of those around them.
- **Decentralization.** People are able to specialize and draw on local

knowledge.

- **Aggregation.** Some mechanism exists for turning private judgments into a collective decision.

Over and above whether there is a correspondence between the two Theosophist authors and a large number of contemporary people's unconscious opinions, the Test could be seen as a process of filling in the blanks of the elusive terrain of emotions, since a translation of immaterial and intangible feelings into a visual equivalent could surely help to pin them down and for the conscious mind to grasp them more clearly.

In terms of the Test taking place at the 14th Istanbul Biennial, which was curated, or rather 'drafted' by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, it's noteworthy that the term "Thought Forms" was included in the main title of the exhibit. This was not just because copies of the Thought Form illustrations were on display at the Istanbul Modern (by pure chance or a kind of auspicious circumstance, most of the originals have just been found in Adyar during the course of the biennial), but rather the idea of exploring the link between consciousness and art seemed to permeate the whole exhibition. Even though the Istanbul Biennial is considered to be one of the top 3 or 4 biennials from around the world, art biennials in general come and go and there are increasing numbers of them. Their content certainly varies from place to place and year to year, but the form is essentially the same. The artist or creator is invited to produce a work of art, such as a film, a painting, a sculpture or an installation to be experienced by the visitor. With the Thought Forms Test we have attempted to reverse the direction of participation from what is exhibited back towards the viewer. The Test is designed to explore the psyche of visitors to the biennial, in terms of how *they* perceive, rather than what we are accustomed to, which is essentially an outward display of the artists' inner feelings and psyche. The visitors, in a way, become a type of *culture* to be observed within a petri dish, which is formed by the Biennial itself.



Figure 11 Neurathian Boatstrap installation at 14th Istanbul Biennial.

In my own investigations with hypnosis on the Neurathian Boatstrap installation at the Istanbul Biennial I myself was interested in observing the workings of the collective mind for instance when 3 visitors came to my 'Z to C consciousness performance.'



Figure 12 Z to C performance

They each selected the same color from a choice of 12 different colors, through a blind test exploring heightened sensing through the skin or what the writer René Daumal termed *paroptic* vision. (Daumal) The likelihood of this occurring was 1,728 to 1. Later I found that all three of them had the same message tattooed into their skin with the words: “How Long is Now” almost as if they formed a collective being.



Figure 13 How Long Is Now tattoos shared by three visitors

I asked one of them what had attracted his attention to the green color? He said: “It just felt different, I was confused about which color to choose until I touched that specific one. And after I touched it, I didn't want to choose any of the others. I can't describe it solidly, a very strong feeling was leading me.”

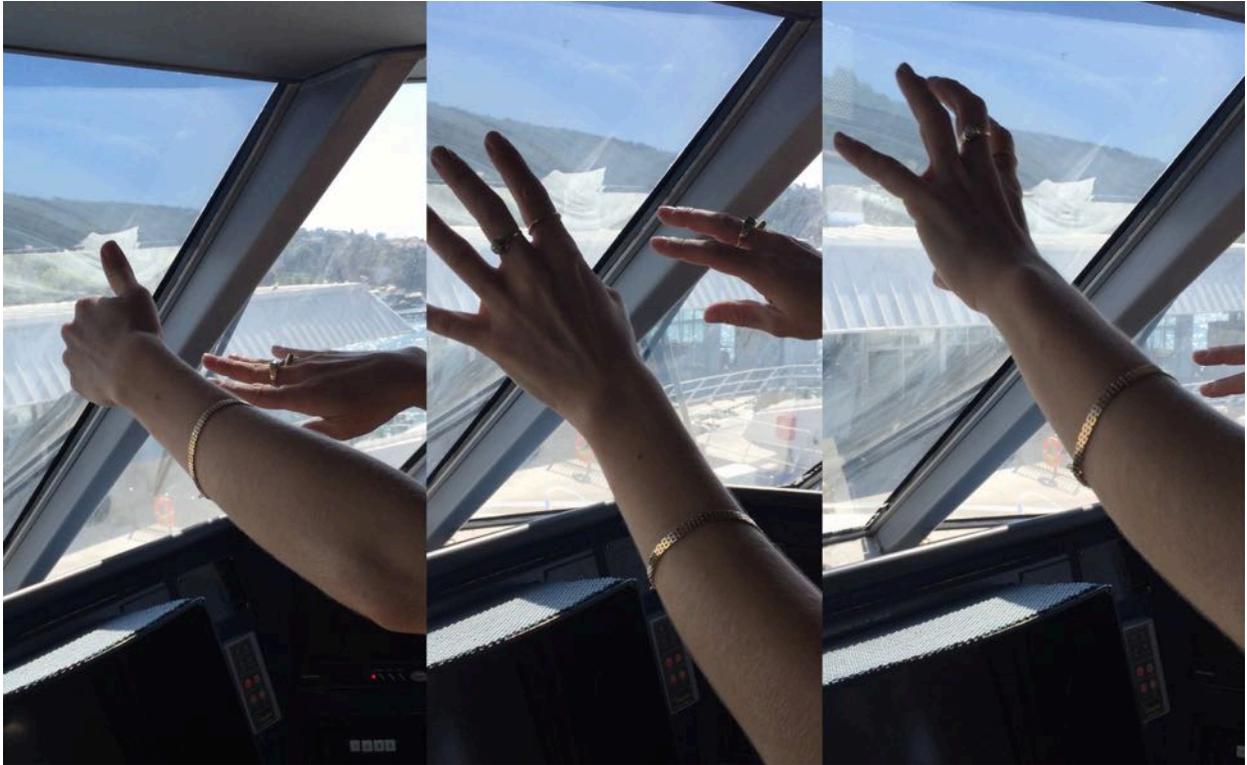


Figure 14 Lea Porsager gesticulating how she could sense external color with her eyes closed.

Another unusual instance that I witnessed at my performance, perhaps even a sign of clairvoyance or however one could term this intuitive thinking process, was artist Lea Porsager's confirming and later explaining how she was able to 'see' the color black with her eyes firmly closed. She described this process much like how a synesthete gestures in mid air to explain the location of involuntary sensations and visualizations. Appropriately, Porsager was responsible for creating the copies of the Thought Form illustrations that were on display at the Istanbul Modern.



Figure 15 Lea Porsager's versions of the Thought Forms exhibited at the Istanbul Modern.

The Thought Forms Test was shared with visitors with the help of students from the Behavioral Neurology and Movement Disorders Unit at the Department of Neurology, Istanbul, who asked visitors at the Istanbul Modern to fill out the simple questionnaire on hand-held tablets, allowing visitors to have the test within their peripersonal space.



Figure 16 The Thought Forms Test being conducted at the Istanbul Modern.

The data was also gathered through posting the online link to the test on the Istanbul Biennial website and social media sites. There was a version in Turkish and one in English to allow participants as much access as possible. We tried to make the Turkish translation as similar in meaning to the English so as not to create a divergence of results between the English and Turkish speaking participants.

The Test asks for name, age-group, gender, country of origin, and automatically notes the time and date. As of today there have been 456 submissions in Turkish and 93 in English.



Thought Forms : Neuroscience Survey Center for Brain and Cognition

Full Name
First Name Last Name

Age Group 0-15
 15-30
 30-55
 55 +

Gender male
 female

Country of Origin
Country

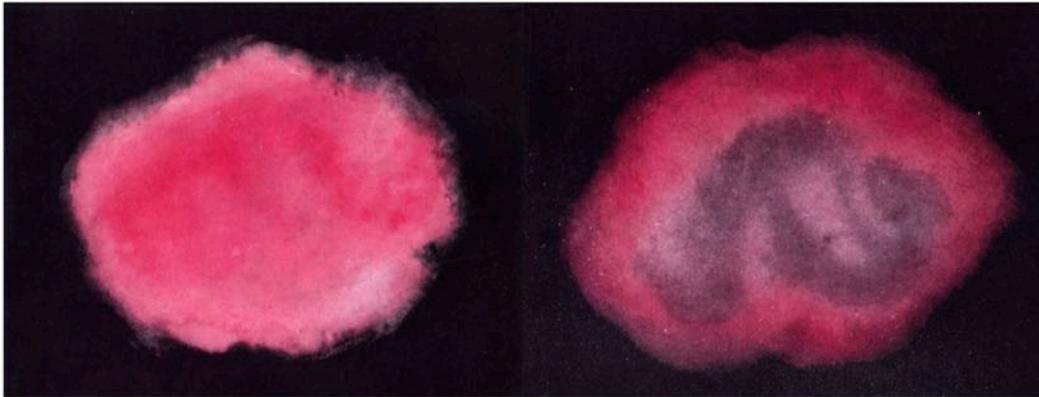
Date - - at :
Day Month Year Hour Minutes

Figure 17 First part of questionnaire with English and Turkish option.

These are 2 sample ‘forced choice questions’.

Which of the two images relates to ‘Vague Pure Affection.’

1) Which one of the two images corresponds to 'Vague Pure Affection'?



PLEASE CHOOSE
ONE:

- left image
 right image

Figure 18 First of the eleven forced choice questions.

Which one of the two images corresponds to 'Watchful Jealousy.'

8) Which one of the two images corresponds to 'Watchful Jealousy'?



PLEASE CHOOSE
ONE

- left image
 right image

Figure 19 Eighth of the eleven forced choice questions.

Data was later analyzed and turned into charts with the help of Ezgi Soncu and Elif Yavas.

Here are some preliminary findings as the Test winds down, however, the idea is that Ramachandran’s center will do a more in depth analysis.

I will just run through a few of the charts:

Many more women than men took part.

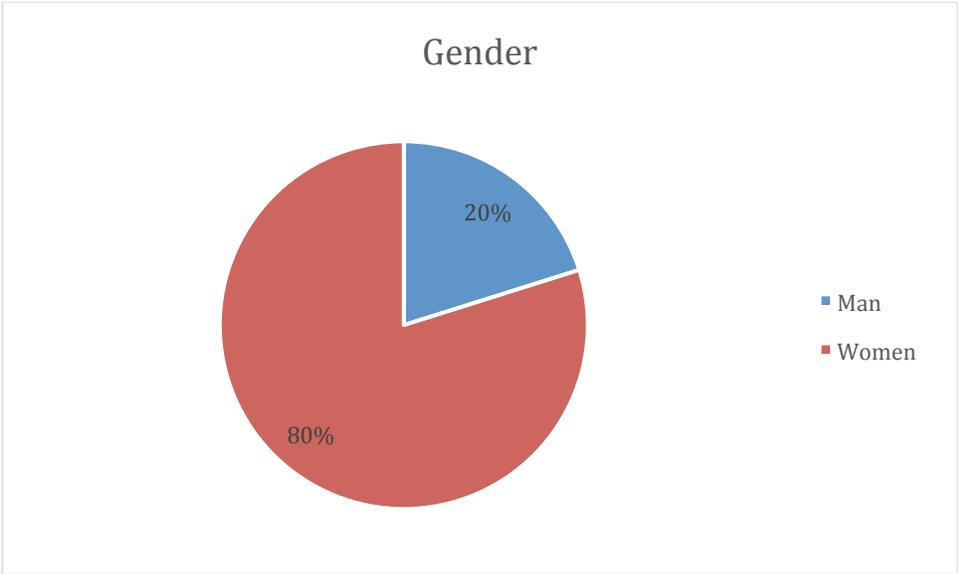


Figure 20 Thought Forms Test Gender Distribution

The largest age segment was 15-30 probably?? reflecting the demographics of the audience that came to the Biennial.

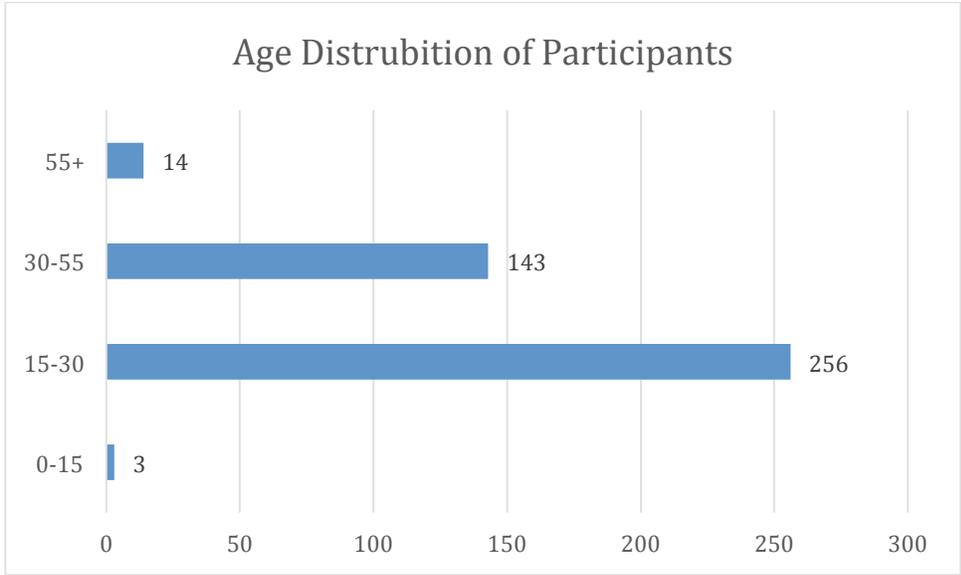


Figure 21 Thought Forms Test Age distribution

By far the largest contingent of respondents were Turkish citizens.

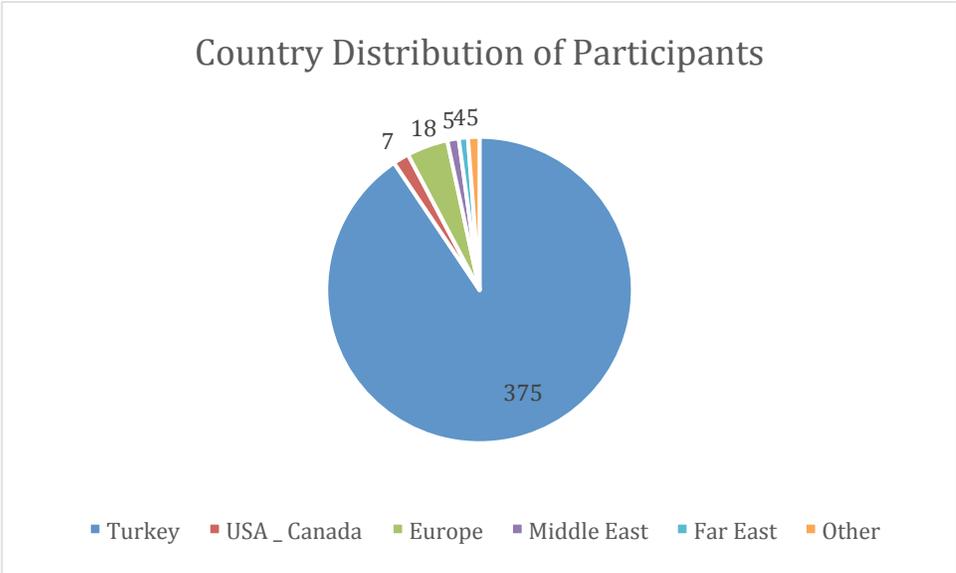


Figure 22 Thought Forms Test Nationality distribution

Participants agreed with Besant on all but 2 test questions.

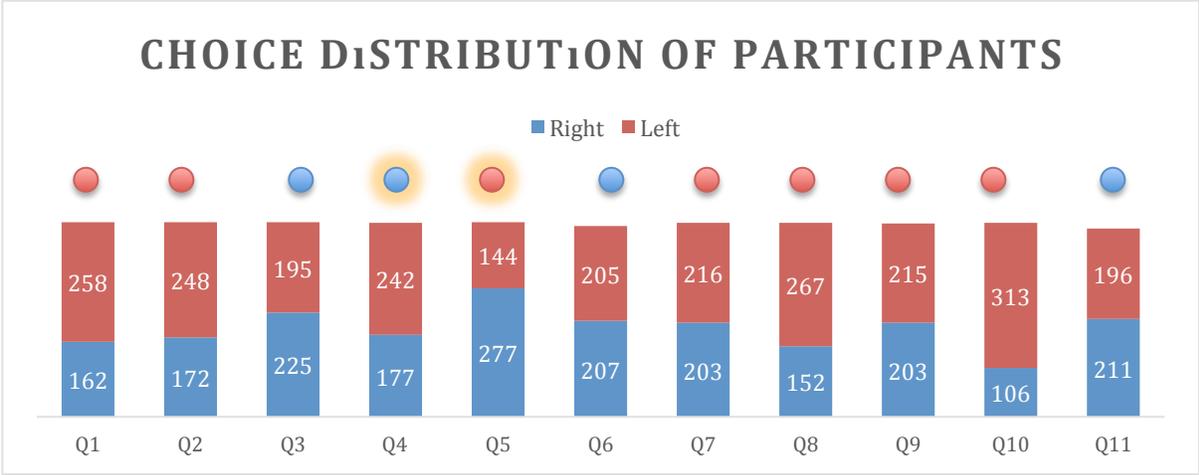


Figure 23 Thought Forms Test Choice distribution

Women were much more decisive than men. Men almost seemed to be guessing since their results were often close to fifty/fifty left or right image.

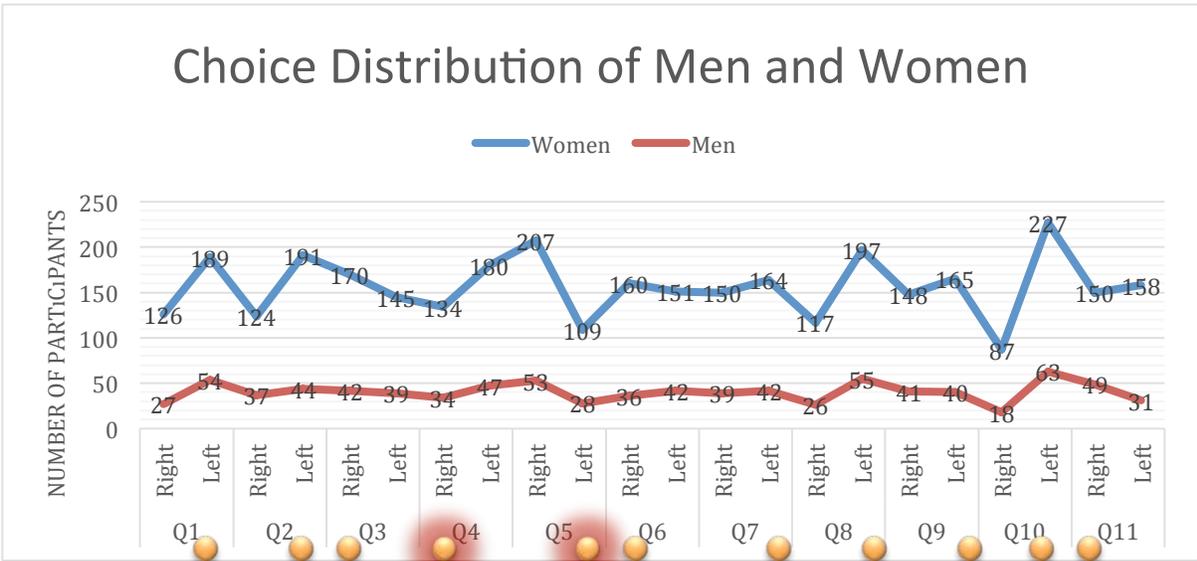


Figure 24 Thought Forms Test Gender to choice distribution

Younger people seem to be more extreme in their decisions. Older people are a little more undecided.

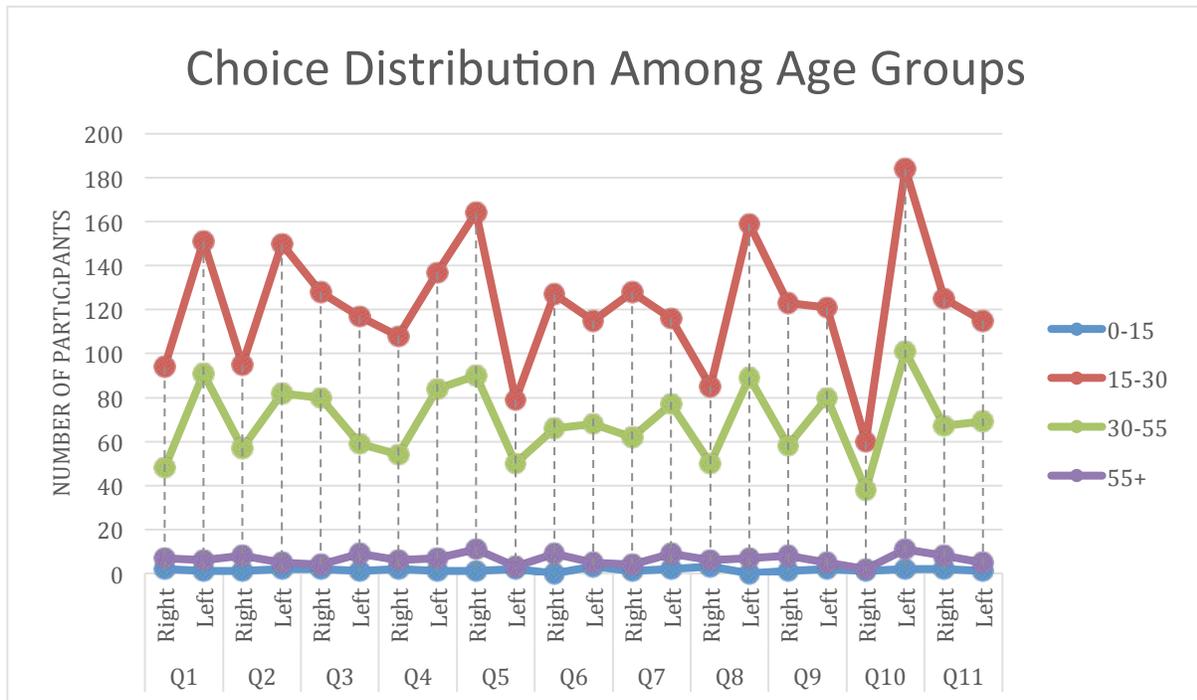


Figure 25 Thought Forms Test Choice distribution among age groups

I am sure that a great deal more neuroscience conclusions can be derived from these tests.

What is most intriguing in general is the emergent way in which neuroscience testing has been applied to an art environment. Many neuroscientists such as Semir Zeki and others have generated theories about art from the perspective of the brain, and yet their theories are often based on the examination of art practices and historical art figures that are not contemporary and therefore do not reflect current art making tendencies and approaches. I hope that this Test that straddles art and neuroscience, as well as this public program in itself will stimulate a greater exchange between the two fields, which after all, are so intimately connected.

Personally, as an artist I am inspired to investigate these spaces of mind: these forms and shapes and textures relating to how our mind may explore the world around us in a state of abstracted and yet heightened sensitivity: perhaps reaching into what the Theosophists termed the Astral Plane.

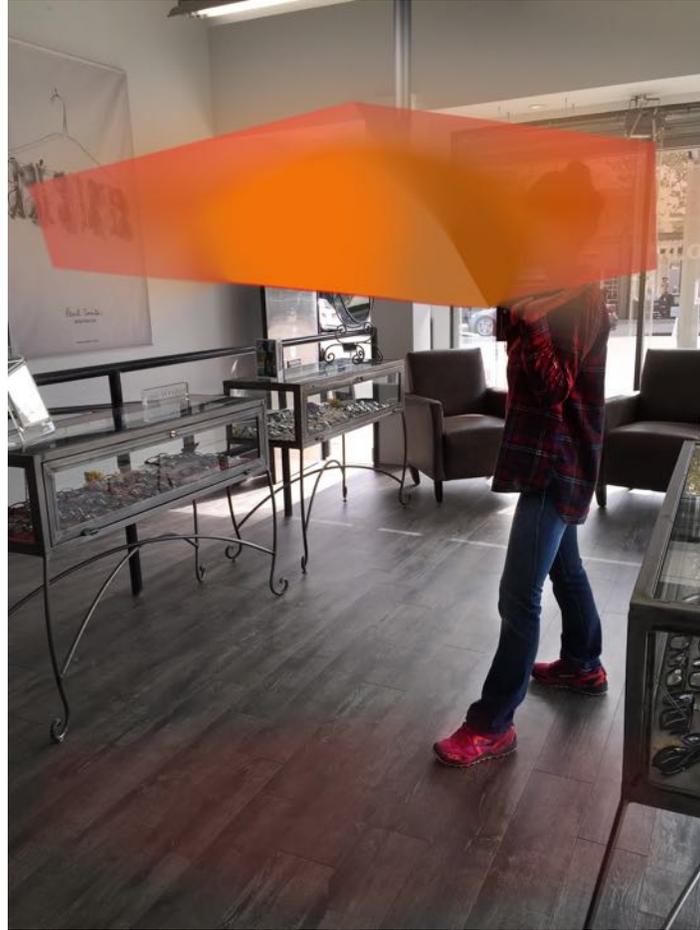


Figure 26 Head spaces



Figure 27 Head spaces POV

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