



Sep 12, 2013 00:00 BST

Seeing the benefit of art

The effect of viewing art on people's cognitive processes and emotions is being analysed as part of a research project by Northumbria University.

The research, which is being conducted as part of the British Science Festival, is expected to build on her previous study which found that art experts concentrate better and give a stronger emotional response to art than a casual viewer. Psychology PhD researcher Jane Dawson is measuring brainwaves to assess the way art experts and lay people view art differently.

Jane is carrying out the research which will see her comparing the responses of a group of 20 artists, curators and conservators with a group of 20 lay

people with no artistic expertise as they look at pictures from the Digital Sensations exhibition at BAL TIC 39 until 20 September. The exhibition is curated by Northumbria PhD practice-led Fine Art researcher Rachel Sharp.

The participants will be wired to electrodes to measure their brain activity as they are taken by wheelchair to look at images from the exhibition for one minute. By being in a wheelchair, the participants can all view the art from the same perspective, regardless of height differences. They are then asked to look at other images in digital format on a computer screen.

“Based on the findings of my previous study, I believe there will be differences in the brain processes between artists and non-artists,” said Jane.

“In my earlier study I found the visual attention of artists was greater and more sustained and their emotional responses were stronger, while I found the attention of the non-artists tends to wander,” said Jane, a Fine Art graduate.

She believes her research underlines the importance of art and the need to teach children how to ‘see’ from an early age.

She added: “It’s really important to teach people to ‘see.’ We know the importance of other activities, such as music and maths, on enhancing the brain process, but I believe if we taught children to see while the brain was still growing, it would enhance their learning.

“I hope this research will underline the importance of art education.”

The British Science Festival is an annual celebration of science, engineering and technology which visits a different UK city each year. The Festival is organised by the British Science Association and this year is being hosted by Newcastle University with Northumbria University and Newcastle City Council as associate partners and AkzoNobel, Northumbrian Water, GE Oil & Gas and Saudi Aramco as major sponsors

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk
07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk
07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact
PR and Media Manager
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk
07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact
Student Communications Manager
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact
PR and Media Officer
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk