# Do lambs roar?

# ( Yes / No)[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Abstract

This inquiry is born out of a tension I personally feel between my fascination with the aesthetic quality of psychological tests and an awkwardness with the classificatory power these tests carry. As a translation of this experience, this thesis explores the tensions between psychological tests as medical-scientific instruments, as tools of power, and as works of (graphic) design. To start, I will give a short historical overview of the development of psychological tests as medical-scientific instruments and works of graphic design by discussing several historical examples. Next, this text will delineate how recognizing psychological tests as design translations and interpretations can shed light on two aspects of psychometry that tend to remain obscure in a strictly medical-scientific view: their functioning as tools of a social, classificatory power and their use as tools for regulating speech. Lastly, by taking a closer look at two artworks, this study will to explore the potential of the visual-structural language that psychological tests employ to be repurposed to invite more open and honest dialogues.

## Prelude

In effect, the writing of this thesis can be seen as the taking of a test. Of course, we tend to see it as a work of personal expression, a chance to explore a topic one feels passionate about, etcetera, but stripped from such ambitions, the writing of a thesis is primarily the final hurdle to be taken on the way to an academic diploma. As such, it is a test of my abilities against a standardized list of competencies connected to the status of being a graphic design graduate of the Royal Academy of Arts (KABK) in Den Haag. With this piece of paper, then, I can convince future employers, clients, friends and family, and maybe even myself, that I qualify to be called a graphic designer, be hired to function as one and receive money in return. I hope, therefore, that this thesis will help me get diagnosed as a graphic design graduate.

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## Introduction———At times I feel like smashing things. ( true / false )

There is probably no psychological test more widely known than the Rorschach test, a series of symmetrical inkblots said to reveal the depths of a person’s mind by simply asking what they see (fig. 2).[[2]](#footnote-2) At least one of the reasons for its popularity is the perceived aesthetic quality of the carefully constructed images, as testified by the numbers of online shops selling posters with Rorschach’s mysterious figures.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Personally, I’ve always been struck by the beauty of the more geometric psychological tests, the ones that use rectangles, circles and triangles, primary colors and clearly structured compositions. One example of such a test is the one shown in figure 2. The picture is taken from the Instagram page of Canadian artist Micah Lexier, who regularly posts pictures of (old) psychological tests.[[4]](#footnote-4) He posts these for purely aesthetic reasons, without mentioning what and how they test. This one consists of a set of twenty-two wooden blocks of five colors and seven geometrical shapes. Three letters are painted right in the middle of the face of each block: BIK, MUR, CEV, and LAG. Even without understanding, the box with shapes, colors and letters following some mysterious logic that is visible, yet largely inaccessible, is aesthetically convincing. In fact, the “not knowing” what the test is for and how it works, creates tension and space for imagination that is reminiscent of the effects produced by art.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However, while tests like these fascinate me aesthetically, an uncanny feeling is lurking beneath. I imagine a child sitting at a table, trying to make sense of the colorful blocks in front of her, knowing somehow that this game is different from the ones she played before.

Openness and playfulness quickly fade away when the weight attached to one’s handling of the puzzle is as heavy as a judgement of being “feebleminded”, “maladjusted”, “of subnormal intelligence”, autistic, “deviant” in personality development, or any other psychiatric label.

One could say that psychological testing is like a game without play. On one side of the table is the test administrator, who, armed with a scientific – and therefore “objective” – tool, has the power and authority to quantify, diagnose and classify the tested subject according to their test performance.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the other is the subject “under review”, following instructions while awaiting judgement.

The asymmetry in this situation is something I have experienced from one side of the table, that of the tested subject. I now find myself in an unusual dual position towards the topic: as a tested subject and as an aesthetic admirer of test designs.

The tension I personally experience between an aesthetic appreciation of psychological tests and an uncomfortable feeling with their classificatory power, provides the starting point for this thesis. As a translation of this experience, this thesis explores the tensions between psychological tests as medical scientific instruments, as tools of power, and as works of (graphic) design. Starting with a historical overview, the text will move to discuss two ways in which a recognition of psychological tests as (graphic) design objects can help elucidate their nature as tools of a classificatory and regulatory power. Lastly, the text reverses perspective; instead of looking for the artistic in scientific tests, the last chapter looks for aspects of psychological tests in works of art.

## Chapter 1——— I like science. ( true / false )

It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that psychology established itself a scientific discipline in Western Europe.[[7]](#footnote-7) Up until then, psychological concepts had been discussed in philosophical or anatomical terms. Humoral theory, the introduction of which is usually attributed to Hippocrates and Galen, had provided a typology of characters based on the balance and mixture of the four ‘humors’, the bodily fluids blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm.[[8]](#footnote-8) This theory remained influential until the nineteenth century, when focus shifted to the head.[[9]](#footnote-9) That is to say: the anatomical head. The so called “sciences” of physiognomy and phrenology, started measuring and mapping human heads and faces, based on the belief that the face and head bear the “outward signs of inner character”.[[10]](#footnote-10) This proto-psychometry gained such widespread popularity that newspaper ads for jobs often requested a phrenological analysis.[[11]](#footnote-11) In 1902 L.A. Vaught published his comically, creepily absurd *Practical Character Reader* as a tool for assessing others in everyday life based on their facial features (fig. 4).[[12]](#footnote-12) Some years later, the “psychograph” was launched, a machine that “measured” a person’s aptitude regarding 32 mental attributes by measuring their head, and then printed the result on a receipt (fig. 5).[[13]](#footnote-13) Psychographs were installed in places like cinema foyers and “readings” were done as entertainment, functioning much like a moralistic version of today’s BuzzFeed quizzes.

Meanwhile, psychology emerged as a separate scientific discipline. The field started out as a hybrid construction, seeking ways to utilize the scientific method, characterized by a quantitative and experimental approach, to tackle questions about the human mind that up until then had been asked by philosophers—not scientists. Therefore, early psychology borrowed physiological instruments from other experimental sciences, to answer questions borrowed from the discipline of philosophy.[[14]](#footnote-14) Later, psychology developed its own, psychometric[[15]](#footnote-15) instruments: psychological tests. This hybrid origin of psychological science lays the groundwork for the central “problem” that psychometry tries to tackle: how to measure things that a society has concepts for, but that are not readily tangible or visible—and thus must be measured more indirectly? This chapter will give some historical examples of the solutions psychologists provided, focusing on their visual aspects.

### 1.1———I see things or animals or people around me that others do not see. ( true / false )

The Rorschach inkblot test was designed by Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach in 1921. It consists of ten symmetrical inkblot shapes to be presented to the test subject, who is then asked to describe what they see. Whereas inkblots had been used before to measure imagination, Rorschach started using them to investigate perception.[[16]](#footnote-16) Importantly, Rorschach acknowledged a reliance on artistic methods.[[17]](#footnote-17) He had carefully painted the inkblots himself, trying to find the perfect balance between ambiguity and recognizability. The images should be ambiguous enough to elicit a diversity in responses, but should simultaneously provide sufficient recognizable elements to allow respondents to see “something” rather than a meaningless blot. Symmetry appeared helpful to meet this last requirement.

The Rorschach test works under the assumption that people project the contents of their unconscious onto the test stimulus in such a way that what they see is a projection of their inner world, and is therefore classified as a projective test.[[18]](#footnote-18) Projective tests developed under the influence of Freuds psychoanalytic approach. Psychoanalysts seek to gain access to a person’s unconscious as the ultimate bearer of one’s personality, revealing aspects they would be unable or unwilling to reveal on a literal questionnaire.[[19]](#footnote-19) As such the “translation” in which psychological concepts come to be represented by interpretations of the visual form of the test (the inkblot), must bridge quite a distance. Consequently, the links between signifier (inkblot perception) and signified (personal psychological facts) seem far-fetched, imaginative or even arbitrary. This mysterious yet eerie distance in translation is reflected in the visual appearance of Rorschach’s figures. There is an uncanny dissonance between the apparent arbitrariness of the inkblots and the impression of intentionality arising from their symmetry.

Another example of a projective personality test developed during this period is the sentence completion test (fig. 6).[[20]](#footnote-20) It consists of several beginnings of sentences that are to be completed by the test taker. Some years later, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) was published. Here, the subject is presented with illustrations of scenes, always showing figures (fig. 7).[[21]](#footnote-21) The test taker is asked to describe what is going on in the picture. The images are less ambiguous than Rorschach’s inkblots, but still allow for multiple interpretations, supposedly arising from a subject’s inner troubles. The illustrations are relatively complex, textured and detailed. As a last example, the Make-A-Picture-Story (MAPS) test, published in 1947, requires respondents to pick a background and one or more figures from a collection of 21 backgrounds and 67 figures, place the figure(s) on the background and tell a story about the created image (fig. 8).[[22]](#footnote-22)

### 1.2 ———It makes me nervous when people ask me personal questions. ( true / false )

From the middle of the twentieth century, an increasing imperative for quantification, together with a shift in focus from hidden unconscious mechanisms to observable behavior, led to the development of a new generation of personality tests. The “old” projective techniques were discredited for being too ambiguous and open-ended, hence “unscientific”. The new types of tests consisted of structured questionnaires solely based on language instead of imagery.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The first of the “new” personality tests was the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), published in 1943 and still in use today.[[24]](#footnote-24) The MMPI contains 567 statements about to be marked as true or false (see the headers in this text). The statements were printed on 567 numbered cards. These came stacked horizontally in a long box, reminiscent of archival card boxes or office storage boxes, but also giving the impression of a quizlike game (fig. 9). In later revisions, the format changed to that of a form with numbered statements and a simple true/false answer option after each sentence (fig. 10). Typographically, the design of the form booklets tries to present the content as “neutral” as possible, choosing standard typefaces and font sizes and a clear compositional structure. Seemingly devoid of any decorative, affect-inducing elements, the test now looks like any other bureaucratic form, waiting to be filled out with simple facts.

### 1.3 ———There was never a time in my life when I liked to play with dolls. ( true / false )

In another domain of psychological testing, images are still being used: that of intelligence testing. Just as with personality testing, IQ-testing began around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The introduction of public schools brought the need for a measurement device to identify intellectually “subnormal” children that were unfit for regular public schools.[[25]](#footnote-25) Therefore, the French government appointed psychologists Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon to develop a method for evaluating differences in mental capacities of children. The first version of this test was published in 1905 and consisted of 30 subtests of intelligence, assembled in a wooden box. Among them was a booklet with illustrated scenes in which children had to spot the “mistake”.[[26]](#footnote-26) In figure 11, this is an illustration of a man walking in the rain, holding an umbrella at has back instead of above his head. Other tasks were specifically designed for non-verbal children, as the task to show understanding of concepts through “playing” with them in a sensical way. To play with the car as if it were driving, for instance, would show an understanding of the concept of a car.[[27]](#footnote-27) As seen in figure 11 the items in the test are brightly colored while the drawings show friendly figures with bold outlines. Together with the miniature items, indistinguishable from dollhouse objects, the test material mimics a box of children’s toys. This visual overlap with toys was a deliberate choice in the test design, making the tasks more engaging for children.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Comparing these examples, it seems that over time, personality testing changed from using more prospective, open-ended techniques towards more structured, closed and quantitative techniques. This development is mirrored in the visual design of personality tests, going from relatively ambiguous, textured and detailed imagery to more unambiguous, clearly structured and numbered images, to the overall abandonment of images in straight-to-the-point linguistic question forms. In intelligence testing, however, tests still use visual means, largely sticking to a modernist style, using geometrical shapes, bright colors and bold outlines.

### Chapter 2 ——— I think I would like the work of a librarian ( true / false )

We have seen different tests answering to the problem of how to outwardly measure the inner mechanisms of human minds. The solutions they designed in the form of psychological tests, although reliant on artistic and design methods, are not usually discussed in terms of (graphic) design. In this chapter I want to argue that recognizing psychological tests as works of (graphic) design can shed light on a part of the psychometric practice that tends to remain obscure in a purely medical-scientific account: their use as instruments of social power.

A book aimed at students of psychology, defines “a psychological test or educational test” as “a set of items that are *designed* to measure characteristics of human being that pertain to behavior”.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, it is quite clear that “designed” as it is used here, does not refer to the kind of thing “we” as (aspiring) graphic designers talk about when we talk about design.

On the one hand, this shows a tendency to overlook the visual design of psychological tests as significant to their functioning. On the other hand, it points to the meaning of the word “design” being somewhat ambiguous.

Generally, I would say, design refers to a matter of translation, interpretation. It is a process of constructing or shaping a message.

The kind of design that is referred to in reviewing psychological tests is a “scientific” sort of design, a design that aims to be an objective, factual and precise translation. As the authors of the same educational book state:

Such tests measure individual differences in ability and personality and assume that the differences shown on the test reflect actual differences among individuals. For instance, individuals who score high on an IQ test are assumed to have a higher degree of intelligence than those who obtain low scores.[[30]](#footnote-30)

However, heavily relying on a “scientific” paradigm that views psychological tests as methods of an exact science—capable of measuring “objective reality”— risks overlooking the ambiguities and contingencies that are inevitably present in the production of scientific knowledge, and thus in the designing of these tests as knowledge-producing instruments.

This is especially true for psychiatric diagnoses. In his works on madness, Michel Foucault argues that the concept of mental illness is a historically constructed, rather than the result of scientific discovery.[[31]](#footnote-31) Tracing the history of the concept, he characterizes the modern American and European understanding of madness as mental illness as a result of the cultural and social construction of difference between the “sane” and “insane”, the “normal” and “deviant”.[[32]](#footnote-32) The classification of mentally ill as “deviant” is “a projection of cultural themes” he writes, in which “sane” society establishes itself in opposition to the “insane” that it excludes from social life.

In support of Foucault’s claims, later scientific studies have also failed to distinguish the psychologically “normal” from “abnormal” without resorting to social criteria.[[33]](#footnote-33) If, then, psychiatric diagnoses are socially constructed systems of classification, this also means that psychological tests, as psychiatry’s measuring instruments, are reliant on pre-existing socially constructed forms of knowledge.

Besides relying on a constructed classification of people, psychological tests are themselves also complicit in the construction of this same taxonomy. As has been demonstrated extensively by philosophers of science, even though scientific measuring tends to be thought of as a neutral, objective registration of reality, methods of measurement simultaneously rely on a prior understanding of reality *and* shape the reality they are said to measure.[[34]](#footnote-34) As such, psychological tests at the same time *constructing* the taxonomy of individual differences that they claim to measure.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The fact that diagnostic classifications make this looping motion, relying on *and* constructing social discourse, is exemplified by the extensively discussed cases of hysteria and homophilia, both once regarded as categories of pathology.[[36]](#footnote-36) Similarly, older IQ-tests can be seen to measure things that today would not seem to fall under signs of “intelligence”, but rather of culture specific “common sense”. One example is the task from the 1911 version of the Binet-Simon test known as the “ugly face item” (fig. 13), in which the child is asked to repeatedly distinguish an “ugly” from a “beautiful” female face as a measure of intelligence.[[37]](#footnote-37) Measuring “common sense”, something that is much more relative to social discourse than a quantitative intelligence quotient seems to imply, is still present in IQ-tests. As Young argues, intelligence tests for children often equate intelligence with “appropriate play”.[[38]](#footnote-38) If the child plays with a toy-like test object in an “appropriate”, “common sense” way, that is taken as a sign of intelligence. Another sign of relativity in intelligence testing is the fact that since the development of IQ-test, IQ-scores continually rise.[[39]](#footnote-39) The explanation for this effect is the influence of the scientific method on education, raising children to become more rational, logical thinkers. And because IQ-tests mainly measure logical thinking, being educated in a more rationally oriented school system results in higher IQ-scores.

Going back to the definition of “design”, it is clear that a strictly scientific understanding of the term does not account for the nature of psychological tests as based on and themselves also co-constructing “sane” and “insane” identities as tools of a social, classificatory form of power.

“Design” in the sense it is used in the graphic design field today, is less about providing an objective and factual translation or definition, and more about using the openness between the “original” message and the translation, interpretation or definition as a space of possibility. This space allows for creativity on the side of the designer, as it simultaneously fosters a critical appreciation of the resulting translation.

As the design duo Typical Organization notes, graphic design is a practice of “redefining defined things”.[[40]](#footnote-40) “Design is entangled with definitions of what is or was; a thing is never “the thing” since everything is under constant negotiation with its own limits,” they write.[[41]](#footnote-41) . Recognizing something as an object of (graphic) design thus becomes recognizing the object as constructed and (temporarily) defined in a space of negotiation.

Therefore, I believe reframing psychological tests as design translations and interpretations in this second sense of the word “design” can shed light on the interpretative, constructed and creative nature of the designing of these tests, and how in the process of constructing-designing them, they are simultaneously made to function as tools of a social power that classifies and disciplines.

Interestingly, early figures in the history of psychological testing did mention a hypothetical, experimental and ambiguous understanding of the relationship between scientific concepts *and* a reliance on artistic methods or ambitions. Francis Galton, seen as the pioneer of psychological testing, hypothesized that every important difference between people will have a *word* to describe it.[[42]](#footnote-42) Because we have a word for introversion, introversion is an actual and important difference between people, which makes introversion measurable, he believed.[[43]](#footnote-43) Rorschach explicitly struggled with the question how to scientifically decide what was “reasonable” to see in his inkblots.[[44]](#footnote-44) Simultaneously, he believed his endeavor to be partly artistic.[[45]](#footnote-45) As mentioned, over time, test designs moved from relatively open-ended techniques, often reliant on imagery, to more closed, quantitative and language-based methods, devoid of any imagery, striving to be (seen as) more “scientific”. Mimicking the lab-coat effect[[46]](#footnote-46), a sober, image-free graphic design is utilized to bring an aura of medical-scientific rigor and professionality to the test. It seems that through the years, acknowledgement of the hypothetical basis of psychological tests and their constructed, designed nature, moved to the background.

Admittedly, an all too frivolous adoption of artistic or design methods into psychological testing can turn out dangerously creepy, as the truly “creative” practices of phrenology and graphology — the study of handwriting as a measure of character, capable of distinguishing “sane” from “insane” handwriting (fig. 14)—have shown. The matter, therefore, is not to adopt artistic/design strategies as if they were scientific, but to recognize the inherent reliance on creativity in any psychometric instrument.

### Chapter 3 ——— No one seems to understand me. ( true / false )

Besides a recognition of the constructed and constructive nature of psychological tests, reframing these tests as works of (graphic) design can elucidate a second function of psychological testing, namely as a regulation of *speech*. Narrowing our scope to the relationship between doctor and patient, test administrator and test subject, a psychological test regulates *who* can speak and *in what language.*

As Foucault writes, one of the important changes in the Western view on madness and insanity that happened during modernism, was the adoption of the medical model in psychiatry.[[47]](#footnote-47) This model, one could say, came with two ways of thinking about psychiatry that help construct and restrict the kind of dialogue that is possible between doctor and patient. The first is the idea of the wise and benevolent doctor, which Foucault attributes to Freud.

After a long period of silencing, Foucault writes, Freud returned to *language* as a vehicle for understanding madness, being the first one to “take the reality of the doctor-patient duo seriously.”[[48]](#footnote-48) However, in liberating what Freud called “neurotic” individuals from the asylum, he simultaneously subjected patients to a new kind of power structure in the figure of the doctor.[[49]](#footnote-49) According to Foucault, Freud made the doctor into the “Absolute Gaze, the pure (…) Silence, the Judge (…) and the Mirror.”[[50]](#footnote-50) “The power of the doctor is naturally moral and social,” writes Foucault. “It is rooted in the immaturity of the lunatic, in the alienation of his person.”[[51]](#footnote-51) The doctor as a moral authority is modelled after the patriarchal picture of the Father, lovingly watching over his children, gently steering them into the direction of “what is best for them”.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Even though the doctor and patient can now enter into a dialogue, the reality of the mad individual can still not be “spoken”: “She [psychoanalysis] can’t hear the voices of unreasonableness – and will never be able to do so –, nor is she able to decipher the signs of pointlessness.”[[53]](#footnote-53) What used to be a “non-reciprocal watching” of the madman by the asylum guard, moves into a “speaking without reply”.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Whereas Freudian psychoanalysis has largely disappeared from “mainstream” psychological practice, the medical model, usually attributed to Freud, still characterizes psychiatry today. It is no surprise then, that the characterization of the doctor-patient dialogue as a speaking-without-reply is echoed in a recent book by Wouter Kusters:[[55]](#footnote-55)

Patients, too, are allowed to talk, and sometimes they’re even listened to. Yet in psychiatry, there is a ban on talking about madness. The psychiatrist may speak as a professional, as a therapist, and even as a human being. The patient may also speak as a suffering person seeking help, as a responsible citizen, as a victor of an illness, or as a bearer of emotions. But what cannot be talked about is madness itself. (...) When madness does speak, the speech is said to have no meaning, to be a manifestation of a disorder, a symptom of an illness, meaningless signals from outside the linguistic order.[[56]](#footnote-56)

This is to say that from the point of view of psychiatric language, there is no truth in the utterings of madness. The mad individual – if to be understood – can only speak to the doctor in a language of symptoms and signs that are to be “read” by the doctor.

This is where the second way in which the medical-scientific model regulates the dialogue between doctor and patient comes in: To think of psychiatry as a medical science, means to invite what Foucault calls “the medical gaze”, a way of looking at “sick” people that is analogous to the gaze of natural sciences: to observe, to divide reality into measurable fragments or features that can be recognized and classified, but added is the authority of the doctor as someone that intervenes.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The medical gaze and the disease relate to one another through a form of coded communication; they share a certain *language*.[[58]](#footnote-58) This language consists of symptoms and signs. “The symptom (…) is the form in which the disease is presented: of all that is visible, it is closest to the essential; it is the first transcription of the inaccessible nature of the disease.” One could say that the disease communicates itself to the gaze in the language of its symptoms.

Psychological tests work according to the same communication model. They take the form of a communication medium between the disease and the medical gaze, embodied in the figures of the patient and doctor, the test subject and the test administrator. The diagnostic test is designed to *reveal* the presence or absence of symptoms. As such, it is a medium for the disease or disorder to communicate itself to the medic. For example, “idiocy” can communicate itself by saying that a lion is blue, fine, hot or sweet (instead of strong),[[59]](#footnote-59) and depression can communicate itself by agreeing with enough statements like “I am too tired to do anything” on the Beck Depression Inventory to score at least 21 out 40 points.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Consequently, the test subject can “speak” to the test administrator only in the language that is set by the test design. Their answers “tell” the psychologist what is “wrong” with them in a language of signs and symptoms, set by the psychology profession. That which escapes this language of fragmented personhood and isolated issues, that which cannot be expressed in the puzzles, tasks and questionnaires put in front of the test subject, will not enter the conversation.

## Chapter 4 ——— If I were an artist, I would like to draw flowers ( true / false )

This last chapter reverses the perspective of the previous chapters. Instead of looking for artistic and design aspects in psychological tests, this chapter looks for (unintentional) references to psychological tests in artistic practices.

### 4.1——— Some people think it’s hard to get to know me. ( true / false )

In 2003, during a residency in a psychiatric institution, artist Kostana Banovic set up her room to be a space where she could be a listener to the stories of “visitors”.[[61]](#footnote-61) The people residing in the institution for psychiatric, (supposedly) non-artistic reasons, came to tell her stories. “I had become an ear,” Banovic writes.[[62]](#footnote-62) Expanding on this experience, she created a form for residents and staff members to fill in (fig. 15). The form is shaped like a list of starts of sentences, followed by a long line of dot-dot-dots, signaling that something is to be filled in to complete the sentences.

Strikingly, Banovic’s form has the exact same structure as the aforementioned “sentence completion tests”. Sentence completion tests have been used to assess personality, but also served as admission test in education.[[63]](#footnote-63) The one in figure 6, for instance, was used as such, scoring prospective students on an index of “maladjustment”.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Upon questioning, Banovic said not to be aware of the existence of sentence completion tests as an actual psychometric instrument. Looking for a visual and performative form that could translate the experience of listening to people’s stories, Banovic arrived at the same shape as late nineteenth century psychoanalysts and psychologists. Their listening, however, is a different listening. The listening of the designers of the college form in figure 6 is a hierarchical, weighing and judging sort of listening. The questions, although open-ended, have answers that are either right or wrong. Mentioning the right password opens the college’s doors, failing to do so leaves them shut. In contrast, the listening for which Banovic designed her form is an honest, nonjudgemental listening. Contrary to the sentence completion test, she did not have any aspirations of “testing” people according to a certain morally loaded standard. About her aims, she writes: “I wanted to go a little deeper into the stories or… touch a little bit of that extreme, subjective world of experience?”[[65]](#footnote-65) One could say that Banovic, *using the same form* (a sentence completion form), managed to create a reciprocal dialogue in which the mad person is allowed and enabled to speak its own truth in a way that is nearly impossible in the aforementioned setting of the test administrator and tested subject.[[66]](#footnote-66)

### 4.2 ——— I would certainly enjoy beating criminals at their own game. ( true / false )

As mentioned in the introduction, artist Micah Lexier regularly posts pictures of psychological tests from his own collection on Instagram. Besides these, he collects educational aids, magic tricks, sticker sheets and other paraphernalia. Next to posting these “functional” items, Lexier also posts works of conceptual art that utilize the same functionalist, administrative or game-like visual means, but in the name of art. Since psychological tests are juxtaposed with artworks that visually overlap, the viewer loses track of the context in the light of which each image was originally to be perceived and judged. In a blurring of the boundary between psychological science and art, a scientific test starts to look like an artwork, inviting aesthetic instead of scientific judgement.

The resemblance between conceptual art and psychological tests, especially IQ-tests, has also been observed by dj readies. Comparing the WISC IQ-test (fig. 16) to the FluxKit (fig. 17), assembled by George Maciunas, both taking the shape of a valise filled with a series of puzzle- and game-like tasks in smaller boxes, he writes:

(…) both [Fluxus conceptual] art and test focus on provoking conceptual thinking. Both ask how an individual (in conjunction with a particular culture) interprets and organizes narratives, frames a situation, follows a labyrinth of choices, or fills in blanks.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The intended effect, however, differs greatly between the two. Whereas the IQ-test uses the open-endedness of the tasks to measure a person’s response against a standardized right-versus-wrong answer sheet, the FluxKit aims to use the same openness to question “common sense” and spark alternative- or non-solutions.

What this shows, is that—again—it is not the visual form of the test itself that is closing the subject in and reduces it to a quantitative right-or-wrong result, but the –setting in which it is used as such. “As a test awaiting the taker, the WISC-R test remains open, potential, and aesthetically provocative for anyone not under the pressure to perform.” “That appreciation,” he continues, “does not simply catalogue the objects, but changes the stakes and the boundaries among the science of intelligence testing (…) and conceptual art.”[[68]](#footnote-68) The non-sensical that used to be a sign of “idiocy” and pathology, starts to look artistic and witty.

Finally, let me go back to Lexier’s box of colorful shapes shown in the introduction. In the comment section below the post, an interesting conversation took place. After reading the “right” solution to the test, another user wonders what would happen if she would organize the blocks in “groups they would not expect?”. Would she then be “marked down as an outlier”? To which Lexier replies: “Definitely recorded as an outlier, or at the very least as an artist.”

## Conclusion ——— I believe in life hereafter. ( true / false )

The starting point for this inquiry was a tension I experienced between an aesthetic fascination with psychological test design and an awkwardness with their power to classify and silence the subject under review. Throughout this text, I have tried to find the origin of my uncanny feeling, and to understand its relation to the visual and structural design of psychological tests. Recognizing psychological tests as graphic design objects, has elucidated their socially constructed and constructive nature, aiding a more critical appraisal of the test’s results. Additionally, recognizing these tests as regulators of speech, both constructing *and* restricting a language for the “mad” person to speak, shows the game-like task designs to simultaneously have the potential to confine a person to a classificatory box *and* the potential to inspire alternative responses and imagination, as seen in the works of Banovic and Maciunas. Test and artwork can share the same visual structures, but use this structure to perform completely different kinds of listening: One listens based on a preconceived notion of what the answer *must* be, the other is listens with curiosity about what the answer *could* be. Paradoxically, artworks like the ones by Banovic and Maciunas, although fragmentary, may end up telling more and painting a “fuller” picture of the person interacting with the task than a standardized psychological test may do, while some psychological test may end up more aesthetically than scientifically convincing.

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5. Later, I found the name of the test: the Vigotsky test, developed by Russian psychologists Vigotsky and Sakharov in the early 20th century. The test was used to measure “concept formation” in children. Apparently, the four “syllables” correspond with the combination of height and width of the blocks. The tested child should end up with four groups of blocks of the same height-width combination and the same letters. (National Museum of American History. “Vigotsky Concept Formation Blocks.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should be noted that large groups of people experience their diagnosis as an empowering label, liberating them from ever persistent social-cultural expectations of “normalcy”, helping a better self-understanding or granting access to treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hatfield, “Psychology, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science,” 207-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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14. Ziche, “Disciplines;” Hatfield, “Psychology, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science,” 207-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Psychometrics is the science of psychological assessment. (Rust et al., “The history of and evolution of psychometric testing,” 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Searls, “Can we trust the Rorschach test?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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18. Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 398-399. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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23. However, projective techniques are still being used, mostly as subtests, to gather some additional information, but less as classificatory tests, resulting in a diagnosis [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Psychological tests are generally divided in two categories: ability tests, which measure skills and intelligence, and personality tests, which measure typical behavior and character traits. (Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 14; Rust et al., “The history and evolution of modern psychometrics,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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29. Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Kaplan and Sacuzzo, Psychological Testing, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Foucault, Madness: The Invention of an Idea; Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin. Philosopher Ian Hacking makes a similar point, arguing that “insane” and “sane” individuals are people “made up” by the science that tried to “discover” them. (Hacking, “Making up People”). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Foucault, Madness: The Invention of an Idea, 104-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Verhaege, Identiteit, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Theodore Porter in Trudy Dehue, “Managing Distrust,” 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Sekula points out the same about specifically physiognomy and phrenology and the way in which they doubly construct and interpret one and the same “archive” of people (Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hysteria, a supposed medical condition now understood to have been a name for “a medical explanation for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in women”, was removed from the DSM in 1980 (McGill, “The History of Hysteria”). Homosexuality was deleted from the DSM in 1974. (Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Katz, Psychological Atlas, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Young, “Test or toy? Materiality and the measurement of infant intelligence,” 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Rust et al., “The history and evolution of psychometric testing”, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Typical Organization, New Document, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Typical Organization, New Document, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Rust et al., “The history and evolution of psychometric testing,” 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Galton, “Measurement of Character,” 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Searls, “Can we trust the Rorschach test?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Flynn, “What Do You See?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The “lab coat effect” or “white-coat effect” is the effect that wearing a white coat makes someone be perceived as having more medical or scientific authority and reliability. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 196-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Love and Mendelman, “Modernism and Diagnosis”; Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 266-267; Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Kusters is a philosopher and linguist, but also writes from the perspective of being someone that has experienced “madness” himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Kusters, A Philosophy of Madness, 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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59. Kelley et al., “Stanford Achievement Test, Ed. 1922.” [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Beck, “Beck Depression Inventory.” [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Het Vijfde Seizoen, “Kostana Banovic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Banovic, Onderkomen voor 19 onrustige mannen en vrouwen en 16 begeleiders. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. APA Dictionary of Psychology, “sentence completion test.” [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Rotter and Rafferty, Manual: The Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank College Form, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Banovic, Onderkomen voor 19 onrustige mannen en vrouwen en 16 begeleiders. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Interestingly, after concluding that the truth of madness could not be spoken in the doctor-patient encounter, Foucault also sought refuge in the domain of art. “Since the end of the eighteenth century, the life of un-reason no longer manifests itself except in the lightning-flash of works such as those of Hölderlin, of Nerval, of Nietzsche, or of Artaud – forever irreducible to those alienations that can be cured (…).” (Foucault, Geschiedenis van de waanzin, 272). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. dj readies, Intimate Bureaucracies, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. dj readies, Intimate Bureaucracies, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)