

ANECDOTES in Why are Artists Poor

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The Numbers 1 till 6 are also presented in the new catalogue with drawings by Hans Abbing. And the numbers A till F are included in the new catalogue with photographs by Hans Abbing.

Art has a high and emotionally charged status. People look up to art and easily feel inferior in the art world.

Illustration 1. Feeling Uncomfortable About Art

Alex, who is both artist and economist, lives in a house with six adults and two children. They share a living room and eat dinner together. The other adults have above average educations and work in technical professions. Alex noticed that at home he usually behaves like an economist rather than an artist. That way they all speak the same language. When he begins to behave like an artist, his housemates feel less comfortable.

Once a week Alex picks little Judith, one of the children in the house, up from school and they spend the afternoon together. Sometimes they visit galleries or museums. Judith is four and still enjoys it. The other day her father, Eddy, confided to Alex that he is pleased that Alex is bringing some cultural education into Judith's life. She really can't expect to receive much cultural education from her parents, Eddy added apologetically.

Art seems to be made for eternity, but does it last that long?

Illustration 2 Art That Ends Up on the Garbage Dump

Alex and his colleagues are serious about their art materials and techniques. Because of the paint, paper, and canvas and the techniques they employ, their works might well last a thousand years. They seriously ponder the possibility that their art might live forever. Which means that if their art is valuable now, it will continue to be valuable in the future. And if it is not valuable now, it is bound to become so in the future.

Two decades ago, Alex met an art historian, Sofia, whom rudely opened his eyes when she told him that the overwhelming majority of artworks end up in a garbage dump. This might happen in part during an artist's lifetime and in part shortly after his or her death. Within fifty years of an artist's death, some ninety percent of his or her manuscripts, scores, compositions, and paintings have disappeared into the rubbish bin. These are averages of course. A rather small selection of artists still has its work intact but for the vast majority, their work has all but vanished. She also noted that of all the paintings that hung on walls in the Netherlands during the Golden Age, less than one percent have survived to the present day.

Alex was shocked. It was not so much the perception of his art that was threatened, but of art itself. Deep down Alex had always cherished the holiness of art and its enduring value. He thought that this value stemmed from an intrinsic quality of art that other products lack. And because an intrinsic quality doesn't just disappear over time, Alex assumed that valuable art now would still be valuable in a thousand years.

In the following years, Alex gradually came to terms with the temporality of his art and of the art he loved and admired. To his own amazement, Alex felt an enormous sense of relief. He no longer had to work for posterity. Instead, he could produce drawings for people, alive now, some of whom are his personal friends. These people evidently have some use for his drawings. But it's very likely that in half a century his drawings will be lost. Who cares? He'll be dead by then anyway. Since this revelation, Alex has found it easier to take responsibility for his art. Having a responsibility for the rest of eternity was always a bit too much responsibility. And so like a loaf of bread, most art works get used up. And Alex now thinks this is the way it should be.

The artist is considered independent, but is true independence really possible?

Illustration 3. Former Teachers and Experts Looking over the Artist's Shoulder

Alex considers himself a selfless and autonomous fine artist, but some years ago something happened that made him rethink his position.

Alex always works with a model. He asks the model to look him in the eyes while the model is sitting. This is an intense experience for both of them. Alex does his best to record the experience in his drawings. While he is drawing, the model's feelings and judgments seem to be reflected in the model's eyes. However, Alex gradually discovered that he was also projecting his own feelings onto his model. The model's eyes can turn into the eyes of people Alex has known. Quite often, it's his father looking at him through the model's eyes. What is brought into the drawing is a mixture of the model, Alex and the people Alex carries inside him. In this short-term symbiotic relationship the model and Alex fuse. There is nothing peculiar about this symbiosis. It is Alex's little artistic trick; other artists have their own tricks.

However, a few years ago, while Alex was drawing in this way, he had a unique experience that relates to the present topic. Alex was drawing a model who was also an art student. Before they began, they chatted awhile and it turned out that the model knew a lot about drawing. Alex also got the impression that this model was not pleased with Alex's intuitive drawing style. His interests were more conceptual. Alex started to draw him. The model's eyes gradually changed into those of Alex's condemning father. And then something unexpected happened. Alex realized that it was no longer his father looking at him but Rudi Fuchs, the director of the Stedelijk, the most prestigious museum of modern art in the Netherlands. His eyes certainly were not approving of what Alex had drawn thus far. (Alex cannot remember what became of this particular drawing, which probably means it did not turn out to his liking.)

This was a shock to Alex. It gave him an uncanny awareness of his limited autonomy. Since then he has come to the realization that all the time he thought he was alone in his studio with his model, there were actually many people present looking over his shoulder. Apart from Mr. Fuchs, there were colleagues, critics, several art school teachers, a few of Alex's students, some important buyers and some members of committees who decided on Alex's applications for government subsidies. For about a year after this experience, his studio actually felt like a crowded place. After a year, these same people were still around, but Alex's awareness of their presence had been reduced, to what it had been before. Nevertheless, Alex was sure that they were continuing to influence him

just as much. Or maybe they influenced him even more, because he was less aware of their power. Once again, Alex had internalized these influences.

How important are fame and money in one's decision to become an artist?

Illustration 4 Making Jokes about Becoming Rich and Famous

Alex remembers that in his last two years at art school he and his classmates used to make a lot of jokes about becoming rich and famous. There was something obligatory about it. Alex was at the stage when the cards were being shuffled, when teachers select certain students to launch into the art world — usually one or two per class. Naturally, everyone was nervous. The chances of success of those who go unselected are not quite zero, but certainly diminish considerably. For the majority their dreams of a career in the arts are over, even though it will take some ten years to admit it. The jokes serve a magical purpose. Their ironic jokes about fame and fortune exorcised their fears about their own futures.

The jokes are double-edged because, on the one hand, students begin to realize that most of them probably won't be rich and famous any time soon. On the other hand, by jokingly exaggerating their chances of fame and fortune, they are effectively mocking fame and wealth and are implicitly expressing their faith in the notions of the selfless artist and the denial of the economy. But above all, the jokes demonstrate their reluctance to face reality and that fame and fortune was on their minds all along. Alex is sure that back in those days they all fantasized about money and fame. Occasionally Alex still catches himself fantasizing about fame and fortune, even though his chances are no better now than they were back then.

Artists claim that quality is their only concern. But is that really the case?

Illustration 5 Costs are Irrelevant; Artistic Justification is All that Matters

Alex's friend, Gerald, is a composer of contemporary classical music. When Gerald graduated from the conservatory, Alex heard the composition he'd written for his final exam, as performed by a large student orchestra. Alex enjoyed it a lot. Since then, Gerald has written three more pieces for a large orchestra. None of them have been performed yet. After that he has also written eight pieces for small ensembles, of which seven have been performed; some of them several times. So, compared to other young composers he is relatively successful. Alex observes that part of the trick must have been writing compositions that are less costly to perform. Gerald is furious, and begins a long involved story explaining how his reasons for writing for small ensembles were purely artistic. It was a 'natural' step in his artistic development and it had absolutely nothing to do with lower expenses perhaps increasing the chances of getting his work performed.

Alex tries to explain to Gerald about all those visual artists who right after graduate start right off painting huge museum-sized canvases only to later reduce them to more consumable sizes, sizes more appropriate for the homes of the well-to-do. These artists also deny that there's any relationship between expenses and marketability. Is all this just coincidental? Gerald says he doesn't know about visual art, but in his case the adjustments have certainly not been coincidental. They are based on his own deliberate and purely artistic decisions.

Some weeks ago, Alex heard the performance of his latest work, which he had written especially for a unique concert of contemporary music in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. It was a work for harp, cello, violin, and celeste. Alex noticed that the celeste was the sole electronically amplified instrument among them. Alex asked Gerald about this afterwards. Gerald felt really embarrassed. During the final rehearsal, they discovered that they were just not getting the right balance. The sound of the celeste was not loud enough. He said that in writing the piece he had overestimated the hall's acoustic qualities. He at first wanted to cancel his performance, but the director convinced him that electronically amplifying the celeste could provide a makeshift solution to the acoustic problem. The director assured him the audience would have no problem with it. Gerald reluctantly agreed. Speaking with Alex Gerald emphasized that he was not against electronic amplification in contemporary music, as long as the decision rests solely on artistic considerations. In other words, amplification should never be used to cover up compositional defects, or to play in a larger hall with more people present. Gerald still believes that he should have withdrawn his contribution. By not doing so, he feels he has failed as an artist.

This last story is related to the first one. It once more makes it obvious just how high and emotionally charged the status of art really is.

Illustration 6. Apologizing for not Going into the Arts

Alex meets Marco at a classical music concert. When Alex tells Marco he's a visual artist, Marco confides in Alex that a few years earlier he had contemplated about going to a music conservatory to study composition. He explains that he is a good pianist and that he has won some prizes at concourses for young people. During their conversation, he reveals his regrets about going into information technology instead. But his regrets appear to be of the romantic kind; the sort of regrets people can indulge in. Alex is more struck by the fact that Marco is apologetic about his choice not to go into the arts, as if he has done something wrong and now must apologize. Maybe he feels the need to apologize because Alex did manage to go into the arts. In Marco's opinion, Alex has done the right thing.

This has happened to Alex before: people being apologetic for not choosing the arts. Marco is, however, the first who explains why he is apologetic. He notes that by letting the arts go, he feels that he missed out on something special. By not becoming an artist, he has harmed himself, like he has mutilated himself. He could have put himself, his personality, into his compositions, which would have allowed his personality to grow. He would have become a more complete human being. Moreover, he would have belonged, belonged to the world of art. But it's not just he who has lost out — Alex mustn't think him arrogant — but society also lost out because of this regrettable decision. If he had become the composer he wanted to be, he is sure he could have offered something significant to society. He would have joined the group of artists who help shape the history of art, of civilization itself. Yes, he is ashamed of his choice and deep down he feels guilty.

Alex tells him that despite his talents, his chances of actually making it as a professional composer would have been extremely slim. Marco says that this just makes things worse. It demonstrates that he is a coward, somebody who wants to play it safe.

Alex has to admit that Marco doesn't appear to be a very adventurous person. Moreover, Alex notices that he thinks Marco is 'bourgeois', even though Alex knows he should be congratulating Marco in his decision to choose a lucrative career.

Alex has discovered people like Marco everywhere, even in a poor country like Brazil. Alex (the alter ego of the author) wrote this chapter in Recife, Brazil. One day, while he was in an alternative bar in the new part of Recife, Alex met a woman, Maria, who told him that she had always wanted to become a dancer but ultimately decided not to. It struck Alex that she talked about it in exactly the same apologetic tone of voice as Marco. On another night, Maria introduced Alex to a group of dancers. None of them were employed at that time. Nevertheless,

some had been working for fringe dance companies in different cities in Brazil, and were hoping to continue to do so. The amazing thing was that their descriptions of the Brazilian fringe dance scene sounded a lot like the fringe dance scene in the Netherlands: the same kind of dedication, the same hardships, the same large groups of dancers working only once in a while. The fundamental beliefs that underlie the arts and the economy of the arts are more international than Alex had thought.

Art has a high and emotionally charged status. One group might look up to the high art choices of another group, while this second group might very well look down at the low art choices of the first group.

Illustration A Cultural Superiority versus Inferiority

Alex finds it hard to characterize his own art. People knowledgeable about art usually characterize his artwork as so-called contemporary or avant-garde. They add that his art reveals aspects of outsider art or 'art brut'. Alex thinks that this puts him in a no-man's-land where his work is respected in both avant-garde art and traditional circles. He exhibits in both areas. However, Alex soon discovered that these two areas in the arts do not carry the same weight in the art world.

Each year Alex exhibits his pastel drawings of 'heads' — as he calls them — in an annual portrait show. The portrait painters who exhibit in this show have one thing in common: they are not ashamed to reveal their traditional schooling. One day during the course of the show, Alex had to be an attendant. He had plenty of time to watch people. From earlier experience he already knew that the longer visitors remain in front of a particular artist's work the higher their appreciation of the work. Most of the people, however, pass right by his work without stopping, as if there's nothing to see. When he confronts them later, they usually apologize, even though they do not realize he is the artist. They usually say something like: "I suppose it is good, but personally I don't like it." But he is delighted to learn that some visitors — a minority — only have eyes for his work. When Alex confronts them they will angrily declare that, his work is the only thing here that could be called art. Alex notes that these visitors express this as if it were a fact. Unlike the earlier group, they did not express it as a personal opinion. There was no apology. Alex is struck by the asymmetrical nature of the behavior of these two groups.

Artists claim that their art has an intrinsic value independent of its price. But they are less sure of this than they appear to be.

Illustration B Market Success Demonstrates Low Quality, But not if the Artist's own Work is Successful.

When Alex goes to the local pub with his artist friends, a recurrent theme in their conversations is the question of whether the prices of artworks reflect their artistic quality. The other day the work of a colleague who has 2002ly become successful in the market was being discussed. They scolded him for accepting such high prices for such dreadful paintings. (This particular colleague frequents a different bar.) They are angry at the stupid art world, which buys all this crap — literally and figuratively. They question the existing order, in what it does to sales and reputations, but mostly regarding its critical judgment.

Alex and his colleagues can be expected to think this way. Within their group, they have developed a specific notion about aesthetics. As artists, it is essential to them to offer, through artistic means, critical commentaries on society, including the market. Because people cannot be expected to purchase painful commentary, society should furnish a sanctuary for art outside the realm of the market. For them this is the *raison d'être* for subsidies. Thus, it's fairly obvious that their notions about aesthetics means that art with a low market value has a high aesthetic value and vice versa.

Later on, that evening something strange happens. Alex's colleagues ask him whether he has sold anything during his present exhibition. They congratulate Alex when he tells them he has sold several drawings. They say he deserves it. One colleague says she thinks Alex's work has improved a lot over the past two years. Alex suddenly realizes that they often berate the market when it favors artists who are not their friends, and conversely, if one of their own suddenly tastes success, they tend to attach almost too much significance to it. The market suddenly goes from being something coincidental to something righteous. And so they have to justify its righteousness by concluding that Alex has worked hard and that his work has improved. But Alex wonders: maybe his work did not improve at all. Is it possible that his colleagues look at his work afresh because it is selling and that they suddenly see qualities they did not see before?

Why become an artist if artist incomes are so low?

Illustration C Taking the Reckless Decision to Enter the Arts

At the age of thirty, Alex decided to stop working as an economist. At that time, Alex unintentionally joined a life drawing class, and three months later, he was admitted to art school. Alex had decided to become an artist. It was a sudden and reckless decision. Alex felt relieved. It felt like he had finally discovered his destiny. He was not worried about his chances. On the contrary, Alex tried not to think about it. In the back of his mind, he must have known that the odds were against him, as they are against any average art student. Therefore, Alex told himself that he had no choice. If he wasn't going to pursue a life in the arts, he might as well just die. Alex was also convinced that anybody about becoming an artist as confident as he was, was bound to be a success one way or another. He stuck to a simple belief: the more dedicated he was, the more inevitable his chances of success.

Looking back at that time, Alex realizes that, now as back then, he had numerous choices. Becoming an artist was only one. Therefore, by not pondering the odds, Alex tried to convince himself of the reasonability of being unreasonable. As he now realizes, someone who makes it in the arts is so unusual, that the desire to become an artist is little more than leaping off a cliff with one's eyes closed.

The life drawing class that Alex presently teaches is made up of artists, art students, and some extremely talented amateurs. The work of some of these amateurs is better than that of the artists and would-be artists. Alex has initiated some discussions between the amateurs and artists. In the course of the conversations, it turns out that some of these amateurs are aware of their talent. Some had even contemplated going to art school, but decided not to in the end. One of the reasons they hesitated to enter the art world was the many uncertainties involved in an arts career. They seem less reckless than the artists. Moreover, they demonstrate that almost anyone can find out that one's chances of success in the art world are low. Nevertheless, they are often apologetic about their decisions.

The government enables artists to be seemingly independent.

Illustration D Subsidies Make Artists Lose Interest in Selling

Nicole draws in Alex's life drawing class. She has 2002ly left art school. Although she is a good artist, she has yet to find a gallery. The following weekend she is going to join an annual 'open studios exhibition' in her neighborhood and she asks Alex for advice about pricing her work. Alex asks her what kind of prices she has in mind. Alex thinks they're much too high. He asks her if she really wants to sell. Nicole says she's desperate to sell. If she doesn't earn some money soon, she may have to stop making art. So Alex suggests that Nicole lowers her prices by approximately forty percent. (Couching his words, he advises her to set prices so as to maximize sales.) Nicole is shocked and objects, but in the end she lowers her prices. That weekend she ends up selling some etchings and three drawings.

Alex has come to the realization that after art school, most students tend to price their work too high. They determine their prices based on the costs it took to make a particular work including a fair remuneration for their labor. Gallery owners usually inform them that with these kinds of prices they won't sell a thing and in the end recoup none of their costs. Low prices seem unfair. Nevertheless, gallery owners demand lower prices from starting artists.

Robin is an ex-student of Alex's. He left art school a year ago. He 2002ly received a government grant for promising young visual artists. He has been offered a show in an alternative space. As there is no dealer involved, he has asked Alex to help select the work for the show. Alex casually asks about the prices he intends to ask. Predictably, his prices are far too high. In a long argument, Alex tries to convince Robin to lower his prices, unsuccessfully.

At some stage in their discussion, Alex tells Robin that like other young artists the prices he is asking are way too high for his work. Robin furiously objects that he cannot be compared with other novices. To be subsidized by the government means that he is a 'promising young artist'. Only then does Alex begin to realize, that the foolish behavior of Robin has been caused by the government grant. Government grants give young artists like Robin the freedom to make 'real' art that in their eyes 'deserves' to fetch high prices. Moreover, they not only feel superior; they can also afford not to sell. Since receiving the grant, Robin has quit his second job in a restaurant because he receives enough money to live off of. And so now he is insisting on asking 'fair' prices, even though he knows there is little chance that his work will sell. For the time being, Robin and his subsidized colleagues can feel special.

When Alex visits Robin's exhibition on the last day, he is amazed to see that Robin has sold one of the thirty exhibited paintings. It's one more than Alex had expected. Later, in talking to Robin, Alex discovers the painting was sold to his uncle, who is a well-to-do professor.

Alex likes Robin's work and is sure that, if Robin cut his price by half, he would have sold at least four paintings, maybe enough to propel him into the thick of the art market. Of course, Alex believes that talented artists like Nicole and Robin

deserve to sell most of the work they exhibit. Alex realizes however, that even when they do price their artworks more reasonably, this still doesn't happen. There are just far too many Robins and Nicoles anyway. And all these artists produce far too much art.

Many artists can continue to work as artists because of the help of their partners and/or families. And yet it is often difficult for an artist to actually close a deal with family and friends.

Illustration E Helping the Poor Artist

Alex likes selling his work out of his studio. (Of course, whenever he does he makes sure to tell his gallery owner about it — well, most of the time, anyway.) Alex likes doing it even though some buyers seem to need endless amounts of time to make a choice, they drink too much tea, discuss their personal problems, and insult him by wickedly praising his work to the sky, etc. There is only one kind of situation Alex can't stand. That's when well-meaning friends and family members come to his studio. He usually does not sell a thing, and afterwards he feels depressed.

Personal feelings not only matter in dealing with family and friends but also with other buyers. For instance, Mr. R. is gay and he likes certain kinds of drawings of male nudes that Alex makes. Alex suspects that Mr. R. likes him as well. Meanwhile, Mrs. V. likes Alex's photographs, but she likes supporting artists like Alex even more. These types of situations are easy to handle. Both parties know the unwritten rules. Therefore, it's not difficult to close a deal.

With family members and friends it's quite different. Within Alex's social group there are no established rules for combining commerce and support. The old rules have disappeared and no new ones have taken their place yet. And this is why they get stuck.

Most of Alex's friends and relatives think that openly supporting him would be insulting — and in the back of his mind Alex agrees. Moreover, an open acknowledgement of the fact that they earn a lot more money than Alex does would only lead to unpleasant feelings of guilt. Both parties want to avert this situation at all costs. And so whenever they want to support him, Alex is not supposed to notice it or he has to pretend not to notice. This puts Alex and his family and friends in an impossible situation. Family and friends think that Alex will misinterpret any hesitance about buying an artwork as a sign that they're not

really interested in his work and more interested in supporting him, which is patronizing and an insult. Therefore, they try to play a complicated game of charades that almost always goes wrong. In the end, no deal is closed and family and friends leave Alex's studio frustrated, while Alex is left behind feeling just as miserable.

The last illustration is related to the first one. It once again reveals how emotionally charged the status of art really is.

Illustration F Serving Art

The other day Alex had a discussion with Robert. Robert makes installations. As far as their reputation in the art world is concerned, Alex and Robert are more or less on the same level. But as far as his career goes, Robert has chosen a different path from the one Alex has chosen. Robert has chosen a path with fewer financial rewards. He operates on the periphery of the 'avant-garde' circuit. Every so often an artist from this circuit is invited into the established avant-garde circuit and gains renown in the general art world as well. Although this happens only to a select few, Robert, without ever admitting as much, seems to be waiting for the call.

When they talk, Robert justifies his actions by personifying art. He 'gives his time to art'. He 'serves art'. He sets himself apart from other artists, whom in his view are 'betraying art'. 'Their solutions are superficial and cheap. They're not interested in art, so much as pleasing the art world.' (In Robert's circle pleasing the art world is an even bigger sin than pursuing money.) Alex asks him if art has interests. Robert says it does. Alex believes he is being sincere. According to Robert the interests stem from the legacy of art. Robert mentions some famous artists from the past he admires and who inspire him. At this stage in their discussions Alex always begins to feel a bit inferior and guilty, because he's not as familiar with the works of these famous artists as Robert is. Moreover, Alex has a difficult time seeing the relationship between these artists' works and Robert's work. But Robert thinks the relationship is evident. (Robert makes installations and sculptures primarily out of mud.) Nevertheless, Alex is impressed by Robert's willingness to sacrifice himself to art.

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