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The autonomous artist still rules the world of culture

Hans Abbing¹

The prediction that the autonomous artist will have died out in ten years time is based on quicksand. After all, fundamental changes in the culture sector take centuries not decades. And this certainly holds for the development of the autonomous artist.

As early as 1935, Walter Benjamin predicted that the technical reproduction of art would lead to the breaking of art's spell (*Entzauberung*).² Art would become less obscure, more accessible and thus less magical. Moreover, as was already evident in film-making, art would lose its autonomy, which might ultimately contribute to its demystification.³ Seventy years later, with the advent of digitalization, technical reproduction has entered a new and exciting phase. At the moment people tell a story that differs little from Benjamin's story. Not only postmodernists, but many art-world experts predict that the days of the autonomous artist are numbered and the autonomous artist is about to make an exit.

I think they are wrong. I am not saying that Benjamin's prediction and that of his modern followers is wrong in itself. I think the timing is wrong. Both Benjamin's prediction and the modern prediction were supposed to become reality within one or two decades. However, at present it isn't hard to see that thus far Benjamin's prediction has not become reality. Today, thanks to technical reproduction, people in the Netherlands can buy a 10-CD set of Bach recordings performed by one of the world's top orchestras from a chain drugstore for little more than the price of a bottle of massage oil — less than a euro each. According to Benjamin's prediction Bach's music should have lost its charm, but Bach and his oeuvre have continued to cast a spell.

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² Benjamin 1974.

³ See: Van den Braembussche 1994, 239-240. Whereas Benjamin applauded these developments, Adorno feared above all the ensuing loss of autonomy. Adorno and Bernstein 1991.

Fundamental cultural changes take centuries rather than decades. This certainly applies to the autonomy of the artist, which is ingrained in our culture. Nevertheless, I do not want to suggest that everything has stayed the same. But to me the changes in certain artists' attitudes appear to be more of a romantic strategy that fits in with the status quo in the arts, rather than the foreboding of a new order. And even if they were the omen of something new that really intends to break away from the present romantic order, I would interpret this in dialectical terms.⁴ Exciting forebodings of a new regime can be present long before the old regime collapses or has reached its zenith. Anyway, if the new really is new, I am convinced that the old culture, the culture of autonomy and authenticity, is still very much present and will successfully resist the new for a long time to come.

Autonomy and authenticity

The extremely high value our culture attaches to autonomy and authenticity in the arts has not always existed. It is part of, what I call, the romantic order. From the Renaissance onwards people became increasingly aware of their individuality. With Romanticism, individuality that could be communicated turned into an ideal for the civilized world. Bohemian artists were the first who deliberately tried to express themselves and so communicate their authenticity. They and their public wanted the soul of the artist to be 'in' the artwork, an impossible and therefore romantic dream. Nevertheless, for both the artist and his public, the autonomy of the artist became a sine qua non. The public increasingly appreciated the artist's authenticity. It identified with the artist through his art work and symbolically shared in his individuality. So both artists and their public started to condemn artists that were commercial or who had 'lost their autonomy'.

Is the value of authenticity and autonomy in the arts decreasing? Is art being demystified more than it has been in the past? If that should be the case, then the autonomous artist will gradually disappear from the scene. The latter would clearly represent a major cultural change. There are areas in the arts where this might be the case, but not many. Looking at the art world at large there have hardly been any changes at all. Several observable facts support this point of view.

Above all else it is the persistently low incomes in the arts that clearly prove the continuing importance of the romantic order for those working in the field. At present the average performing artist earns some 30% less than comparable non-art professionals, while the average creative artist earns 50% to 90% less.⁵ These income differentials have become

⁴ I have taken the term 'romantic order' from Doorman 2004.

⁵ Average meaning: 50% earned more and 50% earned less. Throsby 1994, 18; Meulenbeek and Brouwer 2000.

much higher since the Second World War and there is evidence that they are still growing.⁶ The same applies to the hourly income of those working in the arts. Evidently artists are willing to work for low, to very low, hourly incomes in the arts, because they expect to find more satisfaction in their work and other immaterial benefits than in other professions. Among other things, being autonomous and making authentic works of art in which one expresses one's individuality compensate for a low income. Art still offers a romantic alternative.⁷

Conversely, extremely high incomes and high prices paid in the arts are another proof of the importance of the romantic order in these circles. These incomes and prices are still on the rise and they are not limited to contemporary popular artists and their works. The latter becomes clear when one looks at the value of an entire oeuvre. The present day value of the painter Van Gogh's oeuvre would almost certainly exceed the life earnings of an actor like Leonardo di Caprio, who together with a number of other artists currently heads the list of highest earning professionals.⁸ If artists manage to produce works of art which the public recognize as being authentic, then they are irreplaceable, and their signature can be worth millions. Extremely small variations in quality lead to huge differences in market value - as in the case of the Rembrandt painting that dropped to one tenth of its value when scientific research (as opposed to relying on the naked eye) revealed that it had been painted by one of his students.

Another indication of the ongoing importance of the romantic order is the continuing absence of entrance-barriers in the arts. Although informal barriers exist, to protect inner circles in the arts, entrance in general is free. In this respect the arts differ from all the alternative professions a youngster can choose after high school. The apparent reluctance to erect entrance-barriers in the arts, is still a clear sign of the overall presence of the romantic order.⁹ After all it would be a disaster if another Van Gogh were to be excluded.¹⁰

Artists like Duchamp, Warhol and Koons have been questioning the importance of authenticity and autonomy for decades. The way they have played with these concepts betrays double moral standards and their protest is part of the romantic order in the arts and,

⁶ Throsby 1996; Menger 1999; Peacock and Shoesmith 1982.

⁷ In this article the term 'romantic' in relation to art and artists combines two related meanings: relating to Romanticism and being out of touch, remote from society's standards thus dreaming of the impossible. Hence the alternative is romantic, not only because these expectations of immaterial income are out of touch with reality, but also because they are in themselves expressions of a romantic attitude that can be traced back to Romanticism. Moreover, this romantic attitude is shared by non-artists, who admire artists and who, if they had the chance, would like to have become artists themselves.

⁸ Abbing 2002, 106.

⁹ Abbing 2002, 259-277.

¹⁰ Personally I could not care less.

as such, a romantic strategy.¹¹ The same applies to many postmodern artists. The romantic spirit governs the way they think and act. Whatever his motives may have been, an artist like Joep van Lieshout clearly tried to drop individual authenticity by attributing the art works to 'his' collective. But the international art world attributes them to Van Lieshout. Otherwise they would not sell so well on the international art market.¹²

The case of DJs and VJs is particularly interesting because they are outstanding examples of postmodern artists. Their art is new, relies on recent technology, combines different existing art forms and often rests heavily on copying (sampling). At first sight these artists seem to have adopted a truly postmodern attitude: they do their best to stay anonymous and they appear to believe in it. But this new attitude is still artificial; it has no existing tradition to rely on. Thus, if these artists become a success, their denial of authenticity is abandoned with such ease that it betrays the fact that even these artists operate within the romantic order. Successful DJs and VJs have become heroes, which was only to be expected given our persistently romantic notion of art.

For the moment the romantic order represents an important constant, but there are also important developments in its constituent parts: the widening scope of authentic art; the widening scope of creative art and the movement towards more business-like attitudes in the arts.

The widening scope of authentic art

During the last fifty years the scope of authenticity has widened. Its weight has shifted somewhat from creation-based art and artists to performer-based art and artists.¹³ Composers like Bach and Beethoven used to be the sole heroes, while at the moment many performer-based artists, for instance a conductor like Gergiev or a soloist like Bartoli have joined the arena of success in classical music. Their performances are authentic and their personality adds to their authenticity. These new creative performer-based artists have far more autonomy than the average classical performing artist. Employers agree to many of their demands. At the moment many pop musicians and theatre and dance directors are performing and creative artists at the same time. Therefore their claim to authenticity is even more justified than that of classical performers. More importantly, their demands for autonomy are often granted.

¹¹ See: Doorman 2004.

¹² Accordingly artist-couples like Gilbert and George tend to merge into one individual. As might be expected, such couples usually do everything they can to promote this image.

¹³ Cowen 1998, 145-149.

In my view, these developments do not depend on the growing importance of the cultural industries, but it is certainly a contributory factor. Personalities have become increasingly important and the cultural industries are well able to market and sell them. However, personalities can only exist thanks to an authentic product, whether this be a conversation or a work of art. Therefore not only artists as we know them, but also television presenters and entertainers are seen as highly authentic individuals. Whether one calls the latter 'artists' is a matter of changing conventions as well as personal views. In this context it is illuminating that, among the highest earning professionals, one only finds those sportsmen who (in connection with their sportsmanship), manage to offer a personal product to the audience.¹⁴ They draw the audience's attention by using their personality, by singing, acting in commercials, running talk-shows and the like.

Will autonomous artists disappear from the scene, leaving the cultural industries to take over? Will the widening of the scope of acknowledged authenticity in the form of more and more creative but performer-based artists and art, reduce the independence and autonomy of artists? Artists being employed by the cultural industries is not a new phenomenon. For centuries performer-based artists, like directors involved in music, dance, theatre and film as well as soloists and other performers have been employees. But performer-based artists are behaving more and more like autonomous artists and they often flaunt their independence at their employer. In fact, they adopt the habits of creative artists. Finally, the actual autonomy of these and other successful artists, that operate in or deal with the cultural industries, tends to grow as artists get older. Successful film directors and pop musicians start their own production companies, whilst music, dance and theatre directors begin companies of their own. If they stay with their employers these meet their demands by offering them more autonomy.

For debutant and fringe artists self-employment can sometimes be a sign of autonomy. As they join the cultural industries, or start to explore the market for independent creative artists, their autonomy is reduced. Later on in their career, however, successful artists, both in and outside the cultural industries, manage to increase their autonomy once again. Often they 'buy' their autonomy with money they have earned during the earlier part of their career and they accept the fact that their future earnings will be reduced. Just like poor artists they are willing to abandon money income in order to increase immaterial income and so live up to the romantic notion of the artist.

¹⁴ Abbing 2002, 106.

The widening scope of creative art

One wonders if the border between the autonomous arts and the applied arts and the border around genuine art are in general fading, as Postmodernism claims, thus making the concept of the autonomous artist obsolete. As most applied artists are employed in the creative industries, it is useful to look at the different categories of artists working in these industries.

Many of the above-mentioned creative artists, like directors and pop musicians, work for or are employed by cultural industries. Although they sometimes get commissions, they are not seen as applied artists. There is also the more interesting group of successful applied artists whose products are increasingly recognized as genuine art, as is the case with illustration, advertisement and fashion design. For instance, if fashion designers do not already head their own production companies, their employers usually give them a great deal of autonomy. At first this appears to be a clear example of fading borders. However, after a while borders tend to reappear, be it in new places. Often the successful designers and their public start to protect their new status as autonomous artists by drawing a line between themselves and their supposedly less autonomous and less creative colleagues. Therefore in the long run the products of successful applied artists are redefined: they stop being termed applied art and turn into genuine art. In this sense too there are no fuzzy borders.

Finally, the art world is becoming less critical of successful autonomous artists who start to do commissioned work. Because these artists are successful, commissioners give them a great deal of freedom. At the moment commissioning work from successful artists, who have already built a reputation on the basis of their free work, holds considerable prestige and in the opinion of the art world it does not mitigate the artist's autonomy. However, the same hardly applies to artists just starting out nor to less successful artists.

It is true that the applied art of some very successful artists at the top of their profession is now accepted as genuine art. Therefore the notion of art has widened, but in practice the border between applied and non-applied art or genuine art is still very much in place and considered important. The large majority of not extremely successful applied workers in and outside the cultural industries never stops emphasizing the difference between genuine art and their applied art. By continuously repeating that they are not (true) artists they have in advance abandoned any attempt to challenge artists by claiming their status for themselves. They have submitted. Moreover when some of them make so-called free work, they see this as an altogether different activity. I know several photographers and illustrators who sooner or later in their career started to make free work that differs greatly from their applied work and they cultivate the difference. Some hope for a future move to real art; others emphasize that they are only amateurs.

More scope for business attitudes in the arts

Over the last decades big art companies like museums, but also more and more intermediaries and even artists, have started to use rational marketing techniques. Such techniques are being increasingly taught to art students, art managers and the like. At first sight this may indicate a weakening of the romantic order in the arts, however this difference from the past is just a matter of degree. For instance it has been, and still is, commercial to be a-commercial. When, deliberately or not, artists or intermediaries like galleries, impresarios, publishers and the like show off their anti-commercial attitude, they increase their status, and often reap greater financial gains. These artists and intermediaries appear to be irrational, and they often flaunt it too, but in actual fact they are using rational strategies, even though in some cases they may not be aware they are doing it. Among many other indications, the absence of price tags in galleries shows that these mechanisms still work. Therefore the use of rational strategies by artists and art companies is not incompatible with romantic order.

Even so, the use of deliberate rational techniques in the arts is relatively new. With a considerable delay the arts have joined the process of professional rationalization, often accompanied by bureaucratization, that in other areas started much earlier. According to Weber this form of rational capitalism was bound to lead to a disenchanted world.¹⁵ However, since then Weber, Cambell and Ritzer, among others, have argued that rationalization can go together well with enchantment, even enhance it.¹⁶ In their view rational capitalism was followed by romantic capitalism. Important for romantic capitalism were the arts and crafts produced by bohemians and even more the new scope for their consumption. Postmodernism takes this point of view further, as is apparent in its rejection of the idea of rationality and in the use of terms like 'seduction' and 're-enchantment'. In this respect the difference between museums who stage huge spectacles and Disneyland is only a matter of degree: both use elaborate rational techniques to sell dreams.

Much more can be said about this subject. In the present context, it suffices to say that it is true that the scope and importance of business-like attitudes in the arts is growing, but that this does not necessarily contradict the continuation of the romantic order.

Multiple job-holding and the future of professionalism in the arts

Earlier I mentioned that in some areas the average Dutch visual artist earns almost 100% less than comparable non-art professionals. 80% of them cannot make a living from art and

¹⁵ Weber 1968, 223, 1156.

¹⁶ Cambell 1987; Ritzer 1999.

therefore pay themselves to be able to work as artists.¹⁷ They must have other sources of income like private resources, social benefits, partners who support them and second jobs. Second jobs are the most common and growing source of additional income for artists. Moreover, the degree of so-called multiple job-holding is increasing among artists.¹⁸ Second jobs can be art-related jobs or non-art jobs. And second jobs may only serve as a means to make art or they may also be appreciated in their own right. Modeling, cleaning, working in a restaurant or as a night porter are clearly ways of obtaining money to support making art, but second jobs that involve special education and art-related jobs like teaching at a prestigious art academy sometimes also give enjoyment and pay more than is needed to survive as an artist. However, art-related jobs sometimes contribute to the art job in more than just financial ways.

The vast majority of multiple job-holders earns more per hour in the second job than in the art job. Financially these artists would be better off if they stopped making art and concentrated on their second job. Therefore again, growing multiple job-holding is a clear expression of the continuation of the willingness of artists to work for low incomes as well as the continuation of the romantic attitude in the arts on which this phenomenon is founded.

The future of the autonomous and the professional artist

The continuation of autonomous art and artists in the next decades is a certainty rather than a speculation. The same applies to the development of poverty in the arts. The present degree of poverty in the arts is so unprecedented and out of proportion that I can only expect that in the decades to come it will be reduced, though not eliminated. However, with respect to the developments in professionalism in the arts, I am less certain. I see two possible scenarios.

First there is what I call the conservative scenario. The present growth of multiple job-holding in the arts suggests this scenario. It implies that multiple job-holders will become even more important than they are now, not only in numbers but also in status. In the same way as now they will be seen as autonomous professional artists, because, unlike amateurs, they relate to their peers and to the history of their profession. They will take over and monopolize the most autonomous and most highly esteemed art practices. Their hourly incomes will probably rise, but on average will still be lower than in comparable non-art professions. Nevertheless these artists will not be poor, because they will be earning well in their other jobs. Independent full-time artists will still be around. Some of them will be former multiple job-holders, who have become successful and as a result will want to work full time

¹⁷ Meulenbeek and Brouwer 2000.

¹⁸ Menger 1999.

in the arts and will be able to do so. Others will have been extremely talented artists from the start. However, most full time artists will be less successful. Compared to present day self-employed full-time artists their status will decline and they will become more like workers in non-art professions. With the exception of the top, the latter also applies to fulltime artists working in the cultural industries. I call this a conservative scenario, because it turns the art profession into a luxury profession, more or less the way it was in areas of the arts in earlier periods. Not that long ago many artists could only afford to be artists because they had a private income or because their family supported them. In this scenario artists will once again 'buy' their autonomy.

The second scenario I call the progressive scenario. A gradual and minor degree of demystification of the arts could bring it about. In this scenario mainly artists who can make a living from art will be seen as autonomous professionals. As their income will be higher than the present average income of professional artists, they will attempt to protect their professional status by erecting barriers to keep out the majority: the multiple job-holders who will not be able to make a living from art. As noted, such barriers necessarily imply some demystification because they go against the romantic notion of art.¹⁹ In this scenario the majority of artists with second jobs will no longer be seen as multiple job-holders but as semi-professional amateurs. However, the status of these semi-professional amateur artists and their works of art will rise in comparison with average amateurs, and as a group they may well be set apart from other amateurs. Nevertheless, they will not be professional autonomous artists.²⁰ Finally, given some degree of demystification, successful, but not very successful artists working in the cultural industries will also be accepted in the circle of autonomous artists.

In neither scenario will the autonomous artist make way for the cultural industries and disappear from the scene. In the last scenario autonomy may be somewhat less valuable than it is now, but certainly not unimportant. Autonomy becoming unimportant is an impossible outcome in the next ten years.

Strange things can happen. Therefore the conservative scenario should certainly not be dismissed. If the mystique around art continues to grow, this will contribute to the materialization of this scenario. If however, the slow process of overall demystification has already started, the realization of the progressive scenario will be more likely. If neither should be the case the status quo may be prolonged, be it that in one way or another the arts will become less impoverished. Personally I would put my money on the progressive scenario, but this may be wishful thinking on my part.

¹⁹ Abbing 2002, 259-277.

²⁰ Cf. De Swaan 2003, 34, 35.

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