

Click here to see a list of publications and texts by Hans Abbing. Most of these can be downloaded.

Notes on the Exploitation of Poor Artists

Hans Abbing

Warsaw 111023

These are notes which I used for a presentation during the conference THE LABOUR OF THE MULTITUDE? THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SOCIAL CREATIVITY 20-22/10/2011 in Warsaw, organized by the Free/Slow University of Warsaw (<http://wuw2010.pl/index.php?lang=eng>) . In 2012 a revised edition will be published in an edited book in English, containing articles by, among others, Luc Boltanski, John Roberts and Martha Rosler. If you want to receive a notification when the book is available send an email to jan.sowa@ha.art.pl.

In this text I argue that at present the exploitation of poor artists is of a different order than that of other knowledge workers and that this has consequences for actions aimed at the reduction of the exploitation. The exploitation of poor artist is largely an inner art world affair: it is foremost an art elite that profits from low incomes in the arts.

1. The Role of the Arts in the Development of Post-Fordist Modes of Production

Presently in avant-garde and elite art circles there is much talk about precarity in the arts. Four popular notions circulate. First, modern art has been the social laboratory of the immaterial and precarious labor as required in our present post-Fordist times. (In huge factories like those of Ford there was mass production. In post-Fordism these have partly been replaced by flexible manufacturing units producing for specialized markets. These units require much knowledge work resulting in immaterial results. Working conditions are precarious.)

Secondly, artistic criticism enabled the emergence of post-Fordist modes of production.

The third notion is that presently modern art is the laboratory of social criticism and resistance.

The fourth notion partly follows from these three: the precariousness in the arts is part of the general trend in capitalism towards post-Fordist modes of production and the consequent precariousness of labour in general; hence the causes of the precariousness in the arts rest in capitalism and therefore action to overcome the negative sides of precariousness in the arts should be directed at capitalism, which needs to be reformed or overthrown.

Even when the four notions were true, I am distrustful of the easy adoption of them and the emphasize that is put on them by an art world elite. This may well serve this elite's self interest rather than that of precarious and poor artists. It enables individual members of the elite to exhibit their lefty's [find other word??] orientation, which brings them prestige in many social circles in which they participate. Also and more importantly, it enables the elite to let the arts be victim, while once again emphasizing its exceptionally high symbolic value. This way the own privileged position is accentuated and maintained —see below. (This is not to say that many people within the elite do not honestly believe in these notions and honestly adhere to progressive ideas in general.)

Before anything else it may be good to ask who belongs to the art elite and who does not. Whereas many readers may have a rather clear idea of people they know or heard of who could be part of it, it is difficult to draw a line. It seems reasonable to say that those in the art world, who are poor, usually do not belong to the elite. This applies to the large majority of people in the art world, foremost artists, but also some volunteers and interns [or: people with an internship?]. In case of the elite I am thinking, first of successful artists, who are not only successful but also earn a more than decent income —this is a small percentage of all artists. Secondly, there are the people in the administration of art institutions, especially those with steady and better paid jobs, as well as many curators and mediators. The latter include a relatively large number of people who mediate between art institutions or artists and local or central government bodies and foundations. Finally, quite a few people within governments and foundations as well as private donors and collectors can be said to be part of the art elite.

To return to the previous topic, I think that the eagerness of the art world at large in embracing these four notions and the credibility of the notions are enabled and promoted by a deep rooted inclination in society to put art and artists on a footstall; that is bourgeois art or 'real' and not popular art. Progressive people are no exception. (Earlier also people like Horkheimer and Adorno de facto wanted to elevate aristocratic art to a privileged position.) Moreover, the notions also appear to be true because of the existing romantic idea of art's avant-garde position and hence superiority: 'art is *a/ways* important, because it is *a/ways* ahead in social developments.' But in my opinion the opposite is true. The major part of art and of the art world is conservative.

Why are the first three notions not credible? Concerning the second and most extreme notion, it is true that artistic criticism of the rigid post war society largely preceded post-Fordist rhetoric and may have contributed to the latter. But it certainly did cause the emergence of the rhetoric and even less caused the new modes of production.¹ Chronological succession does not imply causality. It is far more likely that both artistic criticism and the new modes of production follow from long term developments in technology, production and administration. These show foremost from general processes of informalization and de-hierarchization in society. Moreover, I think that also the two notions on the laboratory function of art, now and in the post-war period, rest on a huge exaggeration of the importance of the established arts in society. If there has been and is a laboratory, it is in the culture industry including the popular arts rather than the 'real' arts.

2. Correspondences and Differences between the Typical Artist and the Typical Knowledge Worker

Whether the first three notions are credible or not, would not be a matter of much concern, if they did not contribute to the fourth notion, which boils down to the statement that the exploitation of precarious and poor artists is a matter of capitalism at large. This would imply that inner art world relations are irrelevant and the art world elite certainly is not to blame.

In order to investigate the last notion, let us look at correspondences and differences between the typical artist and the typical precarious or knowledge worker in general. In this I compare artists with knowledge workers with a similar level of professional schooling. At first sight the correspondences are striking.

1. Performance is immaterial and tied to the body of the worker (as is clear in the live production of music, theatre and dance, while visual artists as well produce a product with foremost symbolic value.
2. There is little routine —de-routinization being a characteristic of post-Fordism par excellence.
3. Working hours are flexible.
4. If one is not self employed, contracts are temporary.

¹ Artistic criticism is a term used by Boltanski and Chiapello (2002). It encompasses much more than criticism by artists. It should also be noticed that Boltanski and Chiapello themselves do not state or suggest that artistic criticism caused the emergence of the rhetoric surrounding the new modes of production.

5. There is no clear distinction between work and private sphere.
6. There is much so-called multiple jobholding.
7. Informality (part of the earlier bohemian attitude) is important and there is little respect for hierarchical differences.
8. The emphasis is on creativity. Creativity is a measure of success.
9. Individual autonomy is much appreciated.
10. Continuous development and innovation are important. There is a desire to explore new creative possibilities. One is orientated on the future. (A general strong orientation on the future is not new. It is an important characteristic of modernity and emerged already in the early nineteenth century.)
11. There is an emphasis on communication and discourse. (Most contemporary artists are indeed good with words.)
12. And finally there is relatively much work stress, existential doubts, burn-outs and frustration (depressions) caused by professional failure or the inability to realize one's own assumed creative potential.

Let's next look into some differences.

1. The typical artist is very poor. In most western countries the income of 40 to 60% of artists from all work (i.e. including second jobs) is below the poverty line.² But at present the typical knowledge worker with an equal level of professional training is not poor and often even relatively well-to-do.
2. Parents of the typical artist are higher educated and often more well-to-do than those of comparable knowledge workers. (Therefore, though artists' labor is very precarious, there can be some degree of insurance against real hardship.)
3. Artists have a stronger work-preference. Often when more money comes in, it is used not for consumption and comfort but for working fewer hours in second jobs or for investments in the art job.

² For more data on poverty in the arts and their proper interpretation and on ways, in which artists are defined in the surveys, see a draft version of a chapter of the book I am writing —Abbing (forthcoming 2013)—:
<http://www.hansabbing.nl/DOCeconomist/Value%20of%20Art%20Chapter%20Value%20for%20Artists%20of%20Money%20and%20Work.pdf>

Moreover, in the arts none of the economic logic exists which prevails in non-art fields of cultural production as shows from the following differences.

4. In the dominant social imaginary in and outside the arts there is an opposition between artistic autonomy and commercial success.
5. The artist-intention is to be as autonomous as possible, that is, occupying an extreme position on a scale that runs from 100% autonomy to 100% heteronomy (i.e. as far as external constraints allow). For other knowledge workers positions closer to the middle are most satisfying and often also financially more rewarding. Therefore other knowledge workers are also interested in autonomy, but they cannot and will not negate the underlying economic purpose of their activities. This particular artist-intention is celebrated and propagated by artists themselves, but it is also what is expected from artists. This celebration is absent or far less important in the case of other knowledge workers.³
6. Poverty of artists is not regarded as a bad thing, not by artists or in society at large. One does not have to be ashamed of being poor. In the case of the typical knowledge worker this is the opposite.
7. A comfortable life is no widely shared goal in art worlds. There is a distrust of the pursuit of comfort and a solid career.
8. Public and private support is regarded as good and righteous. For the typical knowledge worker it is a sign of failure.
9. Signatures matter more.
10. Very successful artists are (still) geniuses rather than heroes.
11. The need for artists to be altogether innovative goes much further than that of knowledge workers in general. For the latter creative variations on an existing theme are allowed and often demanded, while presently for artists this is taboo. Often the art world puts down artists who are not innovative enough or start to 'repeat themselves'. (This certainly is a cause of suffering among artists.)
12. Respect for art and artists is (still) much higher than that for other creative workers.

³ In this context it is worth noting that in practice different rules apply to poor artists and those who are part of the art world elite. Whereas it is a bad thing when poor artists compromise, once artist are successful some compromising is often and acceptable. This applies even more to non-art participants in the elite. Unlike in the case of poor artists, these people are allowed to compromise and yet have a high status and reasonable to high incomes.

Given these differences I think that the exploitation of poor artist is not of the same nature as that of other precarious workers. In order to prove this thesis a detour is necessary.

3. The Romantic Ethic of Capitalism and the High Value of Art

There exists a relationship between low incomes of artists and the high symbolic value of art. At first the low incomes in the arts seem to contradict this high value: in spite of the high value of art the majority of artists are poor. But maybe it should be: because the symbolic value of art is high, artists are poor. If this is true, it implies that, if the symbolic value would go down, artists would become less poor

I am talking of symbolic value. Nevertheless financial value both follows from it and contributes to it. This financial value can be very high. For instance, governments and foundations spend huge amounts on prestigious new museums and concert halls — think of the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi and the Elbphilharmonie concert hall in Hamburg. Also much public and private support is predominantly a sign of the high value of art. But the typical artist is poor.

I think that the high respect for art is related to what has been called the 'romantic ethic of consumerism'.⁴ The rationalization, bureaucratization and dis-enchantment in modernity, which has been emphasized by Weber has been accompanied by just as much (re-)enchantment. (Only this can explain the consumer revolution in eighteenth century England. No capitalism without much consumption.) Already in the nineteenth century this romantic ethic went together with an emphasis on creativity, self-expression and self-discovery. Moreover, in society there is a romantic longing and search for individuality and authenticity. But for 'normal' members of the bourgeoisie the latter was beyond reach. Artists were the exception. Hence the high respect for art and artists.

Since the middle of the twentieth century this situation has somewhat changed. For knowledge workers and youngsters in general some degree of authenticity and self-realization is attainable. But artists remain exceptional, in the sense that they are still seen as more 'authentic' and better able to 'realize' themselves. Even a knowledge worker par excellence, the CEO of a large company is replaceable. Within a week after his departure, another has taken his place. The latter may have a

⁴ This is a phrase used by Campbell (1987).

slightly different approach, but the nature of production and the product does not change. However when an artist dies, there will be no more works in his typical style or having his, sometimes very valuable, signature. For instance the death of Karel Appel implied that no more new and genuine Appels are produced.⁵

Nevertheless, the post war developments are not without consequences for the art world. Presently, to be an artist one needs to be very passionate, have much perseverance and be prepared to handle hardship and poverty, but it is no longer necessary to be a genius or an extremely gifted craftsman. This means that the arts profession can be a 'realistic' choice, and therefore many more youngsters enter art schools. Presently in a country like the Netherlands the number of youngsters admitted to the (non-popular and non-applied) art departments of art schools is 5 times as high as 40 years ago, while the number of not regularly educated artists probably grew as much or more.

It is true that at the same time prosperity increased, and so did the demand for some art products.⁶ But because the numbers of artists are so large this demand did not bring work and income for the large majority of artists. This applies strongest to artists making so-called contemporary work. For instance, in the market of realistic, but not necessarily traditional paintings demand followed prosperity and so grew considerably. Therefore there is less oversupply in this market and the proportion of artists, which are poor, is smaller than in the market of contemporary art. For the latter there was and is little demand, while at present the large majority of visual artists operate in this market. A lack of demand is also characteristic for the market of contemporary classical music. Moreover, over the last decades demand for classical music did not increase, but only went down in spite of increasing prosperity. This is partly due to technical reproduction, but at present foremost due to the reduced demand of a younger generation for live classical concerts.

⁵ It appears that within a new romantic ethic which emerged over the last decades, far-reaching self-realization and authenticity is no longer a monopoly of artists. (In fact, in order for youngsters to belong they must be and can be authentic, that is, in the imagination.) This emerging new ethos may in due time lead to less respect for the arts and endanger privileged positions in the arts. This a theme in a book I am presently writing, Abbing (forthcoming 2013).

⁶ In principal the growth in the size of the population could have added to the effect. However, the increase is largely due to immigrants, who so far are hardly interested in Western established art.

The conclusion is that due to the romantic and changing ethic of capitalism the symbolic value of art became very high, which in the second half of the twentieth century made the arts profession more attractive than ever before. Therefore numbers are large and the majority of artists is poor.

4. Inner Art World Exploitation of Poor Artists

Following an economist way of reasoning one could argue that artists are poor, but happy, because they are compensated for their low incomes by non-monetary forms of remuneration. However, more so than in my earlier book, I now think that in this respect the economic approach makes no sense.⁷ I moreover think that there is real suffering among poor artists.⁸

But, as noted, in people's romantic imagery poverty in the arts is not necessarily a bad thing. Moreover, it is a good thing for those who benefit from the high respect for art. This applies to the art world elite. But also many poor artists believe that they benefit from the high respect. And if they do, there must be at least some benefit. The latter probably applies most to poor artists in the early stages of their career. But this type of benefit does not diminish suffering; sometimes it is the contrary. Therefore, I have anyway no problem in stating that extreme poverty is not in the interest of the large majority of artists, who are poor.

The art world elite however, whether or not aware of it, has an interest in the high value of art, both for income and prestige. Therefore, at least seen from outside, the poverty in the arts is also in their interest as it accentuates the high symbolic value of art. In this there exists a fundamental difference with other fields of post-Fordist production. For instance an average very low income in case of IT workers or architects is not in the interest of their elites and investors. (Of course, somewhat lower incomes and the possibility of getting rid of failures and workers with outdated knowledge is in the interest of investors; but very low income are not.)

All in all there are important differences in the way poor artists are exploited in the art world and the exploitation of knowledge workers in general. This is not to say that there are no common causes as well. In both the romantic ethic of capitalism plays an important role. But the interest in very low

⁷ This is what I argue in Abbing (forthcoming 2013). The earlier book is Abbing (2002),

⁸ See the before mentioned draft version of a chapter of the new book.

incomes and the type of beneficiaries differs much and that is relevant for the choice of actions aimed at reducing the exploitation..

Strategies of Resistance

Let me finish with some notes on, what I think, could be relevant strategies aimed at the reduction of exploitation.

Foremost, I think that at the moment professionalization and the development of more commercial attitudes among poor artists (i.e. the majority) is a good thing. Down to earth small scale commercialism can well represent an act of resistance against the existing art-regime. Therefore artists should not always strive for the extreme of as much autonomy as possible on the scale of 100% autonomy – 100% heteronomy.⁹

In this context one should think twice about producing presumably very autonomous art for which there is very little demand. For instance, the latter was and is the case with the making of huge paintings as was common in the eighties and later on of much conceptual art and more recently of numerous installations. Of all three only a minor part could and can be sold to primarily museums. Or it applies to the composing and performing of contemporary classical music for which there is only demand coming from a very small group of peers and other extremely schooled listeners. Such activities have little to do with independence as they are de facto encouraged by an art world elite, including many well meaning but also reasonably well paid art teachers at art schools, who for their own income do not depend on the market.

There is no creativity without constraints. The self-imposed constraint of wanting to get one's art across to an audience of more than peers and an art world elite can also enhance creativity and innovation. In this 'real' artists can learn from popular artists. They can also try to work more often within the popular arts —rather than in Documentas and alike; also when the latter exhibit critical art. When the organizers do, they de facto misuse critical art to celebrate art in general and to safeguard the own privileged positions.

⁹ This certainly does not at all imply that I want to strive for a maximum of privatisation in the arts sector. On the contrary, striving for the continuation or establishment of public spaces where there is room for relatively autonomous art including popular art could be a deed of

Moreover, as part of a professionalization process artists should try to develop an artist-intention in which working for ridiculously low incomes is taboo. They should refuse to do so and make clear to buyers like art institutions, galleries and impresarios that, if they underpay artists, they can no longer count on their services. This may imply that quite a few artists will decide to stop being artists. However, this is not the end of the world —not for them and not for the world—; on the contrary. In this context actions by more or less ad hoc associations of artists backed up by occasional internet support, which lead to a certification of art institutions obliging them to a reasonable remuneration of contributing artists, are important. Presently in the US W.A.G.E (<http://www.wageforwork.com>) is active in this direction. (At the moment attempts to form strong artists unions are likely to be futile and can easily promote conservatism.)

Finally, one should realize that art subsidies are not by definition good, or, in other words, that not all art subsidies are good for all groups within the art world. That would anyway be strange, as there are different groups within the art world with different and sometimes opposing interests, as I hope to have made clear.

Abbing, H. (2002). *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.

Abbing, H. (forthcoming 2013). *The Value of Art. A Sociological Study of Art, Artists and the Arts Economy*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.

Boltanski, L. and E. Chiapello (2002). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Conference of Europeanists, 14-16 March, Chicago.

Campbell, C. (1987). *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford, Blackwell.

resistance; also resistance against some of the excrescences of post-Fordist modes of production in general. However, in which degree public support, i.e. subsidies, are required for these public spaces and must be demanded or maintained, should be a matter of debate.