

The Value for Artists of Work and Money

Hans Abbing

professor emeritus at the faculty of social and behavioral science at the university of amsterdam and visual artist

info@hansabbing.nl

www.hansabbing.nl

This paper is a draft version of chapter 5 of the book I am presently writing *The Value of Art. A Sociological Study of Art, Artists and the Arts Economy* to be published in 2011 or 2012. For updates visit www.hansabbing.nl.

A synopsis and TOC of the book can be found at the end of this file.

The final version of this chapter will be shorter, because later on parts of the chapter will be moved to earlier chapters. In the final stage the text will be re-edited and the English corrected.

Comments are very welcome: info@hansabbing.nl

In our society the value of art is high and yet the majority of artists are poor. Not only the symbolic value of art is high; often the financial value is high as well. People and institutions are prepared to pay much money for works of art and performances and governments and foundations spend huge amounts on prestigious new museums and concert halls. But the average income of artists is persistently low, much lower than that of any other group of professionals. This sharp and paradoxical contrast can be explained: the low incomes are the consequence of the high symbolic value of art. Standard economics however, cannot explain the low incomes in the arts. The phenomenon that many youngsters enter the arts while incomes are low, can be explained by looking at their participation in chains of art events in which positive stereotypes of being-artist are important symbols of membership. Money is relative unimportant and its symbolic value is sometimes negative while that of poverty can be positive. But in the case of failed artists existing stereotypes tend to turn against them.

1. The Economic and Social Position of Artists

Many artists have such low net overall incomes from work, including non-arts work, that they are likely to be poor.¹ In different countries and in various surveys the definition of who is an artist and who is not differs, but outcomes are not very different. In between one third and half of the artists in the West and Australia have overall incomes from work, which are at or below the so-called poverty line or

¹ For a thorough discussion of the economic and social positions of artists, most of all performing artists, see Menger (2006). For references and some results of relatively recent surveys on incomes, numbers of artists, multiple jobholding and their development over time in the US, Australia and France see Menger (2006) and Alper and Wassall (2006) and for those in *five other European countries: Elstad and Pederson (1996) [some results in *Elstad (1997)], Brouwer and Zijdeveld (2004), Jenje, ter Haar et al. (2007), Schelepa, Wetzel et al. (2008), Weckerle, Gerig et al. (2008) and *[recent Swedish survey]. For a summary of older surveys see Throsby (1994b). Earlier Filer (1986) claimed that artists are not exceptionally poor, but his use of census data has been widely criticized. For a discussion on the difficulties concerning the definition of the artist population and of obtaining data on earnings see Alper and Wassall (2006). *[on income penalty: Withers 40%, more recent percentages in European reports, but not in Menger, some in Alper? Data also in comparison to other professionals and if possible also for only work from art if working full time.]

subsistence level. In the reports these artists are categorized as poor. That these artists do not starve is due to support and income from possessions. On average their standard of living is likely to be low. The typical artist earns circa *40% less than workers generally. This percentage is even higher when artists are compared with professionals with the same level of previous training.² Economists call this percentage the income gap or income penalty of artists.

Looking at income from artwork instead of income from all work artists earn even less. In most Western countries a majority of artists would not be able to make a living, if they would work full time in the arts. The difference with income from work can be explained from the fact that presently many artists have second jobs that pay better than their arts job and receive social benefits.³ It can be expected that the overall income and the income from art of the smaller group of artists that are discussed in this book is even lower than that of the usually wider group treated in the surveys. This is confirmed by some surveys on specific groups of artists.*⁴

In this context three points need attention. First, in the surveys and in this chapter income always refers to net income, that is, income after deduction from costs. Costs can be considerable in the case of artists, especially visual artists. This explains that in 2001 the income of 40% of the professional Dutch artists from their artwork was negative. These artists are no amateurs and yet they can be said to pay for working in the arts. Second, because of tax evasion actual income of artists can be higher than the income mentioned in the surveys. Tax evasion is probably more important among artists than among other professionals.⁵ Therefore the income penalty of artists could be less, but it is extremely unlikely that taking into account tax evasion the difference with comparable low income professions would disappear. Third, not all artists with very low incomes from work are poor. Sometimes artists have other income than from work only. For instance social benefits may raise their income but leave them at or below the poverty line. However, income transfers or gifts from for instance partners can raise the income of some artists above it. In this context, information on the standard of living of various groups with incomes from work below or at the poverty line could be informative. However, in the surveys this has not been a topic that has been researched. But, because artists tend to have partners who earn more than they do, come from relatively well-to-do families and sometimes have well-to-do friends, who support them through various forms of small gifts, the average standard of living of poor artists is likely to be somewhat higher than of other poor people.

Western artists have not always been poor. Before the second half of the nineteenth century artists' incomes were not particularly low.⁶ Especially in the second half of the twentieth century the decrease in income was substantial, while the number of artists grew considerably.⁷ At the same time the number of artists who supplement their income with earnings from second jobs has increased much. Presently the percentage of artists having second jobs is much higher than in professions with the same level of previous education. Moreover, these artists almost always earn more per hour in their

² As noted in an earlier chapter, a "typical" or "average" person is the person within a group of people who with respect to a certain characteristic—in this case "earnings"—is in the middle position: 50% of the people in the group possesses less of the characteristic and 50% more. The amount of the characteristic this person possesses is called the median as opposed to the mean, which is the calculated average. Because the income distribution in the arts is extremely skewed, comparisons of estimates of average, in the sense of mean, incomes are usually not interesting.

³ In most surveys the overall income from work refers to income from arts work, arts related work, non arts work and in many surveys also social benefits, while the income from art only refers to income from arts work including art subsidies.

⁴ *References→→

⁵ Because of shame and because many artists do not keep track of their unreported income, part of income that is not reported in tax declarations will also not be reported in surveys and interviews. From my own experience I tend to believe that tax evasion among artists is considerable. I only know of two studies on this topic: *Alper and Wassall (2000) and *Elstad (1997). According to the latter tax evasion is relatively unimportant, while the former →*

⁶ Montias (1987), Frey and Pommerehne (1989), Hoogenboom (1993) and Stolwijk (1998).

⁷ Peacock, Shoesmith et al. (1982) 39, Throsby (1996), Menger (1999) 545.

second jobs than in the arts.⁸ Depending on the country and the discipline in between 70 and 90 percent of artists has presently second jobs. Second jobs can be art related like giving music lessons or drawing classes to amateurs or teaching at an art academy or conservatory; or they can be non-arts jobs, from extremely dull jobs like cleaning or modeling to interesting jobs like teaching at a university.

Of course, also today not all artists are poor. Some are extremely rich. Together with top sportsmen and entertainers their incomes from work are much higher than the top incomes in any other profession. [Here and/or in an earlier chapter examples will be presented derived among others from Forbes.] And looking at all incomes from very high to very low the distribution of earnings is far more skewed in the arts than is found in any other profession including sports.⁹

Though the explanation of the high incomes in the arts is not a topic of this book, I will make a short excursion and say a little about it. The explanation is largely the same as the explanation of high incomes in some other professions.¹⁰ The gist of the explanation rests in the so-called winner-take-all mechanism.¹¹ Most commonly remuneration in production is, directly or indirectly, based on absolute performance. In seasonal work the relation between income and performance is very direct. Someone picking strawberries is paid for the number of boxes he fills. If A fills 99 boxes and B 100, A receives 99% of the income B receives. In winner-take-all markets however, reward depends sooner on relative performance than on absolute performance. If athlete A runs 1% slower than the winner B and is second, he may well receive 5% of the prize money while B receives 90%.¹² In the arts there usually are no straightforward yardsticks for measuring performance, but there as well perceived small differences in performance can correspond with huge differences in income. (Here a perceived better performance or higher quality may well rest on better marketing.)

There are five other characteristics of artists that matter in the context of this chapter. First, though most poor people are little educated and come from poor and little educated families, this does not apply to artists. Their own education is higher than that of the typical poor person. Moreover, secondly, the education level of the parents of artists is higher than that of people in comparable professions.¹³ Next, many and ever more artists are self-employed.¹⁴ There exists a general trend in society towards ever more self-employed professionals, but artists are clearly in the forefront. Fourth, in the arts there is no formal barrier of entrance and therefore also no formal control of numbers. Whereas in many professions, like that of medical practitioners, diplomas are required in order to be allowed to work, this is not the case in the arts. In other professions often such diplomas not only guarantee quality, but also serve to control the size of the group. When the group gets too large and incomes go down, the diploma requirements are raised. Last, when in other professions there is no formal barrier, there are often other organized barriers which contribute to a limited group size. This is

⁸ The second jobs of a small group of very successful artists form an exception. They often have prestigious and well paid teaching positions at famous art schools which nevertheless bring them less per hour than their arts job.

⁹ For an economic analysis of similarities and differences between art and sports see Seaman (2003).

¹⁰ For an analysis and explanation of high incomes and the skewed distribution of income in the arts see Menger (2006) 779-781, Adler (2006) and Abbing (2002) 106.

¹¹ Rosen (1981), Frank and Cook (1995), who introduced the term winner-take-all and Adler (2006).

¹² Frank and Cook (1995) present the example of Steffi Graf who became the world's number one female tennis player, after Monica Seles, who had been number one for years, was forced to withdraw after she was stabbed by a lunatic. Within a few months, Graf's yearly income doubled even though her absolute performance probably had not changed during this period. However after Seles' withdrew, Graf's relative performance did increase.

¹³ Among all art students those with higher educated and well-to-do parents are overrepresented when compared to students in other disciplines that require a similar level of previous education. In the Netherlands in 1998 among all art students the overrepresentation was 40%. The overrepresentation among students in the fine art departments is likely to be even higher. Abbing (2002). Towse (2001) and Rengers (2002) 58 also point to the fact that parents of art students are relatively highly educated. In different degrees the same applies to some other disciplines, like art history, cultural studies and some languages.

¹⁴ Menger (2006)

for instance the case with car repair shops, which have signs that show they are member of an association that guarantees quality. In the arts such organizations and labels are relative unimportant.¹⁵

2. Economic Explanations of Low Incomes

Following common economic reasoning one would expect that the low incomes in the arts are a temporary phenomenon. When incomes are so low, it is reasonable to expect that fewer people will become artist and that part of the group of practicing artists will leave the profession. The apparent oversupply of art would disappear. As the number of artists would go down, supply shrinks, prices go up and average artists' incomes rise till they would be more or less in line with the incomes in professions that require a similar level of previous education. The proportion of all artists earning an overall income that corresponds with the poverty line would become much smaller and far less artists would be poor.¹⁶ And indeed, if for instance the incomes of real estate agents would become as low as in the arts—maybe after an abrupt and large increase in direct sales through the internet—fewer people would become agents and many of the existing agents would leave the profession. But this is not what happens in the arts. The incomes have been low for a long time and have even decreased considerably in the decades after the Second World War, while the number of artists only increased. Evidently the economic mechanism of low incomes resulting in a reduction in supply and next in a rise in income does not work in the arts. How come?

Standard economics cannot explain why income is persistently low in the arts. It assumes that people's preferences are given, people only work for money, behave rationally and are fully informed. If this is the case people will rationally decide on their occupational choice or the decision to stay or leave a profession on the basis of their expected life-time income. They maximize life-time income. However, none of these four assumptions seem to apply and for the explanation of behavior this may well have more drastic consequences in the arts than as well.¹⁷ For an explanation of low incomes in the arts especially the last three assumptions matter. If artists would be fully informed on the chance of earning certain amounts of money during their career, the large majority of prospective artists would know that their life-income, i.e. the total income they will earn during their whole career, is going to be very low. And because in this approach artists are only motivated by money and behave rationally, they will not enter the arts and incomes could not be persistently low. But they are. Therefore, standard economics cannot explain the low incomes.

Not all economists stick to these assumptions. In more modern economic approaches it is often acknowledged that people's preferences change and most relevant in the present context, that, first, people not always only work for money, but also for non-monetary rewards, second, people not always behave rationally and, third, are not always fully informed. Because this applies to anybody, in order to explain low incomes artists must behave more irrationally than others or be more ill-informed or misinformed than others or be more interested in non-monetary rewards. (Sometimes the latter are

¹⁵ Nevertheless some formal barriers exist in the arts, as will be shown in Chapter * * [OR in Abbing (2011/2012)]. Moreover, informal barriers are important in the arts. More about this and about the control of numbers in Abbing (2002) *.

¹⁶ Depending on circumstances, the effect of fewer artists on the price level of art can vary. But because art is a luxury good and demand is inelastic higher prices hardly lead to a decrease in demand and therefore even a relative small increase in price can raise overall income. In this context it should be noted that the relationship between number of artists and supply of art is not as straightforward as it seems. Moreover, the definition and use of notions like demand, supply, oversupply and excess supply of art and of artists and of notions like employment, unemployment and in some cases under-employment in the arts and areas within the arts is often problematic. Moreover a full discussion of the relationships between them is beyond the scope of this book. More about this in Menger (2006).

¹⁷ Economists working in a tradition set by Milton Friedman will argue that it does not matter if the assumptions apply or not, as long as the predictions they lead to are correct. People behave as if they are valid. However, in the case of artists the predictions are clearly incorrect.

called “psychic income”, while people interested in non-monetary rewards are sometimes said to be “intrinsically motivated”.¹⁸⁾

The first assumption is unrealistic. People certainly do not just work for money.¹⁹⁾ They also want non-monetary rewards. Anybody earning more than a minimum income wants to have at least some pleasure in working or get some praise from friends or colleagues. But the question is whether artists receive relatively more non-monetary rewards than others, because they are more motivated by non-monetary rewards and/or because there are more non-monetary rewards available in the arts? If this is the case it could explain low incomes in the arts. Let us therefore take a closer look at forms of non-monetary rewards, which are often mentioned in relation to artists.

As noted in the arts a winner-take-all mechanism operates and therefore a very small number of artists are not only extremely rich, but also extremely famous and receive lots of attention. The latter non-monetary rewards add to the attraction of the arts. Given the high stakes large numbers compete for the rewards and median income is low. But this applies to other fields of production as well, like sports, non-art entertainment, management, stock-broking and the bar. And, especially in those professions in which the control of numbers is weak, like sports and entertainment, median incomes are probably low, but not as low as in the arts.

These winner-take-all professions are likely to attract people who are above average adventurous and get a kick out of going for the top. Therefore gambling brings also non-monetary rewards and a relatively strong taste for risk may well apply to artists. This argument is often brought forward by economists who want to explain low incomes in the arts.²⁰⁾ However, if it applies to the arts, it will certainly also apply to sports, politics, non-art entertainment, banking, managing etc. But as said, while in some of these professions average income is low it is not as low as in the arts.

Next, recognition by peers and critics is likely to form an important non-monetary reward for artists. But, for scientists recognition is at least as important, while unlike artists they earn decent incomes. Also the joy of working or doing creative work or of working as a self-employed person is likely to matter. But many others enjoy working independently and like their work. And for instance, doing creative work can be very rewarding for architects and graphic designers as well, while their incomes are considerably higher than that of artists.

A difference could be that in the arts an experience of self-realization is stronger than elsewhere or that it is not so much liking one's work but having a mission or following a calling that is rewarding.²¹⁾ Also in these aspects artists are not unique, but it is likely that at present they apply stronger to the typical artist than to others like for instance the typical priest, family doctor or nurse. Notions like those of a labor of love or an inner drive, which have been mentioned by economists trying to explain low incomes in the arts, are in line with this.²²⁾ Finally, artists may have a special status just because they are artist. And, indeed, the status of “being-artist” is likely to be higher and more widely appreciated and therefore more rewarding than in the case of other typical professionals. The status of “being-accountant” or “being-engineer” is not as rewarding. The difference with typical sportsmen and entertainers is probably less strong, but it could still be considerable. However, as in the case of an inner drive or calling, in the economic approach it is impossible to tell if there is a difference and how important it is.

¹⁸⁾ Cf. Frey (1997) and Towse (2001). I prefer not to use these terms, because it is unclear what non-psychic rewards may be and because the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be confusing. For instance, these authors see the reward of recognition by peers as intrinsically motivated, while it makes more sense to say that it is an extrinsically motivated form of non-monetary reward.

¹⁹⁾ Frey (1997). The title of Frey's book is *Not just for the Money*.

²⁰⁾ Cf. Towse (1992).

²¹⁾ Cf. Menger (2006) 793 and Abbing (2002) *-*.

²²⁾ Freidson (1990), Jeffri (1991) and Throsby (1994a).

The second assumption, the assumption that people always behave rational is also not true. And if artists behave more irrational than others this could possibly explain low incomes. For instance, artists could be more inclined to be over-optimistic and overestimate the future payoffs of a career in the arts than others or they could be more inclined to stick to the choice they once made and not reconsider their choices and seriously contemplate alternatives. Artists could also be more inclined to let their earlier investment (sunk costs) in their arts career and their proven talents for making art stop them from leaving the arts and go for another profession. But such inclinations can be found in many professions. There is no evidence that artists behave more irrational than others. Almost on the contrary: as self-employed laborers they turn out to manage their risks well.²³ Also, being an artist myself and knowing many artists, I find that artists do not behave more irrational than others. Also, if in this respect there would be a difference between the typical artist and others, it would have to be very large, if it were to explain the very low incomes in the arts. This is unlikely. Of course there are exceptions, but looking at large numbers people are not that different. Moreover, if artists appear to behave more irrational than others, such behavior can anyway better be explained from the fact that artists are more misinformed than others than from irrational behavior.

Finally the assumption that people are fully informed also does not apply. People do not know what the future will bring and if they know that certain events may occur they do not know their probability. The future is uncertain. And the future of prospective creative artists is probably more uncertain than of other aspiring professionals including most sports professionals and performing artists. Creative artists have a hard time in gathering information on the relevant competencies they bring along, when entering the arts. For instance, in sports there often exist simple measures of competence, like distance per minute. Moreover prospective athletes or classical musicians can somewhat monitor their progress and make a rough estimate of their chances as professionals. This is far more difficult for creative artists. However, this argument cannot be very important, because the incomes of performing artists are also very low, while for most of them it is easier to inform themselves on their competencies.

More importantly, part of the information aspiring artists have about their prospects in the arts is bound to be wrong. And it could be that prospective artists are more misinformed on their future monetary and especially non-monetary rewards than other prospective professionals. Society may well paint a particularly rosy picture of a future in the arts, even more so than in sports and entertainment. Especially in the long run the non-monetary rewards of having a special status could be disappointing. But because economics is not well suited for a proper understanding of the nature of non-monetary rewards, it also cannot tell if these are important and how significant the difference with other professions is.

Most important however, is that it is hard for artists to inform themselves on their personal ability to handle long term poverty and lack of success. Most of them know that it is likely that they will be unsuccessful and that their future income will be much lower than in other professions, but they are ill informed on their ability of handling this. Although they are not more inclined to over-optimism than others, given the bad perspectives over-optimism has a much stronger effect in the arts than in other profession where long-term incomes are higher.

The conclusion of this section is that economics is helpful in structuring the analysis of low incomes in the arts. It is probably a combination of receiving more future non-monetary rewards and being more misinformed on these than other professionals, which explains the extraordinary low incomes. But in economics the nature of the non-monetary rewards and of the ill or wrong information is vague.²⁴

²³ Menger (2006) 206.

²⁴ This vagueness is one reason why many economists were and are reluctant in using the concept of non-monetary reward or psychic income. Sometimes they think that it only serves as an easy way out for the explanation of phenomena, which are otherwise difficult to explain. Cf. Towse (1996b) 310.

They are closing entries. If there is no other explanation, it must be these. Therefore economics cannot really explain the low incomes in the arts. Moreover, economics can not tell which is the more important of the two. Are artists, looking at life-time, primarily compensated for low incomes and is there no oversupply of art? Or are they primarily misinformed and is there oversupply and are there too many artists? Therefore it can also not assist politicians in their decision making: is action called for or not?

3. The Celebration of Becoming and Being Artist

1800In the following sections I will to apply the social interaction theory [as explained in the introduction of the book] to artist's behavior and so attempt to explain the low incomes in the arts in a more satisfactory way than economic theory does. People who participate in art events, from concerts to brief conversations on art or artists, produce precious objects, which are symbols of membership. [The notions of the art event, symbols of membership and precious objects has been explained at some length in an earlier chapter. In short and if not mentioned otherwise, art events are events in which two or more people interact while focusing on art.] They do not do this from scrap. Existing stereotypes of Art-with-a-capital-"a" and of artists underlie the symbols of membership. Such stereotypes are widely circulated. They have been developed and are reinforced and maintained in numerous art events. Above all there is the goodness of Art-with-a-capital-"a" and the stereotypes connected with it like: art is good for people, art has quality, art is right, art is beautiful, art is deep, art creates profound human emotions, it enriches, it civilizes, art is autonomous, art is authentic, art is unique, art is not commercial etcetera. And if art is good or has goodness, it follows that those who make art, the artists, must have goodness as well. In art events the goodness of art shines on artists and it shines from them. They are the servants and representatives of Art. In many ways they are better people than other people, the same as the priests in the church were supposed to be better people.

The artist being good or better is a symbol or emblem that, when celebrated in an art event, strengthens the artist and others participants. When at the end of a successful concert people enthusiastically applaud for the soloist, both the soloist and the audience feel strengthened. The event gives them energy. The same may apply to the artist and the visitors during a gallery opening. And when at a birthday party the host introduces me and explicitly mentions that I am an artist while he does not mention the professions of the other visitors, for a brief moment this will raise some enthusiasm and give the people present emotional energy, in particular me, the artist, and the host. I may actually enhance the effect of the brief art event with my informal clothing which signals that I am different and special. In successful art events the being-artist of artists and thus being good or better is a valuable symbol of membership for all participants.

Related stereotypes of artists or of being-artist largely follow from the stereotypes of Art-with-a-capital-"a". In most art events they are loaded with positive value. The most important are those of the creative artist, the authentic and self-realizing artist and the passionate artist. Less prominent, but still widely shared stereotypes are those of the sensitive, vulnerable, selfless artist, the artist who does not care about money, the poor and suffering artist and the artist for whom success is unimportant. The stereotype of the authentic, self-realizing artist is particularly important in contemporary society. It is loaded with value. Probably no one would argue that self-realization is bad and only very few people will dispute the validity of the stereotype. The celebration in art events of this quality can strengthen the participants much, most of all the (aspiring) artist.

The stereotypes that surround other professionals, from family doctors to reverends or stockbrokers, are rather widely circulated as well, but lose value and stop being precious objects the further people are away from the group of professionals. The same does not apply to artists. Almost anybody is familiar with the stereotypes that surround artists and therefore they can become precious objects or be associated with them at almost any occasion. The omnipresence of the stereotypes shows from many small interactions. Already in an expression by a non-artist like: "Oh no, I am not creative" the speaker puts the artist on a footstall. He wants to make absolutely clear that he is not claiming to be

an artist or to be like an artist. That would have been presumptuous. As in the case of Art, the emotional tone of the expressions —admiring, apologetic, indignant— implies that the symbols are, indeed, loaded with value. Even if the (aspiring) artist would want it to be different, there is no escaping the familiar stereotypes. Generally however, events, in which being-artist and the stereotypes connected to it are precious objects that participants focus on, strengthen the artist.

Such stereotypes influence somebody's occupational choice. As Randall Collins writes:²⁵ "...engaging in thinking and talking about future situations certain symbols or stereotypes come most readably to mind. They matter when comparing alternatives."²⁵ In the case of would-be artists these stereotypes are particularly strong. And in the case of strong symbols there is little reason for doubt. Moreover, while moving from one strengthening art event to another and comparing alternatives, it would be irrational to get in situations in which less common and little rewarding stereotypes of being-artist prevail and discussions about being-artist are gloomy. If one would be present during the events in which the positive stereotypes of being-artist are symbols of membership and the aspiring artist is encouraged to continue on his path, it would be difficult not to be infected by the cheerfulness. Moreover, if someone would resist the general mood, he would be an outsider, and most of the time that is unattractive position. Therefore, the aspiring artist who thinks he is talented easily takes a path that leads in the direction of art education. And if the prospect of the admission examination as a special type of art event not only brings fear but is also exciting, he is well on the way to becoming an artist.

Implicit in this reasoning is that although people sometimes compare alternatives in their occupational choice they do not maximize the life-time rewards they expect, as the earlier discussed economic approach assumed.²⁶ Looking at behavior from an outsider position in the interaction approach people go for a short term maximum also when it comes to their occupational choice. In their choice of successive events people rationally "maximize" the rewards at hand, that is the energy these give them. These events form a path and ultimately a career. The energy depends on the value of the precious objects or symbols of membership, which are created during the events. These can have many forms. For instance, the drawing an aspiring artist shows the people present and the passion he radiates can be symbols of memberships as can be the expected future poverty as a sign of an exciting life in the arts. These bring momentary rewards.

This is not to say that people consciously choose their path, while calculating the net benefits of each possible event that they could participate in next. People go with the flow. They find their way by doing; that is, they find their way through unconscious or hardly conscious forms of trial and error. It also does not imply that expectations of the rewards of events which are further away are unimportant. In the events at hand expectations will come up as well and bring temporary negative or positive rewards or energy. For instance, sometimes it is indeed expected poverty that is celebrated. At other moments however, the expectation of low income is bound to lead to a certain gloom. However, when during art events depressing expectations come up, they compete with all sorts of positive symbols of membership and are therefore not the sole determinants of the choices someone makes. Moreover, people will as much as possible avoid participating in depressing events.

The notion that people behave rational does not imply that others will never judge their behavior to be irrational and foolish. Being in different situations and events and thus having other points of view some outsiders may well argue that many (aspiring) artists behave irrational. For instance it can be their opinion that they overestimate their chances or overestimate their ability to handle long time poverty and lack of success and that therefore it would have been rational for them to look for more

²⁵ Collins (2005) 176.

²⁶ In this the interaction approach differs fundamentally from the economic approach and more specific the human capital approach in economics. However, it does not differ in assuming that people behave rational. On the contrary: whereas in the economic approach it turned out to be necessary to drop this assumption, there is no need to do so in the interaction approach. [See also section * in the introduction of the book.]

information on their chances and abilities. For instance, economists or statisticians may think so. And teachers, parents and politicians or older and failed artists, who also participate in circles with a more distant view, could tell the (aspiring) artist that he behaves foolishly and should change his course.

The latter will happen less often than one may expect. Because the stereotypes are so strong and widespread, not many circles with altogether different views exist. Moreover, depending on the situation people can easily hold contradictory opinions or rather focus on one symbol of membership in one situation or event and another in the next. For instance, during a lecture for an economist or statistician data are precious objects and he will warn artists against poverty, while during a casual conversation he may well go along with the mood, put art on a footstall and will actually encourage a talented youngster to become artist. The one behavior is not more rational than the other. Because the stereotypes of Art-with-a-capital-"a" and of being-artist are so compelling even failed artists may encourage youngsters.

Nevertheless, not all aspiring artists become artist and some artists leave the arts. Therefore, in combination with other factors longer term expectations and a comparison of alternatives can induce a youngster to steer away from a career in the arts and can make others leave the profession. Moreover, not every route is open for an aspiring professional. People rationally move from one strengthening situation or event to the next within the constraints set by their financial, social and cultural capital. If there is no money to pay for the conservatory or one cannot get a grant or fails the admission examination again and again, going to the conservatory is no option. Capital is, however, not fixed, but develops in the course of the events people participate in and this will affect their future choices.

Also due to the opinions of others the cultural capital of some youngsters will develop in such ways that they chose to go for other professions. Especially when people, who matter to a youngster, again and again let him know that they do not believe that he is talented enough, this is likely to gradually change his view of himself and therefore his cultural capital. And at least some youngsters are stopped by their families, because they worry about the economic prospects. (This is common in poor families or families which have recently started to rise on the social ladder, among them many immigrant families.) Nevertheless, because of the high value of art the arts are extremely attractive and many youngsters enter even though their financial prospects are low.

4. The Value of Money as Resource

[Large parts of this and the previous section will be moved to the earlier Chapter Value. Next these two sections may be combined?]

1510 Looking at the many artists whose standard of living is low all through their career, prospective artists are right in their belief that, if necessary, they can do with little money. Given the low incomes in the arts most artists evidently spend little money in the course of their career. And even though they earn little, most of them do not take a new course, but stay in the arts. How come artists manage with so little money and do not leave the arts?

In this context it is useful to distinguish two different uses of money. Money is a resource that enables people to participate in social events and it is a precious object or symbol of membership which is celebrated in social events. In this section I will discuss money as resource and show that the artist's need for money as means is relatively low, while in the following I will argue that the same applies to the artist's need for money as symbol of membership.

The artist uses money to live and to make art. To survive as a human being and as an artist he needs at least a minimum of money; in other words, as far as money is concerned he faces a survival constraint. The violinist or painter cannot do without food and social contact and to survive as artist he needs at least a violin or paint and an easel. If he does not receive enough money, he has to leave the arts.

Whereas the survival constraint for staying physically alive (and not die) may not differ that much from person to person, the constraint for surviving as a social being (and, to say it crudely, not commit suicide) will differ more.²⁷ And when it comes to the constraint for surviving as professional artist there are bound to exist considerable differences from person to person. First, comparable with the physical constraint, the artist faces a “technical” constraint. He needs a minimum of money for materials and equipment to stay alive as professional artist. Second, his work in the arts needs to bring him enough money, to socially survive in the arts and third, it needs to bring him enough money to socially survive in other circles he participates in. If it does not, he will decide to go for another profession (or, by way of speech, commit suicide as artist). These three interdependent constraints depend among others on the artistic field, the specialization within the field, the art circles and other circles the artist participate in. Therefore it also depends on age family situation, career pattern etcetera. In this respect there is so-called path dependency. Over time, moving from event to event the constraint moves as well. For instance, an older artist who has earlier known some success and could easily make a living from art, may sooner leave the arts when his income goes below a certain level than an older artist who has never been successful.

Not to leave his profession, and thus to survive as a professional, any person wants more money than he needs for staying alive. In the path he takes, he wants to participate in all sorts of events that strengthen him and bring him energy. He needs money to receive guests or go to the movies or concerts or have a family or go on holiday. And even though a professional painter or self-employed accountant could work at home, most of them want at least a studio or office. However, depending on his profession a professional needs more or less money to be able to participate in chains of events that give him enough emotional energy not to leave his profession. An important factor in this is the cost of participating in one’s social circles, which tend to differ per profession.

For instance, a CEO will need much money to participate in events that strengthen him, like business meetings, receptions and birthday parties. In order to participate he needs a classy or elegant dress, a representative car, a posh house, expensive jewelry. The same as a certain way of speaking, making jokes etcetera, these are symbols of membership and without them the CEO would be an eccentric and outsider. He may actually loose his job or friends, if he shows up at business meetings or parties in the wrong clothes (or all the time makes the wrong jokes). Or, otherwise, in business meetings and other meetings like parties, he is likely to feel so uncomfortable, that in due time he quits and goes for a job and social circle that befit him better and require less money. And apart from such matters as jokes and a certain way of speaking, many of the symbols of membership of the CEO are costly. Hence the CEO needs much money to take part in the events that strengthen him most and that keep him from changing his profession. The same does not apply to the typical artist, the symbols of membership that strengthen him and make him stay in the arts are much cheaper. And although many professionals need less money than CEO’s, compared with most other professions artists need the least.

As noted the stereotypes of being-artist and therefore the symbols or emblems artists bring along in events are precious objects people focus on. While demanding little money, such events strengthen the artist much and give him energy. Most of these symbols are no emblems money can buy. And if they can or must be bought, they are usually not expensive. Expensive objects and activities are usually no symbols of membership in the events artists take part in. Often they are contra-productive. This applies to artists’ meetings as well as meetings of artists with others. If an artist throws a party and he would behave stiffly and spend lost of money on expensive foods and drinks, most often his colleagues would feel uncomfortable (unless it would be a one time joke). The party is likely to be an energy drain. Moreover, an artist in an expensive dress is not what people want to see. Even at

²⁷ It follows that the survival constraint does not have to equal the subsistence level or poverty line as used in surveys or in social security schemes.

official meetings the implicit dress code of artists involves fewer expenses than those of other people present, as one can sometimes see on television. When after the show a famous actor or conductor is introduced to an important sponsor or politician or when a writer receives a prize, his clothes differ from those of the other people present and are almost always less expensive.

Expensive clothing does not befit the artist and the mythology that surrounds him. It creates confusion. When Markus Lüpertz, a rich German painter, drives a Mercedes S class, he deliberately creates confusion and makes a statement, the same as when a rich director of Sony would show up at his office in a Suzuki Swift. (In the case of the director this will be seen as a practical joke; in the case of the artist the art world will interpret it as art and critics will discuss it in lengthy, almost unreadable articles.²⁸) If young artists have sufficient money to take part in expensive pastime, like visiting clubs in which the wearing of designer clothes is necessary to belong, many will not feel like it or have no time for it. The participation by older artists in the events of their social circles usually involves higher cost, but compared with those of other professionals it is still cheap.

All this does not imply that artists have no use for more money. If one were to tell an artist that he does not need more money than he already has, he will certainly protest. And he is right. If he would have more money he would choose a different path, a path that enables him to participate in events that strengthen him more than the events he presently takes part in. He could purchase a grand piano or buy a professional video-camera. Or he could eat out more often with friends. Maybe he could be a happier person. There is also the matter of justice: artists often express that they feel being treated unjustly by society and government who spend too little money on art including subsidies.

However this is not what matters in the context of this section. What matters is that in the course of his career the typical artist uses less money than other professionals to participate in events that strengthen him and strengthen him sufficiently not to leave the arts. This is understandable. Some artists could participate in more expensive events, if they would also take part in events that bring them more money, like making art that sells or working more hours in a second job. But they do not do this, because this would not strengthen them as much or is an energy drain. Evidently, even though the money-need for equipment and materials can be high, the need of artists for money as a means for living is relatively low and this largely explains the low net incomes of artists.

5. The Symbolic Value of Money and Poverty

[Large parts of this and the previous section will be moved to the earlier Chapter Value. Next these two sections may be combined?]

1920In the previous section I analyzed the need of artists for money as a means. In this section I will discuss the need of artists for money as symbol of membership. The two cannot fully be separated, but as conceptual devices the distinction between the two is useful.²⁹ As a means or resource money is not valuable in itself. But in some events money (or close substitutes for money) has also value in itself; it has symbolic value. In these events money or the rejection of money is a symbol of membership. As symbol of membership money can have both a positive and a negative value. For artists money often has a low and sometimes a negative symbolic value. Therefore in this respect they have little or no need for money and this adds to the explanation of low incomes in the arts.

Like Art and God money is loaded with value. It is sometimes worshipped, but it can also be loathed as mammon. The difference with Art and God is that the high positive symbolic value is not that widely shared. There is no generally accepted Money-with-a-capital-“m”. Outside money circles

²⁸ *Reference??

²⁹ In my view Collins (2005) makes a too strict distinction between the two. See also Appendix *.

money is usually not an important symbol of membership.³⁰ Moreover, in society at large the high positive value of money in money circles and the righteousness of earning much money are often criticized.

Money primarily has a high symbolic value in professions in which the core business is money or is directly related to money, that is those of bankers, stockbrokers, financial consultants, chief executive officers (CEOs) etcetera. They talk a lot about money and money related matters and this gives them emotional energy. Even though in such circles the non-work events, like a birthday party, are expensive, the participants generally do not need that much money to take part in them. They need it as symbol of membership. And like any symbol of membership it generates feelings of solidarity and morality. (People in money-circles will most of the time argue that their high incomes are deserved.) Among them they compete for positions with more money than the others have, for instance by comparing bonuses. And if outsiders want to rob them from their precious object by forbidding bonuses they protest.³¹

Each profession has its foremost precious objects. For instance, in circuits of scientists or nurses or artists there is much science talk or nursing talk or art talk and during their events science, nursing and art are important symbols of membership participants focus on. Other symbols of membership can also be focus points, for instance because they stand for success. In science publications, formal positions and the membership of prestigious colleges or councils are emblems of success. In nursing these are positions and a reputation among colleagues of being a good nurse. And in the arts performing or exhibiting art in certain locations and recognition by peers, critics and experts are emblems of success; the same as income and wealth are in money oriented circuits. This is not to say that in non-money circles money or close substitutes will never function as symbols of membership. In many social circles the standard of living and expressions of these, like a nice car, a comfortable house and an expensive painting, are symbols of success, which are every now and then celebrated, but they do not come first. Money is not the foremost symbol of membership and its symbolic value is not particularly high.

In circles of artists money tends to have a low and sometimes negative value. Art circles are no money circles. Nevertheless, some artists who earn a lot can become money oriented. This usually happens, when they increasingly participate in chains of events in which money-people participate as well, like financial advisors, who help them handling their high earnings. Whereas previously they were not particularly interested in money, they are, by way of speech, sucked into money circles and start to try to profitably invest their money in order to increase it and sometimes they start companies of their own. This applies more often to pop stars, who do not feel part of the world of Art-with-a-capital-"a", than to, for instance, world famous writers or painters who earn just as much money. But even a mega star like Michael Jackson did not care much for money and was careless in spending it.

Rich artists in the world of Art-with-a-capital-"a" more often develop behaviour that expresses carelessness with respect to money. This befits Art and the stereotypes of being-artist connected with it, while a strong orientation on money does not. For instance, the painter Lucian Freud who earns a lot—his paintings are more expensive than of any other living painter—is known for his gambling.

*He manages to get rid of the money he earns with the sale of a painting within days.³² In his gambling he is not unique: Francis Bacon as well was a gambler and so were several of the nineteenth century bohemian artists.

³⁰ Collins (2005) *. Here some remarks on Zelizer circuits etc. Zelizer (1988) [or other publication?]. Also CHECK Velthuis (2005)

³¹ How dangerous for the world such a symbol of membership at the level of top-bankers can be, was demonstrated by the financial crisis of 2008/9. Given the importance for them of money as precious object their behavior is understandable. Asking them to redirect their behavior by self-regulation may well be asking the impossible. This would imply that only legislation can change their behavior.

Most poor artists I know are very good in handling the little money that they receive and take great care to spend it wisely. At the same time, the showing off of some carelessness with respect to money and the public denunciation of money clearly are precious objects in most circles of artists and art-lovers. Money must be unimportant; it corrupts art. Art and money are often supposed to belong to hostile spheres. Under the heading of “the denial of the economy” we discussed this at some length in Chapter *. That the value of money is especially low in art circles follows from the high value of Art-with-a-capital-”a”. It is the dogma of art-for-art’s-sake” that has most value for the participants in art events.

Many artists and art-lovers tend to be suspicious with respect to artists who are successful and earn much. They think that the latter are interested in money rather than art and that in their circles it is all about money and not art: money for money’s sake instead of art for art’s sake. Often successful artists, young newcomers as well as older established artists, are accused of being commercial. In different degrees they are excluded from circles of artists. Evidently, even though money tends to have no particularly high positive symbolic value, it is nevertheless loaded with value. In the serious arts there tends to be a kind of reversal of the meanings of success and failure.³³ Low earnings are a sign of success, while high earnings are a sign of failure. In this respect it is telling that in popular music, which does not belong to the world of Art-with-a-capital-”a” and in which many professionals are poor as well, young composers-performers, like pop musicians and dj-producers, are less negative about colleagues who start to earn well than in classical music. And at the same time it is telling that in the area of the emerging serious pop music there is again more suspicion.³⁴

In the present context it is useful to know that depending on its origin the value of money can be more or less positive or negative. In certain art circles and their events the value of government money (subsidies and grants) is higher than of money from the market. In not being commercial government money is a symbol of membership in such circles and those who do not receive government money or worse receive market money are excluded. The importance of such symbols can change with time. After the Second World War and up to circa 1990 in Europe in most Art circles government money was valued much higher than market money, but since then its value has gone down. With respect to the origin of money more subtle distinctions are possible, like between money from the central government or from local government, from an established company like Loyds or a newcomer like Red Bull. However, in all this it is not so much the value of money itself but the association of its source with various forms of art that is celebrated.

Certain money related concepts can be precious objects as well. This is, for instance, the case with poverty. Though within circles of poor people poverty can be a symbol of membership, in wider circles it certainly is not. On the contrary, it is the absence of poverty that has a high value in our society. Poverty is not a good thing. And we look at poor people with suspicion. Or we pity poor people and sometimes try to help them, but often we look down on them as well and often shame them, so excluding them from our events. And, indeed, in a rich society most poor people are ashamed of their poverty. The latter is partly due to the fact that because they have little money for taking part in social events, but also to because shame, they live relatively isolated lives.

However, for artists we tend to make an exception. They are allowed to be poor. Unlike others, they do not have to be ashamed of their poverty. This certainly applies to young artists. The poverty of the artist can even be a precious object and a symbol of membership and the artist can be proud of his poverty. Most of the time he enhances the effect by wearing cheap informal clothing, which is not only useful for saving money, but also as an attribute that is, rightly or wrongly, associated with relative poverty. That the artist’s poverty can be a precious object also shows clearly when people fanatically

³² *References on his high prices and gambling.

³³ Cf. Menger (2006) 776

³⁴ Refer to other chapter or give evidence.

emphasize the poverty of painters like Van Gogh. The artist's poverty is romanticized and often people express that they envy the artist for his lack of money and the freedom this brings him.

However, in the case of money and poverty there is almost always double mindedness or rather: opinions can alternate frequently also during one meeting. While poverty or the unimportance of money is a precious object people focus on at one moment, a moment later the opposite can be precious. Collectors celebrate the poverty of the painter, whose painting one of them recently bought, and a moment later they show contempt for the poor bugger. Young poor artists as well often celebrate their poverty, have mutual feelings of solidarity and believe their poverty to be righteous. But at other moments they will argue that it is altogether wrong that they are poor. Then the right to be supported and receive subsidies has become a precious object and those who oppose subsidies are shamed with all means.

A related phenomenon is that people are eager to know whether an artist is successful or not. In many situations one of the first things people ask a visual artist is "do you sell" and next "can you make a living from your work". Apparently they know that many professional visual artists cannot. If he does they praise and admire him. Therefore the reversal of success and failure is not universal. Especially in wider non-art circles success in the arts is also a clear and widely adhered to precious object people focus on. But when the artist tells them that he cannot make a living and that he has major problems in selling his work, the others may well move to an opposite morality and say that this is what could be expected and that "good art never sells".

6. The Work-Preference of Passionate Artists

2800The stereotype of the selfless and passionate artist who is only interested in his artwork and not in money is a valuable stereotype. The stereotype is celebrated, reproduced and circulated in endless art events. The celebration of the passionate artist is particularly rewarding for artists. It is no accident that in conversations artists often say things that reinforce the stereotype. Hardly noticeable they show off their selflessness.

The stereotype of the artist being primarily interested in his artwork and not in money holds some truth. As noted, if they would work fewer hours as artist or spend less money on their artwork, many artists could participate in more expensive events than they do. Because many artists do not do this, they can be said to have a preference for their artwork or, in other words, an artwork-preference. The artwork-preference of artists follows from the attractiveness of the participation in art making events and art events generally in which the high value of art and being-artist is celebrated and which strengthen them. In other words, because artists have a relatively low need for money, many artists can afford to have an artwork-preference. Because the notion of the passionate artist is so strong we shall examine the artwork-preference of artists in more detail in this section.

The concept of the work-preference of artists is illuminating.³⁵ But it must be stressed that within a sociological approach the term preference does not necessarily imply that an artist consciously prefers artwork to money for other purposes. It sooner is a revealed inclination. The inclination shows most clearly when an artist starts to receive more money. The source of the money does not matter. [Refer to anecdote: Philip remembers →→]The artist gets a pay rise in his second job, he may perform more often or sell more art, or he receives a grant or an inheritance, or he finds a partner who supports him.

³⁵ The way it is used in this book differs somewhat from that of David Throsby, who introduced it in economics. Throsby (1994) and Rengers (2002) tested the hypothesis and presented evidence of the existence of a work-preference with respect to time spend on the arts job. My notion of the artwork-preference differs in more than one aspect from that of Throsby. Most importantly, it also includes extra spending of money on the arts job. This has the additional advantage that artists who work full time can still have a artwork-preference. Solhjell (2000) presents Norwegian data that suggest an exceptional artwork-preference also in the form of spending on the arts job. An other difference with Throsby's concept is that for Throsby the work-preference represents an assumption that it is part of a model of artists behavior, while for me it is a revealed preference. Moreover in Throsby's model artists face a survival constraint that applies to everybody, whereas I work with a subjective survival constraint that includes the survival as a professional artist.

If “normal” people would receive more money, they would buy a LCD television or a car, go more often on holiday or work fewer hours. The typical artist however, uses at least part of the extra money on his artwork, for instance to rent a (better) studio or to buy materials or equipment he can use in his arts job, like expensive paints or a special video camera. Or he uses all or part of it to reduce the hours he works in his better paid second job in order to work more hours as artist. Or he uses it to spend more time within his arts job on making “true” art, while reducing the hours making art that sells. And if the artist starts to receive less money —his partner leaves him, the rent of his studio goes up, the hourly wage in his second job goes down— the opposite is likely to happen. He starts to spend less money on equipment or to work fewer hours in his art job and more on his second job.

An artwork-preference can be more or less intense. The artist can be said to have an extreme artwork-preference, if he uses all extra money he receives for his artwork, and to have no artwork-preference, if he spends none of the additional money on his artwork. The former artists are likely to be called very passionate. In various degrees other self-employed professionals have a work-preference as well. For instance, certain scientists have a clear science-work-preference. But looking at all participants in a non-art profession the work-preference is generally less strong and widespread than in the arts. Passion and a work-preference are sooner symbols of membership in the arts than in other professions. —The work-preference of artists and other professionals is not the same as a general addiction to work in the case of workaholics. The former go for a certain type of professional work. The latter prefer work per se and among them this is a symbol of membership.—

It must be noted that a strong artwork-preference does not imply that artists who have this preference are not interested in money. The opposite may well be true. Such artists can be very much after money and appear to be greedy. They are interested in money, but not as a means for living and for participating in general social events, but as a means for making art, i.e. for being involved in art making events that strengthen them.

An example can illustrate the artwork-preference as well as the apparent greediness of artists. As a visual artist I often work with young dancers who model for him. When they come to me and I tell them my rate, they start to negotiate in order to get the most out of it, while non artists just take it or leave it. These dancers appear to be greedy. However, as soon as they find a paid project in the arts, they quit. They loose interest in money. Sometimes I know that their project leaves them enough free time to continue modeling and I offer them more money, but they are not interested. The apparent greediness has disappeared. Though they may well enjoy the money-earning-event of modeling, they now have alternatives that strengthen them more. Since, thanks to the project, they earn enough, they spend every free minute they have on their artwork, like training, following master classes, helping colleagues out, joining unpaid projects or starting a project themselves. Only when the paid project is over and the money is finished, they come back to me to work as a model again and once more they try to get as much money out of it as possible.

Another phenomenon that is otherwise hard to explain is tax evasion by artists. Artists will not tell how large the amount of their unreported income is, but many admit that they do not report all their income, while other professionals who evade taxes tend to keep this secret and will deny that they do so. Evidently both artists and many people around them regard the tax evasion by artists as less immoral than in the case of others. (When people buy art works in my studio, they bring cash without having been asked for it, even though paying through a bank-account would have been easier and safer.) The explanation is that people are aware of the work-preference of artists and are impressed by his passion. They understand that artists look for money in whatever corner they can find it. Sometimes artists get it by cheating the taxman, sometimes by cheating the officials who supply social security, and wherever there is a grey zone artists tend to exploit it in their own advantage as much as possible. But because people are convinced that they do not use the money for themselves but for art, they see their behavior as justified and not as immoral. Artists are passionate and

therefore the end justifies the means. Again, it is the high value of art that enables this type of behavior.

Not all artists have a strong artwork-preference. Moreover, the work-preference does not imply that artists never take a path that gradually involves more money for other events than just art producing events. The work-preference is usually strongest in the case of young artists, who recently left an art academy or conservatoire.³⁶ With time the preference tends to become less strong. This applies to successful as well as unsuccessful artists. First, artists who remain unsuccessful for a long time become less passionate or, as people sometimes say: they start to “compromise”. They increasingly spend hours in second jobs or make also commercial art. Their money-need increases as art making events start to give less emotional energy, while other more costly non art events become more attractive. However, as the data show, overall income of the typical artist remains very low. Staying in the arts and not going for another profession is still an expression of a significant artwork-preference. Moreover, among all poor artists there is group who is altogether poor. They are in the danger zone. If they would start to work fewer hours in the arts, they would stop being a professional artist. These poor artists may well have a strong artwork-preference, but it does not show.

Second, the small group of artists who become successful and earn more and more money from their artwork will usually spend an increasing part of the extra money on consumption.³⁷ Evidently, the participation in more costly non-art events that strengthen the artist now become within reach. The benefits of eating out more often with friends or taking the family more often on a holiday or buying a bigger house now outweigh the costs; the net effect is no longer an energy drain. Moreover, when the artist gradually takes part in more expensive art and non-art events, he moves into different circles. New people come into his life, while some of his earlier colleagues, who became successful as well go along with him and others are left behind.

The need for income and money are related. Those who earn most usually also have the largest need for money. Therefore, there exist echelons of successful artists. The higher the echelon the more artists earn while at the same time needing larger amounts of money to participate in chains of events that strengthen them. At the same time the numbers in the successive echelons decrease rapidly. In case of the very few artists at the top the money just flows in. Even if these artists would want to stop the flow, this can be almost impossible. The latter is for instance the case when very successful writers or musicians receive copy-rights from books, CDs or television performances that sell all over the world. Most very successful visual artists do not receive large amounts of copy-right money. Nevertheless, when almost any famous museum or gallery wants their work, they can often increase production and/or ask ever higher prices, and this way their income can become very high as well. *As noted, somewhat paradoxically, it is in these situations that some artists become very much oriented on money, not for their artwork but as a symbol of membership in the circles they then participate in.

Within the group of artists who are not poor there is a group with low, zero or negative incomes from art, but with second jobs that are that well paid that their overall income is so high that they are not poor. Often they have interesting arts related or non-art second jobs, which they would not easily give up, when their overall income increases. For instance, a visual artist may have a well paid job teaching at an art academy or a poet works as a family doctor. Their artwork-preference can be relatively low. If they would not have been recognized by their peers in the arts as professionals, they

³⁶ Within the human capital theory in economics the outcome of the artwork-preference can also be interpreted as a form of investment in future monetary rewards. However, given the low income perspective of the typical artist, this interpretation only makes sense in the case of a small group of very promising young artists. However, when the economist would take into account future non-monetary rewards this interpretation can make sense for a larger group of young artist.

³⁷ With respect to working hours (and ignoring spending on the arts job) Rengers (2002) found that artists who earn more in their arts job have a less strong artwork-preference than artists who earn less.

would have been passionate amateur artists. These artists resemble the rich *gentlemen/women-artists [other term?] of old.

Taking into account the artwork-preference of artists the poverty of a majority of artists needs to be put in perspective. Though the majority of artists are poor, it can be argued that a large part of them would not need to be so poor, if they would be less passionate about their work or, in other words, if their work preference would not be so strong. Even though these artists do not feel they have a choice, looking at them from an outsider position they have room to move. Without having to leave the profession they could be less poor, if they would work fewer hours in their art job or if they would spend less money on it. This could well apply to the majority of the artists that are registered as poor. Only part of them are in the danger zone and have no room to move. This is the before mentioned group of altogether poor artists. If their overall income goes down only a little they cannot meet their personal survival constraint for being artist anymore and they will leave the arts.

The point where somebody decides to stop working as a professional artist is not clear; it depends on his personal circumstances and attitude, but it also depends on the conventions of his art world. It is possible that a poet who still manages to work three hours a week as a poet and regularly participates in poetry events is still regarded as a professional artist by his peers, while a violinist, who spends two days a week on his artwork, is not. Often also in his own perception the latter has become an amateur. Nevertheless, while never really leaving the danger zone, many artists in the group of altogether poor artists tend to be very inventive. All the time they find new solutions to be just able to continue to work as an artist. But of course, some do leave, while others enter. After all most young artists start their career in the arts in the danger zone. Only after a while some of them are able to join the group of artists who could have avoided being poor.

Also in another respect the poverty of a majority of artists need to be in perspective. As noted in the first section, the parents of the typical artist are relatively highly educated. On average such parents also have relatively high incomes as have the artist's brothers and sisters and often other family members as well. They are well-to-do. If necessary poor artists can turn to their family for help. Therefore artists coming from well-to-do families are insured against real impoverishment and extreme hardship. For these artists the arts profession is less risky than it appears to be.

By way of excursion I will say a bit more about the effects of the economic background of artists. Parents of families with low and median incomes, including many immigrant families, want their sons and daughters to do better than they did. Going into the arts is generally regarded as far too risky, and looking at the low income perspectives of artists this makes sense. Therefore they will discourage their sons and daughters from going into the arts. In well-to-do families however, most of all those which have been prosperous for more than one generation, the focus on money as a means and sometimes as a symbol of membership symbol as well has often been replaced by an interest in art and culture. They can afford to be interested in art and allow a child to enter the arts and sometimes they encourage the child to do so. Moreover, in the family's social circle the interest in art and the willingness to let a child become artist often enhances the family's distinction; often more so than houses and cars do. In other words, the child frequently takes part in interaction events in which art, artist and becoming artist are precious objects.

Artists from well-to-do families and the circles around them are aware of the fact that if everything goes wrong partners, relatives and friends will stand on their side and will help them out. It is true that when this happens these artists may well be too proud to call on family members for help. But knowing to friends that help is possible makes hardship more bearable. Moreover, in practice many artists, who come from well-to-do families and who are sometimes not even in the danger zone, will every now and then, half-heartedly or not, take part in events with family members or relatives or friends of the family in which a shared mood will lead to actions that are beneficial for them. These people may well use their social network to assist the artist, for instance in finding attractive second jobs. Moreover, the artist will receive all sorts of gifts, like recommendations and extra sales within a

network of friend and families. Also more straightforward gifts, from purchases of art for more than its market price to free housing, can come the artist's way. Sometimes help is hardly noticed as when, for instance, partners gradually start to increase their share in the rent of the house or the payment of the education of the children. And if the artist has been in the danger zone for a while and finally has no other choice but to leave the arts, family and partners will help him find a new job that is interesting and reasonably well paid. Some artists will openly resist help, but at the same time cooperate or indirectly encourage it. In some cases the "encouragement" may come from a combination of pleasing the others and at the same time making the others feel guilty about the fact that they are rich, while the artist is poor.

7. Failed, Excluded and Suffering Artists

2660The picture that may have emerged from the previous analysis could well be one of artists who have little money, but lead exciting lives and are not worse off than others. But this conclusion is not necessarily right. On the contrary, I shall argue that it does not apply to many poor and unsuccessful artists. As said, it is not long term rewards (or life time income as in economics) but exclusively short term rewards that move people and determine their course. Therefore it is possible that the path many artists take goes downhill. During their course the choice of events open to them is increasingly limited to events that bring less and less emotional energy.

When stereotypes as symbols are as loaded with value as in the arts and are as widely shared, and when so many people have invested energy in them, there is bound to be a dark side as well. The artist who fails to live up to expectations and disappoints his surrounding, in other words, the failed artist, damages the precious object of the others, he damages Art. The moment the others are somewhat aware of his failure, he becomes a threat to the precious object and is excluded from the group's feelings of solidarity. At such moments he is no longer a member of the group; he becomes an outsider. Because he as well strongly believes in the preciousness of art and because it was not his intention to put it down, he feels shame and the exclusion is particularly painful for him.

The number of professional artists who every now and then consider themselves to have failed and who are regarded by others as failed artists is likely to be high. In most other professions being able to make a living out of one's work is a requirement for being regarded as a professional. In the arts however, a persistently low or zero income is not incompatible with professionalism, but at the same time, especially in the case of older artists, it is often seen as a sign of failure. And because so many artists cannot make a living from their work in the arts the percentage of failed artists or rather of artists who on many occasions are regarded as having failed is likely to be much higher than in other professions.

In this respect the double attitude towards money and income matters. Though in many events the "official" opinion is that money and income say little about quality or is negatively related to quality, in the backroom or at other moments the opposite opinion can come first, especially in the case of artists who have been poor for some time. Therefore, even though professionalism is not their problem, after having been a professional for a while and selling very little or performing only rarely while earning little or nothing, many artists cannot prevent themselves from occasionally pondering the possibility of being a failed artist, an artist whose work is just not good enough.

Often this does not only apply to the many poor artists but also to artists in the comparatively small group of artists who can make a living out of their art, but in comparison to other professionals and very successful artists earn little. More than once I participated in meetings of such artists. Instead of being proud of their exceptional achievement they often mention that they see themselves predominantly as failed artists.

In no profession the people in the inevitable large group of less successful professionals are regarded by others and themselves as having predominantly failed in their profession. In the arts failure and different degrees of success are loaded with value. This contributes to not only a strong division

between groups of failed and not-failed artists, but also between groups of more or less successful artists. This phenomenon cannot just be explained from the necessarily stiff competition in an area of production in which in comparison to demand there is much supply. It is also the consequence of the wish of less successful artists to avoid the shame of relative failure and of the wish of more successful artists to avoid feeling ashamed for them. Shame about a lack of success is omnipresent in the arts. Both the strong competition and the shame are the result of the unusual high value of art.

Unlike in other professions meetings of artists who do well and of artists who do less well are seldom successful. They are an energy drain. It is best to avoid them. In any profession echelons of success exist. But meeting with colleagues of a different stature can be inspiring and give much energy. For instance in science, the mingling of successful and less successful scientists during a conference can well add to the gaiety. Looking up to others can be nice the same as being admired. In most professions the distribution of success is unequal, there is vertical stratification and there exist barriers of entrance between the various echelons, but I have the impression that only in the arts these are so strong that sometimes just mingling is already frustrating and painful. When I am in the company of artists who are more successful than I am, or on the contrary less successful, both I and the others take great care not to touch on topics from which the difference in success shows. We do so, because being only a bit less successful is already a sign of failure in the arts.

Listening to conversations between colleagues in the arts, who are unsuccessful and have been poor for a long time, I also noticed that certain topics have become taboo. Generally talking about the art's activity itself, the actual painting or performing, is okay. But talking about it as a job is often taboo. One does not ask one another "how often did you perform lately", "how many paintings did you sell recently" or "when was your last exhibition and was it in a real gallery". One certainly should not ask for income from art, nor should one mention the success of others. (And if the latter is discussed, it needs to be put down.) But talking about second jobs is generally okay. Because such taboos are in the back of the participants heads and it takes at least some effort to prevent breaking them, they cannot but influence the events and cause discomfort.

Usually both the artist and the people around him will try to cover up the downside of being-artist. During interaction events there is often a collective denial of the artist's failure. The artist plays the game of the artist who did not fail, who loves his work, who can live with not being successful and poor or who otherwise may still become successful later on in his life, and the others agree. Because earlier in his career such characteristics were unambiguous precious objects, sometimes the artist will believe they still are. Yet his failure is "in the air" and there is likely to be some uneasiness. The collective denial is anyway painful for the artist and the people around him. It is an energy drain. The artist feels shame and others feel ashamed for him. At such moments he is not part of the group.

In the course of a longer event such moments of discomfort usually do not last long, but they make a difference. The people surrounding the artist usually do their best to prevent topics arising that may cause the discomfort, but the artificiality of this and the effort they have to make is already a source of some discomfort. Given the high value of art it is difficult for the artist not to every now and then draw the attention of others, and for the others it is hard to fully ignore the being-artist of the artist.

Therefore if the artist has a choice he will attempt to steer away from such events and to participate in events in which his failure cannot be an issue, because people do not know him. In these he can remain incognito or still boast about his being-artist. But if this has become a way of life, such artists are always on the run. Most of the time their course will be depressing sooner than exciting. Usually however the steering away from unpleasant events by artists, who have been poor and unsuccessful for a long time, leads to a degree of isolation. There is a narrowing down of the circles they participate in and their social network shrinks.

Often such artists feel most comfortable in circles of colleagues and friends or strangers who also have been poor for a long time. In these the romantic notion of the bohemian artist can sometimes ease the pain. But the position of the poor nineteenth century bohemians was different. They knew

that they were at the forefront of artistic development and the fact that, unlike their family members, they were able to communicate and mingle with common people, for instance in bars or cheap hotels, only added to their pride and energy.

More than in the case of poor people for whom poverty is normal the poor person who comes from social groups that are not poor has to justify his poverty for himself and for the people around him. Therefore the failed artist not only has to justify why he goes on while being unsuccessful as artist, but also why he goes on while being an apparently unproductive citizen. Whether one likes it or not, in western society income or at least some income is an important symbol of being useful and thus a symbol of membership. And even though in the arts money is no criterion for professionalism, an artist who for a long time had hardly no income or a negative income has to be very firm not to start to have doubts about his usefulness in society and therefore as a human being.

The poor artist with a small social network has fewer alternatives he can choose from than someone who is not poor and who has a large network. As said, the choice of events open to artists who have been poor and unsuccessful for some time is often increasingly limited to events that bring less and less emotional energy. And if they take second jobs which are not interesting and which only serve to be able to continue to work as artist, their situation hardly improves. They still have relatively little choice.

However, seen from outside, it can be argued that poor and unhappy artist have a choice: they can always choose to leave the arts. What matters however, is that for the artists this usually is no option. In their imagination and in the conversations they have with others the perspective of leaving the arts is worse than staying. Because art is so loaded with value in their imagination leaving the arts is a public admittance of failure and feels like treason. As they run out of choices and leaving is no option, many poor and unsuccessful artists can be said to be stuck. Staying is depressing, while leaving is thought to be worse. Artists can even get stuck in their work-preference. They have to go on spending extra money and time on the arts activity but out of obligation rather passion. The work-preference is just another must from which there is no escape.

There is evidence that leaving the arts is not so bad. Research shows that former artists find interesting jobs. The jobs are not that well paid, but nevertheless bring far more money than they earned before.³⁸ Moreover, it turns out that leaving the arts can bring relief. Presently in the Netherlands there are government sponsored programs that assist artists in leaving the profession and finding other jobs.³⁹ An important part of the program is showing artists that making a change is possible and that there is life outside the arts. And, indeed, I know of participating colleagues who were altogether stuck, changed their profession, became active again and clearly regained a joy of living.

The question remains if artists are worse off than other professionals. One could try to compare for instance the 50% of artists who earn least with corresponding groups of other professionals. But what should be compared? There is anyway no simple answer to the question. It is sooner a matter of making plausible rather than proof. For instance, the phenomenon that artists who with much effort leave the profession feel relieved could be telling. So at least in hindsight, they believe that they are better off in the new job than they were as artist. However, can one compare the happiness of one person or one group with that of another? In economics the so-called impossibility of interpersonal comparisons of utility is emphasized. Nevertheless, in practice people all the time make comparisons and economists are no exception. Moreover, it is the task of politicians to continuously discuss the relative well-being of social groups and, if felt necessary, to design policies aimed at reducing the differences. And scientists assist them. Often research outcomes are used in the discussions.

³⁸ Filer (1987). *??Data Kunstenaars&Co?

³⁹ * Make reference to Kunstenaars&Co.

Whenever people make comparisons they implicitly or explicitly employ yardsticks. The simplest and most commonly used yardstick is money. On average groups of people which are poor are supposed to be worse off than groups which are less poor—even though a specific poor person can well be better off than someone who is less poor. Therefore, in almost any country there are schemes to support the poorest groups in the population. However, in the case of artists the money yardstick may have to be applied with some care, because part of this chapter's argument is that at least during part of their career artists do not need much money in order to be able to participate in satisfying social events. Therefore poor artists could be better off than other poor people. At the same time this is likely to apply more to young artists than to artists who have been poor for a long time. Nevertheless, in this section another often used and possibly somewhat more reliable indirect yardstick for well-being has come to the forefront: this is degrees of social isolation. In the arts this does not only depend on poverty but also on lack of success in art worlds.

It should be possible to do research on social isolation in the case of artists, however I do not know of such research. Given the high value of art, which many people including many failed artists, are continuously reproducing, it is probably not very rewarding to do research on the dark side of the arts. Yet, as I have tried to make plausible in this section, the arts do have a dark side. Many artists are less well off than people often assume they are.

The earlier discussed economic explanation of low incomes led to the question whether artists are primarily compensated for their low incomes by non-monetary rewards or are primarily mis- or ill-informed. In the sociological explanation of low incomes expectations of life-time income and life-time non-monetary rewards are no important determinants of behavior, but the question itself is not irrelevant. If the career of many artists go downhill and they are worse off than other professionals, it can be argued that, seen from outside and using the economist notion of “compensation”, artists often take a course in which, in comparison with others, they are not compensated for low income. The information they used contributed to them taking this course. This information is thoroughly colored by the high value we attach to art. Therefore the high value of art, low incomes and suffering in the arts go together.

8. Conclusion and Signs of Change

In our society the value of art is high and yet the majority of artists are poor. The main conclusion of this chapter is that the relationship between the high value of art and the low incomes in the arts is twofold. For two reasons the typical artist takes a path in which he uses relatively little money. First, the high value of art shines on artists. Therefore artists are much strengthened by events in which the emblems of being an artist and related emblems, above all those of being authentic and self-realizing, strengthen him, while participation is generally cheap. It is relatively easy for artists to survive as artist with having little money. And even though some artists could participate in relatively expensive events, they may not do so. It would imply that are forced to take part in events that bring them more money, like making art that sells, but do not strengthen them much or are an energy drain. Evidently, the need of artists for money as a means is relatively low and this largely explains the low incomes of artists. Second, the typical artist participates in events in which money as symbol of membership has a low or negative value. Therefore expensive emblems work against him, while the value of poverty is not as low as elsewhere and can even be positive. These two factors explain the low incomes in the arts. Given the high value of art poverty in the arts is structural. Many artists being poor is an inevitable consequence of the specialness of art. Only if in the decades to come the high value of art would go down, the percentage of artists being poor would go down as well and the median income would go up.

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THE VALUE OF ART

Alternative title: The Symbolic Value of Art

A Social Study of Art, Artists and the Arts Economy

Hans Abbing

Provisional Synopsis

The book studies art, artists and the arts economy from the perspective of interaction. Value and values in the arts are created, expressed and maintained in events in which people interact while focusing on art. The emphasis is on symbolic value, but other values, among them monetary value, are discussed as well. The text is primarily an application to the arts of the theory of the sociologist Randall Collins on interaction ritual chains, but insights from economics are also applied. Moreover, the theory of the sociologist Norbert Elias on the civilization process plays an essential role.

Introduction

After a general introduction various views on art are discussed. First, there is an essentialist view that colors people's thinking about art and dealings with art. Second, social views on art exist. In this context the notion of the artwork-itself is put in perspective. Over time art works change and so do the ways in which people consume art. Third, this book's view on art is presented.

Next the main unit of analysis in the book, the art event, and its ingredients and outcomes are explained. In art events people interact while focusing on art. Art events run from a concert in a stadium to a conversation about art. The focus on art is an ingredient of an event. For participants symbols of membership or precious objects are an outcome. They are loaded with value. People who participate in successful art events get vitality or emotional energy out of their participation.

Finally different notions of value and values are discussed.

1. The Value of Art

The value of art is high, both in monetary and non-monetary terms. This high value is created and maintained in numerous art events. The same applies to personal value or taste, which is not given but develops in interaction with others. Aesthetic value as well is not intrinsic, but depends on art entrepreneurs, like art historians, who during art events create and maintain precious objects, which function as symbols of membership. Artists and art entrepreneurs invest much energy in the overall symbolic and money value of art. Because not everybody is rewarded correspondingly a notion of exploitation is applicable. The phenomenon that aesthetic value and market value do not always correspond is explained.

2. Civilized Art

At least up to the twentieth century within a long term civilization process society became more formal and this influenced the nature of art events. Moreover, during the eighteenth and especially nineteenth century the role of art in society changed. Art increasingly assisted people in their search for individuality, but otherwise it became less functional. Art and artists became special; sacred art and the mythology around it are born and art is no longer supposed to be a commodity. Moreover, people could derive distinction from their consumption of art. At the same time art became a means in the education of the masses. However, the trend towards informalization, which became the dominant trend after the Second World War and which can be interpreted as a new phase in the civilization process, has drastically changed the position of the arts in society.

3. High, Serious and Popular Art Events

The chapter proposes a distinction between on the one hand high and serious art events and on the other popular art events on the basis of a different type of morality. The righteousness of Art-with-a-capital-“a” in the case of high and serious art is universal while that of popular art, like for instance most pop music, is local. The distinction also shows from the relatively subdued behavior in high and serious art events. Next a distinction is made between high and other serious art events. In high art events behavior has a ceremonial character. It is argued that the extreme stillness during classical concerts is largely ceremonial. Finally the process in which part of pop music events are turning into serious art events is discussed.

4. Artistic Ethos and Ambiance

The chapter analyzes the economic and cultural capital that producers and consumers use in the participation in art events. Various attitudes of artists and art-lovers and their understanding of artworks represent forms of cultural capital. In this context a distinction between specialists and generalists among consumers is useful. In the arts there is both price and social exclusion. Often the latter is decisive. Ambiance, from buildings to producer and consumer behavior, is an important source of in- and exclusion.

5. The Value for Artists of Work and Money

The average income of artists is persistently low, much lower than that of any other group of professionals. Standard economics cannot explain this. The phenomenon that many youngsters enter the arts while incomes are low, can be explained by looking at their participation in chains of art events in which positive stereotypes of being-artist are important symbols of membership. Money is relative unimportant and its symbolic value is sometimes negative while that of poverty can be positive. But in the case of failed artists existing stereotypes tend to turn against them.

6. The Value of Support

This short chapter analyzes various forms of support and market income as well as their symbolic value for artists, consumers, donors and governments. In this context the morality or legitimization that surrounds them is discussed. Special attention is paid to the wish to help poor artists.

7. New Times, New People, New Art

In a simultaneous process of technological change, informalization and de-hierarchization people change as well. Presently the meaning and significance of authenticity is not the same as fifty or hundred years ago. Innovation and the development of schools, styles and genres in the popular arts differ from that in the established arts. The new art-consumer is increasingly omnivore. New media and new ways of communication have a major impact on the popular arts and the ways in which they are consumed.

8. Is Art becoming less valuable?

The final chapter presents an inventory of developments in art worlds in connection with developments in society and discusses the future of the arts. The simultaneous process of demystification, re-commodification and professionalization is likely to continue. Given self-destructive practices in the arts and dwindling audiences, the legitimization crisis of support is likely to increase. Probably part of art will move in the direction of the sciences, another part will take the form of art-services, while a large part will move in the direction of entertainment.

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Provisional Table of Contents

Introduction

1. General Introduction / 2. Views on Art / 3. Art Events / 4. Value and Values

1. The Value of Art

1. The High Value of Art / 2. The Denial of the Economy / 3. Personal Value / 4. Aesthetic Value and Market Value / 5. The Maintenance of the High Value of Art / 6. Conclusion and Signs of Change

2. Civilized Art

1. A Civilizing Process / 2. The Birth of Sacred Art / 3. Decommodification / 4. Distinction through Art and Civilization by Art / 5. Informalization and De-Hierarchization / 6. Conclusion

3. High, Serious and Popular Art Events

1. A Classical Concert and a Pop Concert / 2. Concerts are Celebrations / 3. Art Events differ in Morality / 4. Art Events differ in Self-Control / 5. Art Events differ in Ceremoniousness / 6. The Symbolic and Practical Value of Stillness / 7. Crossing the Border / 8. Conclusion and Signs of Change

4. Artistic Ethos and Ambiance

1. An Artistic Ethos / 2. Difficult Art / 3. Innovative Art / 4. The Money and Social Price of the Participation in Art Events / 5. Ambiance / 6. Conclusion and Signs of Change

5. The Value for Artists of Work and Money

1. The Economic and Social Position of Artists / 2. Economic Explanations of Low Incomes / 3. The Celebration of Becoming and Being Artist / 4. The Value of Money as Resource / 5. The Symbolic Value of Money and Poverty / 6. The Work-Preference of Passionate Artists / 7. Failed, Excluded and Suffering Artists / 8. Conclusion and Signs of Change

6. The Value of Support

1. Extent and Forms of Support / 3. The Value and Legitimization of Subsidies / 4. Helping Poor Artists / 5. Conclusion and Signs of Change

7. New Times, New People, New Art

1. People change / 2. Authenticity / 3. Omnivorousness / 4. Technological Developments / 5. Genres, Styles and Innovation / 6. Conclusion

8. Is Art becoming less valuable?

1. Demystification / 2. Re-Commodification and Less Support / 3. Professionalization / 4. Dwindling Audiences of High and Serious Art Events / 5. Self-Destructive Practices / 6. A Legitimization Crisis / 5. The Future of the Arts. A Prediction