

THE VALUE OF ART

A Social Study of Art, Artists and the Arts Economy

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Provisional Synopsis and Table of Contents

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.

Each chapter will commence with one or two anecdotes based on the author's observation of artists' and art-lovers' behavior.

The book addresses academics: scholars and students in cultural studies, sociology, economy and art-history. The book will be more academic than the author's 2002 dissertation *Why are Artists Poor*. However, interested artists and art-administrators should be able to read and understand the text.

Hans Abbing is an economist and visual artist. He is emeritus professor in art sociology at the University of Amsterdam.

Earlier book in English by the author: Abbing, H. (2002). *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. (Fourth printing 2008. Distribution in the US by the Chicago University Press. Translations in Japanese, Chinese and Korean.)

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. The unexpected in art is emphasized.

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 High 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. An Art Ethos

The chapter analyzes characteristics of the art ethos that exists among groups of art producers and consumers and the cultural capital involved. Looking at the unexpected in art works their repetitiveness and complexity are put in perspective and so is innovation in the arts. In this context a distinction between specialists and generalists among producers and consumers is useful. In the arts there is both price and social exclusion. Often the latter is decisive. Ambiance, from buildings to dominant 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, their extent and 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

People change in a simultaneous process of technological change, informalization and de-hierarchization. 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 new 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. Art works stand out less and art consumption is more integrated in other consumptive activity.

8. Is Art becoming less valuable?

The final chapter presents an inventory of developments in art worlds in connection with developments in contemporary 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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Alternative title: The Symbolic Value of Art

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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 High Value of Art

1. The Production of Value of Art in Art Events / 2. The High Value of Art / 3. The Denial of the Economy / 4. Personal Value / 5. Aesthetic Value and Market Value / 6. The Maintenance of the High Value of Art / 7. 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. An Art Ethos

1. An Art Ethos / 2. Repetition and the Unexpected / 3. Entertainment and Innovation / 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 / 2. The Value and Legitimization of Subsidies / 3. Helping Poor Artists / 4. Conclusion and Signs of Change

7. New Times, New People, New Art

1. People change / 2. Technological Developments / 3. Authenticity / 4. Omnivorousness / 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 in the Arts / 6. A Legitimization Crisis / 5. The Future of the Arts. A Prediction