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Synopsis



Hans Abbing: From High Art to New Art

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High art, the art of the refined citizen, has passed its historic peak. The attendance figures in the traditional performing arts continue to decline while costs continue to rise. They are facing a dramatic dilemma: modernize or perish. At the same time, however, new art has been experiencing an appreciable boom. An ever broader and increasingly varied supply is serving a fast-growing and eager audience. New art distinguishes itself from the high arts in its relaxed and informal atmosphere. Ambiance and emotion have become determining factors in the preferences and choices made by the public. Innovation, inventiveness and market forces are what drive the new arts. Meanwhile, high art has become locked in a vicious circle of inertia, self-satisfaction and subsidies.

These developments are at their most evident in the world of music. In *From High Art to New Art*, Hans Abbing has thus chosen to compare the open and communicative culture of pop music to the formal and self-referential world of classical music. He argues for the development of new practices that are needed to revitalize classical music. Because, if the world of classical music wants to hold onto its audience, it will have to undergo a veritable paradigm shift or at least engage in some thinking outside of the box.

Synopsis

Introduction

The author here defines the central themes of the book. He wants to explain the fact that interest in high art among those with a higher education is dwindling while their interest in popular music, musicals and cabaret is on the rise. Dwindling attendance figures are the most obvious in the world of classical music. Attendance figures, on the one hand, continue to decline and the average audience is

becoming increasingly older, while, on the other hand, the consumption of classical music in the home remains considerable.

In this essay, the author defines high art as the art that is consumed in a restrained manner. Meanwhile, in what the author calls new art, audiences are able to express their emotions. Thus, the manner of consumption is considered informal.

A classical concert and a pop concert

In this chapter, the author compares a classical concert to a pop concert. The audience of the classical concert is quiet, restrained and introverted. The unwritten rules regarding behavior have an all-or-nothing character. Tapping along to the music with your feet and whispering are definitely not permitted. Meanwhile, in a typical pop concert, participation and interaction are essential. The audience expresses its emotional impulses while remaining relatively considerate of their fellow concertgoers. The rules are interpreted with a certain flexibility. Moreover, issues are often negotiated, both between audience members and between musicians and the audience.

While the pop music world encompasses a variety of ambiances, high art performances are characterized by an atmosphere that is almost always the same – introverted and “polite.” In other words, it is a largely homogenous culture. Young people who are not well served by this sort of culture and are not attracted to this ambiance are thus locked out.

Art makes no demands

In this chapter, the author argues that artworks have no intrinsic value; all of its values are socially constructed. There is also no authentic performance and there is no single appropriate way of consuming a work. The same artworks are consumed in entirely different ways in different eras. In the past, people used to dance to some Baroque music, while today they listen to it in silence. The way people consume art may also vary greatly during the same era. Consumption of a specific concert may be formal in a concert hall and informal outdoors with people standing around and able to come and go.

The problems that the high arts currently face are often explained as being a result of their relative complexity and the fact that children in school no longer acquire the skills necessary to appreciate these art forms. But complexity is relative. And, in the case of classical music, pretty much everyone learns some basics along the way, among others through the classical music we are exposed to in films.

Refined citizens

This chapter details how high art belongs to a period during which the formalization of behavior was at its peak and citizens learned to keep their emotional impulses permanently and effortlessly in check. This kind of behavior had its purposes, given the socio-economic relationships of that period.

Feelings were suppressed, but, to a degree, while quietly listening to romantic music, the listeners managed to discover their, sometimes dangerous, subconscious feelings without having to worry about being exposed. These citizens were simultaneously controlling *and* subservient. Thus, an art establishment determined the superiority and inferiority of artworks and the manner in which they should be consumed. This led to the establishment of tradition and the canon. There was social exclusion but also a paternalistic sense of wanting to educate others. At the same time, people feared the emancipatory aspects of market forces and new techniques.

New times

This chapter looks at the process of informalization that emerged to dominate society in the second half of the 20th century. Relations in contemporary society serve flexible people better than people brought up more formally. Thus, in newer concert situations, people give in more readily to their impulses, such as moving along to the rhythm of the music, while keeping the feelings of others in mind. This is a form of “controlled decontrolling.” Therefore, the unconditional obligations that characterize a classical concert situation with all of its all-or-nothing rules have become increasingly difficult to accept. Younger audiences are simply raised in a less formal manner, and thus do not feel at ease in the formal setting of a classical concert.

An informal society offers more choice, more freedom, and more behavioral varieties. The number of musical styles is considerable. Artists have become outspoken personalities, whom the audience can easily identify with. Their voices reflect their personality. In contemporary culture, the experience of being authentic is essential for both performers and audiences. In this regard, the author discusses the characteristics of various youth cultures and the importance of technological developments. He proposes that, contrary to the innovations that occur in the high arts, innovation in the world of pop music is chiefly a matter of self-financing. It is only over the course of time that the market becomes an important factor.

The government

In this chapter, the author argues that postwar government policy has created a situation of “more subsidies for less people.” Attendance figures continue to decline, while the government is now funding concerts and performances at an average rate of four times the price of a ticket. It becomes increasingly difficult to legitimize this level of support.

Social exclusion, which is currently such an essential aspect of a restrained ambiance, seems to be working all too well; even the classical music lovers’ own children and grandchildren are abandoning traditional concerts and performances. This creates a vicious circle of rising costs and increased funding. Thanks to this funding the traditional art institutions can continue in their old-fashioned ways. Therefore, costs only continue to mount, which leads to further increases in funding.

Unlike the offerings of commercial concerts and performances, the ratio of concertgoers to performers among the subsidized high arts is often less than 20 to one. Exclusivity and perfection are expensive, but so far audiences are not that willing to pay the price. The average price of a pop concert is now 50% higher than that of an average classical concert.

Many creative artists who have barely graduated from a conservatory (i.e., including theater and dance school, etc.) receive public subsidies almost instantly. This often leads to innovations that are interesting to only a small, specialized audience, while, in the long run, remaining inaccessible to a larger audience.

However, the past few decades have seen some significant changes in government policy regarding arts funding. Funding is now often also used to encourage art institutions to focus more toward a broader audience beyond a mere select group of specialists. This has begun to bear some fruit.

From high art to new art

The final chapter illustrates in a step-by-step manner how a trend from high art to new art is currently underway across the board. Moreover, we can see evidence along the margins of the established art world of the emergence of a new élan. Besides the existing products, we also see the development of new products that offer a more informal ambiance and more choice to the consumer. For the time being, however, the establishment in the high art worlds remains suspicious or inclined to a strategy of paternalism when it comes to new initiatives. However, one does sense that the tide of waning interest can be turned.