

**Hans Abbing: *The Economies of Serious and Popular Art. How They Diverged and Reunited.* Cham (Palgrave Macmillan) 2022, 345 pp. <[doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18648-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18648-6)>**

This book is a major achievement by the Dutch artist and sociologist of culture. He should already be much more present in the cultural policy discussion with his book “Why are Artists Poor?”, which is now 21 years old. This review argues why the new work must become compulsory reading for cultural managers, and the basic text of courses on entrepreneurship in art and music studies.

Abbing organises his material in cultural sociology and cultural economy into a narrative that spans the last centuries of Western (European-North American) culture. It is about serious and popular art. The book begins by describing the concept of “serious art”. This serious art shaped the art scene for a period of about one hundred years. Before that, the distinction between serious art and popular art did not exist; it was only established in the 19th century. Since around 1980, the distinction between serious and popular art has been losing importance again, although there are still strong forces that continue to fight for such a demarcation. It is along this demarcation that privileges and state support are distributed. The sociological argument—Bourdieu’s terms play a major role—is convincing: serious art is a construct of the bourgeois epoch. With this narrative, Abbing succeeds not only in historicising the concept of art and artistic-cultural life, but also in gaining the detached perspective of a historian and economist on a passing epoch, the particularities of which are then to be calmly described, that is at a distance from the agitated debates that so strongly characterise cultural policy, especially in times of change.

Abbing’s view of art is consistently sociological. Art only comes into being in the interaction between the work of art and the art recipient. This also applies to serious art. The artworld emerges from these interactions. But what kind of artworld is shaped under the idea of serious art? Serious art demands appropriate buildings; temples of art have sprung up in city centres. In these temples of art, citizens meet, they relate to art, which one to be approached with appropriate devotion. A behaviour emerges that characterises many of the halls of art to this day. Proper behaviour requires being silent in the concert hall and in the theatre, to quietly enjoy the art presented in a museum. What belongs in the canon of serious art can change, but such change is hesitant. In the concert hall as in the opera, usually only a very limited “classical” repertoire is

presented. But, the clientele of such serious art is becoming smaller and smaller. People who do not share this art, perhaps because they do not appreciate the form of art performance, are considered inferior before the altars of serious art. Serious art is a means of distinction. And if it helps in such distinction, art is allowed to be difficult once in a while. Adorno declared that jazz was not serious art. In the meantime it is, and in the jazz concerts where it is serious art, that holy seriousness of serious art reception prevails.

Abbing describes the social construct of serious art in many ways. It is authentic (whatever it means to be authentic), it speaks for itself. Art is considered the creation of artistic personalities, works of art are singular. They have an aura. Abbing teaches us to understand that such an understanding of art does not describe the thing, but that it is created in an interplay of production and reception. Only serious art made the artist's personality, only serious art endows the work with the aura of singularity. None of this was the case before the bourgeois era.

For the period of serious art, there is an ethos of everything for art. Serious art is not subject to any restrictions, it may do anything and it does not submit to any economic restrictions. In the artworld of serious art, art and commerce contradict each other. For most artists who move in this sphere and who see themselves as serious artists, this has a paradoxical economic effect: they sacrifice their economic interests to art. And the art world expects exactly that from them, because this is proof of the authenticity and seriousness of artistic activity. Only a few make a decent living in the world of serious art. The opposition of serious art and commerce is not contradicted by the fact that serious art, to a considerable extent, is supported and maintained by public money. Such money, however, reaches artists only very selectively, unless they are lucky enough to have found a permanent job in an art temple.

It is quite different in the arts, which do not fit into the world of serious art. For popular art or for art forms that are not included in the canon of the serious, the audience usually pays, and it often pays handsomely. It is hardly ever, and only exceptionally, that the public purse pays here. Where the system of serious art does not suffice, there is a market, and this is not to the detriment of the artists.

So much for a short summary of Abbing's reflections on the epoch of serious art, which can only hint at the rich arguments contained in the book. The author devotes the last chapter to the changing conditions in the artworld since the 1980s. Since then, serious art has been eroding, taboos in reception and production have been dissolving, even

the hostility against commercial art is losing its power. In part, these changes come from economic contradiction and constraints in serious art, it is becoming less and less affordable—Baumol's Law is at work here—despite the support of public money. In part, it comes from a change in the reception of art: the audiences of serious art are shrinking as societies change. In part, however, it is also the fundamental changes that accompany digitisation, in particular that lead to disruptions in both the content and the distribution channels of art. Abbing traces these changes in technology, and then in the resulting changes in the economy of art production and reception. According to the author, above all, new opportunities arise where artists are not afraid to expand their fields of activity, seek new collaborations and no longer submit to the demands that serious art has imposed, and continues to impose on them where it is still dominant.

Why this book as compulsory reading? It presents an artworld in which not only aesthetic but also sociological and economic factors are at work—what has been and continues to be ignored in the serious art system (everything for art). Thus, the book is a good introduction to what graduates of cultural management and art academies can expect in their careers. Entrepreneurship—to take up one of the buzzwords currently popular—is not an attitude, but only becomes effective when the field of action is familiar to the entrepreneur. Abbing's book is easy to read, even entertaining. This makes it particularly suitable for teaching. Abbing defines his terms carefully: text boxes are interspersed again and again to explain and critically validate the terms and his use of them. And Abbing offers examples: everywhere throughout the volume one can read short anecdotes about an artist who experiences the situations and constraints of the art world that are then theoretically described. Hans Abbing is both artist and cultural scientist, part of the artworld and an economist, as he showed in his earlier book *Why Are Artists Poor? A German translation would be desirable for the many programmes in cultural management there. But the English, sometimes tinged with a Dutch accent, is easy to read and should not stand in the way of its reception. It is very likely that the book is available electronically in most relevant libraries. The print version is prohibitively expensive.*

**DIETER HASELBACH**

Philipps-Universität Marburg

· [haselbach@kulturforschung.de](mailto:haselbach@kulturforschung.de)