

POPULAR

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 2 / 2021

**THE CHANGING SOCIAL
ECONOMY OF ART:
ARE THE ARTS BECOMING LESS
EXCLUSIVE?**

REVIEW

Dušan Milenković

University of Niš, Serbia

THE CHANGING SOCIAL ECONOMY OF ART: ARE THE ARTS BECOMING LESS EXCLUSIVE?

REVIEW

Dušan Milenković

Hans Abbing (2019): *The Changing Social Economy of Art: Are the Arts Becoming Less Exclusive?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 257 pages.

ISBN 978-3-030-21667-2, ISBN 978-3-030-21668-9 (eBook)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21668-9>

1. On the social in art and the economics of art, but not exclusively

Hans Abbing's book *The Changing Social Economy of Art, Are the Arts Becoming Less Exclusive?* (2019) is an interdisciplinary approach to the changes that occurred within the world of serious art before, during, and after its peak. In this book, the author examines to what extent the conventions that governed the serious art production, consumption, and market in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century have gradually changed since then, due to the changes in social values and beliefs in the Western world and following the rise of popular art. Abbing's detailed contribution to the ongoing and ever-evolving discussion on the differences between serious and popular art is mainly focused on the decline of public interest in the former and the world's continuing enthusiasm for the latter. Having in mind that the authority of serious art institutions in Europe currently still seems unshakable, this examination of the causes of these alterations in the art market is more than welcome. In addition to that, the present time is just about right for reviewing this Abbing's book because the author is „currently rewriting the book“ and the revised edition will be available in 2022 (as announced on the website that is accompanying this book with the web notes and texts).¹

Abbing's inclination to the „social economy of art“ reflects his educational background in economy and sociology, but also his own experience as a visual artist. Not surprisingly, the book is aimed at several kinds of readers, including artists, art consumers, art managers, cultural entrepreneurs, economists, sociologists, and even aestheticians. Having in mind that an ambitious project of this kind requires careful methodology, Abbing in the introductory chapter of the book carefully defines the main terminology used in the book (and usually illustrates the usage of a term in a particular context). Not presupposing much common knowledge in the book, he usually provides the reader with his own definitions of the concepts such as the „art-world“ (with a hyphen in his spelling, which I will follow in this review, conforming to his habit). Although Abbing in this case does not rely on the usages of the term suggested by Howard Becker or Arthur Danto, his understanding of this concept still very much echoes theirs: „an *art-world* consists of all persons within an overall *world of art* connected with an artform, who have a say in the definition of art in that artform. Together they (...) control the main art-buildings and the official, that is, accredited, art education institutes.“² While Abbing's definitions of the terms used in the book are usually sufficient for the comprehension of its main ideas, some prior knowledge is certainly recommended when it comes to his analyses of more specific problems. This, for example, applies to the parts of the book in which Abbing recalls Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts on the relation between art and social status or certain economic theories such as William Baumol's notion of the „cost disease“. It is worth mentioning that some of the main points in this book are enhanced by Abbing's references to his own experiences as a visual artist, through the thoughts expressed by his female alter-ego, „Anna“. These Abbing's remarks are as interesting and informative as his analyses of various economic and sociological theories or the empirical data.

On the already mentioned website created especially for providing readers with the „web-notes“ and additional „web-texts“ referenced in the various parts of the book, there are multiple ways of getting acquainted with its key points. There are, in fact, four different ways of getting around the topics covered in the book via the website: primarily, there is a long summary (in 10,000 words) consisting of all the main theses presented in the book (including the additional remarks not emphasized by the usage of uppercase letters)³ and a short summary (in 1,500 words) of the most important ideas presented in the book.⁴ Additionally, there is the author's own review of the book, previously published on the website economiststalkart.org,⁵ and lastly, there is also a somewhat extended version of the table of contents, consisting of all the subtitles in the chapters.⁶ Taking into account that the author has provided these ways of scrolling through the topics of the book, in the review I will not limit myself to presenting all the main topics already covered in these web summaries. Instead, I will try to emphasize some more specific points in the book and a couple of interesting examples, as well as the author's personal remarks.

2. Serious art strives, popular art shines - how did it happen?

The book begins with the statement that currently the serious art is „in turmoil“. Although not very cheerful, these words are very well explained throughout the book. This is mostly done via the comparison of various decisions of the serious art institutions, the artists themselves, and the art lovers in the so-called „the period of serious art“ (covering roughly the period between 1880 and 1980) with the procedures developed in the world of serious art before and after this period. In fact, the main structure of almost every subchapter in the book can be described this way. After some general remarks on the problems being presented in a subchapter (e. g. on the importance of authenticity in serious art), Abbing usually extends the topic through the exploration of the relevant social practices that are customary in the mentioned time periods. The author most often refers to the time before, during and after the period of serious art, while the period of the decline of serious art is typically more precisely defined. He regularly talks about the changes occurring in the world of serious art in the last decade or two and occasionally points to the alterations that are currently happening in it. Expectedly, when the author refers to more recent times, he puts more emphasis on contrasting the artistic, social, and economic habits of the world of serious art with those found in the eclectic sphere of popular art. Throughout the book, Abbing is dominantly interested in the changes occurring in the visual arts and music, while some remarks are also made when it comes to the development of dance, theatre, and cinema.

While Abbing extensively criticizes the principles and conventions governing the world of serious art and culture, his intention is not to denounce the art-world of serious art and to conclude that the tradition of serious art should face its destiny by becoming completely irrelevant to the contemporary audience. This is clearly expressed in the conclusion of the book, where the reader will find some more personal Abbing's comments and even hopes when it comes to the future of art: „Art does not have to be grand, but it would be a pity if it were to altogether dissolve and disappear among all sorts of creative activity“. „(...) [I]n spite of all the relativism in this book, this is my wish“.⁷ In one of the last sentences in the book that could very much be one of the first, the author's critique of serious art is disclosed as the expression of his belief that this kind of art should still be produced and should continue to be relevant, but it may need to pursue its future in a different format – by becoming „less exclusive“, as mentioned in the subtitle of the book.

The first chapter of the book is closely focused on the history of serious art and its main characteristics such as its strict separation from the cultural products that possess the entertainment value, its close boundness to the government's subsidies, and the elitists' „gatekeeping“ of the realm of serious art. Even though Abbing writes about the strong

commitment to authenticity in serious art, he also emphasizes the „laziness“ of the serious art producers and institutions caused by the guaranteed financial help from the rich individuals and the authorities. As it will be shown in the rest of the book, it is exactly the flexibility of the world of popular art that led to its growing success in the 20th century. Unlike in the popular arts, today it is increasingly harder to even maintain the heritage of serious art. Abbing points to this fact from the perspective of the art market and the costs of serious art production, talking about the „cost disease“ happening in the current serious art institutions, especially when it comes to organizing concerts of orchestral classical music.

Having in mind the variety of topics opened in the first chapter of the book, It may seem that the subtitle „are the arts becoming less exclusive?“ is, so to say, somewhat „exclusive“ itself. However, by getting familiar with the rest of the book, the reader will start to realize that all these topics – the problems of autonomy, serious art’s denigration of the entertainment and mainstream character of popular art and so forth - are gravitating towards the problem of exclusivity of serious art. Abbing points to the exclusivity of the world of serious art in this chapter by stressing the importance of the „art-buildings“ for the notion of the prestigious and sublime character of serious art, the art that belongs to elitist art lovers who feel „at home“ in these institutions. However, a change in the art market is illustrated in the fact that nowadays, some of these institutions are turned into more user-oriented places that offer the „overall pleasant experience“⁸ to the consumers and attract tourists as well.

3. Should we pay to see *Mona Lisa* „behind 3 cm thick glass“?

In this book, Abbing is not interested in the topics in the field of aesthetics - he explicitly states that he is not concerned with the problems of aesthetic evaluation and claims that the aesthetic form and content are one and the same thing for him. Interestingly, the following chapter opens with the themes closely related to the matters of this discipline, such as problems of the authenticity of the serious artworks and the idea that the arts are always partially reconstructed in the imagination of the consumers. For the author, this discussion is important because the consumers’ dynamic aesthetic experiences often contribute to the pursuit of their identity and the „exploration of one’s self“.⁹ These themes are closely analyzed since all these factors play a role in the market forces of both serious and popular art-worlds. The discussion is further enriched by examining the extent to which the „presence“ of the artist in her artwork adds to this pursuit and to the overall quality of the experience of a serious art piece. It is interesting how Abbing somewhat demystifies Walter Benjamin’s well-known discussion of the „aura“ of the art piece by bounding this topic to the consumer’s search of the artwork’s own history that changes the reception and the meaning of its content. The problems regarding the technical

reproduction of visual artwork are no more relevant to the contemporary consumer, but experiencing the art with the rich history is still interesting for them. Paradoxically, this often stands in the way of the experience itself, as Abbing interestingly illustrates with the example of the „original“ *Mona Lisa* shown behind the “3 cm thick glass giving the painting a greenish glow”.¹⁰ The author’s point is that when it comes to the consumer’s experience, a carefully manufactured reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* would serve a much better purpose.

Turning to a more sociological perspective, Abbing refers to the bourgeois strive for the enrichment of their own lives through the experience of authentic and expressive art pieces. Compared to their habits of experiencing art in a formal, institutionally-controlled atmosphere of art-buildings, the consumption of popular art (and especially popular music) is usually done in the more natural, informal spaces of open-air festivals. The consumers’ opportunity to dance at music festivals, freely move from one to another venue of the same event, consume drinks, and talk to each other, has much contributed to the success of the popular music market in previous decades. A little bit of my experience in coordinating a venue at Nashville jazz festival confirms this is almost a decisive factor for contemporary consumers (even though elitists still think of jazz in terms of high culture and its values). In later chapters, Abbing will emphasize more clearly how serious art establishments have started to copy these successful mechanisms of the organizers of popular art events, and sometimes have even joined them in coordinating an art venue consisting of the works of both serious and popular art. Organizing this kind of events is maybe the most promising way of setting up the inclusion of artists from various backgrounds – thanks to these venues, serious art producers and popular artists get to know each other and collaborate.

4. „Money talks“ about the exclusivity in art

The central chapter of the book is reserved for the topic mentioned in its subtitle: „are the arts becoming less exclusive”? When talking about exclusivity, Abbing refers not only to artworks produced for the educated and rich elite that consumes them in art buildings, but also to the artists themselves and the narrow notion of art profession, restricted largely to white and male people. In the past, this exclusion in the world of serious art was maintained by the authorities within the strictly compartmentalized society, in which lower classes, people of color, and women were mostly suppressed (and sometimes also prohibited) in pursuing a career in arts or even entering the art-buildings. But although this is not the case anymore in the democratized Western world, there are still many mechanisms of exclusion left. Abbing puts much stress on these persistent exclusion practices that somehow fall off the serious art-world’s radar, even though contemporary art institutions are trying to be more inclusive. The first one of them is the

disappointing fact that art made by women still, even in the last decade, sells for „almost half the price“.¹¹ Another is that the so-called „price exclusion“ currently serves as the governing mechanism of the „gatekeeping“ in the world of serious art – high prices keep away people with low income from most of the activities offered by the high culture establishments. The author here not only refers to the unexplainably high prices of visual art pieces – this kind of „consumption“ of serious art (and hopefully the aesthetic experience as well) is reserved solely for those who have money in abundance. More importantly, the „price exclusion“ applies to the prices of the tickets for many events offering serious art, such as classical music concerts or theatre performances. In these cases, as Abbing suggests, „money talks“ – these prices even nowadays express elitist ideas about the serious artworks and its privileged audience.

What is worthy of attention in this chapter is Abbing’s remark that not well-to-do people still want to participate in the events offering serious art. They did not completely lose interest in it, as it is sometimes stated in the articles concerned with the differences between the audiences of serious and popular art. Among those with low income, there are people who would like to occasionally go to the theatre or attend a classical music concert. In addition to the aforementioned way of dividing people by wealth, a similar mechanism contributes to the exclusion occurring within the world of serious art. For example, someone buying cheaper tickets for the concerts or not buying limited editions of the LP records automatically excludes himself from the top-of-the-game consumer elitism in the sphere of serious art. While previously mentioned mechanisms of exclusion are not that common nowadays in the world of popular art, the latter also occurs in it, as Abbing suggests in this chapter.

Examining the inclusion attempts undertaken during the 20th century, Abbing concludes that the so-called „horizontal dissemination“ of serious art (the dissemination occurring within the same class) is indeed somewhat successful, as opposed to the „vertical dissemination“ (aimed at the inclusion of lower-class people), which should be nowadays more encouraged. What should however be discouraged is certainly the ever-present appeal to the exclusivity of serious art, appeal that is still found among the well-to-do people in the contemporary world. While Abbing deeply explores the prehistory of the current behavior of serious art institutions by talking about the practices established during the period of serious art, it is important to note that these historical reflections are here to provoke thoughts on „what ‘can’ be done to make the serious arts (even) more inclusive“.¹² One of Abbing’s answers to this question is that serious art should look up to the market decisions in the world of popular art. This is one of the main points in the book on the social economy of art: if the serious art establishment is unwilling to change its procedures tuned to a different world of more than a century ago, it will seriously endanger its own relevance and even its existence.

5. Is „art for-profit“ the art produced „in the love of money“?

In the fourth chapter of the book, the author is firstly considered with combating the most common prejudices surrounding the matter of dealing with art as a commodity, the world of serious art as an art market, the artists as those who gain profit with an artwork, and art lovers as those who consume art and buy it. Abbing's examination of these themes is more than welcome for readers not very comfortable with the economic discourse on art, but the placement of this analysis within the book is somewhat unexpected. Having in mind that in the first half of the book the author has already discussed the changes in the art market, the ways of providing artists with enough financial help with subsidies, and even the financial disadvantages of the art profession, the readers should be already familiarized with the context of talking about art as a commodity of a special kind. Furthermore, the admirers of Theodor Adorno's critique of treating art as a commodity should be already repulsed with the terminology utilized in the book. However, despite the concerns regarding the placement of this chapter, Abbing's examination of many economic concepts here directly contributes to his investigation of the changes occurring in the production and the consumption of serious art.

One of the points that the author stresses after discussing on the economists' terminology is that the artists creating artworks for profit should not be automatically treated as greedy materialists compromising the quality of their work and freedom of the artistic expression "in the love of money", so to speak. On the contrary, as Abbing suggests, the profit that artists gain with one commissioned artwork can be invested in creating more artworks, or even better art pieces: for example, the profitable artwork will give them a chance to be more autonomous in creating another work or to improve its quality. While exploring the reasons why the world of serious art has mystified the commercial relations inevitably occurring between the artists, art institutions, and the consumers, he emphasizes how this concealment of everything financial is present even nowadays in the world of serious art. That is why, as Abbing argues, the prices of the artworks in the art galleries are not displayed and the financial interactions are oftentimes publicly presented almost as donations. But following the societal changes by which artists cannot simply expect to be subsidized from the authorities, the world of serious art should accept that "cultural entrepreneurship" is not a taboo anymore. Created, promoted, and sold artworks do not become more or less valuable whether artists make them by following their own artistic goals or by being commissioned by the government or a private consumer. The changes in the art market could positively affect artistic production by turning the world of serious art against the "laziness" caused by its simple reliance on the government's finances in the past. But following Abbing's examinations in this chapter, it is important to note that the causes of this enhancement are not solely bound to artists' fear if they are going to make a living in the contemporary world. In the

serious art world driven by market forces, the artists are already being inspired by, in Abbing's words, their "imagined negotiations" with potential commissioners.¹³

Moreover, the author discusses the fact that the serious arts are indeed becoming more creative in these commercially dynamic times by exploring the contemporary artists' tendency to "enrich" their art by adding extras to the artwork itself. Artists (as well as art experts, critics, and marketing agents engaged in these commercial interactions) often do this by providing the audience with additional information about the work, expressing thoughts in the notes attached to the art piece, and even bounding the work to some universal non-artistic values or placing the art in some sort of a narrative. It seems Hegel was right all along – we (still) live in the times in which the art audience strives for the intellectual (and not merely aesthetic) engagement! Lastly, as Abbing suggests in this chapter, the already changed market forces in the world of serious art lead artists to create works that will make the art-world more inclusive. They begin to take into account and apply the demands of the diverse audiences in creating a more user-oriented art. However, their task of achieving this is not in fact that difficult because – as can be guessed – all this has already happened in the realm of popular art.

6. Sharing is even more than caring – Abbing on the future of art

As Abbing has noted in the "Conclusion", the chapter concerned with the importance of sharing art can be read as the closing discussion in the book.¹⁴ It is indeed focused on the application of previously examined inclusion mechanisms. But instead of simply suggesting some of the solutions to the exclusivity matter in the world of serious art, Abbing is showing that the problem of inclusion is rather twofold. The art-world's task is not only to bring serious art to the lower classes but also to suppress the high society's negative inclination towards the sphere of popular art. By doing this, it would lower the strength of the serious art's reoccurring tendencies towards exclusivity and discourage the "gatekeeping". Fortunately, this twofold process is, to a degree, already happening in contemporary times: as Abbing puts it, "higher-educated people have become more omnivorous".¹⁵ Following this, the process of crossing the boundaries between serious and popular art has started occurring in the media as well (especially when it comes to music). But there is still more to be done, and one of the author's recommendations is that the art-buildings should ensure more discounts and thus additionally motivate lower-classes for attending art events. Although some mechanisms of generating exclusivity would inevitably still be present in the serious art market (aimed primarily at more well-to-do art lovers), it is almost a certainty that by attracting more diverse audiences and adapting to their aesthetic demands, the traditional art institutions would keep their relevance in the ever-changing field of cultural industry of the 21st century.

The fact that Abbing has already concluded much of his previous discussions in the chapter “Sharing Art” resulted in a more direct and even personal tone in his actual “Conclusion” (as I have previously hinted). Here the author has truly unpacked his beliefs on the topics covered in the book, and some of them are expressed very straightforwardly, such as his view that societies should not worry much about the arts aimed at rich consumers, for the market will always provide them with the art pieces of their interest. What societies should do is stop subsidizing this kind of art and support the underprivileged groups in their artistic production and consumption. After all, this kind of inclusion has succeeded in the world of popular art even without any government subsidies! But it is important to note that this had not happened accidentally in popular arts – it happened exactly because of the “market forces”. While Abbing claims in his “Conclusion” that “in principle, markets are neither good [n]or bad”,¹⁶ his thoughts expressed throughout the book gravitate towards the idea that the art commerce indeed contributes to the overall inclusion process in the case of serious art. In addition to supporting underprivileged groups, subsidies from the authorities should also be directed at aiding amateur artists in producing serious art pieces, because this will make the world of serious art less restricted to formally trained artists, that are themselves the “gatekeepers” of a sort. Lastly, Abbing expresses his beliefs that these finances should also lead to producing more free art.

7. Final remarks

It is striking how much data Abbing has covered and examined in this book dedicated to the changes in the social and economic relations in the world of serious art. This is why I think this book is a goldmine for a researcher interested in the dynamic creative and commercial circumstances in which serious art was put after its dominance has gradually diminished throughout the 20th century. That being said, I find that the book can be somewhat improved when it comes to communicating the provided data to the theorists. While in this regard the web notes and texts are indeed helpful (and will probably be even more helpful in the future having in mind that they can be further expanded even after the publication of the new version of the book), it is difficult to constantly shift the attention from the book to these webpages. Perhaps this can be avoided by integrating some of the content from the web notes into the book. Moreover, in some cases, the facts were not referenced. I suppose the only reason for this author’s decision was that he didn’t want to overburden the book with the additional notes, but in these situations, the reader cannot easily follow some of the examples and further expand her knowledge on them. Nevertheless, googling the info was certainly helpful in many cases. Above all, it is more than a possibility that the author will review and expand the analyzed data in the rewritten version of the book that is to be published in 2022.

In addition to being valuable to the theorists concerned with the developments taking place in the creative industry of the world of serious art, I believe that Abbing's book could be equally (or even more) interesting to contemporary artists. Consulting all the data he provided on the changes that had occurred in the art market, they can reflect and decide if they are going to participate in the outdated mechanisms of exclusion derived from the traditional world of serious art or assist in combating these self-destructive habits of serious art establishments. For this purpose, Abbing's willingness to share his own experience along with his analysis of the data seems most rewarding. As an amateur musician, while reading some of the parts of the book, I started questioning some of the decisions I have made in cooperating with the bands I have played with and the attitudes I have had with musical event organizers. Moreover, having in mind that Abbing's remarks are written from the perspective of an artist for which the creative process is no enigma, I believe they will also help the readers deeply engaged with the serious art to demystify the „persona“ of an artist and focus more on the artworks themselves. These demystification attempts can be found in some of the examples analyzed in the book, the most interesting being Abbing's opinion on Damien Hirst's statements on his own art. Citing Hirst's words on his famous „spot paintings“ in which the artist claims that the „[e]very single spot painting contains my eye, my hand, and my heart“, Abbing just adds that he finds this statement interesting, taking into account that „of the 1400 spot paintings all but 25 were painted by assistants“.¹⁷ Not analyzing it thoroughly, Abbing makes the example speak for itself. In addition to finding this kind of Abbing's comments amusing, I also think that these reflections very much contribute to the overall understanding of the matters the author examines throughout the book.

¹ Hans Abbing, <https://hansabbing.com>. Accessed March 29, 2021.

² Hans Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art: Are the Arts Becoming Less Exclusive?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 7.

³ Hans Abbing, „Summary of theses (10.000 words)“, <https://hansabbing.com/summary/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.

⁴ Hans Abbing, „Summary (1500 words)“, <https://hansabbing.com/summary-1500-words/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.

⁵ Hans Abbing, „Text in economiststalkart.org (1100 words)“, <https://hansabbing.com/text-in-economiststalkart-org-1100-words/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.

⁶ Hans Abbing, „Table of contents“, <https://hansabbing.com/cover-text/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.

⁷ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 251.

⁸ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 16-7.

⁹ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 71.

¹⁰ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 93.

¹¹ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 120.

¹² Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 245.

¹³ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 184.

¹⁴ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 245.

¹⁵ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 222.

¹⁶ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 247.

¹⁷ Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art*, 70.

Bibliography:

Abbing, Hans. *The Changing Social Economy of Art: Are the Arts Becoming Less Exclusive?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Abbing, Hans. <https://hansabbing.com>. Accessed March 29, 2021.

Abbing, Hans. "Summary of theses (10.000 words)", <https://hansabbing.com/summary/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.
Abbing, Hans. "Summary (1500 words)", <https://hansabbing.com/summary-1500-words/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.
Abbing, Hans. "Text in economiststalkart.org (1100 words)", <https://hansabbing.com/text-in-economiststalkart-org-1100-words/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.
Abbing, Hans. "Table of contents", <https://hansabbing.com/cover-text/>. Accessed March 29, 2021.