

Professor Hans Abbing
Waterkeringweg 117
1051NZ Amsterdam
hansabbing@gmail.com
University of Amsterdam
Emeritus Professor

AVERSION OF COMMERCE IN THE ARTS (IN THE ART PERIOD)

The text below is a summary of “Part III Aversion of Commerce” of my forthcoming book: “THE ART PERIOD. On the changing social economic position of the arts.”

On 18 June or earlier I will upload a draft version of part III to

<https://amsterdam.academia.edu/HansAbbing>

(The draft is far too long for a paper, but if you wish you can download and “scan” the text. Or you can read the text and let me have your comments during or after the conference. Since this is a draft version **comments are very welcome.**)

The book will consist of four parts and a conclusion:

THE ART PERIOD. On the changing social economic position of the arts

Part I **THE TRIUMPH OF SERIOUS ART**

Part II **AN EXCLUSIVE ART SETTING**

Part III **AVERSION OF COMMERCE**

Part IV **ART WORLDS AND ARTISTS**

SOMETHING GAINED, SOMETHING LOST (Conclusion and Discussion)

The what I call “art period” is the period from the middle of the nineteenth century till circa 1980.

Typical for the period is that art stands out, is serious and exclusive, and that commerce is rejected. In the nineteenth century the period starts with a gradual process of de-commercialization. The provision of real or serious art is little commercialized, or commerce is veiled. Commercialism and the pursuit of profit are taboo. Instead art is created, sold, bought and consumed “for the love of art”. Presently there is a process of re-commercialization: the provision of art is becoming more commercialized.

Reading older texts and listening (during a period of 50 years) to old and young artists and to people working in nonprofits, it appears that in the often fuzzy discourse about commerce various forms of “commerce” are criticized. In my presentation I try to disentangle the discourse. There appear to be three main groups of criticism: first, the very fact that art must be sold and so becomes commensurate is experienced as unwanted; second, commercialism is rejected —artists must not market their art, pursue profit, and worse, compromise by pleasing consumers— and third artists worry about more general market forces in a market economy or more specifically a capitalist and neo-liberal economy. In my presentation I briefly discuss each of these three kinds of complaints and rejections.

Finally I pay attention to the fact that presently attitudes towards commerce are becoming less negative, but that at the same time the re-commercialization in the arts calls forward a new criticism of commerce by certain groups of artists and art theorists.

The following are the titles of the three chapters in part III of the book and those of the sections. (Each chapter treats one of the three main groups of criticism.) The section titles can be read as a **summary**

of part III. The underlined section titles refer to text that treats recent development. They indicate that the art period is coming to a close.

Part III AVERSION OF COMMERCE IN THE ARTS (IN THE ART PERIOD)

1. Disapproval of Art being for Sale

1. "Art is precious. It is too personal to sell."
2. "Artworks must not be interchangeable. Economic value (or price) must not stand for quality."
3. In the arts a culture of giving exists. Gift exchanges accompany trade in art.
4. Commerce and the commodity nature of art is veiled.

2. Rejection of Commercialism and Compromise

5. Artists did not always reject making "commercial" art and marketing their work.
6. "Artists must not give in to consumer wishes and compromise" The line between profit-for-art and profit-not-for-art is thin. Artists are easily accused of being commercial.
7. Commercial art is thought to be inferior, while bad art is thought to be commercial. Art worlds have mixed feelings about success in the arts.
8. To prevent shaming for being commercial artists hesitate to take commissions, veil commercial activities, have "innocent" second jobs and accept a low standard of living.
9. Artists cannot ignore consumer demand. They all the time negotiate to maximize their autonomous space. Autonomy and voice may well conflict.
10. Market demand influences in unnoticed ways artistic choices.
11. "Demands of donors and sponsors must not influence artistic choices."
12. Marketing by artists is taboo, while ensembles and art institutions must exercise much restraint.
13. Self-branding by artists and art ensembles is rejected.
14. Over the last decades a restrained cultural entrepreneurship and more commercial behavior has become acceptable. Artists are now more interested in consumer wishes.

3. Worries about Market Forces and a Commercial Culture

15. "Art is of great value. It must be free."
16. "Art must be freely shared and not owned." Aside: In practice much art is free or almost free.
17. "Art is good for people. Prices must be low to persuade people to consume art. This requires subsidization." Economists plead for price discrimination.
18. "Governments must finance public art and subsidize privately owned art with external effects."
Presently many economists want market forces to play a more important role in the arts.
19. There is a re-commercialization in the arts. The new critics of commerce think that this will have various negative effects as exist already for a long time in the popular arts.

20. Commercial popular art is thought to be little diverse and trivial, while consumers are manipulated, and third world cultures endangered.

21. Commercial popular art markets are more democratic than those in the arts All major social groups have access to music consumption and production. The recycling of styles in the popular arts gives consumers time to “learn” art.

22. “A culture industry produces *dumbing popular art.” Along with changes in capitalism and a re-commercialization in the arts the criticism of “commerce” revives. Developments in the critique of commerce are related to developments in capitalism.

23. Neo-liberal policies affect the arts. Commerce in the arts is thought to reproduce and amplify capitalist and neo-liberal values; the room for effective protest is limited.