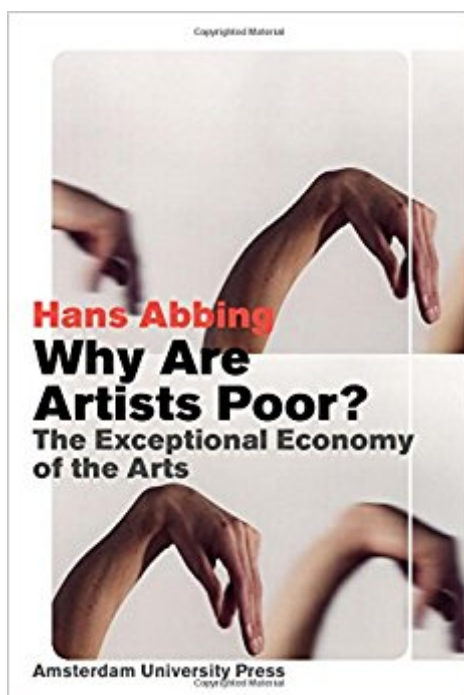


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Why Are Artists Poor?: The Exceptional Economy Of The Arts



Synopsis

Most artists earn very little. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of aspiring young artists. Do they give to the arts willingly or unknowingly? Governments and other institutions also give to the arts, to raise the low incomes. But their support is ineffective: subsidies only increase the artists' poverty. The economy of the arts is exceptional. Although the arts operate successfully in the marketplace, their natural affinity is with gift-giving, rather than with commercial exchange. People believe that artists are selflessly dedicated to art, that price does not reflect quality, and that the arts are free. But is it true? This unconventional multidisciplinary analysis explains the exceptional economy of the arts. Insightful illustrations from the practice of a visual artist support the analysis.

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Customer Reviews

Hans Abbing is a painter, a photographer and an economist. As an economist he lectures at the Faculty of History and Arts at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

The author of this book is both an economist and a painter/photographer, and thus highly qualified to write on this subject. His main argument is that art is quasi-sacred, and for that reason both its practitioners and its consumers are loath to think that it is "about" commerce or commodity exchanges. Most money that flows to the arts does so in the form of gifts (not just grants and donations, but family support and even individual artists subsidizing their own art with funds from a day job). Even outright sales are disguised to resemble gifts. The only learned profession with lower incomes than the arts is the clergy, who operate on similar lines, for similar reasons. Artists who

make a lot of money become suspect in the eyes of peers and critics (case in point: Salvador Dali). Artists use grant money to quit their day jobs while remaining as poor as ever. Abbing argues at length that European-style subsidies merely encourage more people to enter the arts, thereby actually increasing the number of poor artists without ameliorating the plight of the profession as a whole. The main value of such subsidies is to the government (prestige, status, and I would add though Abbing doesn't: appeasement of the intelligentsia) Abbing's basic argument is a persuasive one, at the very least thought-provoking in an area all in and near the arts need to think about more than we have in the past (Abbing argues that young people enter the arts blindly because it is not in the interests of the arts community to inform them of huge unlikelihood of any one of them actually succeeding as an artist). His analysis can be used to answer questions he doesn't even address, such as why the output of musical masterpieces has remained roughly constant for 800 years while the number of composers has increased a thousand fold, and the audience by a factor of 100,000. Artists can even glean some practical advice here: The person with the money should always be given the opportunity to look like (s)he's doing you a favor. For success, it is well nigh essential to suck up to power and influence, but be subtle about it. The flaws in this book? Abbing relies almost entirely on hypothetical examples (by no means all persuasive) to demonstrate his points. His command of English grammar and syntax is a bit dicy. He has a particularly European, maybe even specifically Dutch, outlook that takes him to some peculiar places: he takes it as a matter of course, for instance, that the the films of Werner Herzog are of greater esthetic value than those of Steven Spielberg, and he thinks that Henryk Gorecki lost status when his music became popular. He divides the contemporary "fine" arts into a supposedly prestigious "avant-garde" layer and a less prestigious layer that is merely modernist--a view that will strike most Americans as 30 years out of date. He names several dozen contemporary visual artists during the course of the book, not one of whom have I ever heard. Architecture, where poverty is much less endemic than in the other arts, is nowhere mentioned. He repeatedly (and correctly) asserts that artists usually come from the upper strata of society, while failing to notice that they do not often come from the very topmost tier. He fails to address the phenomenon of philistinism, which denies the "sacred" status of art on which the whole arts economy is supposedly based, and which has been a major, structural distorting factor of the US arts discourse since the nation was founded. Finally, his historical viewpoint is shortsighted. He contends that the conditions he describes have only been in place since the nineteenth century, but there is much evidence to suggest otherwise. Consider Hogarth's "The Distrest Poet" (poets are stereotypically poor, it seems to me, in all cultures). Earlier still, consider Chaucer's Clerke of Oxenford--not an artist, true, but the type is clearly recognizable: a

man with a great deal of economically useless education who, when he does get a little money, spends it on yet another book. Throughout Western history, successful composers have usually lived not by composing but by sinecures in other professions: the clergy, then musical household management, then conductor, then college professor. Despite these and other problems (hugely exasperating at times) Abbing's main thesis is sturdy enough to withstand even the most obtuse misapplication, and for that reason I would recommend this volume to anyone even tangentially connected to the arts community--though it should be taken with a very heavy pinch of salt.

You would not be a poor artist for having the wisdom to invest in knowledge. Buy this!

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