

## Art that is consumed by both higher and lower social groups (83)

**This text supplements section 83 in my book: Hans Abbing, *The Changing Social Economy of Art, Are the Arts becoming Less Exclusive?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) DOI 10.1007/978-3-030-21668-9.**

- The recurring term “period of serious art” refers to a period from circa 1880 to 1980, a period in which the art of the elite was supposed to be serious while popular art was thought to be mere entertainment. In the book I argue that this period is well passed its zenith but has an aftermath which lasts to the present day.
- I use the term “serious art” instead of “high art” with its positive as well as negative connotation. For the last decades I also use the term “established art”.
- Numbers between brackets refer to the numbered sections in the book.
- Anna is the alter ego of the author.

During the period of serious art and up to the present day: OUTSIDE ART-BUILDINGS LOWER-CLASS AND HIGHER-CLASS PEOPLE ARE EXPOSED TO POPULAR AS WELL AS SERIOUS ART. THEY ALSO INTENTIONALLY CONSUME EACH OTHERS ART. THEY ARE OMNIVOROUS. Ever since in the nineteenth century a separation has been created between art and popular/inferior art art-worlds maintain and sometimes adjust the symbolic boundary between art and no-art by deciding that certain art can or cannot enter art-buildings [10]. Almost everybody is aware of their choice. There is a symbolic boundary. Nevertheless, outside art-buildings in (semi)public space and at home the social boundary is less strong. Lower-class people deliberately or casually also consume serious art and higher-class people also popular/inferior art. Part of serious and of popular/inferior art is shared. There is a considerable overlap. People are omnivores; they eat from both racks.

This is “on average”; some subgroups do so more and others less. Over the last decades “omnivorousness” with respect to serious art and popular art has increased, but it is clearly not a new phenomenon; during the period of serious art some *deliberate* consumption of the other class’ art is not uncommon. Serious art and popular art is consumed in live events, sometimes outside art-buildings, and it is consumed in reproduced form in people’s homes.

Aside: As discussed in Section 86 the notion of omnivorousness can be applied in more than one way. Most common and easiest is doing research on preferences, as many sociologists have done and still do in the case of music. But preferences may not reflect actual art consumption. Therefore, looking at actual consumption is preferable. One can look at broad categories: all actual and deliberate actual consumption of serious art and popular/inferior art, or at sub-categories like actual deliberate consumption of music genres. Even knowing about listening to specific ensembles and bands is informative for a discussion of an overlap. But already a measurement of actual consumption of the two major categories —highbrow or serious and lowbrow or popular— is difficult. It nevertheless is good to keep in mind that knowledge of subcategories may lead to somewhat different conclusions. Overlap and omnivorousness is likely to be less pronounced. This is because, when it comes to genres and subgenres, social groups often have “own art” [85].

In section A I look at deliberate art consumption of live art outside art-buildings, in section B I look at deliberate consumption of art in reproduced form, and in section C at indeliberate and casual consumption.

**A. HIGHER- AND LOWER-CLASS PEOPLE SOMETIMES DELIBERATELY CONSUME EACH OTHER’S *LIVE* ART** In organized live popular art events —mainly pop music— since the 1960s there

is considerable overlap in the case of higher educated people taking part . As discussed in Section 86 in the 60s and after ever larger numbers of well-educated youngsters start to visit popular music concerts offered in other than art-buildings. They continue to do so when they become older. They also visit musicals and the performances of comedians.

With regard to live events in the case of lower educated people there is hardly any overlap. As shown in Section 46 lower social groups are almost absent in live serious art events in art buildings including museums. But these groups are also underrepresented in live popular art events, be it in a lesser degree. Nevertheless after circa 1960 their underrepresentation in live popular art events has probably increased. This certainly applies to popular music. With time higher educated people are ever more overrepresented in not only the consumption of live popular music, but also in its production.<sup>i</sup> (Presently —2019— overrepresentation is less large in the consumption and even more the production of Hip-hop music.)

Already for a long time live serious music and serious visual art is consumed along with other consumption. In churches all groups listen to the same religious music and see the same paintings and sculpture, that is, they listen to music and see visual art that is now categorized as serious art. People in churches often “perform” religious music by singing. And at home amateurs also perform serious music.

*A peculiar case of higher-class people performing lower class music exists. On several occasions Anna noticed that “gentlefolks”, including friends of her who were art-lovers, enjoyed singing lower class drinking songs, i.e. folk popular music, in the English private bars. They needed to be drunk before doing so, but when they were, there was no expression of disdain or irony. —The private bar is the part of the pub that is reserved for higher class people.— It is also noteworthy that well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century during visits to dance halls higher class people participate in popular dances .*

Moreover, as noted in section 86, higher class people watch “live” movies —i.e. movies shown in cinemas— which are also watched by lower-class people who can afford to visit a cinema. These movies represent popular art rather than serious art. Examples are the films of Astaire and Rogers, Exodus and Spartacus. With time the phenomenon that “live” movies are shared have only increased.

Although there is some live serious (and popular) art in public space, it is relatively unimportant. Up to the present day it is foremost individual buskers and small busking ensemble, that, in particular in the Eastern European countries, perform classical/serious music in public space. *Anna often joins the group who stop to listen. She is sure that the majority are not well-educated.* But the tradition of free classical music performances in parcs has largely disappeared (but could easily be brought back).

Significant are the pianos that are now present in the halls of ever more railway stations, airports and shopping malls. Both amateurs and professionals play Classical, Jazz and Pop music. Quite a few people stop to listen. This is another good example of how casual and deliberate consumption can come together.

“Live” visual art in public space is a different story. Up to the present day there is much sculpture in public space. Often consumption of both higher- and lower-class people is indeliberate and casual, but not always. Occasionally there are also temporary installations and art performances. (The latter can also be created by dancers and actors.)

The visual art people come across in public space does not have to be well-established art; it can also be new and innovative art. Over the last decades the number of innovative sculptures in public space that are noticed and appreciated by many people has grown much. An example is that of Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate* in Chicago (with the nick name *Chicago Bean*).<sup>ii</sup> The work is interesting because it is serious art while certainly being entertaining and enjoyed by all social groups. It befits the new user oriented rather than studious direction in the arts. [89] Maybe non-art-lovers and common people do not understand the works in the “proper” way, but they understand them in their own way and appreciate them. (In all such case consumption is often also casual. it is hard to separate casual and deliberate consumption —a topic in section C.)

In terms of consumption hours it is not deliberate listening and watching in (semi)public space that brings along a considerable overlap. It is home-consumption of recordings and reproductions. This is the topic of the next section.

**B. MANY HIGHER- AND LOWER-CLASS PEOPLE DELIBERATELY CONSUME EACH OTHER'S ART IN REPRODUCED FORM.** In the consumption of reproduced serious art and popular art at home and (semi)public space there is considerable overlap, both in the case of popular and serious art. As is noted in section 86, all through the period of serious art, higher class people not only know many traditional popular songs; they are not afraid to sing along in (semi)public space, like the private bars in England. And at home lower-class people consume much serious art. *In the 1960s Anna's before mentioned working-class friends watched ballet and opera on television.*

Since radio and record players have entered in homes, both groups listen to recorded serious and popular music. As Anna remembers: there are higher-class people who listen to recordings on records and radios of folk, gospel and other popular music genres. Later on, after radios, record players, LPs and Singles have become affordable, there are many common people who listen to recordings of well-known classical/serious music. Later on again cheap cassettes replace LPs and singles. Common people continue to listen to classical/serious music on the radio. For the last decades we know a little about home listening hours of various art forms on radio and television. Classical music is popular. In the period 1983 - 2003 circa 11% of the Dutch population older than 5 listened to and watched at least once a week to broadcasted classical music. Around half and probably more than half are lower educated.<sup>iii</sup> Listening to classical music in the own collection of CDs, cassette tapes and so forth is circa twice as popular. Ignoring that the choice of classical/serious music may differ, a considerable overlap in the consumption of classical/serious music exists.

ballet

What applies to the home serious music consumption of little-educated people, applies since the 1960s a fortiori to the home popular music consumption of well-educated people. After 1960 well-educated people start to listen to ever more Pop and other popular music, and therefore become —on average— rapidly more “omnivorous”. That is at first, because with respect to the two broad categories of classical/serious music, later on the majority become again “univores”, be it in the opposite direction. They predominantly consume popular music [86]. Since the 1960s higher-educated people listen often and ever more often to popular music on radio and television and on sound media. Again, ignoring that the choice of popular music may differ, by now the overlap in the music consumption of higher and lower social groups is large. Hence, the degree of omnivorousness is large.

Aside: Since the 1960s more data exists on the sales of recordings and nowadays also streams, but, as far as I know, there is no data telling about sales to groups that differ in level of education. (If you know of such data, please let me know.)

For several decades now listen to music accompanied by specially created images in videos (video-clips) on platforms like YouTube, or stream music and on a platform like Spotify. Typical for the conservative classical music art-world is that it does not promote classical music on platforms like Spotify, YouTube and Soundcloud. It prefers to maintain the existing distinction with popular music as shows from the phenomenon that there were attempts to establish own streaming platforms for classical music only. These were unsuccessful. (At present —2019— recordings of live popular music concerts are viewed more often than the earlier story-telling clips.)

As Anna knows in her contacts with lower class people, since television and video-players have become affordable not only registrations of performances of serious-music but also of opera and ballet are relatively popular among lower class audiences. *In the 1970s Anna's before mentioned English working-class friends had a collection of video cassettes of famous ballets which they*

*regularly played, They listened to and watched ballet and opera on television, among others at Christmas.*

Not only during the serious art period but up to the present day there is omnivorousness in the visual arts. It is probably strongest among the group of lower class or little-educated people. This is “probable” because we know very little about the home consumption of both serious- and inferior visual art in the homes of people.<sup>iv</sup> My own observations are unsystematic and limited —the first stem from the 1950s. A bit can, however, be learned from old photographs, old illustrated magazines with gravures, texts and interiors shown in old films. Informative are also the sets of new films and series playing in old times. Set-decorators and their educators base their designs on the just mentioned sources, and they appear to have done their research well.<sup>v</sup> All information is somewhat one-sided: these sources tell more about the homes of the rich than of the poor.

During the serious art period, in the houses of most higher-class people there are many serious art originals including graphics in small editions as well as reproductions, but in the course of the twentieth century most reproductions of serious art disappear. (Works with rural scenes produced before circa 1920 as well as their reproductions are up to the present day still okay among conservative well-to-do art-lovers. *Anna made a habit of scouting art in people’s homes by looking through windows. Recently she walked through streets in the rich Kensington area in London. She saw walls filled—one on top of the other— with framed originals and prints of idyllic scenes produced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Originals and reproductions of horses, hunting scenes, other rural scenes as well as views on villages and towns from a bird’s eye perspective are evidently attractive among all social groups. Although they are, later on, absent in the homes of art lovers they are present in restaurants, cafes and hotels; also those frequented by higher-class people. And they are present in lower class homes. The paintings are produced by individual artists and in workshops —over the last decades foremost workshops in China. The works of individual artists are bought in numerous non-serious art galleries and open-air markets. Even though there are many higher-class people who like them, few buy them. Because of the high degree of repetition and imitation their status is not high, and art-lovers now regard them as inferior-art.

Poster art and nostalgic advertisement reproductions are present in lower as well as higher class homes and many cafés and restaurants. At the time of their creation they were at best inferior utility art, which later is turned into serious art. (It is significant that over the last decades some art museums have started to collect the posters.)

Also ignoring photographs and tapestry, there is far more art on the walls of the lower-middle-classes than people think: reproductions as well as cheap originals. Over time lower-middle-class people have become less poor and they buy originals, even though prices are seldom less than 50 dollar —in present day prices. In the homes there are original and reproduced idyllic paintings —especially views on villages and towns are popular. There are also inferior works on the walls in cubist and abstract styles. Some are clear imitation of well-known paintings, among others of Picasso and Mondrian. Printed reproductions of well-known artworks are manifold; among them the sunflower paintings of Van Gogh.

Higher-class people are sometimes also omnivorous in the books they read. *Anna’s parents read many cheap detectives (mainly Dutch Havank detectives). But they apologized for it. In the presence of Anna and the other children they much emphasized that this is, of course, no literature; it is just entertainment. Anna, nevertheless, was allowed to “read” comic books.* Anna’s Calvinist parents were rather strict, but she noticed that many well-educated people buy and read comic books and graphic novels. (Some even read romance novels but this is exceptional.) More recently they also have become interested in kinds of street art, also in the form of exhibitions and performances in art-buildings.

What Anna's parents said could be expected. It marks two different art-settings: one in the case of the consumption of real art and the other of not-really-art. Omnivorousness does not imply that both kinds of art are treated equally in people's homes. The social boundary is crossed but the symbolic boundary remains important. Up to the present day both higher- and lower-class people are very aware of the difference. This shows from the art-settings (in a broad sense). As mentioned [24], both higher and lower class people create a serious art-setting at home in the case of "real" art, while in the case of popular art there is no clear art-setting or there is a very different "not-really-art" art-setting. If there are reproductions of serious art originals (including graphics) on the walls, they are often framed while inferior originals are not framed or in a much cheaper fashion. Both groups listen to classical/serious music in relative stillness. Also verbal expressions differ. In various ways people make known that they are aware of the difference. They cross the social boundary but know that the corresponding symbolic boundary is important.

The continuing presence of each other's art in (semi-)public-space and in people's homes indicates that people anyway somewhat know and like at least part of the other group's art; otherwise it would not be present. People are or become familiar with the most widely shared works that "belong" to the other group. This is interesting because "learning" of art begins with exposure. This is the topic of the supplementary text *Learning Art*.

C. PEOPLE CASUALLY CONSUME EACH OTHER'S ART. This statement must be put in perspective. There is no clear distinction between deliberate and indeliberate consumption of art, and also not between focused and casual consumption.

Is being "exposed" to film-music during the viewing of a film deliberate and focused? The choice of playing the DVD or of visiting the cinema is deliberate, but the reason for playing the DVD or going to a movie seldom rests in the nature of the music. Nevertheless, watching and listening cannot be separated. Without the music the film would be experienced differently and vice versa. It is a "Gesamtkunstwerk" in which the film director usually has the last say but confers much with the composer. It is significant that also *over the last decades* in Blockbusters like *Gladiator* and the *Star War* and *Harry Potter* movies, music in the classical tradition —among others music composed by John William and Hans Zimmer— is played. The music much affects the visuals.

(Even the music, in earlier days, coming from the Wurlitzer cinema or theatre organ during the break can change the experience of the film a little. Nevertheless, most of the time listening is not deliberate or focused.)

That in the nineteenth and twentieth century people in the private bar sing working class songs implies that they know them. They must have been in situations in which they willingly or not were "exposed" to this kind of music. The same applies a fortiori to much popular music. Part of popular music is all around in public space and in semi-public space —like malls. Many people who never deliberately and focused listen to such popular music know it and are familiar with it.

On the other hand, people who never or hardly ever listen deliberately and focused to serious music know evergreens which are not as present as mainstream pop music, but more present than art-lovers tend to think.

In the twentieth century, especially in Eastern Europe —including Austria— there are many lunchrooms where "easy listening" classical music is played. Some still exist. As Anna noticed some decades ago, several of these places had a little-educated clientele and some still have. People do not go to these places to listen to the music, but it is appreciated, otherwise the management would not play the music.

Also in the twentieth century in many waiting rooms there is classical music. Anna remembers that this was the case in the railway waiting rooms —also the rooms for third class passengers. And two years ago she noticed that in any underground station in Athens classical music was played —and

not only evergreens. Interestingly she recently noticed that in a Starbucks in Amsterdam classical music is played every Thursday. Finally, classical music and music in the classical music tradition regularly accompanies advertisement.

Recently a Dutch expert/critic argued in a journal that when he let people who never go to live concerts listen to ten different classical evergreens, they on average recognized eight of them. They also knew the names of some composers. (This is an outcome that could easily be tested by a MA student.) Given that classical music is still so present in society —also in advertisement— it is well possible that *in the decade to come* “classical music activists” will manage to (re)create a lively and widely shared heritage, in various recorded and broadcasted forms, and possibly also in cheaper live performances for lower middle class people.

It is interesting to note that the breath of visual artworks that people from various social groups come across and probably appreciate is quite broad. Visual art in advertisement —as independents artworks or as utility art that is integrated in the advertisement— can, for instance, be very abstract.

Aside: the chances to come across each other’s art are somewhat limited because different groups usually live and work in different parts of town, that is parts in which different art may come first in bars, malls, public and so forth.

“Learning art” is effective in situations in which people together participate in live art events [See the supplementary text *Learning and Understanding Art* (84)]. But mere exposure and consequent casual consumption can already bring along some learning and understanding of art be it not necessarily in the way art-lovers want people to understand their art. For instance, after watching certain movies and advertisement some people next start to deliberately consume the music they casually listened to. In 2006 after the release of a video game and a movie with *Ave Maria* of Schubert in the score the sales of recordings of various original performances of the piece suddenly increased much. (These were the successful video game *Hitman: bloody Money* and the science fiction movie *To Be or Naught to Be*.) —In such cases sales can easily become ten times as high.— In these and similar cases evidently a considerable number of the users of the game and viewers of the film on television who casually consume the music got interested. Ever since 1935, Schubert’s *Ave Maria* has been used in movies, among others in a 1940 Disney film. Evidently the music is not “too difficult” to be appreciated by “others”. (The first movie in which the *Ave Maria* was used is the well-known *Bride of Frankenstein* of 1935.)

## Literature

Broek, A. van, Huysman, F., & Haan, J. de. (2005). *Cultuurminnaars en Cultuurmijders*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

Halle, D. (1993). *Inside Culture, Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Iannacci, A. (2016). *Hollywood Interiors: Style and Design in Los Angeles*. New York, New York: The Monacelli Press.

Von der Fuhr, S. (2016). *Pop, wat levert het op?* Retrieved from Cubiss website: <https://www.cubiss.nl/wat-we-bieden/pop-wat-levert-het-op>

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<sup>i</sup> In case of recent production in the Netherlands this shows from (Von der Fuhr, 2016) who compare data of 2015 with 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> According to Wikipedia, the bean shaped sculpture is made up of 168 stainless steel plates welded together, and its highly polished exterior has no visible seams. It measures 33 by 66 by 42 feet (10 by 20 by 13 m), and weighs 110 short tons (100 t; 98 long tons).

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<sup>iii</sup>For the Netherlands: (Broek, Huysman, & Haan, 2005) 67-69. In 2003 of those who listened to and watched at least once a week to broadcasted art programs almost half are lower educated. I therefore think it likely that more than half listen to classical music.

<sup>iv</sup> Since the practice of doing surveys has become common in the social sciences, more research could have been done. But existing research is limited to the analysis of data on preferences. I know of hardly any research on the presence of serious-, popular and inferior/unacceptable visual art on the walls of the homes of little educated people. —Doing research on the consumption of works that are sold in the top of the visual art market is sexy, while research on “\*inferior” visual art is not.— (Halle, 1993) is an exception, but the research was undertaken in order to answer different questions than I treat in this section. The findings in his study are nevertheless helpful. He examined the content of the home consumed visual artworks in various neighborhoods in New York in the 1980s. He does not register numbers of original works, but given what he writes it is plausible that many inferior/unacceptable originals are present in the homes.

<sup>v</sup> An example of a book that is used is (Iannacci, 2016).