

Intellectualization in the arts (55)

This text supplements section 55 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.

(Wt-55) THE SERIOUSNESS OF ART BRINGS ALONG INTELLECTUALIZATION, ARTISTIC DISTANCING AND SCIENTIFICATION. THIS CAUSES INNER-ART-WORLD EXCLUSION. In the serious art period, there is a gradual process of intellectualization in the arts. The “proper” understanding of serious art not only requires social competences but also ever higher cognitive competences. In the times of contemporary-art this not only leads to exclusion of little educated people but increasingly also of art-lovers.

Since the 19th century the way of art consumption that is supposed to be proper and that is demanded from art-lovers is an, at least partly, contemplative way. This is not to say that people are no longer allowed to mentally “let go” in the presence of art. Listening to romantic music many consumers let go and embark on little controlled inward journeys. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 20th century an increasing number of listeners report that, also in the case of romantic music, they tend to listen in an analytical way as well and that they enjoy this.ⁱ

The “proper” understanding and consequent enjoyment of art requires intellectual competences that are partly acquired by general education and partly by actual consumption in a “proper” art-setting. Others are made to believe or they believe that the art-lover’s intellectual way is and must be the only way. With retro-active effect all serious art becomes difficult. Especially lower-class people believe that art is too difficult for them. This may well be incorrect. It is true that certain complexity in art can make art less attractive for “others”, but not necessarily. As said, within the classical/serious art-world there are works that were and are very popular and, given widely shared required preliminary knowledge, little demanding. And in his own time, Bach’s complex music was attractive for many little-educated people. They understood the music in their own way and it was important for them. For them the music was not difficult. It took some time, but by now also much modern-art is attractive and important, and not too difficult, for little educated people.

More than anything else it is the discourse surrounding art consumption that over time becomes, first more serious, and next more intellectual and analytical. In the late 19th century the discourse still foremost serves the evaluation of art. It helps classifying art: What is art and what is not really art, and why; which art is better, or more serious, and which art is less good or less serious. Before the serious art period, it was only a few art theorists who were interested in these questions, but during the period of serious art not only expert/critics but also art-lovers participate and enjoy participating in the discussions. Part of art-lovers become expert-consumers, they become connoisseurs. (A good example of work of a dead artist which in England in the 19th century starts to be discussed in a serious way and understood in the way judged to be proper at the time, is the music of Joseph Haydn.ⁱⁱ)

In the course of the longer-term civilization and intellectualization process in the arts certain periods stand out. These tend to be periods in which there is a power struggle within the elites. It applies to the decades in the 19th century in which a new cultural elite establishes serious art and so attempts to show off cultural supremacy to aristocrats and a merchant and manufacturing bourgeois class. It also applies to the 1950, 60s and 70s, a period Pierre Bourdieu studied.ⁱⁱⁱ At that time, once again a new cultural elite attempt to distinguish itself from a still powerful, financially successful, but also conservative and less well-educated elite. In both cases the sons and daughters of the old elite become better educated and catch up. They also start to like and enjoy the new art.

The 50s, 60s and 70s a new cultural elite is particularly interested in modern-art. Modern styles were already developed several decades earlier. In modern-art there is a movement away from the narrative toward abstraction. It is a kind of art in which form is important and content does not come first. For the appreciation of the art by the new cultural elite a, what Bourdieu calls, “aesthetic distancing” is important. In the imagination someone perceives an artwork (also) “from a distance”. He has an overview and notices, for instance, different levels and structures and sometimes also several hidden meanings in a visual artwork or performance. He may construct a personal narrative but this is thought to be less important. What he talks about in conversations with others is his analysis and consequent understanding and not a personal understanding.

Aesthetic distancing is a competence that is enabled by, what Bourdieu calls, an aesthetic disposition, a disposition that is acquired during socialization at home and in education.^{iv} Due to the disposition aesthetic distancing comes naturally and effortless; no additional education is required. (Aside: For those who are not properly socialized even after much education aesthetic distancing —the same as proper behavior [50]— will never come naturally.)

Older bourgeois and common people are socialized in different ways. They miss the competences needed to perceive art in a distant way, a way they need to comfortably participate in art events in art-buildings among art-lovers who have such competences. Due to the propagated requirement of an aesthetic disposition they are de facto excluded. This even applies to the artworks of old which in their own time were consumed by people without an aesthetic disposition —both an elite and common people. Moreover, in principal, when they would not be excluded, non-art-lovers and lower-class people can understand many modern-art and conceptual artworks in an “improper” way and enjoy them. *By now* this clearly applies to visual artworks, like those of Picasso, Lichtenstein and Pollock, and minimal music works, like those of Glass and Zimmer. (Partly due to exclusion this was not yet the case in the time Bourdieu did his research. This may have affected his art theory.)

In the case of conceptual and contemporary-art, however, the artworks themselves appear to put specific intellectual demands on art-lovers. Without an aesthetic disposition and distancing they cannot be appreciated. Moreover, additional intellectual competences are required to understand and enjoy the artworks. It appears that one proper way to understand works has become the only possible way. A mere aesthetic disposition no longer suffices.

To understand that an ordinary fountain in an art room is art, is not that difficult for expert art-lovers. The case was so extreme, that one had to take positions: this is art or this is no art. In the case of later conceptual art and of contemporary-art, however, far more specific intellectual competences are indispensable to be able to acknowledge that the works are art, and to be able to properly understand and enjoy the works. The setting and a discourse not only surround the artwork: a specific discourse has become part of the artwork.

As noted [39], artists want to control the art experience of art consumers; they must not interfere with the artwork. In the case of conceptual and contemporary-art they also want to steer the proper understanding, i.e. the correct deciphering of their work. Their artworks must be understood in one specific way, often a difficult way. All artworks can be multi-layered without the artist deliberately designing them so, but in conceptual and contemporary-art artists insert layers deliberately and they are expected to do so. They create works that in their content/form contain clues about the right and only way they must be understood. Artists who take responsibility for the overall artwork must take

responsibility for the discourse that is part of his work. (Especially visual artists learn to do so in the academies.)

Any artwork can be complex and multi-layered. Much music of Bach is complex. But some conceptual and contemporary-artworks are like puzzles. As said, simple aesthetic distancing does not suffice. Also well-equipped consumers must make an effort to properly understand the works. Some enjoy this. Sometimes visual artists include text in their works which may help solving the puzzle, but which can also make it harder to decipher the works. On the other hand, curators, programmers and expert/critics may help consumers by putting explanatory notes on the walls or handing them out in program notes or writing articles. But usually even these texts are still too general. In the presence of the work the consumer must still make a considerable effort. Otherwise he misses out on the intended artwork.

It is articulation and conversation that turn contemporary-art into art. Danto may have said that it is (an atmosphere of) art theory that turns anything into art.^v The works must be talked about, analyzed, theorized, and not only be experienced in unmediated form. Relatively few people, including art-lovers have sufficient art consumption space, i.e. have enough time and energy, to learn the additional cognitive competences that are needed to decipher contemporary-art and so be able to participate in the discourse. Given their limited time many art-lovers therefore continue to go for less demanding and, for them, more satisfying art. They are de facto excluded from the new art, with as consequence *inner-art-world exclusion*. Sometimes the texts accompanying the works are more incomprehensible than the works. (*Over the last decade this is less often the case.*)

Some years ago Anna visited a serious music concert together with her friend Margaret. Among others, works of György Ligeti and Mauricio Kagel were performed. When they left Margaret confided to Anna "that was hard work". Anna interpreted this correctly: her friend had "examined" the deeper layers in the music, had a very satisfying art experience and was "tired but happy". (Anna, on the other hand, had, without making an effort, understood the music in her own way and enjoyed the music.) With another friend, Gert, she went several times to Bach as well as Shubert performances and in their conversations afterwards she noticed that Gert listened in a way that much differed from her own. Gert had developed an analytical way of listening and talked about the performance in precise terms which Toni was not interested in. (To tell about her own art experience Toni needed metaphors, like a desolate landscape, grayness, a mosaic and so forth.)

Aside: The nature of complexity or difficulty of contemporary-art differs from that of some difficult modern-art, like for instance that of twelve-tone music. The latter is difficult because of a complicated style which all twelve-tone pieces share. Much contemporary classical/serious music is simply unpleasant for many listeners—and not only listeners but also many classical/serious musicians—because of its high dissonance level. Nevertheless, it is foremost articulation and conversation that make contemporary artworks difficult and that leads to exclusion.

A specific discourse turns separate contemporary-artworks into art and makes them complex. The works must be talked about, analyzed, theorized, and not only be experienced in unmediated form. Relatively few people, including art-lovers have sufficient art consumption space, i.e. have enough time and energy, to learn the additional cognitive competences that are needed to decipher contemporary-art and so be able to participate in the discourse. Given their limited time many art-lovers therefore continue to go for less demanding and, for them, more satisfying art. They are de facto excluded from the new art, with as consequence *inner-art-world exclusion*.

Conceptual and contemporary-art are not supposed to be confessional. They appeal to the intellect rather than emotions. But, the same as in any other art, personal narratives are never absent. They are, however, not intended by the artist or they deny their existence. *In 2000 Anna visited a contemporary-art gallery. She was struck by one of the artworks. It was a pistol mounted on a large panel covered with deep blue velvet cloth. The work touched her in ways she did not understand, but she realized the work was important for her. The artist who was present approached her, the same as he approached other visitors, and without being asked started to explain the work using typical*

artworld jargon. When Anna attempted to tell about her personal experience and asked him if he recognized it, he noticeably was irritated and moved to other visitors. (This is another example of artists wanting to control consumers [39].)

The question arises if in the case of modern-art and contemporary-art inner-art-world exclusion can be intentional. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s the art-lovers who like modern-art certainly distinguish themselves from more conservative art-lovers who drag behind. They ought to make an effort and also become expert-consumers. There is disdain. —An art meritocracy also exist among art consumers.— Exclusion is welcome, but usually not intentional. But later on, contemporary-art is often admittedly art for insiders; insiders who do not bother much about others. Sometimes it is “art-for-artists”. And as long as there is sufficient support there is also little need to worry about the others who are de facto excluded.

In the second half of the 20th century new art is foremost created in the mentioned domain of restricted production [16]. Because innovations are not only surrounded by an intellectual discourse but are also deliberately disruptive, they need protection against a supposedly hostile outside world. They become part of a restricted domain. The combination of intellectualization and disruption brings along fear among art-lovers for the new art in the restricted domain. The art is daunting, not something to try out. It belongs to a domain for insiders, which is unattractive for others.

Around 2000 “true” art is still supposed to be complex, but by then a different quality is more emphasized: true art is disturbing. However, *during the last two decades* an increasing number of artists involved in the production of contemporary-art, become more focused on accessibility. The artwork may be layered, but should also be “understandable” without much preliminary knowledge. It is also significant that experts/critics now sometimes call works “beautiful”, a term whose use was earlier taboo.

As said in the book [89], *over the last decades* two domains are developing in the arts. On the one hand in a large more user-oriented domain —also in the world of classical-serious music— there is now less very “intellectual” art, with the consequence that inner-art-world exclusion goes down. Within this domain unmediated enjoyment of art is not taboo. On the other hand, there is a more studious domain, which is foremost a continuation of the earlier domain of restricted production in the arts. The main difference with before rests in a further intellectualization and a process of, what I call, scientification in this studious domain: art is being treated and organized the same as a scientific discipline. In the “better” visual art academies the terms research and project are commonly used: students do not make art; they have projects and do research. Learning to think and talk about art takes priority over learning to make art, which would also require learning and applying techniques.^{vi} Moreover, in this domain so-called practiced-based art PhDs have been developed and its number is increasing.

Literature

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ⁱ Cf. (Smithuijsen, 2001) in Dutch.

ⁱⁱ (Weber, 1992)

ⁱⁱⁱ (Bourdieu, 1984) and (Bourdieu, 1993)

^{iv} (Bourdieu, 1984) and (Bourdieu, 1993)

^v Cf. (Danto, 1986)

^{vi} (Fine, 2018)