

Learning and Understanding Art

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.

84. Excuse: “LEARNING ART” IS FOREMOST A SOCIAL AFFAIR. ENTHUSIASTIC OTHERS, LIVELY ART SCENES AND EMBODIED LEARNING FACILITATE THE UNDERSTANDING OF ART. In order to better understand the sharing of art, its limitations and the importance of having own art, I look at the way many people “learn art”. I also pay attention to worries about art education disappearing from the curricula in primary and secondary schools. This web-text may interest all readers.

First, for a discussion of how people learn art, the notions of an *acquired taste* and *experience good* are useful.³ Taste is not inborn, it is developed. In this context social scientists tend to emphasize the importance of *exposure*. Exposure, for instance in the parental home or in public space generates preliminary knowledge which enables consumption.

Aside: Sometimes mere exposure can already increase consumption. 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 Shubert in the score the sales of recordings of various original performances of the piece suddenly increased much. It is, however, likely that such consumption is preceded by learning kinds of art in the company of enthusiastic others. (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 casually consuming the music got interested. (Ever since 1935, Shubert’s *Ave Maria* has been used in movies, among others in the 1935 movie *Bride of Frankenstein* and in 1940 in the Disney film *Fantasia*.)

Usually, to properly learn and understand art mere exposure is not enough: enthusiasm of others, like parents, peers and teachers is indispensable. Interacting with enthusiastic others sets off a more focused learning and understanding of various kinds of art than otherwise would be possible. The sociologist Randall Collins argues that learning is no matter of “simply cognitive learning; a filling of one’s memory bank.”⁴ One cannot really learn and understand art by reading books on art, listening to lectures, being exposed to art or talk about it in a noncommittal way. Learning is most effective during consumption of art —by “doing art”— in the company of one or more enthusiastic friends. (While learning art, there is, of course, trial and error. Preferences may change —sometimes along with partners and friends.)

The enthusiasm of a friend or friends while focusing on an artwork, at home, in (semi)public space, or in a museum, concert hall or theatre, is contagious. And if a person feels comfortable in a crowd in the concert hall or theatre, the collective effervescence that emerges when the crowd starts to focus on the work of art is contagious as well.

So-called embodied learning is important.⁵ *It happens that Anna goes to concerts in different halls, but with the same DJs producing and playing the same kind of Dance music, while the crowd in the halls differs. In the one it is mainly students and in the other working and less-well-educated youngsters. She notices that their way of dancing differs. Unlike the working youngsters the students mainly move the upper part of their body.* This cannot but corresponds with a different understanding of the same art. It follows that the learning by newcomers also differs. (My observations of dancing behavior are limited and unsystematic. I do not know of systematic research on behavioral differences in consuming art. It would be a great topic to research.)

Aside: Other than one may think, during classical/serious music concerts with still audiences there is also embodied learning through bodily interaction. Bodies are forced to be (almost) motionless, but due to, so called, rhythmic entrainment there is interaction.⁶ However, because, unlike in popular music, a single consumption practice is imposed, all people are forced to learn the music in the same way. For “others”, who are less well trained in or inclined to restrain their body, this much limits the possibility of learning, and developing own meanings and understanding.

In front of visual art in a museum or during serious plays in theaters, people have somewhat more freedom to move and to interact bodily.⁷ A newcomer, without being aware of this, can register facial and other bodily expressions of friends —like serious or excited expressions—, start to learn through imitation and so learn art. In all such cases the not yet educated newcomer cannot but go along. Also without much explanation he gets a feel of what is going on and why it is going on. He starts to understand the event and the artwork or the kind of art. Tuxedos and a conductor bowing are part of the artwork, but a newcomer still has to learn this. When he is with a trusted friend and in a crowd, which he feels comfortable with, he will start to understand the necessity of the behavior and clothing.⁸

In this respect the mentioned lively art scenes surrounding new and innovative art are important [23]. When participants meet in person and together focus on art, the enthusiasm is contagious. Sometimes learning new art appears to be hard or impossible, but it is not. The more enthusiastic the people in a scene are, the more intense the learning, and the faster the diffusion of innovations. In this respect “evangelic” popular art scenes perform “better” than inward directed serious art scenes.

A phenomenon that stops people from trying and learning art is, that longer existing art forms, genres, sub-genres and venues have reputations (or labels). “Serious art is difficult art”; implying that if you do not have a proper education, it makes no sense to try. Or “Techno is loud and just noise.” So, if you do not like noise, it is not worth trying. But reputations can also offer relevant information: some art, like serial music, is indeed difficult; also for music-lovers with limited time it is too difficult. There is self-exclusion: disappointment is prevented. —This phenomenon is enhanced by the reputation of buildings.—

Whether reputations or labels are correct and relevant or not, they are produced. Not only social groups but also commercial art-companies create and construct labels or strengthen existing labels, and so invite certain people to become acquainted with their art and prevent others from doing so. This is beneficial for the targeted group and profitable for the art-company. The labels promote the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. At times they may also indirectly impoverish the works of the labelled artists [77].

For some time now, people in art circles worry about the limited interest in established art among all sorts of social groups. They often blame not only a lack of general exposure to serious art, but also a lack of art education in primary and secondary school. It is true that longer ago in many countries there was more art education. What is demanded is: more school visits to museums, concert halls and theaters as well as “doing art” in school —drawing, painting, playing instruments, acting, dancing and writing poems in traditional ways. Given an emphasis on embodied learning this can make sense.

An existing notion is, however, that an “overdose” of popular art needs to be compensated by learning serious art instead of popular art and by learning the “proper” way of understanding art. But when the pupils are more interested in popular art, success in higher level schools is limited and probably zero in lower level schools. A few very passionate teachers may succeed in enthusing a few pupils. But the average teacher will be unsuccessful, and the teaching contra-productive —a waste of energy and of public money.

Given the above analysis, teachers who genuinely respect the art which the children are familiar with and like, and who understand the way the children understand their own art, are likely to raise the interest in art, also in established art. Doing art will probably be most successful in the case of guitar, keyboard and computer, but some pupils may also start to learn and enjoy playing the recorder and to understand

classical/serious music the way their lovers judge to be proper. The latter is unlikely if this is the sole goal of art education; a paternalistic goal.

By now in many schools art education has been or is being modernized and connects somewhat better with the pupils' existing interests in art and the way their social group understands art. That is, in as far as there is art education. (In several countries, arguing that there is too little art education in schools makes sense. There are many reasons why good art education is beneficial for society. One rest in the importance of giving lower social groups means to express themselves artistically.)

The possibility of bodily movement in art education and elsewhere is anyway important for learning. In principal, in the case of serious music performed in different venues or in different series, bodies could move more and in different ways. This would make serious music more interesting for "others". Presently there are "try outs". Example are mentioned yellow lounge concerts and the classical music raves. In the first there is already more possibility for movement. In the raves with DJs playing mixes of classical/serious music pieces a usually large audience dances on the music, the same as in Dance music parties. (The raves are a Dutch invention. They are, however, most successful in South America.)

Bach's music or Mahler's music is unlikely to be played in ballrooms, but it is presently played in classical music raves. —Mahler's and other romantic classical/serious music is very danceable; even more so than certain modern subgenres of Dance music.— Movement in a trusted crowd is indeed important for embodied learning. For instance, learning Strauss' music among an apparently still audience in a classical music hall, or among other people dancing in a ballroom or among youngsters dancing freestyle during a classical music rave, will lead to different kinds of understanding.