

On the (un)importance of art education for gate keeping (14)

This text supplements section 14 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.

ART-WORLDS HAVE VARIOUS MEANS OF GATEKEEPING. BEING ADMITTED TO STATE ACCREDITED ART EDUCATION AND RECEIVING SUBSIDIES HELPS TO BECOME AN ARTWORLD-RECOGNIZED ARTISTS. BEING A RECOGNIZED ARTIST IS IMPORTANT FOR ARTISTS. In in the supplementary text *Learning and Understanding Art* (14) already briefly discussed the (un)importance of art-education for a career.” Here I partly repeat the text in the book while making additional remarks.

First, in the arts the benefits of having been educated in accredited education institutes are limited and less than in other professions. As shows from some research the benefits can even be negative, that is, artist without art education do financially better than those with art education. The percentage among the former who make, what I call, “inferior” art [3] may well be relatively high.ⁱ

Second, in art education governments play an essential role. In this they work together with art-world establishments and strengthen art-worlds. Thanks to the subsidized official art education institutes the authority of art-worlds increases during the period of serious art. It is no accident that official, i.e. accredited, art education is hosted in prestigious buildings, some of who can compete with well-known prestigious halls and museums.

To be effective as one form among other forms of gatekeeping professional art education needs to be official, i.e. the education institute must be accredited —as we say now— by an authority with power, i.e. a government institute. Such institutes are almost always being advised by people in the art-world establishment. Accreditation represents an indirect form of gatekeeping. Moreover, art education needs to be financed. In some countries not only public but also both private but accredited art schools exist. In all cases at least part of the students pay fees.

In the US part of the cost of public and accredited private schools are covered by present and passed donations as well as subsidies, while in Europe, until recently, governments largely finance the education. In the case of private education, board members are often part of the art-world establishment or are friends of people in the establishment. They indirectly control the course of the institutes, including the nomination of teachers. Their actions affect gatekeeping —of artists as well as art.

Unlike in other professional education certain degrees of earlier education usually do not suffice to be admitted to the schools. On the basis of portfolios, special exams, and so forth, only a selection of applicants is admitted. (The art profession is attractive; therefore, demand for official education is almost always larger than supply.) Next, final exams and graduating opens further doors to becoming a recognized artist, and offers another means of gatekeeping and exclusion. But as in any education, in the course of the training there is gatekeeping as well. Some students are told to leave. Teachers,

already during education, bring some students and not others in contact with art-producers, from dealers and impresarios to curators and directors of ensembles. Moreover, final examination shows and performances help the latter to scout promising graduates.

The granting of subsidies and grants by governments and donors to some starting artists and not to other artists also enables gatekeeping. Most members of the committees deciding on the distribution of funds participate in art-world establishments. Well recognized gallery owners, impresarios, curators, publishers, and so forth, also select certain artists and reject others.

For many artists crossing such barriers and becoming a recognized artist is very important. Being recognized is proof of being a real artist. Such proof is a benefit that is usually far more important than other benefits of being a professional artist. An indirect proof of the importance of art-worlds and being recognized follows from the phenomenon that attempting to become recognized and crossing borders and next failing and being rejected can cause much distress. Such artists interpret rejections as a sign of being a failed artist; an artist making inferior work.

After graduating Anna's first application for a subsidy was rejected. She was very disappointed; and in such degree that it was only four years later that she applied again. The continuing frustration or pain was so large that she wanted to save herself from a possible rekindling of it by a new rejection. However, three years after graduating she found a gallerist wanting to represent her. This was a relief, but it was only when she received her first subsidy that she became convinced of being a real artist. (Up to that moment when she told strangers that she was artist, she felt like cheating.)

Aside: Ignoring artists making popular art, gatekeeping by art-worlds could be an indirect means to control the overall number of artists and the volume of all produced art. This would be the case, if all artists who do not become recognized would leave the arts. This does not happen. Moreover, not all artists aspire to become recognized. Many artists are not well-educated, know that they will not fit into the art-world and its culture, and know that they will anyway be rejected —often already at the gate of the “official” art school. They go their own way and make inferior-art.

Nevertheless, in waves of preferences for certain styles and not others [20], art-worlds also manage to keep the production of serious art down. This brings recognized artists benefits, which other artists do not have: sometimes a higher income, more prestige and other benefits.

The organization of official education in the period of serious art can be interpreted as a form of (re)professionalization.ⁱⁱ This mattered for the control of the numbers of serious artists. *Over the last decades* a similar process of professionalization through the offering of accredited education is taking place in popular music. It started earlier in the US and Britain than in continental Europe. From the perspective of a control of numbers it appears to be unimportant. What is significant, however, is that when in Europe existing conservatories now have departments for popular music, they are almost always hosted not in the prestigious main building in which serious music and serious Jazz are taught, but in separate far less prestigious secondary art-buildings.

Over the last decades the described forms of gatekeeping still matter, especially in the more studious domain in the arts. But at the same time many new and parallel forms of gatekeeping —among others organized by the media— develop in both serious and popular art enabling part of aspiring artists to become professional and sometimes successful artists.[92] In the serious arts these new forms are no longer controlled by the traditional art-world establishments.

The rapidly rising fees of official art education raises the barrier surrounding this kind of education. It is bound to affect the composition of the group of not only recognized artists but, in a lesser degree, of all artists, but if it contributes or will contribute to fewer artists is hard to tell.

In section 14 of the book I state that having been officially educated increases the chances of becoming art-world-recognized and a bit successful. This does not imply that the survival rate of officially educated artists was and is higher than of others. (Alper & Wassall, 2006) p. 842 state that in the USA in the period 1950-2000 the return to education for artists is lower than in other professions, or even negative. But this may no longer apply. There is some evidence

that the survival rate of officially educated artists is higher than of others. See (Bille & Jensen, 2016)

Literature

Abbott, A. (1991). The order of professionalization: An empirical analysis. *Work and Occupations*, 18(4), 307–336.

Alper, N. O., & Wassall, G. H. (2006). Artists' Careers and Their Labor Markets. In V. A. Ginsburgh & D. Throsby (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture* (pp. 813–864). Amsterdam a.o.: North-Holland.

ⁱ Cf. (Alper & Wassall, 2006) 842

ⁱⁱ Cf. (Abbott, A., 1991)