Arts & Humanities | Hans Abbing

Blurred boundaries

Art in the age of social media

Reflecting over the course of the last century, Professor Hans Abbing from the Netherlands discusses the earlier separation of popular art and what Abbing calls serious art. "Combining an economic perspective with sociological and historic insights," Abbing’s recent book, ‘Art in the twenty-first century’, Abbing contextualises artistic evolution and presently in particular the platform economy and hybridisation. He looks further into the fluidity of creative roles and interdisciplinary practice; how modern advancements have prompted the word ‘art’ to be frequently replaced with ‘culture’.

ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: DIFFERENT PRACTICES

Chapter six of Abbing’s book focuses on art in the 21st century. In his analysis, Abbing contextualises artistic evolution through the lens of four spheres of creative expression: consumer-oriented, bohemian, research, and hybrid practices. Each, as their labels would suggest, have unique focuses and practices. For example, the consumer-oriented sphere hones in on the demand of consumers and users. The bohemian sphere differs from the other three. Artists within the sphere that Abbing calls bohemians are very passionate and often do not seek low incomes. Most of the new bohemians are self-taught, whereas in the other spheres most artists have visited art schools which now increasingly offer courses in cultural entrepreneurship. This is the sphere Abbing asks us to consider when distinguishing the differences between, on the one hand, serious art (forms of dance, literature, music, theatre, and other disciplines, which in the previous century were considered true art by artworld establishments), and, on the other hand, popular art (previously judged to be just entertainment). Many pop musicians are new bohemians. Taking care of their own business is common practice. They do not judge the latter to be a waste of time.

DIGITISATION IN MEDIA

Documenting the evolution of art, Abbing discusses the role that digitisation has had in bringing about many changes within the arts, particularly in how art is produced, consumed, and critiqued. Not only has the emergence of social media changed how art is perceived, but art forms have diversified in regards to audiences. New digital technologies, such as the internet, have allowed audiences to engage in new ways. This is particularly helpful to emerging artists, who can now promote their work on various platforms.

A strong argument can be made for the benefits of digitisation when considering an artist’s relationship with the platform economy.

PLATFORM ECONOMY AND THE SUPERSTAR PHENOMENON

Abbing takes note of this century’s economic changes and its significant impact on the creative industries where marketing talent is concerned. A strong economy has been developed through digitisation, resulting in the evolution of popular culture. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them. Abbing takes note of this century’s radical changes and the factors that may impact them.

Abbing argues that in the digital era, ‘the symbolic boundary between serious and popular art has become very fuzzy’. Social media allows artists to showcase their work to users worldwide on various platforms. This is particularly helpful to emerging artists, who can now promote their work to previously unreachable markets, like international ones. Although the number of views (or listens) can indicate...
Behind the Research

Professor Hans Abbing


Reflected

As technology continues to advance, Abbing reflects on the diminishing presence of serious art in this economy. The ways in which we can produce and access art, although brilliant in expanding our cultural experiences, has saturated the markets to a point where traditional consumption grows ever faint. An example of this would be plethora of streaming services that discourage audiences from going to the cinema, which is further impacted by simultaneous or limited theatre releases.

Is there a way of maintaining serious art across practice, production, and presentation in the modern landscape? Although Abbing considers the ‘period of serious art’ to be over, his research allows us to identify the difference between serious and popular art while beginning to understand the various artistic practices behind each form. We can see how the emergence of social media, technological advancements, and hybrid practices have influenced art production, consumption, and its reception – but have also shifted it closer to resembling a culture. In several countries the terms ‘art’ and ‘artists’ and ‘culture’ and ‘creatives’ have become interchangeable. Moreover, we now also speak of tattoo artists and makeup artists – a new phenomenon in Europe.

To clarify, art is not dead. Rather, the ethos behind serious art has evolved so it does not resemble its traditional value. Abbing analyses in detail how the influx of creativity and accessibility through the development of hybrid practices and the platform economy have flooded the boundaries between serious and popular art – leading more toward a culture that embraces entertainment.

The concept of art is not about creating something new, it is about creating something that is a true representation of the current societal situation. This is what serious art is all about. It is about creating something that speaks to the current state of society and its challenges.

References


Personal Response

Can you explain the ways in which you think ‘serious art’ might continue to evolve, as our society evolves?

In the coming decades, the structure of our society will continue to be hierarchical. At the very top people and their families may come and go, but the composition of the group further down will change little. It is foremost this upper group that did – and does – consume serious art and little popular art. In this way, they also express themselves and their relatively high status. This only works well if serious art – which is not consumed by everybody – continues to exist. With some help from prestigious art education institutes they will see to it that the boundary around their serious art does not disappear altogether. Prestigious art venues may offer not only serious art, but people will know that certain offerings are or are not for them. In spite of well-intended efforts of artworld people to make art consumption more inclusive, at this level informal exclusion will continue.

The emergence of social media statistics of likes and followers has changed the way art is produced, consumed, and critiqued.

The way we produce and consume art has changed significantly in recent years due to the rise of social media platforms. These platforms have allowed artists to reach a larger audience, resulting in increased exposure and potentially higher revenue streams. However, this has also led to a commodification of art, with followers and likes becoming a standard measure of success.

The way we consume art has also changed. Previously, art was consumed in a more traditional manner, such as visiting galleries or attending live performances. However, with the rise of social media, people can now consume art in various forms, including videos, photos, and even reality TV shows. This has made art more accessible to a wider audience.

The way we critique art has also changed. In the past, criticism was typically done by art critics or other experts in the field. However, with the rise of social media, anyone can now provide their opinion on art, whether they have expertise in the field or not. This has led to a democratization of art criticism, with a wider range of perspectives being shared.

In conclusion, the emergence of social media has significantly changed the way art is produced, consumed, and critiqued. While this has led to increased accessibility and exposure, it has also raised concerns about the commodification of art and the democratization of art criticism.