

# THE VALUE OF ART

## A Social Study of Art, Artists and the Arts Economy

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### Synopsis and Table of Contents

The book studies art, artists and the arts economy from the perspective of value. The emphasis is on value and values which are created, expressed and maintained in events in which people interact while focusing on art. Although the emphasis is on symbolic value, money value is discussed as well. Using insights from standard economics the book is primarily an application to the arts of the theory of the sociologist Randall Collins on interaction ritual chains. Also the theory of the sociologist Norbert Elias on the civilization process plays an essential role.

#### 1. Views on Art

In order to set the stage the chapter treats various views on art. First there is an essentialist view that colors people's thinking about art and dealings with art. Next social views on art are discussed. The notion of the art work itself is put in perspective. Over time art works change and so do the ways in which people consume art. Finally this book's view on art is presented.

#### 2. Art Events

The chapter explains the main unit of analysis in the book, the art event, and its ingredients and outcomes. In art events people interact while focusing on art. Art events run from a concert in a stadium to a conversation about art. The focus on art is an ingredient of an event. Outcomes are precious objects or symbols of membership for the participants in art events. They are loaded with value. Often they are related to stereotypes of art, artists and artworks. People who participate in successful art events get vitality or emotional energy out of their participation.

#### 3. High Art, Serious Art and Popular Art Events

The chapter shows that high and serious art events differ from popular art events. The distinction rests on a different type of morality. The righteousness of Art-with-a-capital-A is universal while that of popular art, like for instance most pop music, is local. The difference also shows from the relatively subdued behavior in high and serious art events. Next a distinction is made between high and other serious art events. In high art events behavior is more formalistic and the event has a ceremonial character. It is argued that the extreme stillness during classical concerts is largely ceremonial.

#### 4. Civilized Art

The chapter argues that at least up to the twentieth century within a long term civilization process society became more formal and that this influenced the nature of art events. Moreover, during the eighteenth and especially nineteenth century the role of art in society changed. It became less functional and started to play a role in people's search for authenticity. Art and artists became special; sacred art and the mythology around it are born and art is no longer supposed to be a commodity. Moreover, people could derive distinction from their consumption of art. At the same time art became a means in the education of the masses.

#### 5. The Value of Artworks

The high overall value of art, both in non-monetary and monetary terms, is created and maintained in numerous art events. The same applies to personal value and aesthetic value. Personal value and

taste is not given; they are social. Aesthetic value as well is not intrinsic but depends on art entrepreneurs, like art historians, who during art events create and maintain precious objects, which function as symbols of membership. Existing precious objects, from artworks to schools, styles and genres, are protected, while challenging new objects are created. Artists and art entrepreneurs invest much energy in the overall value of art. Because not everybody is rewarded correspondingly a notion of exploitation may be applicable.

## **6. The Value of Work in the Arts for Artists**

The average income of artists is persistently low, much lower than that of any other group of professionals. Standard economics cannot explain this. If it is acknowledged that people do not just work for money, the low incomes in the arts could be explained by non-monetary rewards that compensate for low incomes. But the phenomenon that many youngsters enter the arts while incomes are low, can better be explained by looking at their participation in chains of art events in which positive stereotypes of being-artist are important symbols of membership. Money is relative unimportant and its symbolic value is sometimes negative while that of poverty can be positive. But in the case of failed artists existing stereotypes tend to turn against them.

## **7. The Consumption of Art**

The chapter argues that to be able to participate in art events consumers need economic capital and suitable cultural capital. Therefore there is both price and social exclusion. In the performing arts the latter is usually the more decisive. Ambiance, from buildings to consumer behavior, is an important source of in- and exclusion. A proper understanding of artworks is another. However, artistic schooling is less important than people often assume.

## **8. The Financing of Art**

The financing of art is not only a matter of governments and the market. The third sphere plays an important role, most of all in the form of self-support and small scale donations and support for artists. The symbolic value of spending, donations, subsidies and sponsorship is discussed, as well as their effect on income and number of artists. Prosperity and large numbers of poor artists tend to go together.

## **9. New Times, New People, New Art**

The chapter argues that the dwindling audiences of high art events, especially classical concerts, and the growing participation of all social groups in popular art events can be explained from the perspective of a process of informalization. The latter represents a new phase in the civilization process. Relevant characteristics of the younger generations are examined in connection to developments in technique. In this context stagnation and innovation in art worlds are discussed.

## **10. Art becoming less valuable?**

The final chapter presents an inventory of developments in art worlds in connection with developments in society and discusses the future of the arts. The simultaneous process of demystification, re-commodification and professionalization is likely to continue. Probably part of art will move in the direction of the sciences, another part will take the form of art-services that are supplied within the cultural industries, while a large part will move in the direction of entertainment. Finally, in the context of the future of the arts the notion of the autonomy of art and artists will be re-examined.