

## How to encourage and sustain professional artists?<sup>1</sup>

If sustain implies increasing the population of artists by seeing to it that enough youngsters enter the arts and by preventing artists from leaving the profession, there is no need for any policy. The artists' population is very good in sustaining itself. This is because the arts are still extremely attractive. This is shown by the fact that artists are willing to work for very low incomes. (In the Netherlands almost half of the professional visual artists are poor in the sense that their overall income is at or below the level of social benefits. Moreover, 75% of artists can not make a living from their art work while 40% cannot cover their costs.)

The moment more money flows into the arts - whether from more demand (including more public commissions) or support (including subsidies and donations) - the number of artists tends to grow and so does the number of poor artists. In the case of support this is problematic: support leads to more artists being poor while hardly increasing the amount of art that reaches the public.

However, when the aim is to sustain a healthy and productive population of artists which does not have to worry too much about money, policy is called for. But, at the same time the mission is almost impossible. How to encourage artists without increasing the attractiveness of the arts? How to encourage them by increasing the demand for their work and their contribution to society and thus enthuse them and increase their professional pride? And how to simultaneously decrease the attractiveness of the arts in order to prevent more artists entering the profession than before or, better, reduce the number of artists, so that more artists do not have to worry about money?

Encouragement can come from more public commissions and more activities that promote the sale of art. Talking about promotion, I do not think of financial incentives for people buying art, like subsidies on purchases or tax-rebates. They are relatively ineffective (most of the money ending up in the purse of the often already well-to-do consumers), they are undemocratic (governments giving rich people an even larger say in the kind of art that is produced) and, most importantly, they are too anonymous; they neither enthuse consumers nor artists.

Encouragement can come from activities that make artists more oriented on wider audiences than just peers and critics. It can come from activities that convince artists that art-for-art's-sake is a thing of the past and that art needs an audience, and thus must be sold or function in society in other ways. In this context it is only logical that art schools are encouraged (or required) to offer courses in cultural entrepreneurship and that older artists are encouraged to follow courses in this area. This contributes to the professionalization of artists.

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<sup>1</sup> The text in this provocation also applies to other creative workers but to a lesser degree.

Encouragement can also come from activities that promote a wider definition of what visual artists have to offer; from intervention art to finding creative solutions within businesses or in community art. Moreover, the notion can be promoted that artists can still be professionals when they have attractive arts-related and non-arts second jobs, as long as they do not use these second jobs to be a poor artist who is (or pretends to be) not interested in an audience.

All such policies are senseless (pointless?) if they are not accompanied by other policies that discourage entrance to the arts. Therefore, most importantly, general subsidies for artists should gradually be abolished. Next, the number of youngsters wanting to become professional artists should become smaller. I am no advocate of a general numerous clausus for art schools. In prosperous countries more and more people are educated in more than one discipline, whereas only one leads to a job and others at best to a passionate hobby. But an even more severe selection at the gates of the higher and more expensive educational institutions makes sense. Moreover, remuneration of art schools by governments should not be such that it is financially attractive to increase the number of students, as is now often the case. Finally, institutions should be encouraged, if not forced, to impress on aspirant students that only a small minority of them will become professional artists.

Presently when youngsters at secondary school, but also older people following art courses, show talent, they are often encouraged by teachers, family and friends to try and become an artist. The magic of art is such that we do not want any talent to get lost —‘he or she could be another Van Gogh’— or that we believe that somebody will feel much better, if he or she can make art as a professional artist. Therefore there should be policies that promote the status of high-level amateurism, so that it becomes more attractive to remain amateur.

Thus the large grey area of all those ‘in-between’ artists, aspiring amateurs and marginal artists, can be reduced and a more clear line between professionals and amateurs can be established without increasing the magic of art or putting down talented amateurs.

Hans Abbing is a visual artist and economist. He is professor emeritus in art sociology at the University of Amsterdam. He wrote: *Why are artists Poor. The Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2002 (Fourth Printing 2008).