

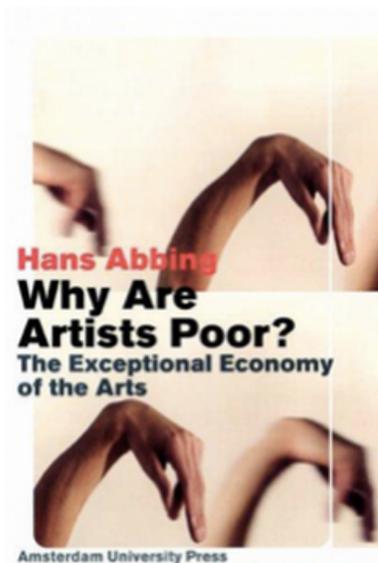
Should We Let More Artists Starve So Some Can Succeed?

by Ben Davis

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(Courtesy ArtSmacked)



Courtesy Amsterdam University Press

Why are artists poor? It's a good question. Just don't ask Hans Abbing, the Dutch economist and author of "Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts."

Abbing was the speaker at a [well-attended Monday night event](#) at Artists Space in SoHo, at the invitation of [Working Artists in the Greater Economy](#) (or W.A.G.E.), an advocacy group that presses for nonprofits and museums to pay fees to artists for showing their work, a model that [seems to work in Canada](#). Abbing's book, "Why Are Artists Poor?", was published all the way back in 2002, and it hasn't exactly made a huge splash. However, it has gained a

certain degree of notoriety in New York thanks to W.A.G.E.'s stamp of approval, and it has [occasionally been taken up](#) to make prescriptions for arts policy. So it may be

important to nip Abbing's percolating influence in the bud, and say clearly and for the record that his argument is balderdash.

W.A.G.E., which used to describe itself as a “pro-artist, pro-capitalist” group (by which they meant they were for artists getting paid, not that they were for wealthy artists ruling over the proletariat), seems to have been attracted to the book because, as an economist, Abbing is all about debunking the notion that spiritual gratification trumps material rewards when it comes to art. You can see how this type of perspective would be appealing if you're an artist and feel like you're getting ripped off, discovering that, as you become more successful, you are going deeper in debt because institutions expect you to work for love of art alone.

But this, unfortunately, is not where Abbing stops. Instead, “Why Are Artists Poor?” turns out to be a crusade against subsidies for artists. In fact, it is a spin on the libertarian dogma that everything wrong with society is produced by government meddling in the free market, only applied to the visual arts.

At this juncture, it might be worth noting that Abbing's worldview doesn't really seem to be based on familiarity with the realities of the contemporary art world. Thus, he argues that the distortions of government intervention explain the existence of “contemporary” or “avant garde” art, which he thinks wouldn't have any economic influence without subsidy from the state. But astoundingly, the only example Abbing gives by name of a “contemporary artist” who might represent this sickly anti-economic style of contemporary art is — wait for it — [Damien Hirst](#)(pg. 68), i.e. Mr. Art Market himself. Huh?

Maybe that's just Abbing's personal bias creeping in (an artist himself with a passion for life drawing, he's got a dog in the race). The “traditional” versus “contemporary” thing is really just a sidenote to Abbing's main claim that the reason artists are poor is because of “oversupply” — there is more art than there is demand. The conclusion he comes to is that *any* attempt to provide economic support to artists outside the market — through grants or tax breaks or even private patronage — simply sustains people who couldn't make it on their own merits, thereby drawing more people to art than the field can sustain. “In theory, then, extra funding will never increase income levels but merely increase the number of practicing artists,” he writes (pg. 130).

Thomas Malthus made the same argument about the poor, to the acclaim of the 19th-century British ruling class: any attempt at social welfare just slowed the process of thinning the herd, leading to more poor mouths to feed and worsening their conditions through overcrowding. Abbing is a cultural Malthusian.

To be fair, at Monday's W.A.G.E. event he claimed to have backed off this extremist argument a bit in the years since "Why Are Artists Poor?" was published. Now, he says, he focuses less on the actual role of subsidies in sustaining unproductive artists and more on the importance of government subsidies as a symbolic "signal" that falsely tells artists that art is a viable career. (Granted, Abbing is speaking from the Dutch perspective, where subsidies have been historically generous, but he is not shy about generalizing.)

A telling moment came during the Q&A section, when someone from the audience asked if he had an opinion about the astronomical prices fetched by art on the secondary market. "I don't have very much to say about it," Abbing answered mildly. "I suppose it would arouse anger from some artists." Got that? State support for arts is a distorting "signal." But endless hype about torrents of cash pouring into the art market? It's not even worth considering that that might be a significant factor in convincing young people that art might be a viable career.

In the United States, the decade has definitely seen a spike in the ranks of what are classified as "independent artists, writers, and performers" (from 509,000 to 676,000 between 2000 and 2008), despite the fact that overall subsidies for the arts — corporate, federal, state, and private — have generally risen only slightly, or, more often, decreased. (Americans for the Arts gathers the data for its [National Arts Index](#).) U.S. artists would have to be pretty frickin' dumb to think that the National Endowment for the Arts, cut to the bone and relentlessly demonized as a swindle to honest taxpayers, is sending them a "signal" that art is a career with a booming future. On the other hand, there has been a huge boom in the *art market* in the same period. Abbing is living in an upside-down world if he thinks the "oversupply" of artists is best explained by government distorting market signals.

Nevertheless, I agree with Abbing at least that you cannot explain the very real and probably unsustainable growth of the cultural economy simply as a function of raw economic calculation — though I wouldn't see it as being based solely on a romantic

“myth” to be debunked either. Rather, it seems an effect of what art has historically represented for society, combined with the realities of contemporary economic life.

“I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy,” John Adams, the second U.S. president, famously wrote in a letter to his wife. “Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain.” Part of the social contract has been that the struggles of each generation of parents are justified if they can make it possible that their sons and daughters be a little less alienated. And the arts, in theory, are a place where you get to dream a little. Thus, as societies become more affluent, more people tend to move towards arts careers (this is a cross-cultural phenomenon, even in places that have traditionally revered science and technology, [like Japan](#)). Studies of the artistic workforce, spotty as they are, show that each year a considerable number of people become artists after quitting other jobs, knowing full well that they will make less money, but simply looking to do something that is a little more personally fulfilling (“Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture,” pg. 821).

More artists exist than can possibly make it without a change in the way society consumes visual art, that’s for sure. But the reason for this phenomenon likely has at least as much to do with how *goddamn alienating* non-artistic labor is as with how naïve artists are — that is, with the ruthless realities of the market that Abbing looks to for salvation.

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