

### Ileana Nicoleta SĂLCUDEAN

**“I think that the emphasis on autonomy and authorship is not good for art and creativity”.**

Interview with Hans ABBING (continuation)

**Nicoleta Sălcudean:** Professor Hans Abbing, you are a professor at the University of Amsterdam, but at the same time an artist and a sociologist. Actually, we have met here in Cluj at a conference: *Conference of the European Research Network Sociology of the Arts*. How important is the network for the researchers?

**Hans Abbing:** I suppose that this network is really important. It probably is the only serious network, at least in Europe. It is very important for us to meet and extend ideas. It is encouraging to know that somebody is working on something similar in another country.

**N.S.:** You stated before that actually the artists are not very good in networking. Why is that? Could it be that they are looking for individual prestige?

**H.A.:** If you are clever as an artist, you would promote yourself by networking. This type of marketing, however, appears to be “commercial”, while it could have been a way to become active, as we discussed last time. Artists tend to be passive, they wait to be discovered. They talk about autonomy, honesty, sincerity. The result is passivity, waiting for others to discover you. The conviction is that as long as that has not happened the artist should only serve the arts, and not serve himself, for instance through marketing, or through other means which could raise one’s reputation.

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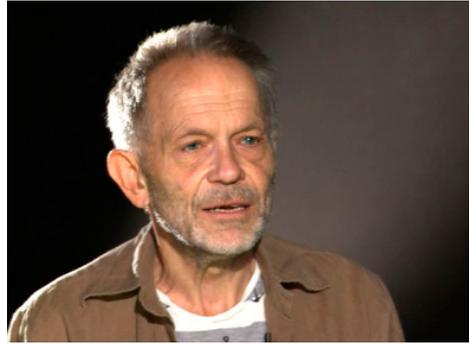
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**N.S.:** We also discussed last time the fact that it is not easy for young artists to launch. Do you see any help coming from the established artists towards the younger ones, especially in Holland? Is that working?

**H.A.:** It is not working, no... We had artists unions in the '70s, we all tried to democratize arts, to become stronger as artists. But the artists who became successful immediately dropped out from the unions. There was solidarity, but only in our rhetoric, not in our practices.. In the end there were always only poor artists and little-known artists who remained in the unions and they did not have any power. It was not a pleasant situation. Solidarity is very limited in the arts, and it is understandable. All the unrecognized artists are a threat for the recognized artists and there are so many that are not famous yet. You have to do gate-keeping as well, that is not restricted to critics, but extends to artists as well.



**N.S.:** We discussed a little bit about your book: *Why are Artists Poor?* But I noticed that it is free to download (thank you for that, anyway). Are the researchers also poor? What about your side as an economist? You allow free access to your books...

**H.A.:** Yes, it is a pretty successful book. By now there have been four prints and it has been translated in five languages. But it is an academic book, and academic books do not pay very well. How many copies have I sold? Or how much do I earn from that? Maybe 500 euros per year. So that was no reason for me to resist the possibility of downloading the book for free. On the contrary. We still need to find out how these various distribution systems work. Maybe having it free to download from the very beginning could even promote official sales. In this case we do not know, as the book has been already around for 12 years. But since this is possible, it has been downloaded a lot. Artists like the book. I have a story from the conference. I met a Finish researcher who is also teaching at the Art Academy and he said that it was really difficult to get art students to read a book. Even if the books are mandatory, they still avoid the tasks. Yet, they are all reading my book and it appears that they put the download link on Facebook and advertise it among themselves. It is great to hear that. In the end I am happy they are reading it.

**N.S.:** If we consider the economics of art... Have you changed your opinions during these years?

**H.A.:** Not really. But now I emphasize more what I call the inner-art world exploitation of artists. The same as in other sectors there is demand and supply in the arts, but the willingness of producers to work for very low incomes differs from that in other sectors. This willingness to work for low income is a very important factor in the economy of the arts. It also allows artists to be exploited. They are so passionate and also so passive waiting to be discovered, that they are willing to do almost everything for

nothing. Commercial companies misuse that, publishers misuse it. Yet, writers are not in the worst position. Commercial publishers will still pay 10% royalties, even if the artist would be prepared to pay to be published. In many respects there are the non-commercial art institutions that are the worst. You would not expect that, because the idea of the artworld which we have is one of all being friends and serving the arts. But non-profits often misuse this notion, and expect artists to work for nothing. They lure artists into a system where they are being exploited. Given low incomes artists have little choice but to compete with one another. The tendency is to work for free, because then you may be discovered. But only very rarely artists who participate for free in festivals or exhibit their work in art spaces for free are really discovered and will start to earn some money. The economy is exploitative. It is hard to break it, the artists have little choice unless you have a system in which notions of proper behavior exist.

Artists usually do not feel exploited, but they should start to realize that they are exploited. Artists should become more demanding, less willing to work for free, "to serve art", and the art institutions should have standards of proper behavior, they have to play fair. Some artists are becoming more active and demanding. In the USA there is now an organization of artists activists (W.A.G.E.) that certifies art institutions which treat artists good. They get a certificate. I think this is a good system; it is a model. In the beginning, the art institutions were not happy about this system, but now there are art institutions asking to be certified. It is a great development. It shows that artists do not have to be so passive.

**N.S.:** We touched a bit on the way the new technologies are affecting art and how much more accessible art is now and we also discussed about the reproduction of art. How reluctant and skeptical are the artists of these ways of dealing with art. Could they improve their financial situation by using new technologies?

**H.A.:** There are new techniques and there is reproduction and often they go together. Especially in classical music there has been —and it still exists— a fear of new technology. And even regarding the theater: it took a long long time before they started to amplify voices, and some still do not do it. In a large music/theater hall it makes a huge difference. When you hear actors whisper on the stage, it is really ridiculous. And now you can have more personal voices, in music, in the opera, comparable with those in pop music. But the institutions are scared of these new developments, and so are many artists. In the short run there is less prestige in it, and they are afraid to serve large audiences, as if serious art could be mainstream. Still gradually the new technologies would help them to do it. Next to amplification in large halls sometimes you can have really big video screens; maybe that is not the best solution for theater, but for concerts it could be great. I would like to see the face of the conductor as you can on television, but in the halls you cannot do that. In the established art performances there are so many do's and don't's. Personally I do not like to go to the classical concerts anymore. They are so formal and ritualized... Anyway, these institutions have a hard time to keep up with our time and that also applies to technical reproduction. They are all the time behind and that is a pity... There are now streaming platforms on the

internet, like *Spotify*, where you pay a little and you can listen to any music. Also classical music is there. But in classical music there is little effort to promote the use of new media. It has been like this for decades. The recordings were an important source of income, but they were never fully embraced. For instance more diverse recorded covers could have



been developed as it is so common in popular music. Also recordings could have had far more different qualities and not just offer experiences which are as close as possible to the original performance in the halls. There are chances enough but they miss out.

The visual arts are more open to new developments, but not so much to reach larger audiences – which is a pity. But visual art video clips, even the vanguard clips, are now on *Vimeo*, and art lovers distribute the links through media like *Facebook*, which is good. But it took a very long time. *Vimeo* is actually an example which shows that they still keep it a little bit exclusive; it is not *YouTube*. My own work is on *YouTube*; on *Vimeo* they could have had slightly more prestige, but a much smaller audience. And even though the visual arts are more open to new developments, they remain averse of technical reproduction, let us take for instance the posters – and that is a pity. Somewhat successful living artists do not want life size posters of their work being published, while posters could be so important. A lot of visual artworks and other very interesting visuals can be seen on new media like *Facebook*, and that is important. But unlike in the case of posters most of the time we look only briefly and casually at them. By the way, we may become better in consuming serious art in somewhat concentrated fashion also on the internet. Nevertheless the physical thing should be ample available.

**N.S.:** You have many profiles: artist, economist, sociologist, scientist, professor. So far I have asked your opinion as an artist and an economist. Now, I would like to ask you something as a researcher. Is the current research in art doing justice to the artists? Is the research reflecting the real situation in art? Are they two different worlds?

**H.A.:** They are different realms. It does not mean that science is useless for artists, there is research that could be interesting for artists, could even lead to conclusions which can promote changes in art institutions. But in practice the research which is done does not come across and this is mainly the fault of academia that uses a language and formats that are not interesting for other people.

**N.S.:** Are the researchers in touch with what is going on, or are they distant from the artistic reality?

**H.A.:** That is a different matter. Even in Art Academies there are now theory departments that are involved with research as well as the creation of art. Usually it is *critical* art theory. Sometimes I am a bit suspicious in the sense that institutional critique

is the most important motor of these departments and that is a critique of the art elite. But the elite is somewhat sadomasochistic: they like to be criticized, but in the end nothing changes. And so, I would be happier if theorists would be more interested in the democratization of arts; and not just community arts, which is great, but can also stay marginal and be self satisfying for artists, not really mobilize people. I would say that good art should mobilize people – sometimes literally – it should anyway help people to express themselves and so tackle their problems: songs and paintings can do that. Foremost it should mobilize people whose voice is not being heard. (Voice is an important concept. Also the passive artists waiting to be discovered have no voice.)

**N.S.:** There is this fueled discussion about the difference between art as art for art sake and the contextualization of art: the sociological, economical, cultural implications of art. What would be the current view on this in Holland?

**H.A.:** I think that when it comes to autonomy it is very much the idea to keep art autonomous and not to have dialogues with non-artists. It might change a bit, maybe due to a cultural entrepreneurship, that would expect art to communicate more with their consumers. But I have the impression that most artists want to stick to a one way traffic. They want to sell art and possibly market art, but they do not want to really communicate.

It is imaginable that artist would give up some autonomy by working together with other artists, producers, designers, so they all can have a recognized artistic input. That would be a step forward, a huge step forward. Also in the mind of the artists. Also now they do of course work together with others, but they want to have the final say. It would be better if a minor loss in autonomy and less emphasis on authorship would not be regarded as the end of the world.

**N.S.:** What would be the role of the European Union in this? I know that the EU brings forth the idea of contextualizing art and connecting it to society, to economics etc. At the same time, the EU is financing many cultural and artistic projects. Is that influencing the take on this issue?

**H.A.:** I do not know so much about the EU, but I know about the Dutch situation. The general notion is that art should become more demand oriented. So far it was not that way. This goes against the passivity we discussed earlier on; artists should seek for audiences, which implies that they may have to adapt their work, or music halls and museums may have to bring different selections of art. But they protest against it. Society or rather people make demands as tax payers. Artists who expect to be subsidized should be aware of this and not believe that they know best what society needs. That is a paternalistic view, which does not work anymore in our modern society, people do not like paternalism.

But it is questionable if governments (or donors) have much power even though they can decide on support. For instance they cannot change the elite atmosphere in the concert halls. It takes artists and art managers to develop new attitudes.

**N.S.:** You are coordinating master degree theses for your students. What are the current interests in art from the research point of view?

**H.A.:** I do it in the Cultural Economic Studies department in the university of Rotterdam and I supervise theses at the University in Amsterdam at the Cultural Sociology Department. There is a major difference between the two. In Rotterdam they are very much oriented on cultural entrepreneurship, also having in mind the future developments in the art professions. The students are very pragmatic and look forward to having positions in the art world. In Amsterdam the students I supervise are more theoretically focused. Since *Occupy Wall Street*, there is the realization that neo-liberalism also affects the arts, and the students are trying to understand this and thinking about ways artists could approach the situation. Is there resilience among artists, how do we deal with the new reality? I find that very interesting.

**N.S.:** In the end I would like to ask you something more personal. I know you have this special habit: each time you travel to a foreign country for a conference or other professional reasons, you are staying a few weeks longer in order to write. Can you tell us the title of the new book you are working on, the main idea behind it? By the way, it is a very good habit, we should all consider it.

**H.A.:** It is working for some people, maybe not so much for others, but it works very well for me. The book is going to be called: *The Art Period and its Forthcoming End*. The subtitle will be: *A study of art, artists and the arts economy*. With the art period I have in mind the last two centuries (with a zenith in between 1910 and 1980) when the respect for arts was very high, even from working class people who did not consume art. I will try to explain how art came to be very respected, because it was not so in the 18th century and before; art was more instrumental and decorative. In the late 19th century and in the 20th century, after Romanticism, higher class people got an extensive relationship with art. At the same time artists had a monopoly on authenticity and creativity. That is changing now. Nowadays everybody can be authentic (the industry also promotes this idea), and there are more mechanisms which make artists less special. In the long run this cannot but have an effect on the way art is perceived and respected. I am not saying that art will become less important, especially not when we consider a much broader notion of art, not only established art but also popular art and forms of applied arts. Then art will remain very important in society.

**N.S.:** Because of this personal habit, we also had the chance to conduct this interview with you, we thank you very much for your input, the interesting discussion, for enlarging our horizon about the current challenges in art and research. Thank you!

**H.A.:** Thank you as well!

Professor **Hans Abbing** is an artist, but also a sociologist and an economist. He lectures at the University of Amsterdam and at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. He is also the author of the famous book: *Why are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts* (Amsterdam University Press 2002). The book can be downloaded from: <https://amsterdam.academia.edu/HansAbbing>