

Two steps back or one forward

Hans Abbing Klamer expresses what the sector wants to hear, that the arts conflict with commerce. But the practices in that same sector are thoroughly economic, Abbing says, something a true scientist should reveal.

Faith is a mighty weapon in maintaining social injustice. For a long time faith in God was used that way, by now faith in 'sacred' art functions in a similar way. In my opinion science should discover what is covered up, also in case of the arts. The inevitable, but still far away 'secularisation' of the arts will be speeded up.

The sociology of the arts has demonstrated that faith in the arts is man-made; it is produced. And the economy of the arts reveals that in spite of the anti-commercial attitude the practices in the arts are thoroughly economic. The shift for instance which young and promising visual artists periodically make from product-art to installations and backwards, will always be explained by referring to artistic values in catalogues and in the press. But the reasons for this change are economic. When prices are low it is more profitable for these artists to make long term investments in building a reputation by notable installations than by competing with an older generation in a market that is low. It is this down-to-earth reasoning and uncovering that was introduced into the economic study of the arts by people like Frey, Pommerehne and Grampp. 'Interest' is the central word. Even Klamer's condemnation of commerce in the arts together with the related fear of

devaluation through money is part of an attitude which is not of all times and which can be deduced from interests just as much as the money-orientated attitude elsewhere in the economy.

Klamer's lecture reeks of restoration. It reinforces the anti-commercial attitude of the sector and art and culture turn out to be exceptional: they are beyond measurement. (A difference exists between 'beyond' measurement and some degree of objective and inevitable immeasurability. In the former case a tricky value-judgement is necessarily involved.) It is striking that Klamer's critical attitude towards art-subsidies was received by the sector without too much indignation. Economists who ventilated a similar opinion in Holland and Belgium at an earlier stage, like Drees jr. and De Grauwe, got a very different reception. Since the attitude within the arts towards subsidies is changing a little, one probably does not feel that threatened anymore. The main reason for the mild reception should however be sought in another direction. Subsidies are important for the sector, but faith in the arts is many times more important. In this sense Klamer expresses what the sector needs and wants to hear. In the case of Klamer it is not opportunism, but conviction. To me this

conviction has to change. If not it takes science two steps back.

Klamer touches at important issues in his lecture. Forgetting about all value-judgements: do similarities exist between the partly non-monetary investment involved in the decision to take a child and the decision to buy a piece of art? And which are the similarities in the case of an art-dealer deciding to take on a certain artist? Part of the expected 'gain' is not fit for money-measurement, because ordinary terms of trade do not exist. And the chance that the gain cannot be realized, is often not calculable in advance. It is exactly these unpredictable risks and the resulting non-monetary exchange which make the area so interesting for the economist.

From the point of view of economics the area of arts and culture is 'exceptional'. But this is only partly true. Almost all exchange is open-ended and therefore fiduciary in some aspects. The exceptionality has nothing to do with value-judgements; it demands a sober and down-to-earth scientific approach. When young visual artists temporarily turn to installations for building a reputation, they need the help of critics. Some sort of deal is made, which may result in the production of considerable future value. But it is not at all certain. The deal is extremely open-ended and the risks are unpredictable. This production of value through extremely risky, non-monetary exchange has so far been omitted from the economists' research program into the arts. Probably this approach has hardly any significance for the area itself. But it is important for the economics of the arts and economics in general can learn from it. Klamer embodies the necessary capital for that approach. If he manages to transform this capital into transferable knowledge, he will put our ever tardy science one step forward.

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