

The Artist-entrepreneur Acting as a Gatekeeper in the Realm of Art

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Abstract The present paper analyses the role of artists-entrepreneurs in the contemporary society. The investigation, focused on studying these actors in their artistic and entrepreneurial activities and processes, reveals another emerging role: these professionals act as protectors of the integrity of the Art when it enters in relation with the logics of the business world. The research is conducted interviewing and observing a group of artists living the experience of founding their own cultural enterprises in the specific context of performing arts.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The World of Artists-entrepreneurs. – 3 The Empirical Investigation. – 3.1 Field of Research. – 3.2 Methodology. – 3.3 Reconstructing a Fragmented Image. – 4 Final Discussion. – 4.1 Artists-entrepreneurs as Gatekeepers. – 4.2 Conclusion.

Keywords Entrepreneur. Gatekeeper. Realm of art.

1 Introduction

The world of contemporary art is characterised by a growing number of artists experiencing an entrepreneurial venture.¹ Especially in the context of performing arts, this has been lived both as a necessary and a voluntary solution to the severe shortage of funds affecting the world of public institutions. Thus a new actor emerges, represented by the artist-entrepreneur (Caplin 1980) who lives a hybridisation of roles and competences. But who are the artists-entrepreneurs? And how do they live the possible tensions emerging from the encounter of worlds that have been reputed as radically different for so long?

The present paper aims at analysing the complex condition of an artist walking on the borders of a middle land where the artistic practice gives substance to the entrepreneurial role. The investigation reveals that these special professionals are well ingrained in the business world but – as artists – they also play

the role of gatekeepers of their own language, looking for a realistic balance between artistic goals and the sustainability of their entrepreneurial choices.

The paper discusses the results emerging from a first qualitative investigation on a group of artists involved in their entrepreneurial activity within the performing arts sector. These have been studied through the analysis of their discourse and the observation of their practices.

The paper is organised as follows. The second paragraph presents the rhetoric of artists-entrepreneurs analysed in their double professional role. The third paragraph introduces the empirical research, discussing the context of investigation, the research question and the methodology used to conduct the research. The fourth paragraph presents the main findings, discussing the role of artists-entrepreneurs as gatekeepers in the realm of Art.

Paragraphs 1, 2, 4.1 are by Monica Calcagno, while paragraphs 3 and 4.2 are by Lisa Balzarin.

1 The definition of art using upper or lower cases opens a link to the debate (Barry 2011, Lindqvist 2011) on the nature of art as “artworld” (Danto 1964) or “art worlds” (Becker 1982). In this work, we adopt a definition of Art following the formulation of Davies (2006, 2007) where he refers to “professional art circles [...] judged on artistic properties that are referential and context bound” (Barry 2011, 158) Art then identifies “the work’s location within the tradition (if and how it is original and unusual, whether it emulates, subverts, rejects or redirects the default convention and art practices of the time, the extent to which its use of the tradition is self-conscious, the genres and styles within which it is located, influences to which it is subject)” (Davies 2006, 227; Barry 2011, 158). Nevertheless, when we talk about the work of contemporary artists, we adopt a perspective where we analyse the processes and the artistic practices emerging in the artistic work (Scherdin and Zander 2011; Zembylas 2011).

2 The World of Artists-entrepreneurs

Artists-entrepreneurs' activity can be identified as a particular kind of 'cultural entrepreneurship'. This practice has been traditionally investigated adopting two main perspectives, based on different meanings of culture.

As a first meaning, 'culture' refers to the sociological frame of reference identifying a set of habits, customs, traditions, and beliefs, which constitute a shared way of life in a specific historical and political context. As a second meaning, 'culture' identifies a complex set of processes, products and actors involved in the design, production and distribution of cultural and artistic goods and services.

Descending from the first sociological perspective, cultural entrepreneurship represents "the skill of certain entrepreneurs to use culture as a toolkit for constructing resonant identities and motivating resource-holding audiences to allocate their resources." (Überbacher et al. 2015, 926). Therefore, cultural entrepreneurship is instrumentally identified in the process of storytelling that gives shape and legitimates new ventures (Lounsbury, Glynn 2011). Not referring to a specific industry, the adjective 'cultural' is used to identify the process of legitimation that entrepreneurs sustain giving shape to the story of their personal and professional life.

In a second perspective, cultural entrepreneurship identifies a set of processes through which a growing number of artists and cultural professionals assume an entrepreneurial role.² Cultural entrepreneurship thus identifies the activity of conceiving, producing and marketing "cultural goods and services, generating economic, cultural and social opportunities for creators while adding cultural value for consumers" (Zemite 2010, 79). The artists-entrepreneurs combine their artistic attitudes with a deep sense of business (Marinova, Borza 2013), economically sustaining the cultural enterprise in coherence with their cultural vision (Zemite 2010).

Given these two main perspectives, the present paper aims at investigating the role of the 'artist-entrepreneur' walking on the boundaries between the ideal embodiment of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur fighting against adverse circumstances to promote his own idea and a reality

that is quite more complex than what emerges at a first glance. If artists and entrepreneurs seem to have much in common (Bonnafous-Boucher, Cuir, Partouche 2011, 31), inducing to state that they have "the capacity to trigger a series of phenomena ex nihilo or, in other words, to be at the origin of a complex series of events", on the other hand artists still have the identity of romantic heroes, whose creativity is preserved by any form of influence produced by the world of business and all its "not values" (Bonin-Rodriguez 2012).

The ambiguity and complexity of a role that combines entrepreneurial wisdom and artistic practices (2004; Preece 2011; Marinova, Borza 2013) give great relevance to the artists-entrepreneurs observed in the multiple dimensions of their role (Jones, Svejenova, Strandgaard Pedersen, Townly 2016).

Analysed in their relationship with different contexts, both if they are part of the mainstream or emerge as radical innovators of cultural codes, they act as mediators between their own artistic language and the external context.

The paper aims at analysing how this role takes shape, interpreting the experience of a group of artists-entrepreneurs operating in the performing arts context.

3 The Empirical Investigation

3.1 Field of Research

Performing arts (circus, dance, theatre) are the field of investigation. The choice has been made following three main rationales.

First of all, the familiarity of the authors with the field of investigation lets emerge that most of the cultural enterprises operating in the performing arts have been founded on the initiative of artists or artistic groups.

As a second reason, live performances are realised through a mix of artistic languages and practical competences that are only partially connected to the artistic world, urging a hybridisation of competences. The complexity of the processes through which the performance is designed, produced and finally distributed, thus shapes the organisational system of these enterprises.

Finally, artists operating in the context of performing arts have a special perception of their

² Bonin-Rodriguez 2012; Scherdin, Zander 2011; Hagoort 2004; Markusen, Gilmore, Johnson, Levi, Martinez 2006; Beckman, Essig 2012; Marinova, Borza 2013; White 2013; Taylor, Bonin-Rodriguez, Essig 2015; Chang, Wyszomirski 2015; Gartner, Roberts, Rabideau 2015.

'being on stage', living a close and intense relationship with their audience. As a consequence, they tend to adopt a relational approach that is fundamental in the entrepreneurial acting, while developing a strong aptitude to self-consciousness that is transferred to the entrepreneurial activity.

3.2 Methodology

The interpretivist approach is the philosophical ground on which we based the choice of a qualitative method of research (Myers 2009; Yin 1989, 2014). More specifically, between July 2014 and February 2015 we conducted an investigation of the work done by a group of 11 artists-entrepreneurs, who developed their artistic projects starting a new venture. Coherently with the double role played by the artist-entrepreneur, the empirical research has been based on a method of research where the two dimensions were analysed in their reciprocal interaction.

Following these trajectories, the research has been structured in two major rounds.

In the first round, a number of six artists were selected. The strategy followed in the case selection was driven by two main rationales.

First, privileging a practice commonality in order to increase cross-case comparability, we focused on those performing artists who established a cultural enterprise and are still operating in it.

Second, we were in part led by the phenomenon itself, identifying additional cases through snowball logic as well. Following the approach suggested by Darsø's (2004), we designed the data set in order to emphasize the variety of artistic experiences in the context of performing arts.

For a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, we then interviewed a limited number of other professionals working in the world of entrepreneurial performing arts as cultural managers and accountants.

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were finally conducted,³ both in Italy and abroad.⁴ All the interviews were recorded and transcribed and, in some cases, they were supported by the

observation of the artists in their daily organizational work, on stage during the performances, and in the backstage during rehearsals.

In the second round, data discussion and triangulation enabled the identification and interpretation of practices and key words used by the artists-entrepreneurs. These findings supported the analysis of the entrepreneurial and artistic role identifying aims, actions and re-actions in a context of complexity. What are then the motivations pushing the artists to establish their own organization, assuming an entrepreneurial approach? And how are they influenced by their artistic being when facing the complexity caused by the multiple and heterogeneous activities required to manage their entrepreneurial activity?

3.3 Reconstructing a Fragmented Image

At a first glance, the interviewees reveal an extremely cautious perception of the duality of roles assumed by the artists in the implementation of their entrepreneurial activity:

I'm an artist. I feel to be an artist. I recognized myself in this idea more than in that one of being an entrepreneur... I am an entrepreneur in a secondary way. I am a secondary entrepreneur. (artist-entrepreneur of a dance company)

Confident of their artistic background, the interviewees tend to affirm the superiority of the artistic values on the entrepreneurial ones, reducing the importance of their entrepreneurial role. The prudence is also justified by a common misinterpretation of the entrepreneur, perceived as exclusively subjected to the economic logic. Artists-entrepreneurs react negatively to the suffered reduction of time dedicated to the process of their artistic research, and nevertheless they adopted an entrepreneurial behaviour when they decided to start their own cultural ventures. This emergent tension develops in the consciousness that:

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⁴ All the interviews were conducted encountering the interviewed personally, and in a few cases using Skype as a technological support.

In our world we are in permanent crisis. We always have not enough money. With crisis nothing changed. There is a little bit less money, maybe this. (artist-entrepreneur of a dance company)

The artists-entrepreneurs are convinced of their poor familiarity with a supposed set of entrepreneurial tools:

In some moments I asked myself: 'Am I able to do this thing?' because I had only a humanistic background, I attended an academy of theatrical arts. 'Can I manage it?' (artist-entrepreneur of a theatre company)

The interviewees declare a managerial gap and perceive their ignorance as an obstacle in the entrepreneurial process. Nevertheless, they overcame the insecurity and their positive motivations emerge.

The artists-entrepreneurs perceive the entrepreneurial dimension as a chance to feel free in the expression of their artistic idea, avoiding creative constraints imposed by others. They want to be in total control of their art:

I have always believed in self-management and self-production because they leave you the chance of being free to create. (artist-entrepreneur of a dance company)

Moreover,

«The urgency to say» (artist-entrepreneur of dance company)

and the artistic ambition

I am ambitious, I want to perform in big theatres. (artist-entrepreneur of a dance company)

justify the choice to act independently, finding the resources to realise their artistic idea.

Once founded their own organizations, artists-entrepreneurs start offering their products in the market and learn from the new interaction with the business world. They make sense of their role under a new perspective:

I like working with enterprises. I have the chance to test myself with different things. They are often new creations. I like working with them, I like every time a new creation is required. This is something interesting for

me. I like to be used, in a good sense... you have the chance to measure your artistic language and you can compare yourself to some aspects different from the artistic and intellectual research. (artist-entrepreneur of a dance company)

The relationship with new contexts of action asks for adaptation and problem-solving aptitudes, that artists-entrepreneurs normally practice in the comfort-zone of the artistic sphere, thus reinforcing the perception that this new experience has much to do with their story.

Compromise is one of the emergent keywords. In a positive perspective, because every choice has its own costs:

A dance company has the production of shows as its mission.

For the production of show it is necessary to invest financial resources. The more you want to maintain a good level of quality, the more you have to financially invest in good dancers and fashion designers and so on.

And in a negative perspective, when compromise means putting all the stuff together:

What I find hard is having time to organise the artistic part maintaining quality in it, because at the same time I have to do many courses, to do marketing activities, to be a manager, to do everything the theatre needs. (artist-entrepreneur of a theatrical company)

Once again, the scarcity of resources - both as time and finances - asks for the artist to mediate between divergent aims. In fact, something new emerges: a different perception of the relationship with the audience that is now directly interacting with the artist, as well as the presence of opposite tensions. These tensions can rise within the enterprise, or result from the interaction with the external context. The search for a better synchronism between the artistic proposal and the audience's needs (Caves 2000) places the artist-entrepreneur in the middle of a situation characterized by diverging forces. A choreographer acknowledges to feeling trapped in what the audience expects to receive from her, and she struggles to innovate:

As an artist, for example, I use the irony to create more audience, but now for example I'm really tired of be funny. I want to work in

another way because as an artist I'm a little bit stressed to be only what the people want from me... I want to be something different.

Therefore, once again, the artists-entrepreneur perceives to be in a constant situation of compromise, where the sustainability of the artistic idea seems to collide with the artistic wisdom.

4 Final Discussion

4.1 Artists-entrepreneurs as Gatekeepers

At a first glance, what emerges with more emphasis from the interviews is the tough and complex relationship between the artistic and the entrepreneurial dimensions faced by the artists-entrepreneurs. The interdependence between the two spheres emerges as a matter of fact, emphasising the dual nature of the cultural enterprise. But duality means adopting an integral perspective that results from an intense dialogue between the two languages.

Analysing the interviews more in depth, an artistic academic background and the absence of an entrepreneurial and managerial education are the common ground of all the artists-entrepreneurs. If according to Loudon (2013) the absence of proper business training produces resistance against the 'economic world', its language and all the related activities, the present investigation depicts an evolution of the framework.

The artists-entrepreneurs here analysed have a good relationship with the business side of their role, even though they recognise the descending difficulties and strongly believe in the primacy of the artistic dimensions on the entrepreneurial and managerial ones. They recognise art as their mission (Klamer 2011), and use the entrepreneurial and managerial tools as a means to sustain the process of artistic creation. The artists-entrepreneurs live then in the middle between the conditions deriving from the external context and the embodied legacy of their artistic language.

On the external side, the world of performing arts has been living in a persistent situation of crisis (Baumol, Bowen 1966), caused by two main reasons: public funds are inadequate to sustain a well-structured artistic programme,

and cultural enterprises are managed unsuccessfully, moving towards a condition of financial failure. In addition, even when the artistic enterprise gains success in terms of audience reach, this is not enough to sustain its financial health (Turbide, Laurin, Lapierre, Morisette 2008), and the artist is forced to look for alternative forms of financial sustain. The external conditions then act both as limitations and as strengths. As limitations, they discourage the entrepreneurial attitude. As strengths, they push artists to find a sustainable solution, contributing to the natural selection of the most motivated among them.

Introducing a dimension of additional complexity, the recent worldwide recession exploded as a dramatic stroke (Turbide, Laurin, Lapierre, Morisette 2008), drastically reducing the number of job positions offered and pushing further the artists to create their own independent venture.

On the internal side, the creative urgency (Barrett 1982), the desire of being independent and in total control of their own art, the will to have an impact on society (Inversini, Manzoni, Salvemini 2004) and the artistic ambition (Bonin-Rodriguez 2012) push them to learn how to sustain their artistic goals assuming an entrepreneurial and managerial *habitus*. Nevertheless, they privilege a pattern of artistic research and experimentation, walking on the fuzzy boundaries between artistic vision and economic awareness. Following this logic, they act to preserve the language of their artistic project both directly and controlling the work of the artists collaborating with them. Artists-entrepreneurs then embrace the challenge as their usual condition of life, artistically and entrepreneurially.

If challenges are part of their artistic research, pursued through a combination of breakthroughs (Abbing 2002) and re-combinations, the same approach is translated to the entrepreneurial sphere. They challenge the economic constraints, and overcome the language boundaries building a shared vocabulary and supporting the process of communication.

Assuming multiple roles and inhabiting a hybrid space of action, artists-entrepreneurs work in a constant tension between the artistic and economic logic of their life (Eikhof, Haunschild 2007), facing dilemmas that need to be resolved through a balancing act (Lampel, Lant, Shamise 2000). What emerges from the empirical observations is that striving to find a balance

between the integrity⁵ of the artistic process and the need to sustain it economically, in the short-term artists-entrepreneurs seem to privilege the first one, but this reinforces the cultural project, thus reaching the economic sustainability in the long term. The same strategy makes sense of the relationship with the audience. This is not perceived as a customer to satisfy but as a point of reference in a process of artistic creation that is grounded in the awareness of a personal and professional investment.

4.2 Conclusion

What emerges through the analysis of the findings is that artists-entrepreneurs, as decision-makers, aim at preserving the Art's integrity, and address their choices to protect it from the perceived negative influences of the business strategies. As a consequence, in managing their activity, they make choices that preserve the artistic sphere and its related values. This aptitude could seem not immediately convenient in economic terms. However, Becker (1998) suggests that "business cannot, in the long run, succeed by lying and being unjust to customers" (159). Therefore, if adoption of integrity has positive effects only on the artistic sphere, this is true also in a managerial perspective: integrity rewards those managerial actors who follow it. These professionals have to adopt a rational behaviour, whereas integrity is a manifestation of rationality (Becker 1998, 159): neither being guided by irrational fears or by desires that are inconsistent with moral values, nor being influenced by social pressure (159). The artist-entrepreneurs daily face this tricky situation: remaining faithful to the Art, they strive to reach a balance between the sometimes diverging forces that characterize how they manage their activity. They perform as mediators.

As the collected evidences let emerge, they act right in the middle between the desire of developing their artistic language and the taste and perceptions of the audience. As artists they feel the need to work for the evolutionary development of the world of Art proposing new creations as a result of their artistic growth and consciousness. On the other hand, as entrepre-

neurs, they must consider what the audience wants, but without deceiving the artistic morality. Finding solutions to maintain an adequate equilibrium between opposite forces seems to be the main activity of these professionals.

Therefore, playing as mediators and protectors, artists-entrepreneurs seem to act as gatekeepers, assuming a role that differs from the entrepreneurial approach traditionally adopted in a business context. Here they perceive to be part of a community that preserves its own artistic language. Facing obstacles and difficulties, they act in order to keep alive the artistic experimentation. Assuming the entrepreneurial role, artists-entrepreneurs create a place devoted to the growth of the artistic language. Under this perspective, these professionals guarantee the development of the Art as well as the proliferation and evolution of the artistic languages. Acting as gatekeepers, thus they find a possible combination of their goals as private entrepreneurs with the aims of a larger community.

Who are gatekeepers and where are they placed?

Griswold (2004) does not mention them in her cultural diamond. Nevertheless, Foster, Borgatti and Jones (2011) use a taxonomy underlying the importance of this role of mediation in the artistic world. Gatekeepers are classified in coproducers, tastemakers and selectors. Fulfilling different and specific activities, all of them share the experience of being in the middle of a process, working to facilitate the artistic product in establishing a successful dialogue with the market. The empiric evidences of the present investigation suggest that a new kind of gatekeeper is acting in the artistic world, as a consequence of playing the double role of artist and entrepreneur. This special condition contributes to make sense of the entrepreneurial role, enriching the distinction among mainstreams, mavericks, misfits and amphibians (Jones et al. 2016).

Even though these actors are strategically placed in a different relation with the context, the question then could be if they share a sense of community that influences their entrepreneurial choices.

⁵ In the present paper, integrity is conceived as the "state of a system where it is performing its intended functions without being degraded or impaired by changes or disruptions in its internal or external environments" (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/integrity.html>).

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