Chapter 9

Conflicting Values, the Balancing Act of Artists

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Abstract

This chapter explores the role of entrepreneurship within the careers of fine artists. This is positioned within the context of the discourse of cultural value. How artists manage their artistic and, sometimes conflicting, entrepreneurial identities is explored. The fields of entrepreneurship, and more recently the creative industries, have received much attention from both policy makers and researchers. Fine artists are perhaps one of the least employable, and arguably most entrepreneurial (by necessity), as Higgs et al. suggest 'some occupations naturally have substantially higher numbers of self-employed people such as "Artists" with 91% self-employment' (Higgs, Cunningham, & Bakhshi, 2008, p. 94).

The study captures the career histories of a cohort of fine art graduates, all of whom had graduated at the same time (1994), from the same institution. Taking a narrative approach, detailed career stories were obtained. The relationship to and tensions surrounding entrepreneurship and artistic practice were explored in detail. While artistic identity emerges as a strong force for this group, artistic identity and entrepreneurial identity are sometimes at odds with each other. The practicalities of making a living as an artist, arguably, call for entrepreneurial activity. However, the findings suggest that this presents a conflict for some artists, both aesthetically and emotionally. This chapter explores what this means in the context of cultural value, and cultural value as a 'lens' for understanding an artist's career.

Keywords: Artists; creative industries; identity; entrepreneurship; cultural value; artist careers

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to explore the relationship between the multiple roles required by artists (i.e., the role of entrepreneurship) within the careers of fine artists. The chapter provides an exploration of how artists manage their artistic (and sometimes conflicting) entrepreneurial identities and considers this in the context of cultural value. The creative industries are, by their nature, characterised by high levels of self-employment and arguably entrepreneurial activity. What emerged from this research was a very real tension experienced by fine art graduates between their artistic and entrepreneurial identities and the precarious nature of where value lays.

The chapter is structured in as follows. First, some context is offered to the study through examination of the existing literature of entrepreneurship within the creative industries, and fine artists' careers and cultural value in the context of creative industries entrepreneurship. Next, the methodology is discussed, including insight into the approach, how the sample group was determined and the approach to analysis. Lastly, the findings and discussion section focuses on artistic identity and the tensions and motivations experienced by the participants and explores how this intersects with cultural value, here assuming the notion of cultural value as a 'lens' for understanding an artist's career (Fillis, Lee, & Fraser, 2015; Lehman & Wickham, 2014).

Careers and Entrepreneurship of Artists

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Artists' careers share similar traits with other creative disciplines characterised by their independent nature or by being a portfolio of activity (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Bridgstock, 2011; Reid, Albert, & Hopkins, 2010). Careers are described as 'boundaryless' which is suggested to be 'opposite to organisational careers', or those 'conceived within a single setting'(Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 6). Arguably, fine art is the least employable discipline within the creative industries, with few job adverts explicitly seeking fine artists (Carey, 2013). Higgs et al. (2008) suggest 'some occupations naturally have substantially higher numbers of self-employed people such as "Artists" with 92 per cent self-employment' (p. 94). The 'protean career' (Bridgstock, 2005, 2011) describes the creative career as centred on the individual rather than the organisation. Menger (1999) goes further, suggesting that an artist's ability to build a public persona is crucial to building and sustaining the required recognition of their work and talent, however marketing has been highlighted as 'at odds' with the artist's original motivations for their artistic activity (Kubacki & Croft, 2011).

The portfolio career has a number of associated positive and negative aspects: it provides flexibility, choice and an avenue through which to pursue artists' creative endeavours; however, there is a lack of career progression and little financial or job security (Reid et al., 2010) amongst artists, and there is evidence of exclusivity of networks and in turn access to opportunities (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Artists, like those in other creative disciplines, are reliant on a high level of networking in terms of sharing and collaborating on exhibiting

opportunities (Bridgstock, 2005). Linked to these factors is the difficulty that creative graduates have in establishing themselves in the first instance (Bridgstock, 2011) and in particular for artists who, like their peers, experience a 'difficult first year'.

Throsby (2007) identifies work patterns whereby artists are balancing non-creative paid work with their creative work. However, as Oakley, Sperry, and Pratt (2008) discuss, artists can be an asset in terms of what they bring to the non-creative environment

> …from an innovation perspective, the importance of this form of work organisation is perhaps less what it tells us about the labour market and more what it tells us about the crossover and cross-fertilisation of people and ideas across the arts, and between the arts and non-arts worlds. (p. 6).

Artists' careers are, therefore, arguably different from other creative disciplines. Carey (2015) highlights the 'embedded artist', exploring the role of the artist when working outside of their discipline and potentially embedding cultural value in non-creative organisations. There is a body of work that explores the creative entrepreneur, and various definitions have been discussed along with attributes of the creative entrepreneur, including those 'who can work flexibly with good interpersonal and research skills' as having excellent communication, networking and teamwork skills (Ball, 2003, p. 14). A widely cited definition is provided by Howkins (2002) who describes the creative entrepreneur as someone who uses their 'creativity to unlock the wealth that lies within themselves' (p. 128). As described, this focus has developed and has led to further publications and special issues of journals focussing on the creative entrepreneur. Aggestam (2008) refers to the 'art-entrepreneur', who is described as a 'holder of tacit knowledge that is realised as part of human capital and includes individual skill, competence, commitment and creativity-based mind-sets' (p. 30). Creative entrepreneurs are also seen as 'key stakeholders' within the creative economy (Rae, 2008). Moreover, Rae (2008) points to further challenges for the creative entrepreneur, suggesting that they 'face all of the challenges of running a business that a more generic entrepreneur would face, but they have the distinct challenge of sustaining a business from "creative activities"' (p. 58).

Cultural Value and the Careers of Fine Artists

An important grounding on cultural value is presented by Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) who suggest that focussing on the individual might be problematic in terms of capturing where value lies. However, the focus here tends to be on individuals as recipients of culture. When the focus is on creators, these individuals are amateurs as opposed to cultural and creative professionals, as highlighted by the statement 'We are continually trying to analyse the effects of individual organisations and programmes on individual people' (Crossick &

Kaszynska, 2016, p. 39). Another interesting feature is the authors' lack of reference to entrepreneurship (note that freelancing is only mentioned once when describing the characteristics of the sector). The term 'creative business' is used throughout, but often in the context of creative business's economic value or creative/cultural activity to attract businesses more broadly (as opposed to the perceived values, be the economic or otherwise, to individual creative businesses and artists). One concession to this is the discussion around business models: 'Innovative business models are, in this perspective, a key prerequisite of creative practice' (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016, p. 94). Belfiore (2018) highlights the growing criticism of 'the mounting critique of the predominant articulation of the value of the arts and of creative artifacts in terms of economic value' (p. 2). In addition, she highlights important questions: who attributes value? who is included in the decision-making process? The Arts Council of England has articulated the breadth of value that arts and culture contribute to society, highlighting four main areas: society; health and well-being; the economy and education (Arts Council of England, 2004). They do, however, identify the lack of causality in the studies they explored and the need for larger datasets to quantify the true value of arts.

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Arts and culture (and, more broadly, the creative industries) contribute and create value (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016); however, what is unclear is how these values manifest in the individual creative entrepreneur? As suggested by Carey (2015), there is some evidence that trained artists act as cultural value carriers when embedded within non-arts organisations. This chapter provides insights into the careers of fine artists and identifies the often-conflicting relationships with the values of which they are custodians or generators. In turn, the chapter looks at how this tension impacts identity. Identity, in discussions of value, tends to focus on the shaping of identity through the medium of cultural pursuits (e.g., singing and dancing) or national identity in relation to cultural acts or artefacts (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). This chapter aims to explore this gap and investigates the impact of cultural value on the identities of professional (as opposed to hobbyist) fine artists.

Methodology

The study drew upon qualitative methods, specifically narrative and career story interviews to elicit the depth and detail of the participants' careers. Narrative has been increasingly recognised in the social sciences and has been suggested to provide a 'holistic understanding of an individual's vocation and career' (Rehfuss, 2009, p. 82). Narrative has also been heavily used within existing career research as well as offering a practical device within career counselling (Severy, 2008). Studies using narrative are also prevalent within entrepreneurship research (Elfving & Howard, 2018) and, importantly to this study, entrepreneurship within the creative industries (Rae, 2005;Kellet, 2006). A narrative approach has been highlighted as a means of offering a number of benefits; not only does it provide rich insight into the storyteller but also arguably allows one to get closer to the

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'real, lived experience' (Rae, 2000, p. 157). A number of researchers have identified other benefits, such as the storytelling environment is considered to be less formal, potentially putting the interviewee at ease (Johansson, 2004) while also offering the interviewee some benefits: 'narrative and storytelling also offer the interviewee the opportunity to make sense of their situation, giving them the capacity to explain a series of events or an outcome' (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 35).

Research Sample Group

The study looked at the career histories of a cohort of fine art graduates. As identified in the literature, artists frequently have portfolio careers or work alone. This formed part of the rationale for selecting this sample group: as artists, the participants were more likely to have been 'pushed' into entrepreneurship or have been required to behave in an enterprising manner. Graduating in 1994, they would have been in the job market before the point in 1997 when the term the 'creative industries' emerged and the then Labour administration began to support efforts both nationally and locally within the sector. This timing also lent itself to the participants being at a point in their careers where personal responsibilities might have had an influence over their careers (e.g., parenthood, home ownership or other caring responsibilities). There was a prolonged effort in trying to pursue and engage the participants, eventually those interviewed were eight women and five men, and this represented 22% of the original graduating cohort.

Approach to Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo. A three-stage coding approach was adopted as advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998): first, 'open coding' where any themes that emerged from the data were coded. Next was 'axial coding' where inks were identified within the open codes and new themes considered. Throughout the process, the researcher made use of 'memoing'. Strauss and Corbin (2008) describe memos as 'ideas for further data collection and different ways of thinking about the concepts that emerge from the data' (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 233). The final stage of the analysis was 'theoretical coding' where core themes emerge, and theory is developed.

Results and Findings

First, this chapter sought to elicit the tensions experienced by the participants throughout their careers in terms of managing multiple identities; this is considered through the lens of cultural value (i.e., where and what was valued?). The following section explores these factors and provides some insight and explanation as to how, when and where entrepreneurship is experienced within creative careers. These findings culminate in an emergent model of tensions and motivations of arts practice and how different values contribute (see Fig. 9.1).

Artistic Identity

Artistic identity was identified when participants spoke about their ongoing 'need' to create artwork or discussed their artistic practice. Participants frequently described themselves as 'artists' (even though in some instances they may not have made work for some time); others were less comfortable with being labelled an artist but shared the similar desire to make work and have some sort of arts practice. Artistic identity was identified as a theme informed by both internal and external factors. These, briefly, consisted of internal factors related to their 'compulsion' to create, desire to create artefacts, often described in terms of being important to their physical, mental health and emotional well-being:

> it's like an itch that I have to keep having to scratch.

> …dying to like start making something.

> It's like a gnawing thing and that's what I mean about the disease, it's always there…

> I know, for me, making stuff makes me feel a lot happier, makes me feel a lot more settled and balanced.

Anderson (2004) provides some insight by suggesting two types of artists. These are described as 'essentialists', namely those who make art for pleasure and importantly for themselves, and 'contextualists' who are concerned with using their art to communicate to others. Most artists, he suggests, are motivated by one or other of these positions. Elsewhere similar findings have been acknowledged within work related to musicians. Mithen (2006) identified a human compulsion to create music and linked this to our need to communicate, going as far as to suggest that making music had been part of the evolution of language. Dissanayake (1992) also identified this link between art and evolution and linked the human compulsion to create with our pleasure centres and enjoyment of play.

External Factors Informing Artistic Identity

External factors included the participant's background, their 'art school' education, the 'arts world', 'other people' and 'ambition'. This next section focuses on the arts world. The wider arts world or milieu provides a number of opportunities and problems for the participants. Bridgstock (2005) highlights that the arts world has a great influence over artists, and this has been identified as artists being both producers and consumers of art and in terms of setting trends and tastes within art. Throsby (1994) argues that this not only informs artists of what other artists are working on but also provides them with insight into the marketplace. The arts world also informs practice: artists, although often working independently, seldom work on a 'totally autonomous basis' (Oakley et al., 2008, p. 2). The participants in the study, as identified, had a compulsion to create, but what they

create, and the eventual commodification of their work was informed by the wider arts community.

Tensions Emerging

Participants described a tension associated with selling their work and attributed this in part to their relationship with the 'arts world' or peers. Here they described an 'undercurrent', a sense that one was in some way being disloyal or 'selling out' by commercialising their work. The following narrative extract illustrates this point:

> I was just completely lost when I first graduated in terms of how to make money and it's weird with art, I sometimes feel like the act of doing it is like a luxury. But if you go and try to sell your work or appear too commercial ... it is sort of frowned upon by the wider artist community. (Participant 2)

This highlights the perceived weight and importance given to the arts world and the sense that there is a point at which one might become 'too commercial'. Alternatively, perhaps the 'fantasy' described below is that of the less commercial and 'bohemian artist' (Savage, 2006).

> I suppose I've not really put into practice ever really sort of pushing to make any sort of living out of being a practising artist, but maybe I haven't because I want to protect it, my fantasy of it. (Participant 4)

The apparent snobbishness of the 'arts world' extended beyond just being critical of over-commercialising to the methods deployed by participants in marketing themselves. Again, an unwritten rule emerged where some methods were frowned upon and more traditional methods appear acceptable.

> Artists have to eat … absolutely, you have to feed creativity in every possible way, but why can't we be commercial at the same time or have some kind of idea of how to manifest what we want to do. (Participant 5)

As well as the ideas discussed previously, there was also evidence of a disconnect between the relationship participants had with their work and making money. Making money, while necessary for living, was also necessary for continuing with their arts practice but was not a motivating factor in itself. For the participants in the study, however, the realities of life (their lives progressed, and their personal responsibilities increased) meant that often they were unable to sustain working as an artist or live with the ambiguity and uncertainty of their portfolio careers.

Related to finance were other issues: amongst some of the participants, a 'fear of finance and managing money'. The participants were clear that being an artist required one to be self-employed. This was an accepted and known part of being an artist. However, aspects associated with running a business, for example, managing finance and accounting systems and marketing, proved a barrier to some.

> I hate dealing with money and I always have, for example, in the past, I hate the idea of ripping people off… (Participant 1)

This 'fear of ripping people off' suggests that there were issues of how the participants perceived their work in terms of value. This led to, for example, issues around how to go about pricing their work (discussed in the following section), but it also highlights the type of education the participants had received. What emerged was that they had not had any explicit business education.

> I never had any experience, sorry, I never had any taught experience of business, it was learnt through trial and error and I wouldn't say I'm a very good businessman. (Participant 9)

Through these narrative extracts, a number of aspects emerge: while they highlight the need for practical skills in running and managing a business, they also provide insight into skills specifically associated with arts practice: being able to network, price work, manage turnover and sell and market work (Carey, 2013). The response to this is to assume these skills should be taught within schools of art and design, embedded within the curriculum. Teaching enterprise and business skills across disciplines within higher education has been highlighted, and specifically at teaching enterprise in schools of art and design (Carey & Naudin, 2006; Penaluna & Penaluna, 2008) has emerged, but has subsequently gone quiet. However, is the answer as straightforward as this? What about questions around art schools being for teaching art? And being taught to attribute cultural value and what happens when, as the participants describe, their sense of worth and the notion of selling, perhaps, a little bit of themselves when they sell their work. There is also a tension described well by Preece (2011):

> Artists' careers can provide a further understanding of this as they are caught between two worlds, the critical world from which they derive psychological success and the financial market from which they derive economic success. (Preece, 2011, p. 2).

This highlights the tensions which these individuals experience: the need to be doing 'the right thing' in the eyes of the arts world, but they also have the requirement to make money. It also suggests a conflict between their artistic and entrepreneurial selves. These forces that fight against each other and around the individuals are illustrated in Fig. 9.1.
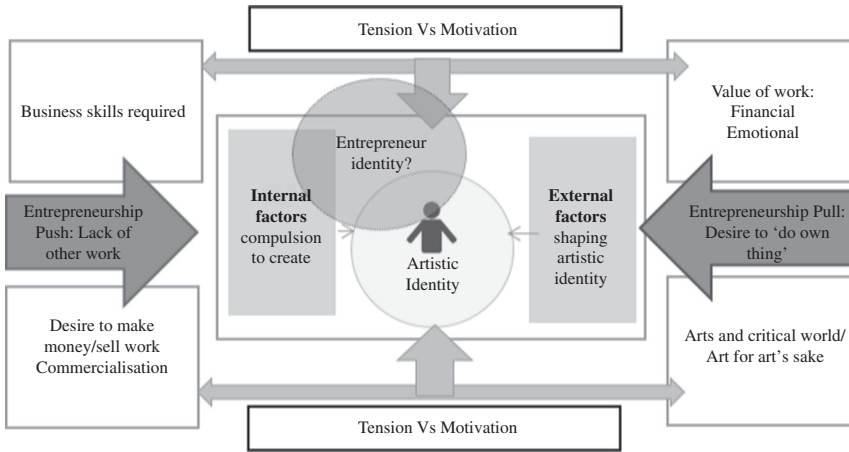
Fig. 9.1.   Tensions and Motivations of Arts Practice: The Collision of
Entrepreneurial and Artistic Identities and the Role of Value.

Value in Fine Arts Careers

Having established that there are tensions in terms of being too commercial and a 'disconnect' for the artists in terms of monetising their artwork, it is worth reflecting more deeply on the role of value. Within the analysis, value became a cross-cutting theme in terms of how artwork was valued by the artists, the market, both the buying public and art dealers and commercial art galleries, as established participants frequently felt ill at ease with the financial aspects of being an artist. Pricing their work and the act of selling were particularly problematic. Partially this inability to attach a monetary value to their work related to their feelings of where the work had originated from. In this instance, where participants experienced a strong compulsion to create and linked this to a physical or emotional personal need, then being able to have a sense of how this might translate for others was hard.

> …this is probably part of the sort of being creative disease side of
> it, by saying to people, just give me whatever you think it's worth,
> you know. (Participant 1)

One participant, who has predominantly made their living as a writer and journalist and subsequently returned to visual art, spoke about their ability to sell their writing but not their artwork. Potentially this is linked to the writing work being commissioned, as opposed to the artwork, which comes from this internal compulsion to create:

> Yeah, it's almost like a guilt thing, isn't it? that I'm doing this for
> myself … whereas if I'm writing something, there's a publisher that

> will benefit and an agent who'll benefit and the readers that will benefit … whereas actually with art, you know, I think it's very much about a self-expression. (Participant 4)

Interestingly a participant who moved from fine art to illustration had a similar experience; having struggled with selling their own work or even the idea of it, they felt far more comfortable selling something which perhaps could, arguably, be more easily (than a piece of art) described as a product.

> That's why I went into illustration, because I thought I could let my work kind of promote itself and be its own sort of thing and now I realise that, I suppose I am becoming more enterprising in that I am making a product... (Participant 3)

There are a number of things going on here; arguably, there is a market for the participants' work in these examples: authors and publishers, and in turn the participants, have greater confidence and a sense of the expectations of their work. This could be because they felt more at ease selling something that they perceived to be a product, as well as a less personal relationship with the work.

> I think from the fine art perspective, there's a nice sort of self-indulgent [*sic*], or there was a thing of I'm doing it 'cause I'm doing it and if it's not reaching people, so what, it's out there, 'cause it's about me. (Participant 3)

Arguably the dynamic of feeling the need to express oneself through art, having a close relationship to the art and in some way having to sell part of oneself when selling the work represented a barrier to continuing arts practice for some participants. Interestingly, if one takes a business education perspective and looks at marketing theory and practice, then these anxieties are well placed; after all, as Kotler, Wong, Saunders, and Armstrong (2005) suggest, the market-led route to product development is one of looking to solve a problem that the market has: 'when designing products, marketers must first define the core of benefits that the product will provide to consumers' (Kotler et al., 2005, p. 540). A market-led approach to product development would suggest that one only develops a product to solve an identified consumer problem. Clearly there is a tension here for some of the participants of the study and highlighted elsewhere within the literature: 'artists have a reputation, not always deserved, for being focused on their inner processes and their products, and therefore being out of touch with the marketplace' (Kubacki & O'Reilly, 2009, p. 57). Participants expressed anxiety in terms of making their 'product' fit with the market. Moreover, Oakley et al. (2008) highlight a suspicion from artists about business generally 'as promoting commercial gain at the expense of other values' (p. 3).

Elsewhere the discussion of the value of artwork has identified a number of types of value. It could be argued that artists are working within three types of

value: emotional, aesthetic and financial. Guest (2002) looks at how art is approached and considering the 'viewing public' suggests they might attribute some 'personal values' to a piece of art as well as identifying its role within the 'enrichment of a community's life' (p. 316). Fenner (2003) describes the 'location of the value' when discussing the use of 'ready-mades', and he gives the example of Duchamp's use of an 'off-the-shelf' snow shovel. He makes the point that once an item is given art status by an artist, it becomes art. An alternative perspective is offered by Mandel (2009) who describes artworks as 'luxury goods', which highlights the somewhat cynical nature of the arts market.

The discussion of values identifies multiple versions of what is considered of value by the various stakeholders that come into contact with the artwork; this is also informed by trends within the arts market. This creates a tension for the artists and is highlighted by the participants:

> I think there's an on-going sort of having to sell oneself and having to make what one's selling kind of seem palatable to the people who are buying it. (Participant 4)

Interestingly, although by their own admission, the participants had had little or no career guidance, no enterprise or entrepreneurship education, they did have a reasonably clear sense of what was required of them to sell their work. As the last narrative extract suggests, part of this was about selling part of themselves, suggesting that the artist themselves has a value in terms of the artwork. Contemporary examples of the artist having an impact on the value of artwork are Emin and Hirst in terms of 'using their celebrity status to further shape demand for their work' (Fillis, 2010, p. 38).

On this basis and based upon what the participants describe as 'selling part of themselves', we can assume then that the artist or their reputation is the underlying commodity and not the artwork. Emin and Hirst were the art stars of the participants' generation, along with the rest of the Young British Arts movement (YBA). Arguably their careers and the route they took influenced the participants of this study.

> I was influenced by the art scene in London, i.e. Damian Hirst and the like. (Participant 13)

What these artists also did, arguably, was behave entrepreneurially. They sought and created opportunities to establish themselves as artists, using some of those art stars of their generation's careers and their approach as a blueprint. Fig. 9.1 illustrates an emerging integrative model. Here we see the artist surrounded by the internal (e.g., compulsion to create) and external factors (the arts world) informing their artistic identity and around this the tensions and motivations pulling and pushing the direction of their careers. Notably we see how multiple values intersect and are in tension with other factors, for example, the need to earn a living and commercialise. Here we see the interplay of their artistic and sometimes necessarily entrepreneurial identities.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to offer an in-depth insight into the motivations and tensions experienced within the careers of fine art graduates. These were discussed in terms of how they relate to their sense of themselves as artists. This has resulted in discussion: first, an exploration was made into the participants 'compulsion' to create, the internal and external factors that impact their artist identity; the factors that have contributed to the participants' sense of themselves as artists and where potentially there are barriers to their perception of success. Alongside this, the deep tensions that exist within the careers of fine artists were discussed, particularly the relationship between art and commerce and in turn the relationship creators have with the value they create.

Arguably, fine arts represent the least commercial end of the creative industries spectrum but are prolific in generating cultural value, which here is an exploration of the relationship they have to their 'products' and their sense of selling something of themselves. A useful further piece of research would be to look across other creative disciplines to establish if these findings are transferable. But there are other implications here. It may be argued that the rhetoric of business and entrepreneurship has been imposed on the creative industries in recent years. This study gives rise to re-examining that and offers a more nuanced understanding and insight into creative individuals, what motivates them, and the unsteady relationship they have in identifying the value they create, be it cultural, social or economic.

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