

16 Creative Work and Entrepreneurial Creativity*

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Introduction

I quit. It's not time for entrepreneurs like me.

With these words, the subject of the present study opened his last interview with us. What was said with the cold tone of a normal business update referred instead to the suffered decision to end his venture. In the last years, indeed, his creative, economic and social entrepreneurial aspirations did not align toward a common ground and were not navigated easily in the context of a micro-enterprise. The entrepreneur was constantly confronted with the difficulty of creating value in these different but intertwined domains of his activity: the creative, the market, and the social. For a long time, he leveraged the tension between these spheres as a tool to renovate his enterprise, but at a certain stage they clashed so deeply that it drove him to end the business.

The micro-business in question was established in mainland Venice in 2006 with the mission to become a cultural entity dedicated to narrative and theatre for young audiences, and it moved through a sequence of transformations that are exemplary of how micro-enterprises are often the result of a unity of contraries in entrepreneurs' activities and aspirations.

Our entrepreneur, always acted in search of new (un)stable positions for his micro-enterprise. So much so that the entrepreneurial journey took the shape of a plurality of trajectories that were configured as contrasting tensions between opportunities and constraints on the one hand, and as a dynamic process of transformation on the other.

The chapter analyses this case study by isolating the entrepreneurial venture from the venture of the creative agent running it, and makes sense of the emerging vulnerability of a microenterprise struggling with limited economic margins and difficult control over the management logics embedded in the enterprise itself (à la Lindqvist 2017).

* This chapter is a joint endeavour. Author's names are listed alphabetically. Authors' credits: Calcagno wrote sections 2 and 5; Cavara wrote sections 3 and 4; Calcagno and Cavara wrote sections 1 and 6.

The following chapter makes sense of the case to understand how entrepreneurs working in the creative industries find that the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurial creativity clashes at times with the practices and processes of creative work.

Micro-entrepreneurs in cultural and creative industries (CCIs), combining creative work and entrepreneurial creativity

Scholarship on cultural and creative entrepreneurship emerged as a subfield of the general theme of entrepreneurship. With time, however, it has gained more and more relevance because of both (1) the growing economic impact of CCIs (UNESCO 2013), and (2) the symbolic, social, ethical, and aesthetic value that CCIs have for the whole economy (Caves 2000; Cunningham 2004; Potts 2009; Lhermitte et al. 2015; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Werthes et al. 2017; Cattani et al. 2021).

Notwithstanding the relevance of the entrepreneurial processes in CCIs, creative entrepreneurs have special conditions and often a micro dimension that justify special attention (Chang and Chen 2020; Chen et al. 2017; Swedberg 2006).

As creative agents, they are primarily involved in processes of cultural and symbolic creation driven by their autonomous thinking (see, among others, Cunningham et al. 2008). At the same time, they strive to make their ideas marketable, trying “to commercialize their creative products with the purpose to make a profit” (Chen et al. 2017, 3). Therefore, cultural entrepreneurs play multiple roles (DiMaggio 1982) and match different and opposed identities as producers of cultural and symbolic meanings for society (Jones et al. 2016), but are also fully in charge of their own sustainability (Lampel et al. 2000).

While entrepreneurship in CCIs has been growing as a field of investigation, creative entrepreneurs are still in need of real support while they struggle to match their economic goals and creative values (Werthes et al. 2018; Patten and Stephens 2022).

A possible way to make the reflection more impactful is to consider the condition of a creative entrepreneur as the sum—and the desired balance—of two dimensions: creative work and entrepreneurial creativity. In both dimensions, creativity is the key ingredient, but is aimed at achieving different purposes. On the one hand, considering creative business as producing cultural and creative value by delivering symbolic messages (Throsby 2008; Chang and Chen 2020), creative agents fundamentally aim to pursue their cultural, artistic, and social goals. On the other hand, they also act entrepreneurially, and use their creativity to generate and implement their ideas in terms of products, processes, and business models (Amabile 1996) to make their venture profitable.

In the process through which they balance their cultural and economic identities (Werthes et al. 2018) they face two challenges: the complexity of

the external environment, and the lack of competences supporting their strong motivation.

While the context urges them with multiple and different logics, offering sources but also constraints and limitations to their action, entrepreneurs working in the cultural and creative industries do not always possess the right skills and know-how to sustain their creativity at an entrepreneurial and managerial level. However, the micro size of their ventures forces them to embody both entrepreneurial and managerial roles (Leiserowitz et al. 2006; Sinapi and Juno-Delgado 2015; Calcagno and Balzarini 2016) in their prominent creative aspirations.

All these factors force creative entrepreneurs to renegotiate their goals and ambitions, in a process of revision of both their role as producers of cultural and symbolic meanings for society (Jones et al. 2016), as entrepreneurs striving to attain economic wealth (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001), and as managers immersed in processes and daily routines while they manage their businesses.

The case study: case selection, data collection and analysis

The study we present is “revelatory” (Siggelkow 2007; Yin 2014) of the difficulties that micro-entrepreneurs in CCI may face in managing their creativity/multifaceted nature and of how this, in turn, impacts their venturing over time. The case was theoretically selected for a number of reasons.

First, it granted a vantage point for observation of an entrepreneurial venture in its entirety, from its establishment to its end. Indeed, it ultimately tells the story of the failure of a micro-enterprise, which makes identification of the initial and final milestones of the entrepreneurial journey an easy task. This is important because only a complete vision of an entrepreneurial venture can actually reveal the definitive impact of patterns of entrepreneurial behaviour on it. Only such a case can reveal the medium-to-long-term impact of a decision made at a time t on the following timeframes $t + 1$, $t + 2$, and on the end of the enterprise, something otherwise difficult to observe in shorter windows of time.

Second, the case was particularly permeable. Permeability was essential to disentangle the entrepreneur’s creative work from his entrepreneurial creativity. This was possible thanks to the trust and confidence that developed between one of the authors and the entrepreneur from the opening of the business onwards.

The combination of these two characteristics allowed us to collect huge amounts of longitudinal data from diverse sources:

- 1 the 16-year archive of the business, with documents from 2006 to 2022, including all business meeting minutes, hundreds of market contracts and personal diaries where *everything that popped up in our mind was written, in order not to forget it* (entrepreneur’s collaborator 2018);

- 2 observations from
 - a an immersive multi-year ethnographic study from 2006 to the end of the enterprise (Lingo 2020), which one of the authors was able to conduct thanks to the close relationship she established with the subject of the study, and
 - b three rounds of ethnography, one in 2016/2017, one in 2018/2019 and the last in 2022, covering both extraordinary occurrences such as one-time meetings with professionals, and everyday working life;
- 3 fifteen semi-structured interviews held between 2018 and 2022 with the entrepreneur, his business partners, collaborators, and also a few customers.

Different data were analysed differently: through the archival material we reconstructed the detailed factual history of the enterprise (and coded facts according to whether they involved matters of creative work or entrepreneurial creativity). For example, the minutes of board meetings were significant in testifying the formal trajectory of the enterprise as the result of entrepreneurial creativity and creative work, whereas the personal diaries contained more information about the entrepreneurs' free rein in terms of cultural and social aspirations, not necessarily weighted with considerations on their entrepreneurial feasibility or sustainability. Observations were used to detect how things worked in practice (Watson 2011) before being codified in the formal documents of the business archive. It is a fact that observations facilitate the identification of otherwise difficult-to-observe patterns of behaviour (Mair et al. 2016; Rojas 2010; Yin 2014). Notes from the immersed multi-year ethnography granted access to distant-in-time entrepreneurial practices and made it possible to sort behaviour according to what pertains to creative work or entrepreneurial creativity, while notes from more recent rounds of ethnography focused on digging into entrepreneurial aspects identified as critical by the multi-year ethnography.

Finally, interviews added nuance about the entrepreneur's thoughts and feelings connected to his enterprise venturing. We talked together about his thoughts and feelings regarding some specific facts, I asked him to evaluate his business performance over time, and obtained explanations on the hows and whys of his behaviour. The adoption of multiple data sources supported not only the necessity of triangulating the data, but also that of disentangling the entrepreneur from his enterprise when we realised that a discrepancy was emerging between the "objective" representation of the enterprise performance and the entrepreneur's "subjective" thoughts and struggles around it.

In order to avoid the risk of the author's closeness to the entrepreneur causing her not to see certain things, the two researchers played different roles in the data collection and analysis phases, based on the level of confidence with the subject of the study. While the "high confidence" researcher

reconstructed and made sense of the history of the enterprise through archival research and the multi-year ethnography, the co-author played the counterpoint through observations and interviews, in a sort of tempered inside-out approach to the study of organisational dynamics of crisis (Bishop et al. 2018).

Mapping the entrepreneurial venture

We narrate the result of our inquiry in the form of a history of the micro-enterprise that aims at emphasising/disentangling two aspects of it: on the one hand, the difference between the history of the enterprise venturing and of the entrepreneur's creative, economic and social aspirations on the other; then the entrepreneur's struggle between giving voice to his creative work or entrepreneurial creativity when they are substitutes and not complementary. In this way, the history is composed of a sequence of five phases, each of which is characterised by a change in the entrepreneur's stance towards his enterprise with its consequent struggles. Each change of phase comes from a change in the relationship between the enterprise venture and the entrepreneur's cultural, economic or social aspirations around it, or a change in his strategy regarding the implementation of creative work and entrepreneurial creativity, as we will make clear. What we observe is an entrepreneurial journey in which aspects that are successful at a certain point in time and in a certain domain become constraints to successful outcomes at other times and in other domains. The apparently contradictory trajectory results then from the complexity of matching multiple entrepreneurial roles and pursuing goals that are sometimes in opposition.

Phase one: 2006–2008

The bookshop is not a bookshop, but a business exploiting its activity by selling books and organising other cultural activities (entrepreneur 2019).

The micro-business was founded in 2006 in mainland Venice as a cooperative with the aim of starting, managing, and promoting cultural services connected to narrative with a main, although not exclusive, focus on children and adolescents (Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws 2006). It was created by five partners - two booksellers, two theatre actors and one psychologist. All partners had previous experience working with adolescents and were actively involved in commercial, cultural and educational activities provided inside and outside the bookshop (for example, in schools and public libraries).

At the beginning, the bookshop activities and the collateral theatrical and psychomotor activities were equally important, as indeed the cooperative form of governance was specifically chosen to hold everybody accountable for the overall performance of the business.¹ Although our player declared

that *in the whole history of the business a decision with which I did not agree was never made* (entrepreneur 2019).

The cultural, financial and operational sustainability of the business was initially achieved by the equal contribution of all members according to their field of specialisation: the booksellers operated the bookshop and the promotion of reading-related activities, the theatrical actors took care of animated lectures and theatre classes at the bookshop and in the city, and the psychometrist set up workshops in the bookshop and schools.

In its first years, the bookshop presented active space for cultural activities, since it counted a total of 230 square metres, 90–100 of which were dedicated strictly to the bookshop, and 70–80 square metres were devoted to extra activities. There was enough space even for psychomotricity. The first business plan presented the logic of conducting many cultural and social activities in the bookshop (entrepreneur 2019).

Soon after, the president of the cooperative realised that *the workload was not the same for everybody* (entrepreneur 2019). In particular, he felt the weight of taking care of all the bookshop activities plus that of managing the operational activities of the cooperative as a whole, while other members focused more on their restricted area of action. This made him feel frustrated because he could not satisfy his cultural aspirations due to the urgency of having to manage the business, while the other members could focus on their own cultural goals.

Despite the fact that the business was growing financially in this first phase, the point of view of our entrepreneur was that *yes, the business was growing, but not at a satisfactory pace and in the right way for me* (entrepreneur 2022).

He started thinking that he wanted to grow at a faster pace both financially and culturally, not only from the point of view of profit but also from that of his creative work. As a consequence, he began scouting new locations that could better satisfy his cultural and social aspirations, the latter in particular.

Phase two: 2008–2016

The second phase started when the enterprise moved to a new location. In 2008, the cooperative moved the bookshop to a smaller and less expensive venue. The new place generously satisfied the entrepreneur's ambition to transform the bookshop into a place for social interaction because it was more centrally located in the territory where it stood.

The change can be synthesised into the claim *We do not sell books here, we create readers* (entrepreneur 2019 and again 2022). A brand new activity exemplifies what he means: reading groups with “young readers”

of diverse age groups (9–11 years, 12–14 years, 14+ years) were established and never abandoned in the following years. He met all the groups once a month until the very end of the enterprise, in meetings where they discussed topics that delved into the young readers' values and beliefs through narratives and stories (business partner 2019). The new venue thus represented a break from the past that gave the entrepreneur the opportunity to put better into practice his conception of narrative as a powerful tool of education and social communication, beyond the commercial outputs that an entrepreneurial venture must necessarily present.

At the same time, space constraints forced the partners to *conduct some activities that used to take place in-house outside the new location* (entrepreneur 2022). This choice also mirrored new financial issues. In particular, the two theatrical actors gradually reduced their work inside the bookshop, provoking a divide among business partners that never bounced back. In 2014, the separation was formalised in some significant board meetings. Although the overall business had been growing steadily since 2009—and collected the highest profit for cash flow in FY 2014—there was no lack of criticism around the gap in revenue contribution from the narrative and theatrical souls of the enterprise. Activities around psychomotricity were not a topic of discussion here because they always counted as a minor element of revenue. As of August 2014, book retails accounted for the main item of the company's revenues (Board of Directors, 15 September 2014). As of March 2015, the bookshop's sales volume had increased by 16% compared to the corresponding period of 2014, whereas revenues from the theatrical activities had decreased by more than 50% in the same time span (Board of Directors, 13 April 2015).

While the theatrical activities were drifting apart from the narrative side, the bookshop celebrated its success when it received the Andersen Prize as the best Italian children's bookstore in 2015. The prize gave the entrepreneur nourishment to push his personal plan for the cooperative further. *The Chairman briefly summarises the benefits for the cooperative arising from winning the Roberto Denti Prize as best childhood bookshop in Italy for 2015, in terms of new and bigger projects to be implemented* (Board of Directors, 24 August 2015).

He wanted to feed his creative work on cultural and social narrative projects further, while deciding to outsource the operational management of theatre activities (Board of Directors, 14 September 2015). In interviews, he admitted he did not want to continue taking care of the administrative and economic aspects.

Phase three: 2016–2018

During this phase, new narrative projects arose, scaling up the creative work of our entrepreneur, freed of the operative constraints and financial imbalance suffered in the past in the relationship with theatrical activities.

New projects included collaboration with local institutions on narrative education, the establishment of a publishing house dedicated to narrative for children and young adults, and collaboration with a strategic consultant about the future of the business. Working with institutions like universities, foundations and museums reinforced the entrepreneur's self-recognition as a cultural entrepreneur, beyond his commercial role, while the establishment of the publishing house was in line with his aspiration *not to sell books, but to pursue a cultural mission* (current business partner 2019).

At the same time, however, two unexpected breakthroughs occurred: first, he started developing the will to change his core business because he started aspiring to direct the bookshop towards an adult target and no longer to children and adolescents only. That meant aspiring to change the nature and identity of his business. He even hired a consultant to help him re-target the bookshop. Second, all these changes reinforced the narrative turn of the business, but increased the conflict with partners taking care of non-narrative activities, exacerbating the crisis. In September 2016, the cooperative came to an end, and our entrepreneur remained alone as its sole owner and director.

In response to a request by the business partners to terminate their relationship with the cooperative, the president proposes to take over the business (Board of Directors, 5 September 2016).

September 2016 is a crucial date in the life of the company, a date the entrepreneur still recounts with sadness and regret as the biggest turning point in the history of his business. The takeover could have represented the opportunity to expand the freedom of the entrepreneur's creative work to a maximum degree, but instead it brought about negative consequences: (1) a downturn on the creative work side, (2) more managerial tasks (becoming so overwhelming that in 2017 the entrepreneur hired a new working partner to help him manage the bookshop), and (3) serious financial issues. The space lost its multilanguage dimension: *many micro activities we used to do simply disappeared because I did not have the moral strength to implement them* (entrepreneur 2021).

Cutting off the theatrical soul of the company meant giving up on summer camps, public readings, theatre classes and psychomotricity workshops. That, in turn, sharply reduced direct and indirect revenues from people attending those activities and concurrently buying books at the shop.

As a consequence, *the fact that 2017 and 2018 didn't go well from the financial point of view made the bank very rigid. They turned off the taps and started asking me to return the money* (entrepreneur 2019). The situation was so dramatic that our player even considered the option of closing down the cooperative and passing everything on to the publishing house (which was an independent organisational entity).

On the contrary, he decided to sustain his cultural project further, and approached the issue of financial and operative sustainability differently, by looking for new partnerships and—again—a new location. In December 2018, the bookshop was moved to an even more central location, in the context of a cultural and commercial hub promoted as a social and urban regeneration project. The location seemed to be perfectly coherent with the strategic course of the company, at that moment strongly based on the *idea of the bookshop as a social service to the community where it is located* (entrepreneur 2021).

Phase four: 2019–2022

The move to the cultural hub had, of course, to be financially sustained and the entrepreneur was forced to look for extra economic support. He signed a network contract with one of the biggest cooperatives operating in the Italian cultural industry. The financial support provided by the cooperative was so relevant that the entrepreneur changed his company's Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws to give full equal rights to the financing partner. As stated in the contract:

Participants in the network contract will respect the current terms and obligations in the realisation of projects to favour the common plan; they commit to periodically verifying the implementation of the network program through periodic analyses of project execution (network contract 2018).

The new phase started with the expectation of entering into a strong partnership with the cooperative. The opportunity to provide services such as guided tours for children and young adults in the museum of the cultural hub was attractive from a cultural, social and economic perspective. The entrepreneur was excited to offer his narrative and educational activities to a wider urban community than his own and started negotiations with the museum and hub administrators to reach that goal. But things did not turn out as he had hoped. On the one hand, the hub had long and complex decisional processes and offered inadequate financial support for the educational activities provided, and on the other hand the network partner was not totally ready to be involved in those activities. Using the words of the entrepreneur, *the museum really likes our proposal for didactic activities, but when it comes to paying us, everything slows down* (entrepreneur 2019). As time passed by, cultural constraints were added to the operating difficulties, as the *financing partner expects something from us intellectually and we feel constrained by it* (working partner 2019). Creative and financial discontent cancelled the initial enthusiasm for this new phase. The entrepreneur lost his freedom to prioritise personal projects, and had to respond to the financing partner's pressure. On top of that, the years of pandemic exacerbated the

complex financial situation. Although the Italian government paid attention to independent micro-cultural enterprises, the financial support was insufficient to reach sustainability. Moreover, the decision to keep the bookshop open during the pandemic forced the entrepreneur to give up part of the public financial support allocated to closed retails. It was time to change again.

I have never wanted to participate in tenders because they force me to adapt creative ideas to the tender requirements, constraining my creativity. Anyway, last year I started to take part in them because it is economically super convenient (entrepreneur 2021).

While public tenders partially satisfied the search for better financial sustainability, during the lockdown the entrepreneur and his working partner committed to the creation of new narrative projects, as *the lockdown gave us time to think* (entrepreneur 2022) and we realised that in the past *time was what we missed the most, being caught up in day-to-day operating tasks* (working partner 2021): for example, podcasts and book trailers, summer camps for adolescents and readings for adults.

The fourth phase is another turning point in the entrepreneurial venture. The sequence of changes clearly revealed the nature of the constant struggles of the micro-entrepreneur: the trade-off between nurturing his social and creative aspirations while trying to reach the financial sustainability of the business when this conflicted with his personal essence.

Phase five: looking to the future

The strength of this business is to create readers, that is, for us to create citizens with critical consciousness, ready to see things profoundly. It is not something commercial, but more ethical-philosophical (working partner 2021).

The last phase opens at the beginning of 2022, when the bookshop is definitely declared financially unsustainable. The various aspects of the entrepreneurial journey emerged quite sharply during the last interview in April 2022. The entrepreneur evoked the choice of moving the bookstore to the cultural hub as the greatest mistake in his life, underlining the failure not only of the economic side of the project, but also of his cultural and social aspirations. The move was costly, and he did not find the managerial support that was initially promised to him by the cultural hub administration, in order to be able to focus on the content side of his enterprise. Collaboration was in general difficult to manage.

At this point, the entrepreneur made the decision to accept the offer to run the cultural hub's museum bookshop. In this way, the entrepreneur made a final, radical decision to maintain his cultural and social aspirations in a new

guise. That is, maintaining his creative work without the need to realise it through entrepreneurial creativity. The original bookshop closed at the end of September 2022.

The entrepreneur and his working partner both started new initiatives with some cultural and institutional entities, maintaining their identity as cultural and creative workers, but without bearing the financial risk of being entrepreneurs.

Discussion

The story we have narrated suggests that in the micro organisations typical of CCIs, entrepreneurs build their venture not only through exploiting or setting up opportunities, but also by facing obstacles and transforming them into means that renew their entrepreneurial promises. In other words, the way micro-entrepreneurs in CCIs balance (or do not balance) economic, social, and cultural goals (Lampel et al. 2000) in times of uncertainty is sometimes by setting their own limits to creativity through financial security bonds, and then by breaking them to push the next phase of creativity and change, in a recurrent wave-like mechanism. The entrepreneurial story we have narrated shows indeed that entrepreneurial life is sometimes made up of ambiguous situations, where decisions seem incoherent and reflect the (im)possible match between opposing entrepreneurial logic.

This happens at each phase of the analysed entrepreneurial venture. If we observe the sequence of the entrepreneur's decisions and their effects on the life of the company and his own subsequent decisions, we see how the coexistence of apparently conflicting choices creates new obstacles to overcome, and how obstacles can become triggers to renew business strategy. This tendency emerges clearly in our last meeting in April 2022, when the entrepreneur makes sense of his current position and recognises the value of his story: *I have the advantage (and disadvantage) of having faced a crisis for many years now [...] I had to reinvent myself many times. Being in a crisis makes you reflect more than others.*

Other examples are disseminated through each stage of the company. In phase one, the enterprise starts as a collective cooperative, preparing the ground for diversified financial, operative and creative support for the bookshop. Different partners play multiple roles and embody the many facets of the company (narrative, theatre, psychomotricity), facilitating access to more than one market (e.g., private clients, families and schools). This is supported by a large space where they implement many activities. However, the burden of managing the cooperative overcomes our entrepreneur's possibility to creatively embody his entrepreneurial and cultural role, preparing the field for a critical confrontation inside the cooperative and favouring the change towards relocation of the bookstore.

In the second phase, the match between cultural goals and financial sustainability seems to satisfy the entrepreneur and success is officially

recognised by both the market and the field gatekeepers (through the winning of the Andersen Prize). Nevertheless, tensions increase again in the company when cultural goals collide collectively, pushing the entrepreneur to lead the situation to the point of rupture. Notwithstanding, when the partners leave the company during the third phase, the cultural, financial and managerial consequences have a negative impact on the sustainability of the venture, forcing the entrepreneur to find other opportunities for sustainability that in the future will be detrimental. Financial sustainability is indeed damaged by the decision of the entrepreneur to ~~play~~ go it alone.

During the fourth phase, the move to the cultural hub is made to once again nurture the entrepreneur's social role. The hub is meant to work as a place for cultural activities, engaging citizens and contributing to the social regeneration of the city. However, in the end this decision will be defined as *the worst decision I ever made, ever* (entrepreneur 2022).

What we observe at the end is a cultural project totally reshaped from its initial purpose. Cultural and social goals were pursued in other ways than those expected, as the entrepreneur pushed himself to experiment with new ways of nurturing his cultural and social impetus.

Entrepreneurial stories are unique combinations of decisions and actions, which can be made sense of only by immersing into them, in depth and ex post. If we observe them at a certain distance, we acquire a clearer image of the shared needs of entrepreneurs and common patterns of entrepreneurship. The issues of growth often emerged in our entrepreneurial story, when the entrepreneur explained his choice to move the bookshop to the second location, and finally to enter the cultural hub. The concept of growth for the entrepreneur had a dual meaning: economic growth in terms of business development, but also an increased reputation as a social and cultural actor. This double dimension emerged throughout the whole entrepreneurial venture. Every change was driven by this double aim, and every change was destined to let the trade-off emerge again and again. During the last move to the cultural space in particular, he was perfectly conscious of the risk linked to his decision, but balance seemed to be finally achieved. Being in a place devoted to hosting a cultural and social regeneration project could guarantee cultural reputation, while in the end the size of the shop would facilitate business growth and also enrich the cultural offer: *at least 120 square metres [...] I tried to grow.*

A second issue is that of the business model.

In our story, every turn is signalled by a new business model (Sinapi and Ballereau 2016) that solved previous problems, but also presented pitfalls for our entrepreneur. In the first phase (2006–2008) the business model revolved around a cooperative company with four other partners, which was optimal from a financial perspective, but constraining for the intellectual aspirations of our player. In the second phase (2008–2016), the cooperative slowly lost coupling among the partners until the third

phase broke down (2016–2018), and the business model changed to a cooperative with the founder as the only employee involved in the job. That was good for the entrepreneur's intellectual realisation, but bad for the financial sustainability of the enterprise. The fourth phase (2018–2022) saw a new institutional partner entering the business, a new working partner and new Articles of Association and Bylaws that were meant to fix the debt position, but presented new intellectual constraints, even if the period of the pandemic saw a nice dip into creativity. The fifth phase implied a stop to the company's activities, but not to the cultural project. Looking for new partnerships in a cultural and social context seems to be the best possible compromise to relaunch the cultural project once again, without bearing the financial risk entailed in being an entrepreneur, but preserving his creative and social agency. All these changes seem to reveal the hazardous and irrational nature of our entrepreneur, but they simply make evident the fragile condition of micro-entrepreneurs operating in CCIs. Their micro size increases permeability to the external context, and they tend to be more exposed to all external turbulence, which impacts heavily on their activities and shapes their actions. In an attempt to escape this condition, they search for new solutions, changing their business model in a circular way for revision where their previous choices become the premises for new and opposing changes, where they struggle to find an (im)possible combination of creative aspirations and entrepreneurial success.

The entrepreneurial journey can thus be configured as a continuous process (Steyaert 2007; Hjorth and Reay 2022) of transformation where the opportunity of today becomes the obstacle of tomorrow, regenerating the urgency of the entrepreneurial venture as a process of dynamic search for new (un)stable positions. The entrepreneur moves through a sequence of changes where his entrepreneurial *modus operandi* is shaped by the dynamics of unstable positions in his multiple aspirations and domains of action, which constitute critical turning points perceived as new obstacles to overcome as well as triggers to prompt change.

A third and final issue is the value of the community as part of the resources needed in the entrepreneurial process (Chang and Chen 2020). Given the micro dimension of their ventures, cultural entrepreneurs perform their role in close connection with their community, both as a network of external relationships and as a group of partners pursuing a shared ambition. The community is thus strategic to reinforce their reputation as social and cultural players, and also influences their business. The story of our entrepreneur is partly misaligned. Every external and internal change, such as a new location for the bookshop or a reconfiguration of the corporate organisation, redesigned his community and had a visible impact on his business. Nevertheless, although maintaining the community was a strategic intention, making the change was a necessary condition in order to find new sources to sustain the entrepreneurial project.

Conclusion

Many enterprises share stories of difficulties that become opportunities, while triggering changes in a process of continuous regeneration, but, as the entrepreneur revealed to us, *it's not time for entrepreneurs like me*. Making sense of the quote means making sense of the challenges of cultural and creative agents working as entrepreneurs.

First, cultural entrepreneurs are placed in a hybrid area where market, creative goals and the social and political context (see Lindqvist, in this book) co-define their space for entrepreneurial action, creating struggles and tensions. If the market defines their competitive goals, resources and opportunities depend on their capability to navigate social and cultural domains where success cannot be exclusively defined in market reach. The ability to play all roles defining a coherent pattern of choices, makes cultural entrepreneurship a complex field of action where the search for novelty and creative thinking embedded in the cultural project (Wijnberg and Gemser 2000; Sherdin and Zander 2011; Jones et al. 2016; Calcagno 2017) takes place in institutional and political contexts that offer opportunities but also constraints to entrepreneurial freedom.

Second, the micro size of creative companies amplifies the complexity they face. This is dependent on both the financial vulnerability of the enterprise and the multiple roles of the creative agent. From the first point of view, the micro-enterprise cannot achieve the necessary stability to sustain its strategy in the long term. Struggling with the shortage of resources, the entrepreneur is forced to make choices by necessity, changing and revising them in the search for an impossible balance in the short term. From the second point of view, the entrepreneur has multiple roles to play, and does not always possess the right knowledge and know-how to make the right decisions.

Reflecting on what possible solutions are to support creative and cultural workers, we need to wonder if entrepreneurship is a necessary condition to work in a CCI. The end of our story suggests that creative work can be separated from entrepreneurship or, at least, other possible solutions can be suggested to sustain creative work with other means and resources.

On the theoretical side, our work identifies a need for reflecting on the relation between the creative nature of entrepreneurial work and the specific needs of cultural and creative agents acting also as entrepreneurs, providing a systemic perspective on how to set the frame to make creative work a sustainable entrepreneurial project.

Note

1 By overall performance we mean cultural, financial and operational performance.

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