

Artists as entrepreneurs

Valentina Orrù reflects on London Creative Network as a model for artist development.

As assistant programme manager for SPACE's artist development programme, London Creative Network (LCN), I hear many stories about how artists/makers manage to self-organise, navigate, fight for and claim their own space in the complex city of London. I believe that these artists/makers can be great examples of entrepreneurialism. Is 'entrepreneurial' a different name for DIY? Perhaps, or maybe it's more than that. In this text, I use LCN as an example to help unpick the dynamics between art making and entrepreneurialism.

The LCN programme supports London-based artists/makers (referred to as artists from now on) who are at a critical stage of their career, looking to move on to the next level or change direction in their practice. They are, in most cases, 'mid-career' as opposed to 'emerging' or 'established', having worked as artists for quite a few years (typically more than six), and having been out of education for a while. LCN helps mid-career artists individually, teaching new skills and providing a safe, supportive space to experiment with ideas and develop new projects, as well as connect with other artists and potential collaborators.

LCN is part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund Programme (ERDF), an economic development fund by the European Union¹ whose aim is to foster local economic growth. This funding comes to an end in 2020. One of the most interesting, yet challenging, aspects of working with such funding is embracing and facilitating a business language that is often still very alien to artists. Participants on the programme are referred to as businesses that are characterised by a high business failure rate — in other words, it is very likely that they are precarious. Money is indeed a major issue for artists, and their typically small turnovers often makes them an invisible part of the creative industries — one of the fastest growing sectors in the UK. With public funding decreasing, and a lot of emphasis placed on being profitable above anything else, advocating for a deeper understanding of artists' livelihoods and the meaning of growth for them feels especially urgent right now.

Within this context, reflecting on the idea of artists as businesses is an interesting exercise. It is immediately clear that there are many differences between an artist and any other private business.

Crucially, most artists work independently, which implies that in order to be legally recognised as economic entities (as well as being eligible for LCN) they need to be registered as self-employed with HMRC. They are what the Government calls Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and the majority fall more specifically into the 'category of freelancers'², which is common within the creative industries.³ Freelancers are self-organised individuals; they don't hire employees, but rather collaborate with other professionals and usually work on a project basis.

Additionally, the majority of artist freelancers in London earn far below the London Living Wage.⁴ Anecdotally participants on LCN confirm that this financial precarity is a major reason why artists are often reluctant to take risks with their practice — although, as Hans Abbing argues in his book *Why Are Artists Poor?*, artists can be considered above-average risk-takers simply by dint of having taken the art career path.⁵

Growth is a complex concept, especially in relation to artists and the creative economy. In economic terms, it is often measured by increase in turnover, along with job creation as a key indicator. An artist's career trajectory won't necessarily equate to an increased bank balance or employing a team of assistants. According to a recent Arts Council England report, mid-career artists' average income is as low as £7,600, with established artists' income only rising to £13,300.⁶ Instead, artists' growth is often driven by personal aspirations such as pursuing a passion, a creative idea, or generating a social impact.⁷

Financial instability impacts the way artists can make work, develop their practice and their personal lives too. There is a strong desire among artists to make a living through their work, rather than taking second jobs;⁸ although in some cases other occupations in arts-related or creative industry sectors can benefit the artist's practice by generating opportunities and ways to capitalise on creative skills.⁹ So, what business models are available to artists? And, how can artists become economically sustainable? Here is where entrepreneurialism comes into play.

Essentially an entrepreneur is someone who is a risk-taker and aims to make profit. However, there are other skills that make up the entrepreneurial attitude: pragmatism, intuition, creativity and resilience; artists embody all of these qualities and LCN has been supporting artists to unlock them.

Taking part in the LCN programme has given me a new insight into my work and the confidence to explore new possibilities.

Confidence has been a game-changer for artists in this process, allowing them to gain better understanding of their opportunities, set their own values and terms of success and charge a realistic price for their work. Unpaid or low paid work is indeed a very common challenge for artists, as well as a structural problem of the arts in general.

After LCN, participants registered a 15% turnover uplift.¹¹ This doesn't simply mean they're making more money but also that there has been a fundamental shift in the way in which they work. For some, it becomes clear that a particular area of their practice is more profitable than another, for others, it's understanding how the different strands of their work can support each other.

It's also about learning how to think beyond public subsidies and developing alternative financial solutions (e.g. crowdfunding),¹² or looking at new multidisciplinary approaches to work (e.g. moving between design and fine art). Financial sustainability is essential as it can lead to greater resilience and less anxiety around time constraints, the need to pay bills, and making mistakes, leaving artists freer to experiment with their practice.

Innovation is very important in the creative industries¹³ and creativity is a skill that has recently been recognised as key in relation to the future of the workforce in the UK.¹⁴ Although innovation is measured in relation to the development of new products or production processes, LCN supports a broad definition of the term, of which experimentation is an essential part. Artists try out new ideas, which may or may not lead to final works; most importantly, it can be the push needed to take them in a new creative direction.¹⁵ Innovation is about change and taking risk, and enabling artists to do so is absolutely essential for the development of the creative sector as a whole.

Another crucial element of the LCN model is the network. If artists alone are great at self-organising and responding to challenges, meeting peers often facilitates this process. Sharing concerns with others and getting their feedback is very valuable, as one LCN artist said:

Interacting with mentors and peers through LCN has been fruitful in testing out new ideas and methods of making.

Conversely, the network can also be an enormous barrier; if networking and word-of-mouth are essential ways to get new work in the arts, then unconscious bias on class, race, gender, sexual orientation as well as personality traits (e.g. extrovert vs introvert) often determine who gets what. That's why the network can play a major role in making the sector an elitist and exclusive environment that constantly replicates itself. However, this doesn't mean that peers aren't an amazing resource; in fact, working with and talking

to people in the same boat can make artists feel less isolated in their struggles.

LCN has seen participants develop new collaborations and ways of self-organising. For example, one group of artists on LCN made a successful joint funding application.¹⁶ Alternatively, the programme has led artists to change the way they make work, for example, deciding to outsource an aspect of their production — 41% of LCN artists are more likely to do so,¹⁷ ultimately impacting positively on the wider creative economy.

LCN has made the complexity of what growth means for individual artists clearer — it is not just about gaining an increase in turnover, or being good at networking. Reflecting on the idea of artists as businesses can help gain a deeper understanding of how artists operate as independent and self-led economic entities within the wider creative economy.

Artists are entrepreneurial in their ability to respond to contemporary challenges — particularly financial precarity — and to re-think their business models through new ways of organising and working. Learning and self-reflection is key to this; indeed, artists' entrepreneurialism is about a practitioner's ability to set their own rules.

The diversity of artists' experiences proves that the routes to developing a sustainable practice are varied and subjective. Artists' professional development programmes are essential to enable and facilitate these processes.

- 1 For more information visit: www.gov.uk/guidance/england-2014-to-2020-european-structural-and-investment-funds. Updated July 2018.
- 2 88% of LCN participants are self-employed. In-house analysis, March 2019.
- 3 Creative Industries Federation, Creative Freelancers, July 2017.
- 4 79.3% of LCN participants earn less than £20,000 per year or have a deficit. In-house analysis, March 2019.
- 5 Hans Abbing, 'Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts', Amsterdam University Press, 2002.
- 6 TBR, funded by Arts Council England, 'Livelihoods of Visual Artists — Summary Report', 14 December 2018.
- 7 Creative Industries Federation, 'Growing the UK's Creative Industries. What creative enterprises need to thrive and grow', 2018, pp.18.
- 8 72% of LCN participants. In-house analysis, March 2019.
- 9 TBR, funded by Arts Council England, 'Livelihoods of Visual Artists — Summary Report', 14 December 2018.
- 10 85% of LCN artists have become better at business planning and 84% have learned how to talk about and promote their work. BOP, London Creative Network Evaluation. Final Report, December 2018.
- 11 BOP, London Creative Network Evaluation. Final Report, December 2018.
- 12 In 2017 artist Louisa Bailey ran a successful crowdfunding campaign which enabled her to set up The Bower, a new art space and publication studio in South London; LCN supported her in developing and achieving this project.
- 13 Areti Gkypali and Stephen Roper, NESTA, Enterprise Research Centre and Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, 'What can we learn about the innovation performance of the creative industries from the UK Innovation Survey?', May 2018.
- 14 Creative Industries Federation and NESTA, Creativity and the Future of Work, November 2018.
- 15 BOP, London Creative Network Evaluation. Final Report, December 2018.
- 16 Following LCN, a group of participants carried on meeting and successfully applied as a collective to Artquest's annual Peer Mentoring programme, and were awarded the Peer Forum 2018 Award.
- 17 BOP, London Creative Network Evaluation. Final Report, December 2018.