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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of Italian independent artists-run spaces as incubators of artistic careers. Considering the trade-off between the sustainability of artist-run spaces and that of the careers of the people working in them, this article raises questions about the viability of the artists' support provided by these organisations in the medium and long run. Based on an in-depth analysis of fourteen case studies in Italy, our findings provide evidence of how artist-run spaces' organisational, managerial, and financial characteristics can work towards the professional development of artistic careers. We identify different trajectories of development of such organisations which vary according to the field of intervention chosen and to the motivation to establish and run the space. Results show how these factors influence the capacity of artist-run spaces to provide more effective strategies than those individually pursued by the artists to face the complexity of their labour market.

Keywords: artist-run space, incubator, artists' careers, entrepreneurship

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing recognition of new forms of art spaces within both academic and policy spheres, whose emergence, organisation and practices markedly differentiate them from more traditional and institutionalised cultural organisations. These kinds of organisations have become objects of a flourishing research interest both inside and outside the academic field leading to the creation of various labels such as "independent art spaces" (Shaw, 2013) and "alternative cultural spaces" (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2016). Despite the fuzziness introduced by the multiple definition of the phenomena, all these labels refer to a similar area of meaning where creative practices, allegedly independent from those of traditional cultural institutions, open up new spaces for artistic experimentation and citizenship participation in the cultural and political life of society (Bertacchini et al., 2022).

In a systematic literature review of the theme, based on text mining methods, Vorobeva (2021:1) highlights how usually independent art spaces "are described as non-profit, artist-run places striving to bring together local and international cultures and engage artists in cooperation". Research on independent art spaces has focused on several aspects of this phenomenon, from the study of

artistic practices and organisational aspects to the contribution of these spaces to place-making processes and urban transformation. However, the contribution of these spaces to the construction and progression of artistic careers is relatively underexplored (Blessi et. al, 2011).

It is perhaps no coincidence that the emergence of the phenomenon and discourse on independent art spaces mostly coincides with significant shifts in the art labour market in recent years. While it has long been acknowledged that the artistic labour market possesses intrinsic idiosyncrasies compared to other labour markets, contemporary discourse increasingly grapples with the escalating economic marginalisation experienced by individuals working within the arts and culture sectors (Bain and McLean, 2013; Donald et al., 2013; Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015; Timberg, 2015). Thus, the art world is not only a forerunner of flexible but highly skilled labour markets but risks quickly turn into a system of hyper-precariat and gig-economy (Morgan and Nelligan, 2018). Paradoxically, this rather bleak economic landscape has not deterred aspirants from seeking careers in the arts. Indeed, evidence of a steady growth of the artist and cultural labour force in recent decades is documented in surveys or censuses (Eurostat, 2022). This trend might have been influenced also by the raise in the popularity of the debate on the 'creative class' and the diffusion of discourses that integrated the pleas to the role of human capital in economic development (Florida, 2002) with a policy rhetoric that interprets creative labour either as a human universal attribute or as a specifically meaning-making work practice (McGuigan, 2010). As previous academic contributions highlighted, such rhetoric might have influenced students' choices, expanding the pool of neo-graduates searching for their first job without corresponding opportunities regarding the number of vacancies available and their working conditions (Communian et.al 2011).

The hypothesis explored in this study is that artists may establish artist-run spaces to find a "place for their art" and, simultaneously, to provide a space for the experimentation of emerging talents in artistic production and curation. More specifically, the article addresses two questions. First, to what extent independent artist-run spaces represent an organisational response to address the increasing complexity and challenges of artistic careers? Second, do they represent a viable and sustainable model for the development of emerging artistic careers?

To answer these questions, we qualitatively analyse fourteen independent artist-run organisations in Italy. These provide an interesting case study of the new opportunities for the career

development of professionals in the creative field. The contribution of the paper is twofold. First, the study aims to bridge two different analytical domains explored separately in scholarly research, that of artistic careers and artists run spaces. We believe that the dialogue between these debates has a potential for understanding individual and collective careers trajectories and how they mutually influence each other. Second, by delving into the potential of independent artist-run spaces as incubators for artistic careers, this article offers insights into contemporary cultural trends, particularly within the Italian context, and discusses the opportunity of tailored schemes and policies for these spaces.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The second section outlines the debate on artists' careers and independent art spaces, providing a theoretical framework for our analysis. The third section introduces the methodology and the case studies. The fourth section presents and discuss the findings concerning whether the support of artistic careers is intrinsic to the mission of artist-run spaces and the strategies to pursue it. The fifth session presents evidence about the potentialities and obstacles connected to the long-term sustainability of the role of artist-run spaces as incubators of artistic careers. Finally, the sixth session summarises the main findings and presents the concluding remarks.

Artist-run spaces and the challenges of artistic careers

The discourse surrounding the arts labour market has frequently underscored its marked distinctions from related occupational categories. These distinctions encompass both its demographic composition, characterised by a younger and better-educated workforce, and its distinctive features such as higher rates of self-employment, unemployment, or underemployment, along with lower and more variable income levels (Menger, 1999; Throsby and Hollister, 2003; Menger, 2001; Abbing, 2002). Accordingly, multiple pieces of evidence highlight how this market has over time come to serve as a laboratory for observing and experimenting with processes of labour flexibilization and precarization now extended to the broader economy (Bain e McLean, 2013; Donald et al., 2013; Pasquinelli e Sjöholm, 2015; Timberg, 2015; Morgan e Nelligan, 2018). In fact, the arts labour market is among the first experiencing increased uncertainty and vulnerability related to marginalization of local production due to globalisation, as well as the replacement of

long-term forms of employment with project-based labour systems that shift business risk to workers.

The hardship in developing artistic careers appears to be in stark contrast to the trends of sustained growth in the enrolment in art's education paths as well as in arts employment seen in recent decades in countries with advanced economies, as well as to the importance for socio-economic development that current cultural policy rhetoric associates with creative work (Communian et. al., 2010). The hypotheses put forward to explain this contradiction are diverse and range from those that doubt the actual existence of the creativity-growth link (Boschma and Fritsch , 2007) to those claiming that the labour market does not reward creativity due to several reasons such as: the attachment of lower prizes to financial rewards connected to the specificity of creatives' utility functions (Ball, 2003; Abbing 2002; Galloway et al. 2002), the exploitation and self-exploitation connected to such value system (Terranova, 2000), the *screening* (Towse, 2011, Spence 1973) or the *human capital hypothesis* (Becker, 1964); the less conventional path of creative careers and their slower pace (Blackwell and Harvey 1999; Oakley et al. 2008); the informality and uncertainty characterising the creative market structure (Baumann 2002, Dex et.al 2000) or, more simply, an oversupply of graduates (Abbing, 2002). Other hypotheses link this trend of perpetual growth in people pursuing an artistic career to the political rhetoric that emphasises their importance at the societal level (Communian et.al., 2011).

The literature on the arts labour market has not only focused on its distortions but also on the different strategies spreading out to manage the burden of risk increasingly attached to the choice of an artistic career. These strategies range from the adaptation of artistic work through its simultaneous engagement in multiple disciplines or social issues, as well as to the increase in mobility and self-entrepreneurship. It is increasingly turning out that what Hall (2004) calls "protean career" models, namely highly adaptive and context-sensitive ways of working, are becoming popular to self-determine and shape careers according to one's background and values and to achieve success and personal psychological satisfaction. Nevertheless, given the strong influence on artist's personal identities, such iper-adaptiveness exposes workers to forms of vulnerability attached to the ongoing efforts to match artists' needs with external trends and demands. Similarly, another emerging model is that of the so-called "portfolio careers" characterised by a high degree of multidisciplinarity and bringing together broad and differentiated competencies that go beyond creativity to invest soft skills such as business acumen or the ability to work on multiple multimedia

platforms (Mietzer and Kamprath, 2013; Throsby and Zednik, 2011; Frenette and Tepper, 2018). Also, doing contemporary art as a social practice has become one of the ways artists can build their careers. Indeed, today we are increasingly noticing how the choices in the artistic path are not only geared toward maximising opportunities for individual creativity, but artists also seek to be socially engaged in their communities, as educators, social workers, activists, politicians or even health workers (Lingo and Tepper, 2013). The rapid acceleration of digitalization, particularly since the pandemic, has reshaped creative strategies by decentralizing creative spaces and processes. This shift enhances accessibility to tools, encourages new artistic expressions, and fosters the rise of a creator economy. However, it also raises concerns about the uniqueness and authenticity of human creativity and challenges related to market saturation, creative control, job displacement, and precarious employment precarisation (Farchy and Denis, 2020; Hearn, 2020; Waldfogel, 2020). Therefore, pursuing an artistic career in the digital era entails navigating both opportunities and challenges, requiring creative professionals to balance the intersection of art and commerce (Klein et al., 2017). In this context, the reduced need for mobility and the new opportunities for flexibility, visibility, and data-driven insights continue to support portfolio and protean career strategies for creative workers (Bartleet et al., 2019). However, the unpredictability of gig economies, exacerbated by digitalization, is prompting some to adopt "portfolio-to-platform strategies," seeking a stable job for financial security while exploring additional creative opportunities (Clague, 2023).

Whereas the analyses of individual strategies are central to the understanding of the development of artistic careers, recent trends in the arts labour market have highlighted the need for new interpretive approaches that are oriented toward viewing artistic and cultural work in entrepreneurial terms, rather than in employment ones (Scott, 2012; Lingo and Tepper, 2013). This interpretative shift implies understanding how artists and freelance cultural workers develop the entrepreneurial skills and attitudes necessary for a versatile career, such as planning capacities, the ability to structure a business plan and communicate with their project stakeholders. Thus, the dimension of entrepreneurship, when not self-centred, moves the interpretation of artistic careers beyond individual strategies, requiring an understanding of how artists experiment forms of mutual support and join their forces to run their own project or space.

Amid these transformations in contemporary artistic careers, a significant question arises: How can artists effectively respond to these complexities and challenges? One answer might lie in the

existence of independent artist-run spaces. An emerging body of literature has already explored the role of artist-run spaces in addressing the social, economic, and cultural challenges specific to the contemporary art field. This literature focuses on a wide array of facets (for a more comprehensive discussion, refer to Bertacchini et al., 2021) that collectively illuminate the multifaceted nature and significance of independent art spaces. These facets span from cultural attributes, intricately tied to the intrinsic or instrumental perspectives of alternativeness and the autonomous curatorial policies rooted in independence or identity-driven rationales (Vivant, 2009; Shaw 2005, 2013); to economic and organisational attributes that pertain to the sustainability of cultural offerings, the level of professionalism, and integration within the established art world and its organisational framework (Rota and Salone, 2014; Lange and Burkner, 2013; Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2016); to spatial attributes, highlighting their roles in contributing to gentrification, neighbourhood revitalization, and culture-led place-making processes; (Carr and Servon, 2008; L; Grodach, 2011; Grams and Warr, 2003; Andres 2011; Andres and Gressilon, 2013; Salone et.al 2017) and finally, to political attributes encompassing their orientations towards political objectives, involvement in political groups, and the strategic nuances of political practices (Murzyn-Kupsiz and Dzialek, 2017; Borén and Young, 2013; Novy and Colomb, 2013; Groth and Corijn, 2005; Miles, 2005; Valli, 2015).

This literature highlights how independent artist-run spaces serve as dynamic hubs for artists to exhibit their work and and engage in creative experimentation. Such spaces provide a platform for the recognition of artists' work from both an aesthetic and economic standpoint. Artist-run spaces have thus become incubators for novel artistic ideas and projects, often financed independently or with partial support from local public institutions. Crucially, the blend of characteristics exhibited by independent artist-run spaces also addresses other social needs. Indeed, such spaces not only serve as a strategy for artists to cope with uncertainty, gain recognition, and secure adequate earnings, but they also contribute to the broader cultural landscape by fostering creativity and innovation in various fields.

The increasing orientation toward entrepreneurship in artistic careers underscores the growing demand for spaces and contexts that can support and nurture this trend. In this context, artist-run spaces emerge as a bridge between artists' creative aspirations and the practical realisation of their ambitions. However, it is essential to acknowledge that, despite the prevalence of self-employment in the creative sector, there often exists a skills gap in venture creation and management among those working in this field (OECD, 2022). This gap can be attributed to the limited integration of

managerial profiles within art institutions and artists' distinct motivations and personal goals compared to traditional entrepreneurs (Hoffman et al., 2022). Combined with the structural vulnerabilities of the art sector and supportive cultural policies, this issue often results in a lack of long-term development strategies, particularly in the early stages when organisations tend to base their activities on immediate needs. Therefore, the sustainability of artist-run spaces and the careers of those working within them presents a promising area of analysis, connecting the two strands of analysis of the art world.

The Italian Context

The Italian context provides an illustrative case of the broader trends previously discussed. Italy's artistic labor market is one of the most challenging in Europe, marked by relatively high rates of self-employment, irregular work patterns and career uncertainty. According to EUROSTAT Cultural Statistics,[1] in 2023, Italy had the highest rate of self-employment among artists and writers in Europe, with a staggering 64%, more than three times higher than the national economy's average.

At the national level, in the absence of comprehensive statistical data, recent studies based on convenience sampling have provided new insights into the labour conditions of Italian artists. The survey on young creative workers conducted by the association Giovani Artisti Italiani (GAI) and Fondazione Santagata in 2020 (Bertacchini and Borrione 2021) revealed that the majority of respondents (52%) reported an income from artistic work of less than €5,000 per year, representing less than 50% of their total annual income. This confirms the prevalence of multiple job-holding among this demographic. Furthermore, income is closely correlated with the number of years spent in the professional field, indicating a high rate of attrition from pursuing a purely artistic career. A similar conclusion was reached in another survey, this time focusing on the visual contemporary art sector, conducted by Art Workers Italia (AWI)[2]. Building on this evidence, the precarious labor conditions of artists in Italy have been increasingly leveraged for advocacy purposes, particularly during and after the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic exacerbated the existing challenges faced by creative workers, bringing to the forefront the lack of financial stability, social protections, and

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[1] EUROSTAT Statistics Database: Cultural Employment, focus on creative and performing artists, authors, journalists and linguists (ISCO264, 265)
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/cult_emp_artpc/default/table?lang=en&category=cult.cult_emp, Last access on 4th October 2024
[2] The report is available at https://artworkersitalia.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/AWI_Analisi-dati-Indagine-di-settore-2021-Anna-Soru.pdf, last access 4th October 2024

institutional support for those in the sector. [3] Simultaneously, there has been a growing recognition for artists' run spaces and their potential to foster creative communities and social transformation (Ratclif and Castelli, 2013; Bertacchini et al., 2022). In this context, since 2000s, new forms of non-institutionalized cultural centers, as mapped by the organization cheFare, and space regeneration initiatives have emerged as vital components of Italy's cultural landscape, gaining attention in the public and policy debate.

Methodology

Our analysis focuses on artist-run spaces in Italy. A qualitative approach has been adopted via the selection through convenience sampling of a limited number of case studies in different territorial contexts. The selection was based on the following criteria.

The first criterion for the choice was the period of establishment of the space. We considered organisations that were set up from 2005 onwards, and with a minimum of 3 years of operational activity. This means analysing both mature organisations, which may have undergone organisational changes over time, and much younger ventures appearing on the cultural scene. The second criterion for choosing cases was the decision to deal with organisations that do not receive stable and continuous financial support for their operations from public or private institutions. The choice of analysing centres that do not have stable support was made to better isolate the endogenous strategies and choices made in developing and operating organisational models that require to find a balance between economic sustainability and cultural production. The third criterion concerns the identification of active spaces in cultural and artistic productions, with the following requirements:

● They are not entirely dedicated to curatorial/exhibition activities, although programming may be one of the core activities;
● They devote an essential part of their activity to artistic production (works, festivals, reviews, theatre seasons, etc.), and not only to hospitality, organisation of events and artistic residencies.

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[3] Besides the advocacy organized by AWI, other examples of the mobilization started by the cultural sector are "I diritti sono uno spettacolo, non mettiamoli in pausa," "Mi riconosci? Sono un professionista dei beni culturali," "Bauli in Piazza," "La rete Professionisti Spettacolo e Cultura – Emergenza Continua," "La Musica Che Gira," and the various appeals by Confcultura, ARCI, CARPE, sectoral associations, Agis and Assomusica.

No limits were placed on the legal and organisational nature of the centres or their artistic fields of specialisation. From the point of view of the areas of work, spaces aimed mainly at mono-disciplinary artistic practices were examined, but also multi-disciplinary spaces, hosting different realities within them, with diversification of cultural and creative activities. The selected centres try to cover the country's main geographic areas and are located either in metropolitan areas or in smaller urban centres. Table 1 presents the list of the case studies, with information about relevant characteristics.

CENTRE	CREATIVE FIELDS	TERRITORIAL SCOPE*	COUNTRY AREA	CITY (PROVINCE)	YEAR OF BIRTH
AlbumArte	Multimedia Art, Sound Art, Visual Art, Video Art, Performance Art	International	North-East	Rome	2013
Artkademy	Visual Art	International	Centre-South	Milan	2015
Campidarte	Visual Art, Design	Local	Islands	Ussana(Cagliari)	2012
Centrale Fies	Performance Art	Glocal	North-East	Dro - Trento	1999**
WunderKammer	Design, Music, Visual Art, Architecture	Glocal	Centre-North	Ferrara	2012
DAS	Performance Art, Music, Video Art, Dance, Poetry, Research	Glocal	Centre-North	Bologna	2019
Dimora OZ	Visual Art, Performance Art, Multimedia Art	Glocal	Islands	Palermo	2014
Flip	Visual Art	International	South	Naples	2011
Linkinart	Research	Glocal	North-West	Genoa	2006
Numero Cromatico	Visual Art, Design, Architecture, Literature, Research	International	Centre South	Rome	2011
OFF TOPIC	Music, Performance Art	Local	North-West	Turin	2018
Quartiere Intelligente	Performance Art, Video Art, Participative Art, Music	Local	South	Naples	2013
RAMDOM	Sound Art, Visual Art, Public Art, Performance Art, Research	Glocal	South	Lecce	2011
RAVE Residency	Visual Art	International	North-East	Borgo Soleschiano (Udine)	2011

Table 1- Characteristics of the interviewed Artist-Run Spaces
*The territorial scope of artist-run centres was divided according to the degree to which their artistic activity reflected, or was characterised by, both local and global considerations (i.e; Glocal), reflected something specific to a particular geographical area or community (i.e; Local) or referred to something that transcend national boundaries and refer to the artistic field of one or more countries at a time (i.e; international). ** Centrale Fies was taken into consideration, despite the fact that its foundation date was earlier than the selection criteria because it is an important reference centre for independent Italian cultural centres.

The inquiry was conducted thanks to a desk collection of information from secondary sources combined with a series of observant participation sessions and ethnographic interviews with the centres' managers between July and November 2020. The interviews were mostly carried out in an informal way during trips to the artist-run spaces, and the information provided was mostly collected through notes with only a few instances in which we could record them. We interviewed an average of two people for each cultural center, mainly in the X and Y position, for a total amount of X key informants.

We analysed each case study paying attention to the following aspects. First, we inquired into the history, mission and identity of the organisation, with particular attention to the needs and conditions that led to the creation of the space and to the practices that distinguish it at the local and national level. These aspects are particularly relevant to understand the role that the creation of the space has played in supporting and advancing the artistic careers of its founders or whether there are clear strategies for supporting emerging talent. Second, we focused on organisational factors and dynamics, such as structure and staff, economic sustainability (current or planned), factors and obstacles in the development of activities and projects and differences compared to the pre-Covid period. These characteristics have been considered in order to test the long-term durability of the characteristics discerned in the previous points, with particular reference to the capability to support emerging talents (see the fifth section). Third, we investigated the relationship with the local context to understand localization choices, the impact of location on the cultural offer and the positioning of the artist-run space within neighbourhood dynamics. Fourth, we inquired into the networks and collaborations that artist-run spaces have with other organisations, to understand the territorial level, the area and type of collaboration. Table II reports the exact questions we asked for each of the explored issues.

Issue	Inquiries
History, Mission and Identity	What are the needs and conditions that prompted you to create your space?
	What practices and activities characterise the identity of your project?
	What cultural or social change do you intend to achieve with your activities?
Organisational factors and dynamics	Can you briefly describe how you operate from an organisational point of view?
	What actions allow you to be economically autonomous and sustainable?
	What are the main factors/obstacles you encounter in the development of activities and projects?
	Are there differences between the pre-COVID period and in this new phase?
Relationship with the local context	How would you describe the neighbourhood or locality you are in?
	What were the motivations or factors that prompted the opening of the space in this neighbourhood/location?
	What role does the space in which the centre is located play in the choice and programming of activities?
	How is the centre positioned in its area of reference? How is it viewed by those who live there and by the public? What role does it play for the artists and creative people who participate in the proposed activities?
Network and collaborations	With whom do you usually collaborate on programming? At what territorial level? What kind of collaborative relationships do you have? Is there active participation of other artistic and creative organisations in the centre's programming?

Table 2 - Interview structure by issue and inquiries

The DNA of Artist-Run Spaces

To what extent do independent artist-run spaces represent an organisational response to address the increasing complexity and challenges of artistic careers? A first answer to this research question was given by the analysis of the activities offered by the centres which showed a marked attitude towards acting as a point of reference for young people's creativity, both in the training phase and in the first steps of their careers. In the words of one of the interviewees ``Non-profit spaces are known for being a springboard for the young scene". This inclination appears explicit in some centres, which declare it as the cornerstone of their objectives and activities, as in the case of Quartiere Intelligente, or of some specific activities, as in the case of Off Topic; while for others, it emerges implicitly from an examination of their programmes. Table 3 summarises the activities offered to young professionals by artist-run spaces, distinguishing them according to two main fields of interventions in which these operate. The services to support artistic careers most frequently reported in the interviews by artist-run spaces were: scouting for young artists, the offer of production spaces in order to foster the practice of emerging artists; mentoring through tailored programmes involving curators, industry professionals and a community of other artists; the support in participating in public tenders and the development of independent projects; the offer of periods of residence and exchange with other artist-run spaces.

Intervention	Services for young professionals
Intervention in the Art Field	artistic residencies practice for emerging artists scouting workshops digital formats public art youth mobility agents for artists
Intervention in the spatial dimension/ social community	co-working mediation business accelerator for innovative environmental start-ups

Table 3 - Artist-Run Spaces by field of intervention and services offered to young professionals

To further extend the analysis, we inquired into the importance given by the artist-run spaces to support artistic careers relatively to the wider motivations that led to their establishment. Although the interviews revealed a manifold set of conditions underlying the birth of artist-run spaces, we were able to recognise four main patterns concerning the intentions, vocations and needs of these organisations. As summarised in table 4, these patterns are based both on the nature of the motivations that led to the creation of the artist-run space and on the main field of intervention in which artistic practices are developed. These characteristics, in turn, influence the relationship of the artist-run spaces with the territory and their role in career development and support.

Table 3. Focus and reasons for setting up artist-run spaces

	Main field of intervention	Motivation to establish the space	Relationship with the territory	Role in career development and support
Space for artistic experimentation	Artistic	Art's sake; self or collective expression in the local art scene	Territory as a container of artistic practices	Mutual support of protean careers
Space as aggregator of opportunities and contamination	Social/Community	Economies of scale and scope in artistic practices, enhancement of social capital	Territory as content of artistic practices	Mutual support of portfolio careers
Space to pursue cultural innovation	Cultural	Pursuit of structural change	Territory as a vehicle of cultural practices	Change of the structural conditions hampering the development of artistic careers
Space as an actor of territorial regeneration	Spatial	Identification and satisfaction of the needs of local stakeholders	Territory as a target of artistic and cultural practices	Boost for portfolio careers

Being driven by the will to express the vision of individual artists or collectives (i.e. art for the art's sake), spaces of artistic experimentation seem to approach the territory as a container of their artistic practices. These practices appear to be driven by an intrinsic motivation to innovate the artistic field, with territorial interactions having a residual value. Other artist-run spaces tend to operate as aggregators of opportunities and contamination. In this case, the territory becomes a source of content for artistic practices that pursue economies of scale and scope and the enhancement of social capital within and beyond the local artistic community. Compared to the

previous two typologies, spaces acting as cultural innovators often intervene in the artistic field to pursue objectives of wider social change. Here the territory is interpreted as a platform for participation into practices that contrast global environmental and social justice issues, promoting alternative visions of places. Finally, the last model identified is connected to the role of artist-run spaces as actors of territorial regeneration. These spaces are driven by the identification and satisfaction of the needs of local stakeholders, with the territory being an end of their activities that are mainly focused on the regeneration of the spatial dimension. Each of these typologies recall the definition of artist-run spaces both as a "locus of desire" for self-organisation and collectivism (Harker, 2020; Wright, 2019) and as spaces embedded in the mainstream through power-networks of strategic reciprocity and funding (Bugden, 2020). This highlights how the notion of "alternativeness", if not articulated properly, risks to miss the way in which the negotiation of tensions over power constitutes an intrinsic characteristic of artist-run spaces and a wide-open field of research to be explored, as we already discussed elsewhere (Bertacchini et.al 2022). The motivations to set up an artist-run space seem to be consistent with strategies to face the increased complexity of the art labour market and the precarious and flexible nature of artistic careers. However, most of the organisations observed, with the only exception of the spaces that try to operate as cultural innovators, tend to adapt to the difficulties of pursuing artistic careers without challenging their structural causes. On the one hand, the tendency towards hyper-adaptive behaviours marking individual artistic careers belonging to the so-called "protean" type also seems to be retained when artists group together to run their own space. In this way, "coming together" often represents a strategy to adapt more quickly to the changing market's conditions rather than opposing them by promoting change. On the other hand, setting up an artist-run space socialises the strategies individually pursued by the artists to support a "portfolio career" marked by a high degree of multidisciplinarity. However, setting up and running an independent art space, especially when paralleled by the birth of other similar experiences that network in a local scene, mitigates the need for an hyper-mobile behaviour that characterises these careers when pursued alone and keeps a stronger tie with the territory. Several interviews underlined also two main relational dimensions with the territory. The first concerns the network with other local cultural organisations and institutions which is considered essential because together they can build more solid projects, expand their target audience, and experiment with forms of funding through public tenders. The second dimension is with the community of the neighbourhood or place in which the artist-run spaces are established. Working with and for the community emerges as a necessity for some

organisations, since it responds to the need to have a recognised role at the local level. The territory is identified as a starting point that constitutes the very meaning of the projects and from that starting point, the projects expand towards collaborations at local but also international level.

"Stand by me"- The long-term sustainability of artists-run space role as incubators

Do artist-run spaces represent a viable and sustainable model for the development of emerging artistic careers? A first answer to this question comes from the importance that artist-run spaces attach to the availability of resources to plan, realise and distribute cultural production. For the cultural centres interviewed, one of the most critical problems is how to find a model of sustainability that responds not only to economic and financial matters but that is also satisfactory from the point of view of ethics, relations with creators and users, the working method in the community and the cultural direction chosen. For all the actors involved, there is a need to find a balance between wills and values that are difficult to compose, these are often subject to external factors such as, for instance, the audience response to the cultural offer, the institutional framework within which it is possible to operate, the coexistence of different visions between members of the organisation, or the need to deal with unforeseen events. Having made these initial considerations, we can review the main issues that emerged more or less explicitly in the observation of the case studies that mark the theme of sustainability of artist-run spaces. The first issue concerns the fluidity of the nature of economic activities. According to the Italian legal framework, cultural activities can be considered commercial or non-commercial, depending on the organisation's statute, mission, or the institutional context in which they operate. However, there is a high degree of uncertainty in classifying and distinguishing them. This also has repercussions on the economic balance of organisations since different possible classifications imply different tax frameworks and costs. Therefore, the research and work to make the organisation financially sustainable also concerns the choice over the legal nature and purpose of the organisation. Closely linked to this issue is the fact that organisations sometimes have to opt for a legal nature that does not fully correspond to their intentions, but which allows them to carry out a number of activities that would not otherwise be possible.

An example among the case studies is an artists' space in a rural area. The desire of this organisation to transform the previous agricultural company into a cultural park could be realised only by configuring the centre as an agritourism farm. This was a practical and bureaucratic solution to obtain eligibility for the organisation of cultural events and activities. Such transformation and

choice of legal nature have also occurred in other rural territories, such as in some cases in Piedmont or Tuscany, where farms have found motivation and energy to activate, alongside their usual activities, experimental spaces for the arts. These operations have also been repeated in the case of more structured farms or wine cellars.

Similarly, some organisations have decided to avoid mixing commercial and cultural activities by setting up two structures, a non-profit association and a commercial company, such as a limited liability company, to manage the commercial aspects. On the other hand, some have decided not to set up a formal organisation, working in an informal group sometimes even for years, as in the case of Flip in Naples.

The second issue is that centres often feel they have to deal with a trade-off between the sustainability of the organisation and the sustainability of the people who work there. This trade-off translates into the precariousness of those working in the centres, as well as into many unpaid working hours, and the prioritisation of spending on the venue over spending on people. While these choices are necessary to kick-start the experience in the short term, in the long term they become sources of a lack of sustainability, fragility of the experience or even cause of its closure. Indeed, the sustainability of independent cultural production centres is first and foremost the sustainability of the people who work there, and the fact that the needs of the spaces prevail over those of the people is a significant problem to be solved because, without the creative energies of people, those spaces become empty again, losing their cultural meaning and function within the community. Moreover, in some realities, which operate as consortia or which in any case aggregate several subjects in the management of the space, the sustainability of the centre is delegated to and ensured by the sustainability of the individuals. In this perspective, artist-run spaces' sustainability can also be sought through a balance between commitment to personal projects of the individuals and commitment to the centre's planning.

The third issue is to identify an organisational model that will stand the test of time and allow people and space costs to be paid while also investing in production. This problem is faced by a mix of different activities and funding channels, including, in order of importance: the lease of the cultural centre space; the participation to call for funds for cultural and social projects; the combination of cultural practices with closely linked commercial activities in terms of ethics and design; the support of branding strategies through artistic and cultural production; sponsorship by private parties; participation in festivals or events with a large audience aimed at sharing the revenue generated

by ticketing and increasing the reputation of the space; self-financing by members or through fundraising; internalisation of some activities (e.g. press office, communication, production, implementation of cultural enhancement activities); participation in European projects hosting artists, such as Creative Europe.

The fourth element weighing sustainability choices is the institutional context and the framework of agreements in which artist-run spaces operate, as well as the presence of similar actors willing to cooperate. In this respect, the territories are profoundly different, both in terms of the sensitivity of administrators, who create frameworks that are more or less favourable to the establishment of artists-run spaces or the recovery of spaces, and in terms of the presence of plans, agreements and projects in which to operate.

It is clear that being able to manage spaces with reduced or no rent, or with agreements providing for the participation of the owners, often local government bodies or agencies in the costs of utilities is a condition that facilitates the first steps of the cultural centres and their economic viability in the early development stages. However, there is a complete lack of homogeneity in the actions of the involved public agencies. Without general guidelines from the Ministry of Culture or other national agencies, each city administration acts autonomously, possibly unaware of other experiences or unable to adapt them to their particular situation. In the cases investigated, some regulations that are relatively simple to activate and make operational, while respecting the needs and resources of both artist-run spaces and the administrations, do not seem to be applied, such as the administrative bartering scheme[4].

Similarly, operating in a territorial context in which there are other similar initiatives makes it possible to have access to information more quickly and effectively, to establish cooperative relations, to move within an institutional framework that has already been able to welcome other experiences, with the advantage of lowering transaction costs, speeding up transitions and growth.

The organisational set-up of artists-run spaces is also a fundamental element. In the opinion of many of the artist-run spaces interviewed, it can happen that spaces shut down and collectives "break up"

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[4] The administrative barter was introduced by the "Sblocca Italia" decree of 2014 (art. 24 DI 133/2014 and allows citizens and third sector organisations to pay tax and extra-tax debts through socially useful services that may concern "the cleaning, maintenance and beautification of green areas, squares and streets; their enhancement through cultural initiatives of various kinds; interventions of urban decorum, recovery and reuse with purposes of general interest, of unused areas and real estate."

precisely because they cannot identify an organisational model that adheres to the vision and aspirations of the artists and creative professionals involved in running the centre.

The interviewees describe investing considerable time initially, and even after the centre's establishment, in discussions, consultations, and deliberations regarding the most effective organisational structure to adopt. As previously mentioned, these centres can assume various legal forms; however, in nearly all cases, they operate under common governance arrangements that often diverge from legally mandated bodies. Coordination committees, steering bodies, and discussion assemblies are among the structures cited as facilitating strategic decision-making within artist-run spaces. Many organisations complain that the decision-making horizon is often constrained for fiscal and reporting reasons to the short term, leaving a long-term perspective aside, which makes it harder to think strategically about possible evolutions, growth, consolidation of income, investments in activities and people.

When asked about their long-term visions, most of the centres respond regarding cultural positioning, productions and activities. A smaller number also reflects on the long-term economic dimension, partly explaining how difficult it is to think over more than two years, given the fact that there is no general long-term support system and that the resources available are more often connected to projects rather than to the organisation itself.

Artist-run spaces which also contemplate a long-term economic perspective are not absent. These underline three possible strategies to deal with the hardship of pursuing long-term economic sustainability. First, the differentiation of revenue sources ensures the centre's sustainability even when some of the revenue streams are lacking. Second, the possibility of transferring artistic and entrepreneurial skills to other contexts is a fertile breeding ground for project sustainability. Thirdly, the capacity to adequately compensate staff work in order to elevate voluntary or partially remunerated work to their primary employment. It is specifically in relation to these aspects that the interviewees pointed out the most common errors. Despite recognizing an ethical premium to the construction of purely horizontal practices, most interviewees describe it as a time-consuming factor and underline the need to define some sort of governance structure that tries to speed up decisions, avoiding establishing any rigid relation of power. A linked question connects to the lack of an objective division of tasks and duties, which inevitably leads to the overloading of part of the team. These problems also relate to the frequent underestimation of the care of the team and its skills, flying over important questions such as work-life balance and the dignity and value recognized

to work itself. Also, the need to be familiar with the institutional and bureaucratic framework and develop specific organisational and economic-management skills is often given less importance than it deserves. These organisational mistakes are paralleled by strategic and financial ones, such as the underestimation of start-up costs; the shift towards commercial forms which show their limits in the context of independent production; not networking with other organisations from the outset.

Conclusions

This paper moved from the hypothesis that artist-run spaces provide a platform for creative professionals to experiment in artistic production and curation and develop their career. To confirm this hypothesis, we analysed fourteen case studies of artist-run spaces spread out in all the Italian territory, also trying to understand to what extent the supportive role of these organisations is sustainable in the long-term.

Our study has bridged two different analytical domains. Until now these were explored separately by the scholarly debate. On the one hand, the debate regarding artists' strategies to face the increasingly complex and precarious nature of the arts labour market. On the other hand, the debate concerning the characteristics and potentialities of artists run spaces. The dialogue between these two strands of research has been fruitful in gaining insights into contemporary cultural trends of the Italian context. First, the analysis of the many activities offered by the selected artist-run spaces confirmed a marked attitude towards acting as a point of reference for young people's creativity, both in the training phase and in the first steps of their careers. This attitude was further reinforced by the analysis of the motivations driving the creation of these spaces which revealed the existence of four main patterns concerning the intentions, vocations and needs of these organisations which varied according to their field of intervention and to the motivation to act in it. Whereas the motivations to set up an artist-run space were all consistent with strategies to face the increased complexity of the art labour market, most of the case studies analysed tended to reproduce at the collective level the strategies identified by previous studies on individual artistic careers. Indeed, most of the artists working in the analysed spaces teamed up to share risks and pool resources and competences, enhancing a strategy of adaptation they already pursued individually, rather than collectively trying to react to the changing conditions of the market by acting on the underlying structural causes. Whereas the socialisation of the strategies to face the challenges of artistic careers did not seem to lower the individual tendency of iper-adaptiveness attached to the so-called "protean careers'', it helped in supporting the multidisciplinarity required

by "portfolio careers'' without the need for an iper-mobile behaviour on behalf of the single artists. Indeed, creative professionals could find possibilities to collaborate and expand their portfolio in a flourishing network made of artist-run spaces that also helped to maintain ties with the local territory.

If the supportive role of artists-run space for professionals in the creative field seems to be confirmed, the analysed case studies reported several issues related to the sustainability of such a role in the long run. Indeed, all the case studies analysed strived to find a mediation, about the structuring of a model of organisation that responded not only to economic and financial matters but was also satisfactory from the point of view of ethics, as well as of the multiple relations with creators, users and communities. The main obstacles to the achievement of a similar objective were often connected to a lack of correspondence between the legal nature taken by artist-run spaces to carry out their activities and their identity and intentions; the trade-off between the sustainability of the organisation and that of the people who work there; the identification of an organisational model that would allow to invest in production; the existence of a favourable and supportive environment made by a network of institutions and similar spaces.

Offering an empirical study of artist-run spaces, our article tried to expand the set of available knowledge on the organisational, managerial and strategic vision of these organisations. However, further research needs to take in to account also some limitations of the current work. From a methodological viewpoint, the absence of records of interviews and their respective transcripts not only prevented us from including relevant quotations for the purpose of supporting our findings, but also ruled out the possibility of complementing qualitative evidence with a quantitative content analysis of the answers given by key informants of the art spaces. Future research using discourse analysis may prove useful in simultaneously identifying general trends, nuances and elements of complexity related to the phenomenon under study. Moreover, by studying the role of indepentent artists-run spaces as an organisational response to the uncertainty of emerging art careers, our article leaves open a number of promising lines of research, such as the role of relational and friendship dynamics in the early careers of young artists and how these influence the birth and development of spaces.

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