Museums and Entrepreneurship

*Museums and Entrepreneurship: The Effects of Capitalising on Culture in the 21st Century* addresses the largely under-examined impact that different entrepreneurial endeavours have on museum practices today.

It identifies an entrepreneurial turn in today’s neoliberal context and critically evaluates how this turn redefines museums in organisational, conceptual and empirical terms. It assesses the challenges that different types of museums face, examining how they are conceptualised, managed and experienced in order to remain financially viable while also remaining relevant to the communities they should serve. It brings to the fore the dynamic relationships formed across corporate sponsors, private collectors, cultural administrators and local communities that shape today’s museum practices in a global context. Evidence-based in its approach and with case studies from Europe, the United States, South America and China, this volume engages with entrepreneurship across theory and practice and combines perspectives from museum studies, curating, exhibition design, business and management.

Shedding new light on discussions around cultural branding, sponsorship, the politics of display and experience economy, and highlighting the importance of resilience, decolonisation and social responsibility, *Museums and Entrepreneurship* is essential reading for students and researchers in museum and heritage studies, curatorial studies, arts and heritage management and business.

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[Logo of MOMus: Metropolitan Organisation of Museums of Visual Arts of Thessaloniki]

[Logo of Ésad TPM: École Supérieure d’Art et de Design Toulon Provence Méditerranée]
1 Introducing the entrepreneurial turn

Eve Kalyva

The context

Museums today find themselves in a precarious position between the public and private spheres. The neoliberal deregulation of the economy and the labour market, the privatisation of public goods, services and heritage, opportunist government agendas, the retraction of public funding and the expansion of the cultural economy have compelled museums to take an entrepreneurial turn towards new ways of generating capital. While the involvement of private capital in the production of and access to culture is not unique to the twenty-first century, market logic is now pervasive in the cultural domain. This has become more prominent by the prolonged financial and societal crises of the last decade and the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed the ramifications of the “glocal” market as well as its fragility. Museums have to cope with sudden closures and loss of income, respond to the increasing digitalisation of interaction across personal, professional and civic life, and remain relevant to audiences whose needs are changing in unprecedented ways. In addition, while state institutions strive to defend their mission to preserve and present heritage in the service of society (see the International Council of Museums’ code of ethics; ICOM 2017), a plethora of emerging private initiatives have advanced competitive business models, transformed visitor expectations and foregrounded the potential of museums to stimulate economic development. As culture becomes a financially lucrative market whereby heritage, knowledge and experience are turned into commodities, museums have to reconsider their practices and redefine their exploitable assets.

Enter entrepreneurship. Traditionally understood as the creation of organisations (Gartner 1988) and more recently as the creation of opportunities and the pursuit of new ideas (Alvarez and Barney 2007; Holmquist 2003), these opportunities and ideas are conceptualised and realised for business growth (A.W. 2014). This is the premise of this book: that however one approaches it, the context of entrepreneurship is business and its objective is to generate profit. In the culture industry, where the convergence of cultural with financial activity is now expanding to include heritage, entrepreneurship is emerging as a new frontier. It is often considered as offering new business models and approaches to museum management, increasing
communicative potential and creating new investment opportunities, thus improving financial viability.

A range of activities in the last decade demonstrate this. In 2012, the Benaki Museum in Athens organised the conference “The Entrepreneurial Museum: Revenue and Capacity Building Strategies for Self-Sustained Non-Profit Institutions” in collaboration with the American Embassy and the British Council, and explored innovative strategies to help cultural institutions engage their communities and find new sources of funding, thus becoming more self-sustained (CoMuseum 2012). The Benaki Museum would later be one of the sites of *documenta 14* (8 April 2017 to 16 July 2017), an edition criticised for its disengagement from local reality while profiteering from it. In 2015, MuseumNext, a leading for-profit business partnership across museum directors and innovators based in the UK, launched the Museum Entrepreneurship Platform, aiming to develop working methods that would expand a museum’s professional and commercial outreach while preserving its quality and integrity. In a publication stemming from this project, Erik Schilp (2015), a marketer and former museum director, outlined the ten principles of entrepreneurialism as preparing for the future, changing focus (to recognise that a museum is a business), living up to expectations, trusting the facts, sharing the museum’s purpose (e.g. through partnerships and the hire of freelance curators rather than their employment as permanent members of staff), building a community, breaking the mould (e.g. by creating new markets), balancing the budget, using the space and taking risks while allowing for failure.

In 2019, the *Museum Magazine*, published by the American Alliance for Museums, turned its attention to the term “museopreneur”. In an article on how museums are leaping into new business models with an entrepreneurial spirit, Brendan Ciercko, the CEO and founder of Cuseum (a platform that helps museums and cultural organisations engage their visitors, members and patrons), defined museopreneur as “one who embraces or assumes characteristics of an entrepreneur to advance their museum’s business model and general operations” (Ciecko 2019; emphasis in original). Ciercko’s suggestions ranged from making the “story” of a museum or a collection attractive to the widest audiences possible, offering personalised experiences and creating interactive visitors’ “walls” (i.e. virtual or physical spaces where visitors can add their input), to outsourcing museum expertise and staff to private clients and renting out premises for corporate events (ibid.). At the same time, museum entrepreneurship has become an expanding field of academic and professional studies – consider PGCert Museums and Galleries Entrepreneurship, Goldsmiths, University of London; Cert Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Harvard Business School Online; and MA Arts and Cultural Entrepreneurship, National University of Singapore, in addition to courses in art business, management and cross-business approaches to entrepreneurship. Such developments push forward the monetisation of cultural offer.

Thus, entrepreneurial activities change how museums are conceptualised, managed and experienced. This not only concerns the remit of a museum’s sponsors, the commercialisation of its activities, working conditions, the redefinition of its
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mission and the branding of its audiences. Entrepreneurship also has an impact on the role of museums in society, and their relation to culture and heritage – and by extension, on our relation to and understanding of culture and heritage, of which museums are custodians. To be precise, entrepreneurship actualises the inherent tendency of advanced capitalism to privatise the commons and, when involving the museum sector, it redefines the relationships across museums, audiences and local and global economies. All the while, as a so-called new frontier, it furnishes this tendency to capitalise on culture with a new guise – that of a rhetoric of opportunity that co-opts demands for inclusivity, representation, participation and democratic access to culture. Herein lies the entrepreneurial “turn”, which this volume seeks to define and assess.

In the glossary of the Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is defined as

> a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

(ICOM 2017, 48)

Notwithstanding, ICOM’s recent publications on cultural and local development note the role of museums as agents of social and economic change, generating knowledge for and about society as places for social interaction and dialogue, and a source of creativity and innovation for the local economy (ICOM 2019). Entrepreneurship may be one such way of effecting economic change, but its far-reaching implications should not be left unchallenged. Entrepreneurial experiments and idiosyncratic donor-driven decision-making are prone to short-sightedness, lack of vision and opportunism, which can damage a museum’s outlook and cause financial instability. For its part, the focus on third-party funding and sponsorship not only encompasses how museums are marketed but also affects the discourse on the role and the nature of museums, as well as their structural organisation (e.g. administration and management of resources), identity, programming, curatorial practices and visitor experience. Importantly, the logic of the free market and its inherent competitiveness undercut core museum values of social responsibility, civic mission, the preservation of heritage, education and community building, as well as integrity. Beyond their doors, museums are often connected with city economy – for example, through their “starchitecture” – and become part of wider entrepreneurial approaches to urban planning and their associated cycles of devaluation, investment, regeneration and gentrification of districts, opportunist political agendas, diversion of public budgets, social control and exclusion – consider the Bilbao (or Guggenheim) Effect (Gonzalez 2004).

To put it differently, regardless of the nature of an entrepreneurial endeavour (e.g. sponsorship from the industry, high-end architecture, blockbuster exhibitions or unique exhibition designs), its success is measured by how many people come
through the door. This shifts focus from quality to quantity, from knowledge to entertainment and from public service to client service. Even in the case of for-profit initiatives that have entrepreneurship as their core trait (and it is telling that many of these initiatives retain the word “museum”, admitting to the value that the term still holds), their activities contribute to transforming culture into a commodity. Critically reflecting on entrepreneurship in the museum sector and its impact is therefore fundamental for determining the future of museums and their role in society.

In the last decade, museums have undergone organisational and conceptual transformations in how they engage diverse sets of stakeholders across audiences, funding bodies, sponsors and governments. In this process, entrepreneurship has been considered in different ways. Des Griffin (2003), director of the Australian Museum, Sydney, between 1976 and 1998 and former president of Museums Australia, discusses entrepreneurship in relation to museum leadership. Griffin identifies developing a vision, working effectively as a team and modelling appropriate behaviour as key characteristics required to transform museums into effective organisations – organisations that have a strong sense of identity and therefore resilience, in addition to generating profit. Griffin moreover argues that visitor experience should be the ultimate goal of entrepreneurship in museums based on interaction with authentic objects and increased understanding and knowledge (ibid.). However, market logic dictates that investment in visitor experience and engagement move away from offer and towards profit. Susan Ashley (2014) warns that invoking “engagement” as a process for generating, improving or repairing relationships between museums and society at large is often misleading if one ignores the power relations at play. One type of such power relations derives from profit-making and, in recent years, a fundamental shift has emerged in the re-conceptualisation of museum visitors as self-directing clients able to make meaning for themselves (Rodney 2019).

From a different perspective, entrepreneurship has been linked to creativity and innovation. This includes the so-called art entrepreneurship and the discovery and pursuit of new ideas using new organisational forms (Scherdin and Zander 2011); social enterprise in relation to a museum’s organisation, outreach, content presentation and visitor experience (Eid 2020); and commercial awareness, creative economy and participation management (Piber 2020). Still, as neoliberal agendas push for the marketisation of cultural institutions, we cannot ignore macro-marketing and how ideologies of commerce and politics influence institutional practices (Ekström 2019). What is more, the ramifications of incorporating art and culture into the capitalist economic system are not only socioeconomic but also geopolitical (Aboudrar, Mairesse, and Martin 2021) – consider, for example, the looting of heritage and repatriation, post-conflict reconciliation, neocolonial intervention and (cultural) imperialism.

As such, entrepreneurship does not only reinterpret the position of museums in the market, allowing them to make their business models more effective and competitive – for example, by finding new opportunities for growth through the
diversification of financial resources and the increase of the value of their services. As long as its core logic remains money-making, entrepreneurship will expedite the commercialisation of museums, including the exploitation of their workers and alienation from their communities, and, ultimately, the commodification of culture itself. It is this impetus of the entrepreneurial turn that museums must resist.

About this book

*Museums and Entrepreneurship: The Effects of Capitalising on Culture in the 21st Century* examines how the entrepreneurial turn transforms museums in terms of their mission, organisation, programming and relationships with their audiences, and redefines their value in monetary terms. It addresses cultural branding, the staging of heritage, sponsorship, experience economy and the (colonial) politics of display; and brings to the fore the dynamic relationships that shape museum practices across different stakeholders such as corporate sponsors, private collectors, cultural administrators and local communities. Through a multi-layered discussion, this volume negotiates the wider context in which museums are required to operate while underscoring their social value, and charts the changing dynamics in the dissemination of culture. It evaluates the impact of entrepreneurship on the capitalisation on culture, and at the same time highlights the importance of social responsibility, community building, knowledge exchange and decolonisation.

The contributing authors critically discuss case studies from different geopolitical and social contexts across Europe, the United States, South America and China. Their chapters are arranged in three interrelated axes of analysis: private management of public museums, corporate sponsorship and architecture (Chapters 2–4); exhibition design, experience economy, colonial logic and the racialised spectacle (Chapters 5 and 6); and private versus community initiatives and social responsibility (Chapters 7 and 8, and Postscript). Through these multiple perspectives, this book hopes to lay bare the far-reaching implications of the entrepreneurial turn in the museum sector and to indicate ways in which to recover from it.

In Chapter 2, Annie Kontogiorgi interrogates the process of privatisation of culture in Greece led by the neoliberal right-wing government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, in office since 2019. This included the renovation of key national heritage institutions by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), heralded as a “cultural boost” amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Kontogiorgi explains the extent of this private sponsor’s involvement, often bypassing legal requirements or not complying with the ICOM charter, and draws attention to the political and institutional discourse that sought to support the SNF’s participation. Such entrepreneurial endeavours lead to the elevation of sponsors to “partners” and legitimise the demands that corporations can place on the state for investment returns in the form of products, services and promotion.
Importantly, as Kontogiorgi explains, the privatisation of culture serves a political agenda, which in the case of Greece is directly linked to what Michael Herzfeld (2002) identifies as “crypto-colony”. This perpetual – albeit not always directly apparent – dependency on foreign colonial powers (in this case, Britain and the United States) in financial, political and now cultural terms serves as the backdrop against which the current neoliberal Greek government builds its success story after a series of financial and societal crises in the past decade. The interference of the private sector in different aspects of public life goes beyond the cultural domain and affects not only the access to, and conceptualisation of, national heritage, but also the conceptualisation of national identity itself. As Kontogiorgi concludes, “Greek politicians seem to have lost the connection to the ‘sense’ of the cultural heritage of their own country. They consider it as a product of entrepreneurial activity” (in this volume, 29).

In Chapter 3, Pamela Bianchi likewise examines the politics of the museum sector. Using the National Museum of 21st Century Arts in Rome (MAXXI Rome) as a case study, Bianchi analyses the birth of a state museum run by a private foundation and managed by political officials, and focuses on how museum architecture can help understand a museum’s practices and collections. The creation of MAXXI was based on an architectural competition that selected Zaha Hadid’s project for its capacity to provide an urban public space that seamlessly blended in its neighbourhood. Yet, as Bianchi argues, the museum has not been able to exploit the scientific and technological innovation of its architecture and instead has become a victim of it, oscillating between commodification and emptiness.

Bianchi draws attention to the relationships across the aesthetics of MAXXI’s parametric building design created by the architect, the exhibition solutions adopted by the artistic director and the controversial nature of the museum’s administration. She describes how MAXXI operates both in the field of market economy with a for-profit objective, and as a political instrument whose practices are often in dissonance with state regulations and the civic mission expected by a state museum, especially in terms of budgeting, expertise, museological awareness and exhibition focus. As Bianchi notes, MAXXI became “the spokesperson of an ephemeral, perishable experience that privileges appearance over being” (in this volume, 40).

In Chapter 4, Linn Burchert examines the effects of entrepreneurship from the point of view of the sponsor. Her chapter critically explores how cultural sponsorship and exhibitions have served to re-brand Volkswagen as a sustainable and environment-friendly company, and market its products while affecting organisational and curatorial choices. From its key role in Germany’s Nazi regime to the so-called post-war economic miracle, and from fossil fuel scandals to greenwashing, the involvement of Volkswagen in the cultural domain cuts across national, political, financial and social agendas. By analysing six VW-funded exhibitions held between 2016 and 2022, Burchert identifies the “spirit of entrepreneurship” in state museum practices as a general move towards the neoliberal values of self-realisation and innovation, and the embrace of capitalist and corporate culture.
Sharing a common interest with Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter explains how corporate sponsorship can be directly implicated in a museum’s programming, hiring policies and building construction and maintenance. This involvement is more evident in curating, where sponsor-dependent curatorial choices can often obscure corporate responsibility behind a seemingly neutral display. This makes a museum complicit in misrepresenting both its own practices and social reality in what Burchert describes as “ideology in action” (in this volume, 59). Ultimately, corporate cultural sponsorship allows private entities to manage their public image and co-opt critique. Importantly, it creates a framework under which entrepreneurial values such as individual freedom, risk-taking, adventure, discovery and personal satisfaction become a currency for artistic and museum practices.

The next two chapters expound on the effects of entrepreneurship on exhibition design and visitor experience. In Chapter 5, Eve Kalyva analyses the exhibition Stedelijk BASE (2017–2022, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) and suggests two frameworks for understanding and evaluating museum entrepreneurial practices – experience economy, which concerns the commodification of experiences themselves as marketable units in addition to, and distinct from, a museum’s holdings; and polyphony, in terms of the voices, agencies and capitals that entrepreneurship introduces in a museum setting (e.g. across the curator, the designer, the architect, the artist, the visitor and the marketer), and which can be selectively employed in order to best define and market a museum’s assets.

Kalyva’s analysis demonstrates how BASE sought to capitalise on the art fair experience yet ultimately failed because the staging of this experience was permeable and in dissonance with the museum’s identity, shifting focus from learning to entertainment. Her chapter brings to the fore the emerging qualities of combining spatial design with content selection, and the extent to which space participates in meaning-making and the assigning of value. It draws attention to how the entrepreneurial turn allows the logic of the market to enter the field of culture and therefore the commons, transforming its production, organisation and distribution. Commercialisation can signal not only a shift in how a museum conceptualises its civic mission, Kalyva argues, but even “cultural bankruptcy if a museum, or the cultural sector more generally, does not keep in check the polyphony of the different interests that characterise its operations” (in this volume, 93).

In Chapter 6, Pearlie Rose S. Baluyut closely examines a 2006–2007 blockbuster exhibition of René Magritte at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) designed by the pioneering conceptual artist John Baldessari. Seeking to unify the exhibition design with the artworks on display and the space that visitors occupy while bordering on picturesque theatricalisation and parody, Baluyut explains how the museum capitalised on the embodied and unpaid performance by its Filipino security guards as both authority figures directing the audience and entertainers dressed in the typical attire of Magritte’s visual vocabulary. In doing so, LACMA espoused a capitalist and colonialist logic that commodified and commercialised the museum’s own human resources across markers of class, gender and race.
Baluyut’s post-colonial critique of the power dynamics at LACMA offers a clear example of what Paul Werner (2005) has described as “Museum, Inc”. Wondering whether the corporate business has superseded the art world, Werner sees cultural institutions as reflux from the colonial expansion of the liberal nation-state and democratic rhetoric, highlighting their various risks. In her call to decolonise LACMA’s cultural hegemony, Baluyut interrogates the racialised spectacle that the Magritte exhibition created and seeks to re-frame racialised labour, which is prevalent in the museum sector, the American (and especially Californian) context and the Philippine diaspora. Concluding that the entrepreneurial is (inherently) imperial, Baluyut argues that “Unequivocally unethical, the white cube represented nothing but cultural hegemony, visualising a system of biases, assumptions and values of those in power” (in this volume, 127).

The last two chapters in this volume examine entrepreneurship from an organisational point of view and from contrasting positions in relation to private, for-profit initiatives and community-based museums. In Chapter 7, Nick Pozek explores the entrepreneurial turn in China that ensued from the country’s financial and cultural boom at the turn of the millennium, and saw the rise of different business models for establishing and running private art institutions. Pozek presents a range of institutions from historical museums to new business initiatives that merge art and retail, and explains how their emergence can be mapped onto four stages of private museum development: the idealist stage (in the mid-1990s), the stage of business strategy (in the early 2000s), the art bubble (in the late 2000s) and the policy bubble (since 2012) (Xu 2014).

While new legal frameworks in the last decade have encouraged cultural enterprises, promoted the development of the international cultural market and allowed a considerable degree of flexibility in how private museums are managed and what they exhibit, Pozek demonstrates how the viability of private museums remains prone to the idiosyncratic and often short-sighted vision of their founding donors, as well as to the lack of expertise. In response to volatile, uncertain and complex market relations, such initiatives often resort to sustainability manoeuvres such as coordinating joint actions with international museums – for example, with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (discussed in Chapter 6). This reveals the global reach of the art market and how its entrepreneurial practices become a means of cultural hegemony.

From the opposite perspective, Viviana Usubiaga’s contribution testifies to the value of community engagement, social responsibility and decoloniality. In Chapter 8, she discusses the Museo Regional de Pintura “José Antonio Terry” in Argentina, the Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore (MUSEF) in Bolivia and the network of “organic museums” in Brazil. Usubiaga introduces the concepts of the museum of the proximate, mutual parenting and affective memories. Discussing different operational models by which a museum’s contents can be co-created and the institution co-administered with Indigenous and local communities, she demonstrates how community-based projects can generate an alternative cultural economy capable of questioning the entrepreneurial turn, which has affected the
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ontology of museums and the production of knowledge in the last 20 years, even reversing some of its effects.

Extending the discussion of Chapter 6, Usobiaga’s contribution highlights the possibility of what can be understood as decolonial memory inclusivity and prompts us to contest the Eurocentric and colonial perspectives that typically define anthropology and archaeology museums. It specifically underlines the need to replace hegemonic museum practices with organisational and operational models that favour greater awareness of the role of the institution in local communities and advocate for the sharing of cultural heritage. In the case of MUSEF, Usobiaga explains how this entails an ontological change insofar as objects are conceived as subjects, as living entities . . . [focusing] not on formal and stylistic questions – the object of the exoticising colonial gaze – but rather on aspects fundamental to the social life of those objects.

(in this volume, 165)

Thus, lessons from the Global South can help undo the binary colonial logic of Western modernity and give rise to new collective epistemologies and ontologies.

Closing remarks

Entrepreneurship aims to generate and exploit new opportunities for business growth. In the cultural domain, the entrepreneurial turn shapes not only the professional field of museums but also their social function, which in turn impacts how culture is understood, produced, accessed and valued. This is so because the cultural sector involves a range of stakeholders, from individuals to institutions, and cuts across different domains of human activity, from personal experience to public policy and national identity. Therefore, a critical and comparative discussion of different initiatives, contexts and conceptualisations can reveal the far-reaching effects of entrepreneurship.

While the case studies presented in this volume are not exhaustive, Museums and Entrepreneurship: The Effects of Capitalising on Culture in the 21st Century invites a wide-ranging enquiry by ultimately asking: Can the entrepreneurial model be dissociated from the neoliberal paradigm which it propagates in the cultural domain, and culture be saved from a singular understanding in terms of opportunity and gain, commodification and consumerism? The answer seems to be no in the first instance, and yes in the second. Iro Katsaridou, in Postscript to this volume, explores where we can go from here. She explains that museums “cannot contend with the fallout of hyper-capitalism, as this endangers their true mission” (Katsaridou in this volume, 179), and underlines the value of community engagement as a strategy to democratise the museum. Democratising the museum and re-conceptualising it as a space of social care and social justice is one way that positive social change can be realised towards making our societies more democratic and less exploitative.