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# Guest editorial: Unlocking the transformative potential of culture and the arts: innovative practices and policies from social enterprises and third-sector organisations

“Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to change consciousness and impulses of man and woman who can change the world” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 32).

## Introduction

Drawing from the critical and transformative potential of culture and the arts, this special issue focuses on the role of social enterprises (SEs) and the social and solidarity economy (SSE), as well as third-sector organisations (TSOs) in the wellbeing and sustainability of local communities and society at large. In recent years, arts and culture have moved towards the centre of social entrepreneurship and SEs. In many parts of the world, arts-based creativity and culture in social entrepreneurship are significant drivers for developing life skills, empowerment, strengthened community relations and novel forms of SE. Arts and culture organisations engage in multiple kinds of value: social value, financial value, civil and democratic value, restorative and recovery value and productive value (Andersen and Green, 2024). Furthermore, the SSE is a heterospace for diverse economic activities and substantive economic relations related to peoples’ interaction when building their livelihood. As such, SSE is a slow-growing, diversifying and rooting of community activities, community economies, reciprocity and a regenerative and redistributive economy (Andersen *et al.*, 2021). Arts and culture, then, if inscribed in such contexts as SEs or social economy organisations, possess transformative capacities in the small and the big.

On the one hand, there has been a revival and strengthening of linkages between artistic and cultural expressions and social and local socio-economic grassroots initiatives and global issues of environmental sustainability, human rights and participatory democracy, with strong expression in the context of the recent crisis and the solidarity economy (ENCC, 2021; Kárpáti, 2023; Richez-Battesti and Petrella, 2023; Walther *et al.*, 2022). Some even talk about how a renewal of radical SE and cooperatives as vehicles of arts and culture could provide comparable working structures across diverse occupations such as social workers/community workers and artists (McRobbie, 2011). On the other hand, culture and the cultural and creative industries continue to be promoted as a tool for the global competitiveness of places and cities and economic regeneration and growth (Keat, 1999; Ray and Sayer, 2012).

While much attention has been paid to the latter, there is a gap in knowledge and understanding of the dynamics and reach of what is taking place in solidarity and civic socio-economic collaborations in culture and the arts. SEs might emerge as a third way between public policy austerity and marketisation (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). At the same time, precariousness and fragmentation continue to increase in the field, greatly due to the “creative economy” discourse and framework (McRobbie, 2011). Research also shows that “TSOs in the field of ‘arts and culture’ have to survive in a climate of permanent austerity as



public funding is being scaled back. Working in the area of arts and culture is very precarious and below the poverty line (...) and the field often lacks an encompassing umbrella organisation and a sub-sectoral infrastructure” (Zimmer and Pahl, 2016, p. 12).

SE initiatives in culture and the arts are diverse and continue to evolve across institutional contexts. They include an economic dimension related to sustaining artistic and cultural expressions through the market and non-market relations, on the one hand, and embedding cultural and artistic dimensions in socio-economic relations, on the other. Growth in arts-based SEs indicates a growing interest in how culture and the arts can support economic and social development and contribute to just ecological transitions. Arts and culture can be the main tools for social intervention and social welfare organisations promoting arts and culture projects, and arts organisations may enrol in community empowerment and social interventions. These organisations often display specific trajectories of social, economic and governance characteristics influencing SEs’ pathways towards hybridisation (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). In this context, these new economic models can generate employment for individuals excluded from the labour market, increase job opportunities in dignified work environments, encourage citizens to participate in the production and management of cultural resources and challenge dominant market models of cultural production and consumption (McQuilten *et al.*, 2020; Nogales Muriel, 2023; Green, 2022).

Social dimensions of this kind of SE emphasise aesthetic, cultural and civic values circulating and giving consistency to the linkages between people and people and the planet, helping to create community(ies) from the construction of utopias and narratives in spaces of diversity, citizenship and trust (Caruana and Nogales Muriel, 2020). It involves artists and culture workers and often collaborations across sectors (public, conventional enterprises, cooperatives and associations), resources (market, public grants and philanthropy) and activity fields (Colin and Gauthier, 2010). Arts-based SEs embrace a co-dependence of three goals, often in tension and competition – artistic practice, social purpose and economic activity – and, increasingly, ecological (Nogales Muriel, 2024). Usually, tensions between the external forces such as government policy, markets, investors and philanthropy interested in the “self-sufficient” economic potential and those working in arts-based SEs that tend to prioritise social values and ethical business over significant financial returns and are often ambivalent about their roles as entrepreneurs as simultaneously critical and affirmative, but also embedded in conditions of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism (McQuilten *et al.*, 2020).

We assume a definition of SE related to the historical institutionalist frameworks adopted in the European approach. SE emerges from contextualised social dynamics and the co-evolution of institutions and organisations, particularly those related to welfare and the social economy. Thus, SEs are “private, not-for-profit organisations that provide goods and services directly related to their objective of benefiting the community. They generally have a collective dynamic that involves several types of stakeholders in their governance bodies, values autonomy and supports economic risks related to their economic activity” (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008, p. 204). Arts and culture SE may have legal forms such as “foundations, associations, platforms, exchange networks, cooperatives and even other types of organisations run along commercial lines” (Barbieri *et al.*, 2012, p. 7). SEs are studied in this special issue in several ways and with diverse meanings by the authors of the different articles. Cyrille Ferraton, Francesca Petrella, Nadine Richez-Battesti and Delphine Vallade use the concept of French SSE cultural organisations to focus on three cases consisting of an association, a cooperative of collective interest and cultural workers’ cooperative to focus on their participative governance model. Stacey Edgar addresses the

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social impact of formal and informal SEs in Zambia as crafts businesses with primarily social and environmental motivations. Nancy Duxbury, Fiona Bakas and Cláudia Carvalho refer to mostly Portuguese social economy organisations with arts and culture interventions and, particularly, democratically and territorially committed solidarity economy enterprises as interlocutors in local development and community benefit action research projects. Silvia Sacchetti and Alberto Ianes also refer to cultural social economy organisations studying a network of musicians' cooperatives, musicians' and students' associations, and one civic school in Northern Italy. Rocío Nogales Muriel proposes the concept of "cultural and artistic social enterprise" (CASE) in the study of an arts and culture initiative aiming at dignifying and professionalising the work of cultural and creative workers. Aviv Kruglanski works with social entrepreneurship in community economies and organisations.

### **Democratising the public sphere through culture and the arts**

Implications of the recent evolution from the "democratisation of culture" to "cultural democracy" make visible the critical nature of many emerging artistic and cultural practices and the challenges they generate to the mainstream (Lopes, 2009; Bonet and Negrier, 2018; Nogales Muriel, 2019). Artistic and cultural expressions contribute to unlocking the imaginations and practices of other worlds and offer ways of living by communicating utopian and dystopian alternatives and criticisms. Culture and arts are seen here as a repository of civic values essential for the constitution of the public sphere. Cultural practices and groups actively create and occupy democratised public spaces, enacting the right to the city. This practice implies paying attention to the meanings and practices described inside the creative industries frameworks, including the role of the market as a mechanism to organise the exchange of cultural and artistic creations and experiences and the position of SSE-based initiatives concerning these meanings and practices. Considering these premises, this special issue seeks to address the role of CASEs in promoting the regeneration of the public sphere through public art interventions (as opposed to private arts closed in artists' workshops, museums and art fairs). Moreover, it addresses the role of SE in supporting local democratic arts collectives.

Cyrille Ferraton and colleagues focus on the impact of cultural democracy in SSE cultural organisations' governance in performing arts and audio-visual production. By focusing on the challenges of cultural democracy, they explore if organisations are interested in their democratic organisation and in what way. They analyse three cases of cultural SSE organisations of diverse legal forms, ages and sizes, where explicit efforts were made to make democracy and participation more effective in their governance model as part of their cultural projects of democratisation of culture. One of the cases is an organisation that evolved from classic artistic production to promote a new relationship between art, culture and society. It includes a public benefit dimension, such as urban development and social inclusion, and an advocacy role for citizen participation and cultural democratisation. Another case was, from the outset, a cultural project articulating an urban renewal intervention and an artistic and cultural intervention aiming at inventing a new relationship between art, territory and society. The third organisation was created as a cooperative to establish democratic governance in the highly fragmented, isolated, intermittent and competitive audio-visual sector, intending to develop a diversified cultural offering aimed at specific audiences, often marginalised by the mainstream audio-visual offer.

With the concept of the "craft of democratic governance", the authors shed light both on the formal and informal dimensions of democratic governance and on the way they are intertwined and shaped by internal mission and external pressures. This includes changes in organisational form, proximity criteria for board composition, setting up of stakeholders'

colleges, internal working seminars and meetings, working groups, collective management and developing partnerships with the community. The article shows that implementing these mechanisms is often a trial-and-error process, requiring an investment of all stakeholders and attention to resist environmental pressures that go the opposite way.

### **Social and economic inclusion to and through culture and the arts**

Artistic practices for social inclusion of disadvantaged people addressing cultural exclusion and/or the multidimensional character of social exclusion stand out as a significant part of SEs involved in culture and artwork (Barraket, 2005). Cross-boundary observations and multidisciplinary interventions, including artists, social workers and educators, disclose and target the systemic nature of social exclusion from the individual to the institutional and societal levels. The role of arts and culture in SSE initiatives often targets disadvantaged territories, communities and people, promoting economic inclusion. Arts, crafts and culture play a central role in providing symbolic meaning and value to the work and products of local communities as, for instance, in fair trade and community tourism, often a way to preserve local culture, memory and identity. In other cases, SE collaborates with the “creative classes” (e.g. graphic designers) in re-signifying local cultures and artefacts. Using artistic practices by SE enables awareness and outreach to disadvantaged groups and promotes local cultures and identities.

Stacey Edgar’s study on Zambian SEs in the crafts sector shows their relevant role in women’s economic inclusion and empowerment. The author finds that “of the 81 Zambian artisan enterprises surveyed, 77.3% were owned and operated by women. Over 57% of companies employed 50% or more women as artisan producers, with 24 companies employing 100% women”. Besides, these SEs demonstrate a significant capacity to contribute to the formalisation of economic activity and, therefore, increased security, particularly for women.

Nancy Duxbury and colleagues’ paper presents the case of two place-based action research projects. CREATOUR is an interdisciplinary research-and-application project that used community- and territory-embedded culture and the arts to develop a network of local creative tourism initiatives. REDE ARTÉRIA is an action-research project and artistic intervention initiative that uses cultural mapping and artistic creation as strategies to construct community and place-embedded cultural and artistic objects of territorial expression. The two projects worked closely with local social economy organisations with culture and art interventions and particularly solidarity economy enterprises fighting economic, demographic and social decay of disadvantaged territories. The paper analyses how these projects “encouraged and facilitated the participating social economy organisations to identify and use place-embedded knowledge and local cultural assets to develop new initiatives that contribute to local development and community benefit”.

### **Combatting the precariousness of arts and culture workers**

Precariousness and intermittency define work traits in the cultural and artistic sector that affect artists’ access to citizenship rights and social protection (EENCA, 2015). These are becoming the norm of the larger labour market. Artists, mainly, are usually among those with the highest precarity, combining their work in arts with other jobs to carry on artistic work. They also experience high levels of spatial mobility related to their art careers. These work patterns are particularly challenging for women due to the prevalence of the sexual division of social reproduction labour. In these usually individualistic and isolated careers, forms of collective organisation help deal with artists’ work and life circumstances. This

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special issue deals with the precarity of artists and culture workers and the solution SE can present to minimise it.

Rocío Nogales Muriel researches a SE-based solution to precarity by studying the SMART model. This model was developed initially as a Belgian association of creative workers who work intermittently and on a project basis. SMARTbe offers contract and activity management, information and advice, guarantee funds, debt collection, insurance, training, networking, co-working, financial services, legal assistance, research, an art collection and insurance. The model scaled up to 12 other European countries with different results. Studying the scaling of this model to other locations, the author concludes that “the SMART model harnesses and promotes the creation of spaces for cooperation (including international cooperation); innovation (as a CASE with a proven business model); emancipation (both economic and political with the backing of a critical mass of actors and key alliances); and criticism of the approach to culture as a commodity in a global market”. Moreover, the case study provided by Silvia Sacchetti and Alberto Ianes in the Trentino province shows that the development of stable forms of collaboration between the public sector and arts and cultural social economy organisations contributes to the stability of the labour relations and working conditions of artists.

### **Cultural policy in a period of transformation for culture and the arts**

Culture, arts and creativity have become core assets in policy strategies for the global competitiveness of regions and cities and an element in processes of gentrification and turistification. In contrast, most arts and culture organisations suffer the effects of austerity. Cultural policy-making has evolved from initial generous subsidies to drastic cuts in the past decades, including strategies that range from instrumentalisation to co-construction (Belfiore, 2022).

Recently, the connection between arts and culture (and more broadly, the creative economy) and research on society in general has become more prominent, leading to new business models for arts and culture organisations. This increased interest has led to a rethinking of public services and how this could be delivered in alternative ways, adapting the arts and culture. At the same time, increased awareness of ethical (and unethical) practices and attention to well-being, access and care from creative and cultural producers has led to creative social economies (Comunian *et al.*, 2020, p. 106). Moreover, new actors have emerged as interlocutors, with policymakers representing culture and the arts while citizen-based initiatives are booming.

Silvia Sacchetti and Alberto Ianes provide a counterexample of the tendency to the commodification of culture and the arts, one of collaboration between social economy organisations and the public sector in producing arts and culture. The authors present the pioneering case of Trentino province between the 1990s and early 2000s, where an innovative collaboration system between the public sector and the social economy was implemented. This arrangement resisted the pressures towards competition and the use of tenders. The study focuses on one of these cultural platforms, music schools, providing access to music training and production alternative to the exclusively public or market provision. The services are developed through “co-programmazione” and “coprogettazione”, implying joint planning and joint delivery of services. This indicated reaching an agreement about educational objectives and standards. Considering that this experience can be inspiring as a possible method through which the social economy can enter into relations with the public administration, the authors identify areas of efficiency and inefficiency *vis-à-vis* the competition alternative. Regarding the first, a climate of collaboration and mutual sharing enables the identification of innovative and creative solutions to meet needs,

activates a variety of resources to satisfy varied demands, contains the effects of asymmetric relationships, promotes the autonomous initiative of citizens and favours users which would otherwise be excluded. As for inefficiencies, the authors identify the accessibility of social economy organisations to this solution, particularly smaller organisations, the challenges of the actor's involvement in the participatory process over time and the understanding of the meaning of true collaborative practices from the inception of the process and, finally, the risk of routinisation.

The paper by Ferraton and colleagues connects the transformations in culture and arts organisations with the changes in France's centralised and tendentially elitist cultural policy landscape. Several changes concur to reshape cultural organisations, such as decentralisation, retrenchment in public funding, new contractual funding logic and the demand for cultural democracy. As the landscape of cultural providers becomes more diversified and complex, cultural rights make their way into French law, rendering SSE a central actor in promoting and defending cultural rights.

### **Culture as a field of transitions**

Culture is a core element in transitioning to sustainable societies, including promoting and preserving cultural diversity and the role of local knowledge and cultures in biodiversity preservation (Nogales Muriel, 2023). This includes strategies for considering culture and, connected to it, knowledge as a new common where cultural and artistic collaborative practices open the diversity of ways of knowing and speaking. Cultural activities often question current power relations and dynamics by allowing for an engagement of citizens and communities. These events include intellectual property rights ownership, promotion/preservation of local knowledge and cultures, co-production of knowledge and mutual learning and trans- and intercultural dialogues. CASEs put forward alternatives with other transitions underway, including the eco-social transition. An emerging shared vocabulary is under construction, and these different transition areas often interconnect and combine strategies, languages and actions. Cultural fields of transition focus on awareness raising, education and alternative narratives to the mainstream economy with a view to sustainability, articulating interdependencies, substantive notions of the economy connecting human beings and nature and excess economies as an alternative to economies of scarcity and artistic communities in urban commons. However, the critical question is how these initiatives are sustained and scaled.

Two papers address the potential of arts and culture approaches to knowledge co-production and the relationship between researchers, practitioners and organisations in generating alternative interventions worldwide. Duxbury and colleagues' paper argues that culture and arts research methodologies can be a tool for engaging residents of smaller places and propelling co-designed local initiatives, on the one hand, and to overcome the researcher-practitioner divide, avoiding the researchers-as-expert approach and valuing practitioners and residents as co-researchers. The authors emphasise the parallels between participatory research principles, SEs' participatory governance and reciprocity, and their relevance for situated knowledge co-production. In contrast, cultural activities may be a method for community engagement and knowledge co-production.

Aviv Kruglanski's paper proposes to make and know alternatively alternative forms of economy and organisation through art-based research, more sensitive to realities that often remain hidden in mainstream management theories. The Wild Yeast Economies methodology concepts are juxtaposition, encounter and drift, used in a research process "that uses alternative means to understand how alternatives might be created". The author presents two cases. One action research project, through community art projects, intends to

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learn and experiment with making economies from everyday circumstances. The other is a case study of a 30-year-old grassroots social housing organisation whose story can be described in juxtaposition, encounter and drift. The author suggests that arts-based methodologies can contribute to a view of social entrepreneurship that is open to change and uncertainty regarding how it is practised and tells its stories from a different perspective than the usual managerial control-based stories, thus exploring how they offer transformative possibilities.

Two contributions cover the issue of scaling as enabling the transformative possibilities of SEs' social innovations. Firstly, Stacey Edgar's paper asks, "What factors contribute to scaling positive impact in artisan ventures in Zambia, and how can these factors be leveraged to promote positive economic, social, and environmental outcomes for women and their communities?". It interprets scaling social impact not as growing organisation size or market share but as increasing the SE impact in lives, communities and the environment. In using a quantitative, non-experimental descriptive design based on survey research, the author found that over 85% of companies provided at least one social impact programme and at least one environmental sustainability effort in addition to income generation. This included a wide range of areas such as employment creation, training, education, health access, group saving schemes, pension funds, support to families' economic activities and sourcing and using environmentally friendly materials. Qualitative analysis shows that "artisan work has motivations beyond income generation that are tied to utilising human creativity through creating beautiful and useful goods, creating opportunities for empowerment and connection, and more generally creating a positive impact in the lives of others". However, there are challenges related to scaling social impact related to finance and accessing markets.

The SMART model, studied by Rocío Nogales Muriel, constitutes the "first socially innovative initiative emanating from the SSE in the field of culture that has scaled up across Europe". The author studies the replication path of this CASE in 12 European countries. She identifies "two trajectories that involved partnering with others: dissemination of knowledge and affiliation strategies". Its dissemination combined the existence of a proven concept with the strengths, local expertise and contacts of local teams. It required expertise about the model and how to replicate it, knowledge about the local context, good connections, the sharing of the social mission, a solid identification between CASEs and SSE and collaboration among their agents and collaboration between SSE and public administrations.

## Conclusion

This special issue stemmed from the interest of a group of researchers working on "the SE field" [1] and related topics, including culture and the arts. After an initial face-to-face academic seminar held in 2019, we set out to continue working on this unique crossing directly connected to issues of social and labour inclusion, social justice, democracy, economies, knowledge production and, progressively, the eco-social transition. The six contributions gathered constitute an example of the potential of the research concerned with culture and the arts to enlighten dynamics within the SE field but also the other way around: in a historical moment marked with the greatest challenge of all, the climate emergency, how can cultural and artistic knowledge and expertise, as well as agents and traditions, contribute to substantive economies following the general interest of communities and the planet? The papers in this special issue advance some themes for the research on arts and culture SE field, such as the relation between organisational democratic governance and cultural democracy, the changing and diverse relations between cultural public policies and the SE in enacting cultural rights between traditional or elitist public offer and the market offer, the expressive elements in social and economic inclusion and local development, the

role of new organisational models and of public policies in reducing precariousness of arts and culture workers and new forms of knowledge production and practice in the frontier between arts and humanities and the social sciences.

Further research avenues stemming from this special issue include the following lines. Firstly, while precariousness and intermittency continue to be the norm in the work arrangements in arts and culture, collective action and SE-based solutions are offering ways to counteract their negative impact on the lives of artists and creators. Among them, novel strategies to join forces with public administrations seem to be emerging, although their prevalence is yet to be tested amidst the intensified processes of political polarisation that we are witnessing.

Secondly, and related to the former issue, the “social” dimension of SEs and how it is really implemented at the organisational level remains a crucial element: it not only sets apart this type of organisation from other conventional (hierarchical and vertical) ones, but it also provides the entry door for business practices that are based on real voice and agency, vote and redistribution of resources. This sense of empowerment and agency could set the base for real transformation through culture and the arts, but more research is required.

Thirdly, arts and culture SEs reconfigure a conventional approach to arts and culture by developing plural value formats and implementing and insisting on processes and products as simultaneous inherent and taken effect in these organisations. Often, the arts and cultural profile transgresses the space, materialities and monolithic organizing principles enacting a much more fluid landscape in which people can move and engage in a variety of ways. Arts and culture then, pave the way for unique crossovers of arts, health, wellbeing, labour market integration and citizenship.

Fourthly, while it appears that CASEs increasingly recognise themselves as eco-social transition agents, the strategies and models they develop and implement are to be studied more in-depth. Moreover, the process through which this social innovation spreads and the role of early adopters is still to be understood.

Fifthly, arts and culture SE research is fertile terrain for multidisciplinary involving arts, humanities and the social sciences and for transdisciplinary involving scientific and practice-based knowledge, opening up the possibility of new research questions, new analytical frameworks and new relations between knowing and doing.

As guest editors, we hope this special issue contributes to locating SE in the vast area of culture and the arts post-crisis context and encourages our colleagues to undertake further work on these and additional topics. Redefining our action plan as human species is likely better if forces are joined to generate future scenarios worth living for all based on cultural and artistic knowledge and economic practices that allow for participation, social creativity, mutual support and reciprocity.

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## Note

1. We use the EMES' notion of "the SE field" to refer to the wide field of social enterprise, social economy, solidarity economy, social entrepreneurship and social innovation.

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