

Book Review: *Creative Infrastructures: Artists, Money, and Entrepreneurial Action*
By Linda Essig. 2022. Intellect, The University of Chicago Press.

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In the arts sector we have become accustomed to seeing the word entrepreneurship paired with the word artist and may no longer question this as part of the framework that enables artists of all disciplines to build and sustain a professional career. Linda Essig has chosen to examine this assumption in nine interrelated essays, and provides us with historical context, insights, economic theory, thought provoking reconsiderations, and ultimately a set of hopes for the future. Through scholarly research observation, and the voices of individual artists she offers us a window into the tensions, contradictions, and opportunities inherent in navigating the relationship between a contemporary artistic practice and money. These issues are examined within the economic and societal context in which artists create in the United States, and which also confound the artistic path.

The author has had a ringside seat to the evolution of entrepreneurial action and artists over the last few decades as the former director of Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Programs at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University and through its Pave Program in Arts Entrepreneurship. She left ASU in 2018 and became dean of the College of Arts & Letters at Cal State Los Angeles. Dr. Essig currently serves as Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs of Baruch College in New York. In addition to her work in academia, Dr. Essig also had a career as a theatre lighting designer so has experienced the sector as a generative artist.

In her first of the essays, Essig posits the ouroboros as a fitting metaphor for the relationship between art and business – the head of the serpent being art while money is its tail that it eats, feeding and perpetuating itself. She has elected to define the ouroboros of arts entrepreneurship as “artists connect art with audience to generate the revenue needed to make more art”, while also pointing out that it exists inside a larger and more complex ecosystem. It is these larger systems that receive some compelling examination. The essays delve into and continue to return to the neoliberal economic governance model of late capitalism as the force that shapes and limits artistic production (and the lives of artists). Neoliberalism, grounded in economic policies that affirm the primacy of the free market and a “bootstrap” concept of individual responsibility, tends to value economic systems over social relations.

Essig examines the implication of late capitalist neoliberalism for artists through several lenses, from the philosophical to the pragmatic. This includes forays into the concepts of innovation and novelty, various meanings and methods of social impact, definitions of “creative industries”, and an array of components of the marketplace including roles and shifting forms of gatekeeping and intermediaries, and the corrective potential of property ownership in a capitalist system. Interviews with individual artists provide glimpses of the ways that artists deploy and wrestle with entrepreneurial opportunity and limitations. From individual actions to

collective efforts, artists endeavor to bring agency to the challenges of securing financial resources. Beyond the purely financial realm, she brings attention to the social and community networks that sustain artists and considers the essential nature of these relationships. Regardless of the attitudes or beliefs that an artist expresses, we see the impact of the larger economy and culture on the careers and lives of artists.

The tension between material needs and the need to make art is constantly at play. Essig provides sources that support her view that artists' entrepreneurial actions and mindsets differ from the prevailing form of entrepreneurship focused on creation of wealth. This places many artists outside (or at the edges of) the consumption model of capitalism into a realm of "noncapital entrepreneurship" where value lies in the meeting and meaning of artist and audience rather than in economic gain. The co-created experience of art builds value and meaning that goes beyond consumption. While this may well be true in some (or many) cases, there are undoubtedly artists who might disagree. The stories of fifteen artists Essig interviewed and has threaded throughout the essays add nuance to this view but are a limited set of voices. She makes it plain, however, that the relationship between an artist, artistic production, distribution, consumption, and assets derived, financial or otherwise, remains complex and variable.

The essays, along with an epilogue, were written between 2017 and late 2020. The shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and social reckoning about systemic inequity spurred by the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement infuses the later essays and appear to have led the author to further question the limits and dangers of entrepreneurial action and late capitalism in supporting artistic production. She notes her own (and our field's) professional complicity in these systems in the arts. The final essays and epilogue hold seeds of hope that lessons learned from the pandemic and recent social awakenings may open new approaches beyond the free market economy, including some speculative examples of what post capitalist scenarios might mean for artists. As the pandemic recedes, and systemic inequities persist, we see that entrepreneurship nurtured by a neoliberal economy is likely to remain a necessary tool for artists, at least for the foreseeable future.

Understanding and addressing the needs and experiences of the individual artist have been a consistent aspect of my professional life for more than four decades and, as such, I found Essig's essays thought provoking. I appreciated her exploration of economic theories and research in the context of studies of artists and arts production. As an educator I would likely be selective about use of these essays since there is so much territory covered that it presents challenges in making sense of artists, money, markets, and issues of value and impact. That said, I heartily welcome Essig's thinking and her willingness to push back on our inclination to see entrepreneurial action as the answer to support production and distribution of art, and the careers of artists. Her questions and observations enrich the conversation as artists and arts organizations shape a post-pandemic future in a changed environment. These essays provide an important opportunity to apply a critical lens to our willingness to embrace entrepreneurial structures at the cost of nurturing alternatives.