

BOOK REVIEW

## *Creative Infrastructure: Artists, Money, and Entrepreneurial Action*

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**ABSTRACT:** Centering around three concepts: artists, money, and entrepreneurial action, *Creative Infrastructure: Artists, Money, and Entrepreneurial Action* by Linda Essig elaborates on essential concepts, competing theories, and diverse perspectives of arts entrepreneurship as both a scholarly field and creative praxis. By elucidating the conundrums and complexities between the principles of the capitalist economy and the needs of artists to be flourishing, Essig uses a critical lens to free the concept of entrepreneurship and arts from the domination of the hierarchical Western-centric social and economic systems, offering a holistic, sustainable, and equitable approach to perceiving and practicing arts entrepreneurship. **KEYWORDS:** arts entrepreneurship, neoliberalism, sustainability, equity. **DOI:** [doi.org/10.34053/artivate.11.1.173](https://doi.org/10.34053/artivate.11.1.173)

*Creative Infrastructure: Artists, Money, and Entrepreneurial Action* by Linda Essig is in many respects a remarkable book that, over 196 pages, thoughtfully discusses and demystifies the key issues that make frequent appearances in the burgeoning discourse of arts entrepreneurship as both a scholarly field and creative praxis. Centering around three concepts: artists, money, and entrepreneurial action, as stated in the subtitle of the book, *Creative Infrastructure* endeavors to address the question, “How can artists make work and thrive in this late-capitalist society?” (Essig, 2021, p.4). To answer the question, the book uses nine essays to elaborate on essential concepts, competing theories, and diverse perspectives concerning underlying rationales, behavioral principles, as well as social and cultural contexts of arts entrepreneurship. Each essay creates an intellectual space where the author engages in thought-provoking conversations with various sources, including classic and recent scholarly publications, artworks, news articles, and

government reports, among others. The author also intricately weaves her insightful observations and comments into various stories of artists and communities.

As a former theater professional who attained a doctorate in public administration and public policy, Essig integrates her dramaturgical lens and training in stakeholder theory to analyze both contextual and behavioral constructs of arts entrepreneurship phenomenon through the following questions: What is the economic, social, and cultural context for arts entrepreneurship? Who are stakeholders of arts entrepreneurship, and what role do they play in both the phenomenon and discourse of arts entrepreneurship? How are artists and other stakeholders situated and motivated to take action? How can the arts sector and the late-capitalist world be transformed for and through arts entrepreneurship? Most importantly, how do the power dynamics shape the narrative of arts entrepreneurship and the transforming arts sector? Guided by these questions, Essig's nine essays elucidate the conundrums and complexities "between the principles of hierarchy (of capital over labor) and of autonomy" (p.46), which dictate the relationship between artist individuals and arts institutions, creativity, and the economy of scale, as well as neoliberalism and the pursuit of a more equitable world.

The first essay of *Creative Infrastructure* offers an elaborate theoretical discussion on the ouroboros—the circular image of a snake with its tail in its mouth, common to Ancient Greece and Egypt. Essig first introduced and explicated the image as a metaphor in her well-regarded editorial, "The ouroboros of arts entrepreneurship," in *Artivate: A Journal of Entrepreneurship in the Arts* (2015). According to Essig, the ouroboros does not represent the drive to accumulate capital, which is the essential spirit of capitalism. Instead, the resources accumulated through entrepreneurship feed and nourish the head, emblemizing a cycle of artistic survival and flourishing. Much like the ouroboros, the book's nine essays demonstrate how the strategy of "buying up, not selling out" plays out in helping artists, organizations, and communities renew and sustain their arts practices and cultural production. Essig's sophisticated deliberation over competing perspectives regarding property ownership and capital points to the paradoxes and controversies that can emerge when applying neoliberal principles and capitalism tools to achieve sustainable, equitable, and community-centered arts practices.

Essays two and three present an overdue reckoning on how our understanding of art is situated in the reality of capitalist society. Taking up a claim from chapter one, Essig begins by demonstrating how she sees artists and their audiences connecting through arts entrepreneurship. Drawing upon John Dewey and artists in different art disciplines, the author asserts that such connection is an inherent attribute of art creation in that artists are intrinsically motivated to convey symbolic meaning and value by creating art experiences that interact with audiences and their social contexts. Based on the assumption that an economy is a system of social interactions where the circulation of goods and services is facilitated by currency (Sharpe, 2010), Essig contends that the underlying assumption for the arts economy in capitalist societies is that "experience is the currency of art" (p. 33). What is most inspiring about this essay is that it shifts our focus from the theories of social and economic impact of the arts to the nature of art as an infinite and open system with its own wholeness. This holistic view of art allows artists and arts organizations to break through the hierarchical, racist, unsustainable, and inequitable

capitalist system by reclaiming their autonomy of the production and circulation of their creative practices.

In essay five, Essig draws on the best practices of creative placemaking to discuss the unique contributions artists can make to changing the perpetuating inequities in the late-capitalism society. In this essay she shows how artists, through their creative processes and products can make a significant, positive impact on not only cultural communities but also their material and artistic sustainability.

While the first five essays elucidate the underlying assumptions and fundamental conceptual constellations of arts entrepreneurship, essays six, seven, and eight zoom in for a close-up of controversies and challenges facing the concept of “arts entrepreneurship” as actions and “arts entrepreneur” as an identity. One of the key contributions of this essay is the wake-up call for policymakers, institutions, and artists to stop only taking the very few artists who have achieved stardom as the models of successful working artists. Instead, they should encourage and support the broad middle-rank artists who do not benefit from the “winners take all” arts economy (Menger, 2014; Caves, 2000) needed to take entrepreneurial action. Essig argues, “It is these artists, the artists in the middle, who can serve the social good, create excellent work, and critique the economic system in a meaningful way” (p. 98). As an educator who teaches an arts entrepreneurship course in my institution, what I enjoyed reading most in the last few essays are the lived experiences of artists and the embodied pedagogies of Essig. They demonstrate that the most fundamental units of entrepreneurial action for individual artists may be rooted in their artistic ways of observing, thinking, and making.

Of course, as one of the most disruptive events in the past three years, COVID-19 demonstrates the vulnerability of the neoliberal market system and the resilience of artists at the same time. By emphasizing the inequities created by the neoliberal free market with more examples in essay eight, the author further discusses how artists leverage the systemic inequities by taking advantage of their abundant creative assets and how they circumvent the precarity by connecting their creative work with audiences or by harnessing the tools of neoliberalism, such as presales, resource-sharing, and union-based collective action.

I found this book an intellectual delight for scholars, teachers, and artists who want to develop a systemic and comprehensive understanding of arts entrepreneurship as an academic field; a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon; or simply a term full of controversies and possibilities. For scholars interested in contributing to the scholarly work of arts entrepreneurship, this book can be viewed as a compass of the most significant conversations and theoretical constructs. For educators, this book clarifies the theoretical rationales and practical pathways for curriculum and pedagogical development of arts entrepreneurship as a specialized field connected to but fundamentally different from the entrepreneurship training of business schools. Although “critiques of neoliberalism tend to rely on and reproduce the coloniality of knowledge” (Kangas & Salmenniemi, 2016, p. 210), the author’s contemplation of the relationship between art, artist, inequity, and capitalism offers an opportunity for “entrepreneurship” and “arts” shackled by hierarchical, Western-centric social and economic systems to reclaim their freedom. Essig’s insightful piece of work is a bold reimagination of non-

capitalist ways of living, creating, and influencing for artists.

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