

From Territory to Museum

A/r/tography, Symbolic Cartography, and Artistic Entrepreneurship in Depopulated Contexts

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ABSTRACT: This study explores artistic entrepreneurship as a strategy for cultural revitalization and social cohesion in rural contexts affected by depopulation. Drawing on a collaborative and participatory process of social mapping, the study analyzes how artistic practice can operate as a method that connects situated knowledge production, community engagement, and public cultural projection. The research is articulated around three analytical axes: (1) collaborative artistic practices as vehicles of memory, belonging, and recognition; (2) participatory mapping as a process of cultural placemaking and community leadership; and (3) the transformation of collaborative processes into public cultural outputs, with the exhibition understood as a form of artistic entrepreneurship with social projection. The methodology combines the analysis of discursive fragments and visual artefacts—intervened stones, photographs, and site-based installations—interpreted as symbolic mediations in the construction of place-based meaning. The results show that collective artistic creation not only strengthens identity and memory but also activates collaborative networks, fosters local leadership, and projects rural narratives to wider audiences. The findings highlight the capacity of artistic entrepreneurship to generate expanded cultural and social value beyond aesthetic outcomes, offering a replicable methodological model for sustainable cultural development and the strengthening of social capital in depopulated rural communities. **KEYWORDS:** entrepreneurship, cultural management, community development, creating creative places, creative economy. **DOI:** doi.org/10.34053/artivate.14.1.247

1. Introduction

Rural depopulation in Castile and León, a historically agrarian region in northern Spain, has become one of the most emblematic expressions of what is often referred to as “Empty Spain.” Over recent decades, this process has involved not only a sustained demographic decline but also the gradual erosion of livelihoods, support networks, and local narratives that once structured everyday community life (Bank of Spain, 2020; Camarero & Oliva, 2016; Del Barrio, 2013; Del Molino, 2016). As villages lose residents and services,

everyday infrastructures and social ties weaken, intensifying feelings of isolation and accelerating the loss of intangible cultural heritage (Sampedro & Camarero, 2016; Rodríguez-Soler et al., 2020; Alamá-Sabater et al., 2019, 2021).

In the participating villages, everyday life is shaped by demographic ageing, dispersed settlement patterns, and the progressive loss of services and meeting spaces. The project engaged both current residents and out-migrants/returnees whose memories and attachments to place often coexist with long periods of absence. The “Boulders of Memory” (*cantos rodados*) were used as a tangible, portable metaphor of personal and communal trajectories—objects that could be held, intervened, and then re-situated in meaningful locations as part of the mapping process.

In such contexts, cultural initiatives increasingly play a central role in sustaining social ties, reactivating collective memory, and projecting new narratives of place. When developed collaboratively and grounded in local realities, artistic practices can operate as mechanisms for mobilizing symbolic resources, fostering participation, and generating shared value beyond their aesthetic dimension. This article examines how these practices can function as a transferable form of artistic entrepreneurship in rural settings affected by depopulation.

The study is grounded in “Boulders of Memory: Voices of the Forgotten Castile”, a collaborative cultural project developed in depopulated villages in Palencia province. The project sought to make visible and activate the collective memories of residents and out-migrants through participatory artistic processes embedded in local contexts. Drawing on interviews, ethnographic observation, and documentary materials, the project facilitated the co-creation of a social and participatory cartography that mapped emotional, social, and territorial experiences linked to everyday life. This process generated a set of visual and material artefacts, such as intervened stones, photographs, and site-based installations, which functioned both as a living archive of shared memory and as a space for collective reflection, dialogue, and shared meaning-making (Macaya-Ruiz, 2017; Gómez Valenzuela & Holl, 2024).

Rather than focusing on the exhibition as an end in itself, the article approaches this process as a method through which artistic practice, research, and community engagement converge. The project culminated in a group exhibition at the Fundación Díaz Caneja, Museum of Contemporary Art,¹ which translated the participatory mapping into a publicly accessible cultural product. The exhibition is understood here as the outcome of an entrepreneurial process: one that transformed collaborative fieldwork into a cultural offering with social projection, activated community resources, and extended the reach of local narratives to wider audiences.

This article proceeds as follows. First, it situates artistic entrepreneurship and cultural placemaking in relation to rural depopulation and symbolic approaches to place and memory. Second, it describes the project’s design and methodological approach, including interviews, participatory workshops, and the co-creation of a social and participatory mapping process. Third, the findings are presented through three analytical axes: (1) the symbolic potential of collaborative artistic practices, (2) the capacity of participatory mapping to operate as a strategy of placemaking and creative community leadership, and (3) the role of the collective exhibition as an entrepreneurial outcome with social projection. Finally, the discussion reflects on the implications of this approach for

¹ <https://diaz-caneja.org/educacion/universidad-de-valladolid-cantos-rodados-de-la-memoria/>

generating cultural value, strengthening social cohesion, and supporting community-led cultural development in depopulated rural contexts.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on rural depopulation has consistently shown that demographic decline is inseparable from broader processes of social, economic, and symbolic erosion, particularly in historically agrarian regions affected by sustained out-migration and institutional neglect (Bank of Spain, 2020; Camarero & Oliva, 2016; Del Molino, 2016). Beyond population loss, these dynamics disrupt everyday infrastructures, weaken social ties, and accelerate the disappearance of intangible cultural heritage, reshaping how communities relate to their territory and to one another (Sampedro & Camarero, 2016; Rodríguez-Soler et al., 2020; Alamá-Sabater et al., 2019, 2021).

From a symbolic perspective, territory is not merely a physical location but a relational and meaning-laden construct produced through shared practices, narratives, and memories (Azarian, 2023; Dinç & Diker, 2023; Zhang & Sangiamvibool, 2024). Place condenses affective ties, historical tensions, and senses of identity and belonging that are continuously negotiated over time (Yeh, 2018; Vanderbeck & Worth, 2015). In contexts of depopulation, these symbolic dimensions become particularly salient, as communities renegotiate what is remembered, what is forgotten, and how possible futures are imagined. Symbolic interactionism provides a useful framework for understanding these processes by foregrounding how social actors construct meaning through interaction, language, and shared symbols (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) and by conceiving memory as an active, socially mediated process that contributes to identity formation and future projection (Alvaides & Scopinho, 2013; Amadini, 2015; Baudet et al., 2025; Svob et al., 2016).

Within this conceptual framework, social and participatory mapping has been increasingly recognized as a practice-based methodology capable not only of documenting territories but also of re-signifying them through the integration of narratives, memories, and collective practices (Araujo, 2020; Carrión & Albert, 2022; Sabatini et al., 2024). Rather than producing neutral representations of space, participatory mapping activates territories as symbolic and relational places, enabling communities to articulate situated forms of knowledge and to “activate imaginaries” linked to identity, belonging, and future possibilities (Duxbury et al., 2018). While some approaches emphasize technical or geospatial dimensions (Brown et al., 2018; Eilola et al., 2019), recent studies highlight that the transformative potential of participatory mapping is greatest when it becomes a cultural and creative act embedded in collaborative processes (Castaño-Aguirre et al., 2023; Calvo & Candón-Mena, 2023), favoring community ownership, intergenerational dialogue, and the emergence of local leaderships (Saravia-Ramos et al., 2021; Virgens et al., 2024).

In this article, artistic entrepreneurship is understood as a process through which artistic practice is intentionally organized to generate and circulate cultural value with social projection—mobilizing resources, partnerships, and forms of public access beyond the production of the artwork itself. Cultural placemaking refers to the collective activation of place-based meanings through cultural practices that strengthen belonging, relationships, and public narratives of place. In this case, the “entrepreneurial subjects” are not individual artists alone but a collaborative assemblage: participants,

facilitators/researchers, and the host cultural institution, whose coordinated actions enable the translation of situated memory work into a public cultural output.

These perspectives converge with research on artistic entrepreneurship and cultural placemaking, which understands artistic practice as an expansive process capable of mobilizing symbolic resources, fostering participation, and generating social value beyond economic outcomes (Araujo, 2020; Bayat et al., 2022; Son et al., 2022; Dash & Thilagam, 2023; Robazza et al., 2024; Chen, 2025; Medina et al., 2025; Menezes et al., 2025). Community-based art practices have been shown to revitalize rural environments, strengthen collective identity, and generate new narratives of place through collaborative creation (Bai et al., 2024; Eagle, 2024; Nogales-Muriel, 2023; Dash & Thilagam, 2023), while also fostering creative community leadership and long-term collaborative ties (Saravia-Ramos et al., 2021; Virgens et al., 2024; Menezes et al., 2025). When artistic practices are articulated through participatory methodologies and qualitative research approaches (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Ruiz, 2012) and grounded in principles of care, reciprocity, and ethical engagement (Tracy, 2021; De Kock et al., 2025), they offer robust frameworks for action in contexts characterized by complexity and limited resources (Dash & Thilagam, 2023).

3. Data and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative and inductive research design grounded in constructivist theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018; Charmaz, 2021) and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). This methodological framework is appropriate for examining how people in rural contexts affected by depopulation construct, negotiate, and re-signify their relationships with territory through narratives, symbolic practices, and shared social experiences. The approach integrates research, artistic practice, and educational action through a participatory research-creation strategy. In this case, that strategy draws on a/r/tography, an arts-based research framework that foregrounds the intersecting roles of artist/researcher/teacher (hence the slashes) to generate knowledge through collaboration and reflection in situated contexts.

The empirical work was developed in depopulated villages in the province of Palencia, selected for presenting indicators of severe demographic decline, with population losses exceeding thirty percent over the last two decades. A total of forty-nine villages were included, seeking geographical and socio-economic diversity in terms of population structure, productive sectors, available resources, and infrastructures (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2025). The selection process combined purposive sampling (Ruiz, 2012) and snowball techniques (Reidl, 2012), prioritizing heterogeneity in age, gender, occupation, migratory trajectories, degree of attachment to the territory, and participation in local initiatives.

The study involved eighty-nine participants from forty-eight villages, including fifty-one women and thirty-eight men. Seventeen participants were under thirty-five years of age, thirty-six were between thirty-six and sixty, and eighteen were over sixty. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over eighteen years of age, to have resided for at least a decade in municipalities affected by depopulation, to maintain permanent residence or direct family ties in these areas, and to participate voluntarily. Individuals without a direct relationship with the rural context studied or who did not provide informed consent were excluded.

Data collection combined multiple qualitative and arts-based techniques. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews ($n = 74$) were conducted using flexible thematic guides informed by the literature (Ruiz, 2012), addressing identity, belonging, perceived territorial changes, collective memory, and future projections (Gerson & Damaske, 2020). In parallel, five a/r/tography workshops were organized in cultural centers and public spaces, integrating artistic intervention with stones and photography. Participants were invited to write words, phrases, or symbols on stones representing their emotional relationship with the village and to place them in meaningful locations—both natural and urban—selected by themselves. These interventions were documented photographically as symbolic expressions of personal and collective trajectories.

Participatory social mapping articulated oral narratives, images, and intervened objects to construct a symbolic cartography that transcended purely geographical representation (Chambers, 2006; Vaughan, 2018). Documentary analysis complemented this material through the incorporation of demographic and historical data (Bowen, 2009), triangulated with the lived experiences and perceptions of participants. All activities were mediated through dialogic and intergenerational dynamics and documented through field notes, audio recordings, and graphic materials (Marín-Viadel & Roldán, 2019).

The analytical process followed the principles of constructivist-grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2018), using open, axial, and selective coding supported by Atlas.ti 23 software (Gil Ruiz & García Arnao, 2024; Vallés, 1999). Categories emerged inductively from the data and were subsequently refined through the integrated examination of interview fragments, visual artefacts, and spatial interventions. Intervened stones, photographs, and sites were interpreted as symbolic mediations in the construction of place-based meaning (López-Vázquez, Ojeda-Rosero & Hindrichs, 2024; Ojeda-Rosero & López-Vázquez, 2022; Zhang & Sangiamvibool, 2024).

Through this analytical process, three broad analytical axes were identified: the symbolic potential of collaborative artistic practices, the capacity of participatory social mapping to operate as a strategy of placemaking and social cohesion, and the role of public cultural outputs as entrepreneurial outcomes with social projection. These axes structured the presentation of results and enabled an integrated reading between the analytical process and the interpretative narrative. The triangulation of sources, techniques, and perspectives, together with an external review by an independent qualitative researcher, contributed to ensuring internal coherence and interpretative validity.

The research complied with international ethical standards, including the Declaration of Helsinki (2008), and followed the recommendations of the American Educational Research Association and the British Educational Research Association (AERA, 2019; BERA, 2019). All participants were informed about the aims and scope of the study and provided written informed consent, including the right to withdraw at any time. The project received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Valladolid (PI 23-3402 NO HCUV) in December 2023.

4. Results

The results presented below draw on participants' testimonies, descriptions of collaborative processes, and materials generated throughout the fieldwork to examine how artistic practice and cultural entrepreneurship intersect in depopulated rural contexts. Rather than responding to predefined objectives, the findings are organized around three analytical axes that emerged inductively from the analysis: the symbolic potential of collaborative artistic practices, the capacity of social and participatory mapping to operate as a process of placemaking and community leadership, and the role of public cultural outputs as entrepreneurial outcomes with social projection (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Cartography of a woman. Visual synthesis of a participatory artistic piece illustrating the symbolic and social projection of the mapping process. *Courtesy of the authors.*

Collaborative Artistic Practices as Vehicles of Memory, Belonging, and Recognition

The first set of findings shows how collaborative artistic practices operated as vehicles through which participants articulated memory, belonging, and recognition, enabling shared artworks to situate individual experiences within a collective narrative.

In the workshops, interventions on stones and photographs associated with significant places were used as catalysts for memories and personal narratives. These actions allowed participants to symbolically materialize their links with the village and its history, demonstrating that the act of creating in community encourages the emergence of intimate and collective narratives that transcend the material dimension of the work (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Boulders, each with texts representing fragments of the interviews conducted, accompanied by photographs of interviewees holding a boulder in their hand, a metaphor for the personal and communal journey. *Courtesy of the authors.*

Several participants described how the artistic process led them to reflect on their identity and to recognize the value of their experiences within a shared memory. One participant stated: “I once lived in a time when the village meant everything to us. . . . Even when those who left return, it can never be quite the same again” (W8-70-years). This type of testimony reflects the affective connection with the territory and the perception of irreversible change in community life.

Others noted that the resulting work helped them to reaffirm their sense of belonging, even when their daily lives no longer take place in the village: “The village is more than a location; it is woven into who I am. Although I no longer reside there, my memories and sense of self remain deeply connected to its landscape” (M47-35-years).

The integration of individual narratives into a collective artistic production was valued as a public acknowledgement of their personal history. One participant expressed: “Seeing my own story—and those of others like me—mirrored in the images and

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narratives gave me the sense that our fight for recognition truly has a place” (M29-W-64-years).

Significant interactions between generations were also observed during the development of the activities. An older participant noted: “What impacted me most was the attentiveness of the young people as they listened. It felt as though I wasn’t just speaking but that there was an acknowledgment of the experiences lived in the village . . .” (M53-M-62-years). These types of moments, recorded in different workshops, indicate that artistic practices facilitated spaces of encounter and mutual listening.

Cases were also identified in which participation in the project led to a personal reevaluation and a renewed perception of one’s own identity. One middle-aged woman commented:

Taking part in the mapping process has allowed me to appreciate my identity more deeply, to reconnect with my roots and feel gratitude for all that I have lived. I belong to a homeland that no longer exists, yet it continues to live within me for as long as I draw breath. (M18-39-years)

Finally, the inclusion of the testimonies in the collective work was experienced as an act of recognition and hope. One participant stated: “Realizing that my voice and my story have a place in a project like this fills me with hope that change is possible” (M3-42-years).

Thus, the results associated with this axis show that collaborative artistic practices enabled the expression of emotional ties with the territory, facilitated the emergence of intergenerational narratives, and generated a sense of collective recognition through shared artistic production. These findings will be interpreted in the discussion in relation to their potential for the symbolic construction of territory and cultural revitalization in depopulated rural contexts. While these practices foregrounded individual and collective meanings, their effects extended beyond personal expression to reshape shared relationships with space and community.

Participatory Mapping as a Process of Cultural Placemaking and Community Leadership

Building on these symbolic practices, the second set of findings examines how social and participatory mapping functioned as a process of cultural placemaking and the emergence of creative community leadership. This approach integrated artistic interventions, oral narratives, and photographic records, collectively constructed from the spaces and memories that each participant identified as relevant.

During the workshops, the choice of locations for the intervened stones led to collective walks through streets, squares, and natural sites, encouraging spontaneous conversations and the exchange of experiences about the use and meaning of these places. Sometimes, different participants coincided in the selection of the same spot, which led to intergenerational dialogues and the identification of shared memories. Several participants described how the mapping process deepened their appreciation of personal identity, reinforced connections with their roots, and generated feelings of gratitude linked to a sense of belonging to places that no longer exist as lived environments but which persist as symbolic references.

The open nature of the proposal allowed each intervention to respond to the motivations and experiences of its author, giving rise to a diverse and polyphonic symbolic

map. This visual resource not only functioned as a living archive but also as a catalyst for encounters and new links between neighbors who in some cases did not know each other previously. In the words of one migrant participant:

What impacted me most was seeing how attentively the young people listened. It felt as though I wasn't speaking alone but that our experiences in the village were being acknowledged—and that gave me the sense that our history still holds meaning. (M53-62-years)

The process also favored the emergence of creative leadership, especially among people with no previous experience in artistic activities, who took on roles of organization, mediation, or motivation of the group. These informal leaderships contributed to the cohesion and continuity of relationships beyond the face-to-face sessions. One university student participant put it this way:

After hearing the migrants' stories and seeing them represented in the mapping, I feel a personal responsibility to contribute to reversing depopulation—not only from my role as a researcher but also as an engaged citizen. (W-23-years)

The participatory and public dimensions of the project reinforced the sense of belonging and legitimized the voices collected, culminating in the exhibition installation in the Fundación Díaz Caneja (Palencia). For many, seeing their testimony and their artistic intervention in a museum context constituted an act of recognition and collective projection:

Knowing that my voice and my story are part of a project like this and realizing that young people are aware of what is happening fills me with hope that change is possible. (W-42-years)

In sum, social and participatory mapping activated intergenerational interactions and new neighborhood ties, empowered forms of creative and participatory leadership, provided a tangible collective resource open to future community appropriation, and strengthened the visibility and legitimacy of rural narratives at risk of disappearing.

These findings show that, in contexts of depopulation, symbolic and collaborative mapping not only records territorial memory but also contributes to reconfiguring it as a shared cultural asset capable of fostering cohesion, identity pride, and community agency. These processes of placemaking and leadership found their most visible articulation when the collective work moved beyond the local context into a public cultural space.

From Process to Public Cultural Output: Exhibition as Artistic Entrepreneurship

The third set of findings addresses how the collaborative process culminated in a public cultural output understood not as an endpoint but as an entrepreneurial outcome with social projection. The transfer of the cartography and artistic interventions to a museum space transformed the individual narratives into a shared symbolic heritage accessible to both the participating community and the general public (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Poster of the exhibition and detail of the installation at the Fundación Díaz Caneja (Palencia).
Courtesy of the authors.

The exhibition brought together photographs, intervened stones, QR codes linked to audiovisual interviews, and selected texts, forming an immersive installation that allowed visitors to interact with the micro-narratives collected during the fieldwork. This format not only amplified the scope of the testimonies but also generated an explicit recognition of the participants, who were represented as authors and repositories of memory and not only as objects of study.

For many older people, seeing their history integrated into a prestigious cultural space was an unprecedented act of recognition, given that “I used to believe my memories no longer held any value, but sharing them and then seeing them represented in the exhibition made me realize I still have something meaningful to offer” (W-78-years).

The experience also reinforced the intergenerational connection by providing a meeting point where young and old shared pride in the work they had done:

Seeing my story, along with those of others like me, reflected in the images and narratives made me feel that our fight for recognition has found its place—not just within my community but also in the awareness of the younger generation. (W-64-years)

The emotional and symbolic impact transcended the expository moment, generating subsequent actions of creative appropriation. One participant recounted:

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then eighty-nine living images—each with its own voice and agency—create a profound impact, not only on me but also on my grandchildren, on the village, on life itself. I was so moved by this thought that I wrote my own account of the experience and shared it with the mayor. (W-52-years)

The exhibition functioned as a collective cultural product with high symbolic value and social projection, reinforcing participants' sense of belonging through institutional recognition, broadening the reach of local narratives by engaging external audiences, and fostering community leadership through active involvement in mediation and associated activities.

The exhibition also generated an external projection of the territory, associating it with a story of resilience and creativity. This *cultural place branding* effect was manifested in the perception of pride and in the willingness to replicate similar experiences in other towns:

Realizing that my voice and my story are part of a project like this and knowing that young people are aware of what is happening fills me with hope that change is possible. (W-42-years)

In short, the group exhibition acted as an integrating closure to the process, bringing the artistic and narrative productions into the institutional sphere and favoring their recognition as a shared symbolic heritage. The interaction between the works, the public, and the participating community made it possible to strengthen bonds of identity, broaden the scope of the testimonies, and project a positive image of the territory without losing sight of the collaborative and participatory nature that gave rise to the initiative.

5. Discussion

The results show that social and participatory mapping, articulated through collaborative artistic practice and oriented towards artistic entrepreneurship, has operated simultaneously as a research tool, a device for cultural placemaking, and a catalyst for creative community leadership. These findings are in line with research that points out that social mapping not only documents territories but also re-signifies them by integrating narratives, memories, and collective artistic practices (Bonomo et al., 2013; Araujo, 2020; Carrión & Albert, 2022; Sabatini et al., 2024). In this sense, the project does not limit itself to a static representation of space but activates it as a symbolic and relational place consistent with Duxbury et al. (2018) on the potential of cultural mapping to “activate imaginaries” and generate new forms of situated knowledge.

The diversity of expressions collected in the process—from intervened stones to oral narratives and collective maps—confirms that the methodological openness favors community ownership and the emergence of local leadership. This coincides with Saravia-Ramos et al. (2021) and Virgens et al. (2024), who highlight that the flexibility and co-creative nature of these methodologies enhance equity in community-university interaction and strengthen long-term collaborative links.

Intergenerational work and dialogue between people with different degrees of involvement in village life reinforce the idea that social mapping can function as a “third space” (Escaño & Mañero, 2025) where knowledge, affects, and memories converge and where horizontal relationships that transcend formal hierarchies are articulated. In this line, the *placemaking* experiences described in various studies (Bai et al., 2024; Eagle, 2024; Wu, 2025) support the capacity of community art to revitalize impoverished rural landscapes, strengthen collective identity, and generate new development opportunities.

The impact of the group exhibition in Fundación Díaz Caneja (Palencia) confirms what Zhuang et al. (2022) and Song et al. (2024) have identified in rural contexts: when art is

moved into spaces of institutional legitimacy, its symbolic value, reach, and potential to transform external and internal perceptions of the territory is increased. The exhibition acted as a product of artistic entrepreneurship (Nogales-Muriel, 2023; Liang & Yu, 2025), generating social return by legitimizing the voice of the participants and projecting an image of resilience and creativity associated with the community.

Furthermore, the public surfacing of the stories along with the observed intergenerational recognition, relates to what Murray et al. (2024) and Machado-Oliveira (2024) call socially engaged art: a field where aesthetics and community action intertwine to foster agency and empowerment. Hence, in this case, the installation was not a closure of the process but a platform for future initiatives in line with Roberti et al. (2025) on the role of art in mobilizing agents of change. Based on the *verbatim* transcription of the participants, it is possible to affirm that the results of this axis show that the exhibition in Fundación Díaz Caneja (Palencia) connected two moments: one of closure, concretizing in the exhibition a process that has been detailed, and, linked to this, another one of opening that entailed the return to society of the creative process, activating new narratives, reinforcing community cultural leadership, and bequeathing a symbolic resource to continue generating cohesion, memory, and cultural projection for the participating peoples.

From an educational perspective, the experience coincides with the contributions of Bustamante-Toro & López-Castaño (2024), Chang & Kuo (2021), and Ramon & Alonso-Sanz (2022), who highlight the pedagogical potential of participatory mapping to integrate learning, identity, and territorial sustainability. The methodology implemented here also responds to Tracy's (2021) qualitative quality criteria by placing the ethics of care, reciprocity (De Kock et al., 2025), and active participation at the center of the research process.

In comparative terms, while projects such as those described by Brown et al. (2018) or Eilola et al. (2019) emphasize the technical-geospatial dimension of participatory mapping, this study confirms, in line with the work of Castaño-Aguirre et al. (2023) and Calvo & Candón-Mena (2023), that its greatest power emerges when it becomes a cultural and creative act capable of reconstructing links, activating memories, and generating new shared narratives.

Thus, it is possible to affirm that, from a theoretical point of view, this study broadens the understanding of *artistic entrepreneurship* by showing how social and participatory mapping, when integrated into a participatory research-creation process, not only acts as a means to document and preserve territorial memory but also as a mechanism for generating cultural and social value that exceeds the available material resources (Araujo, 2020; Bai et al., 2024; Bayat et al., 2022; Chen, 2025; Dash & Thilagam, 2023; Medina et al., 2025; Menezes et al., 2025; Robazza et al., 2024; Son et al., 2022). Theoretically, it connects the framework of cultural *placemaking* with community creative leadership (Menezes et al., 2025), demonstrating that collaborative artistic creation can operate as a territorial revitalization strategy in contexts of depopulation (Eagle, 2024; Nogales-Muriel, 2023; Dash and Thilagam, 2023). This work situates artistic entrepreneurship as an expansive process that combines symbolic production, social cohesion, and identity projection, reinforcing the idea that the value created is greater than the sum of its parts (Duxbury et al., 2018).

Beyond its contextual specificity, the process documented in this study allows the identification of a transferable methodological sequence for artistic entrepreneurship in depopulated rural contexts. Rather than a linear intervention, this sequence operates as

an iterative framework that articulates artistic practice, community engagement, and cultural projection. Based on the analysis of the project, this entrepreneurial method can be synthesized into a set of interconnected phases: (1) situated listening and collection of narratives; (2) collaborative artistic translation of experiences into symbolic artefacts; (3) collective mapping and activation of place-based relationships; (4) public articulation of the process through a cultural output; and (5) social return understood as the reinforcement of identity, leadership, and future-oriented imaginaries. Figure 4 summarizes this methodological sequence, offering a visual tool to support its potential replication in other rural contexts.

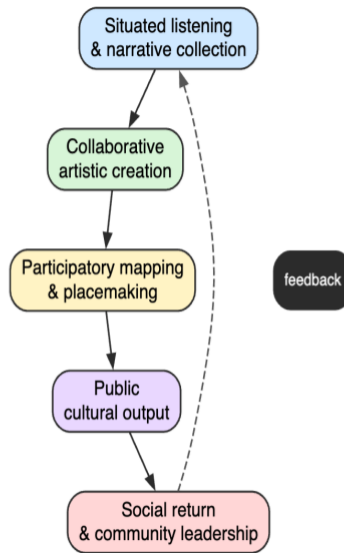


Figure 4. Artistic entrepreneurship process derived from participatory A/r/tography. *Courtesy of the authors.*²

Methodologically, the project offers a replicable model of articulation among qualitative research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Ruiz, 2012), participatory methodologies, and collective artistic production adapted to rural communities with limited resources (Dash & Thilagam, 2023). The integration of intergenerational workshops, artistic interventions in the territory, and a museum exhibition as an act of social devolution provides a methodological innovation that responds to the principles of quality, reciprocity, and equity in community research (Tracy, 2021, De Kock et al., 2025). This proposal is in line with the demonstration that the application of mental habits and ontologies inherent to artistic practice—creativity, adaptability, co-authorship—can enrich entrepreneurial processes (Machado-Oliveira, 2024), simultaneously strengthening social impact and cultural sustainability (Dash and Thilagam, 2023; Saravia-Ramos et al., 2021).

² The dashed arrow indicates the iterative feedback loop through which social return reactivates new cycles of situated listening and collective creation.

Finally, on a practical level, the results offer artists, cultural managers, policy makers, and communities a set of strategies to activate symbolic and affective resources as levers for cultural development and social cohesion (Crawshaw & Gkartzios, 2017, Song et al., 2024; Dash and Thilagam, 2023). Experience shows that the combination of participatory mapping, community art, and spaces of institutional legitimation—such as museums or cultural centers—can become an engine of artistic entrepreneurship with lasting effects: the generation of collaborative networks, local leadership, and improvement of the external projection of the territory (Bai et al., 2024; Eagle, 2024; Wu, 2025; Zhuang et al., 2022; Dash and Thilagam, 2023). In this way, the work provides results directly applicable to cultural management, arts education, and rural development policies, disseminating perspectives that strengthen the intersection between artistic expression and entrepreneurial action (Liang & Yu, 2025).

6. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that social and participatory mapping combined with collaborative artistic practices and artistic entrepreneurship strategies can become an engine of cultural revitalization and social cohesion in rural contexts affected by depopulation. The experience developed shows that the collective creation of territorial narratives and their projection in spaces of institutional legitimacy not only preserves memory and strengthens identity but also expands the social and cultural capital of the community. The project also confirms that art, when framed as an entrepreneurial process, can generate value that transcends the aesthetic to have an impact on social, educational, and symbolic dimensions.

The case study provides evidence that cultural *placemaking* is not an end in itself but a continuous process where creative community leadership emerges from sustained collaborative dynamics and the appropriation of methodologies that combine research, creation, and social action. In this sense, the study adds to the literature that highlights the capacity of socially engaged art to promote agency, resilience, and identity projection in small communities.

Finally, the findings reinforce the need to conceive artistic entrepreneurship not only as an economic or management activity but as a strategic approach capable of mobilizing symbolic resources, generating intersectoral alliances, and opening up new opportunities for sustainable development through art and culture.

7. Limitations of the Study

Firstly, this is a single case study, which limits the generalizability of the results to other rural contexts with different social structures, cultural capital, or economic dynamics. Secondly, although diverse testimonies and artistic productions were collected, no quantitative metrics were implemented to assess economic impact or social reach in an objective and longitudinal way. Thirdly, the active role of the researchers as facilitators and co-creators, while consistent with the methodology, may have influenced group dynamics and participants' perceptions, introducing an unavoidable relational bias.

Also, the temporality of the project—limited to an annual cycle—prevents a full assessment of the long-term sustainability of the networks, leaderships, and creative practices that emerged. Finally, the absence of a systematic comparison with similar

communities that have not developed participatory mapping initiatives limits the ability to exclusively attribute the observed changes to the intervention carried out.

8. Future Lines of Research

Based on these limitations, a number of opportunities for future research open up. A priority line of research would be the development of comparative studies between different rural communities adopting similar methodologies in order to identify patterns, variations, and contextual factors that enhance or hinder the success of the community arts enterprise.

It is also relevant to incorporate mixed methods that combine qualitative and quantitative analysis, including indicators of economic impact, collaborative networks, and media projection, in order to obtain a more holistic view of the value generated. Another relevant direction could focus on exploring the sustainability of the initiatives, assessing their capacity to consolidate local leadership, attract new audiences, and generate cultural micro-economies.

Finally, it is proposed to investigate the possibilities of broadening the scope of social and participatory mapping through immersive digital technologies, collaborative online platforms, or artificial intelligence applied to the documentation and dissemination of cultural and intangible heritage, which could strengthen its impact and projection in cultural networks and international creative markets.

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