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reflexive analysis of the
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Keeping tensions up

A reflexive analysis of the (strategy)-making-of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*

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Abstract

Adopting a process ontology and a strategy-as-practice lens, this paper explores the (often tacit) dimension of strategy work in cultural entrepreneurship. Drawing on a peculiar combination of auto-ethnography and more traditional observation and interview methods, the paper reconstructs the birth and becoming of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*, a major art curatorial project. From an analysis of the curator/entrepreneur actions, interactions and beliefs, two main elements emerge that explain the peculiarities of strategizing in this setting: the centrality of “tensions” and “cultural attitude”. Tensions of several kinds are constitutive to the project, whose birth and becoming need the ability to create and keep tensions up continuously, not to solve or to manage them. However, these are sustained by an underlying, organic and passionate view of the whole project in its becoming, something that we call “cultural attitude”. These findings allow for a discussion of some features of cultural entrepreneurship and also of research-practice reflexivity and learning.

Introduction

This paper is part of a larger research program on cultural entrepreneurship (Di Maggio, 1982; Scott, 2012; Klammer, 2012; Calcagno, 2014) and addresses the strategizing of a cultural initiative. It is moved by the willingness to understand how cultural organizations – typically complex, fragile, professional ones, characterized by a chronic lack of resources – can exist, work, and become (Mariani & Zan, 2011; Lusiani & Zan, 2015). Uncovering this might have something to say to organizations in general and to organization and management studies themselves.

Building on a process ontology (Chia, 1997; Rescher, 2000; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and a strategy as practice perspective (Golsorkhi et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006) this paper will analyse the birth and becoming of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*, a major art curatorial project conducted by a cultural entrepreneur (Di Maggio, 1982; Scott, 2012; Klammer, 2012) on the Dolomites, a range of the Italian Alps. The study is part of an ongoing research and is explorative in nature, therefore no a priori specific question will drive our analysis, but the “making-of” the project, i.e. the myriad of micro actions through which the curator/entrepreneur shapes his activity (his strategizing), as well as the webs of his beliefs and habits of action, will be under our analytical lens.

Most crucially, the study experiments a particular methodology to foster both an engaged scholarship and a reflexive practice, in the intention to narrow the research-practice hiatus down: the inclusion of the practitioner (the curator/entrepreneur) as a fully self-reflexive co-researcher. We therefore blend a sort of auto-ethnography (Vesa and Vaara, 2014; Karra & Philips, 2008) by one of the authors with more conventional observations, interviews, and archival analysis by the other

author as complementary data sources. This has a double consequence: on the one hand, it mitigates the effects on the analysis of an external researcher's bias in information processing (researcher's subjective bias); on the other hand, it mitigates the effects on the analysis of a too native view (practitioner's subjective bias) – or rather, it leverages on both.

Emerging case-based findings revolve around what DC does and what it has achieved (a first descriptive reconstruction which is already interesting in itself) and, more central to our focus, how it works (our interpretative analysis). On this latter point, the research is in progress, but a first, close (reflexive) analysis of strategizing at *Dolomiti Contemporanee* is pointing at the centrality of two elements: “tensions” and “cultural attitude”. Tensions of several kinds are constitutive to the project, whose birth and becoming need the ability to create and keep tensions up continuously, not to solve or to manage them, as we will see. Searching, creating and keeping tensions up seems to be a recurrent pattern in the making-of DC, to the point that they seem to be the key dynamics moving the entrepreneurial project. However, there seems to be another ingredient fuelling these tensions which wouldn't necessarily move otherwise: an underlying, organic and passionate view of the whole project in its becoming, something that we call “cultural attitude”.

These findings allow for a discussion of research-practice reflexivity and learning in a twofold way. First, having research reflecting on itself through this tight confrontation with the practice (e.g., DC experience confirms a process ontology, yet missing in most of mainstream management discourse, but also the complexity and non linearity of strategizing and the limits of management knowledge preconceived frameworks). Second, having practice reflecting on itself through a tight confrontation with research, trying to answer to one of the calls of this sub-theme, as it experiments a way to have practitioners engaged in questioning their own practices, reflecting on their role as professionals and making sense of the organizational becoming they are part of.

The paper is structured as follows: because it originates from the exploration of a phenomenon and the willingness to experiment an unconventional research method, rather than from a theoretical problem to be solved, there will be no comprehensive literature review and conceptual problem or gap to be solved or spanned. Rather, we will make a background statement on the specific theoretical stance we adopt, moving then to a description of the particular method experimented. The findings will be organized in two sections: one on the case description, explaining DC and what it has achieved so far (what it does and whether it works), and one on the mechanisms that keep it up – the tensions and the so called cultural attitude – (how it works). Finally, a discussion on the research-practice reflexivity and some concluding remarks will be made.

Theoretical stance

This paper rests on a process ontology, according to which the world is made of processes and lived experiences that continually unfold, rather than substantial entities. As such, change, action and time are at the core of process philosophies (Rescher, 2000) and are thought to be constitutive of reality. In this frame, “things” as organizations and structures are temporary instantiation of an ongoing becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). As Chia (1997) and Langley (2009) stress, adopting such a becoming ontology entails to prefer activity and movement over substance and entities, to see reality as characterized by change instead of stability and to look at processes that make phenomena happen.

Because process thinking directs us toward action as it is happening, opting for a practice perspective appears as appropriate. Without the existence of any unifying “practice theory” (Rasche & Chia, 2009), we position ourselves close to the scholars who conceive practices as the daily activities and doings of actors in context. In management studies this focus emerged in response to a perceived need to humanize strategy research (Whittington et al., 2002), re-focusing research on what people do, i.e. on the myriad of micro actions through which human actors shape activity (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Applying this stance as an analytical lens allows capturing the dynamics of strategizing as they manifest themselves in context while reflecting on how they both shape and are shaped by higher level practices.

Methods

This study is part of a larger research program on cultural entrepreneurship conducted by the Department of Management of the University of Venice. It was made possible by an unconventional research-practice collaboration promoted by the Department of Management, on the basis of which a set of cultural entrepreneurs (curators, organizers of festivals, filmmakers) were granted a bursary to be engaged as fully self-reflexive co-researchers for one year, in order to develop genuine practice-based reflections on their own work or on topics related to cultural entrepreneurship. This study is based on one of these research-practice collaborations, namely with the founder and curator of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*. The paper inductively explores how an individual free from any formal managerial knowledge strategizes, starting up and running a major cultural project.

Data collection is in progress from the following main sources:

- Auto-ethnography in the form of extensive periodic reflexive accounts (N: 4) and monthly diary (N: 12 entries) produced by the practitioner-researcher between March 2014 and February 2015.

- Continuous informal conversations supplemented by semi-structured interviews (N: 5) conducted by the academic researcher with the practitioner-researcher and other collaborators and other actors involved in the project (in progress).
- Non-participant observations (by academic researcher) during summer events 2014 and spring events 2015 (more fieldwork is prospected for summer events 2015).
- Documents (reports, budgets, press articles, online articles, visual documents, etc.), jointly collected and analysed by both co-researchers.

A preliminary analysis has been conducted as follows: after a deep immersion in this wide and composite mass of textual and visual data to familiarize with the case and its lingo, the academic researcher engaged in a coding process to identify relevant themes, according to an open, inductive design. In this first analytical round the academic researcher was soon struck by the issue of “tensions” and the issue of “cultural attitude”, as these were more or less explicitly emerging from what was told and seen. The analysis of data was taken back to the practitioner-researcher for his comments, and his reflections on the data were incorporated in this first version of the study. Our preliminary findings will be organized in a first section describing the action of *Dolomiti Contemporanee* and its main achievements, and a second interpretive section singling out what seems to constitute the two main ingredients of the strategy making-of *Dolomiti Contemporanee* – namely, tensions and cultural attitude.

Case description: *Dolomiti Contemporanee* and its main achievements

“*Dolomiti Contemporanee – in-environment visual arts lab*” (DC hereinafter) is a major curatorial project that was founded in 2011 by Gianluca D’Inca Levis (participant and co-researcher in this study), a contemporary art curator, with a background in architecture. By the time of the launch of DC, the Dolomites, a range of the North-Eastern Italian Alps, had just become a UNESCO World Heritage site (2009). These mountains had been hosting hubs where people had lived and worked for centuries, constituting an immense motor of local identity and of social and economic development. Crises of several kinds have turned these motors down in the past decades. The mountains economy has changed in favour of tourism exploitation and these sites linger abandoned.

The idea of DC is therefore to identify relevant abandoned sites on the Dolomites, such as large factories, other complexes of industrial archaeology, or residential settlements that are no longer active, and to reactivate their potential by rethinking their relationship with the surrounding nature and with the humankind (what DC calls “contemporary landscapes”) in a non-trivial and non-stereotyped way, through the curatorship of temporary visual arts events.

The first initiative organized by DC was the one of Sass Muss in 2011, a 20,000 sq. m. site that had been hosting a hub of chemical production and that was closed down in the 1950s. The industrial site belonged to a public agency and had previously been completely restored through European funds, yet left empty and unused. DC transformed the former industrial complex of Sass Muss for three months (august-october 2011) into a contemporary art exhibition centre, creating a sort of “creative citadel” that included an international residency for artists (dormitories, a café, a bookshop, ateliers for artists and for educational activities); the former warehouses became exhibition rooms; the surrounding mountain environment became the training ground for the artists and the invited curators who worked on the identity of the site and its surroundings, by inhabiting them.

The operation budget was 400,000 € and expenditures were covered through public funding (80,000 €) and through material support by 100 local partners (providing maintenance services, tools and materials, food, transportation, communication services, etc.), as well as a large base of volunteers, found through a door to door communication campaign by DC staff prior to the launch of the project. In those three months of activity 70 artists from ten different Countries lived and worked at Sass Muss, over 100,000 visitors came, ten exhibitions and ten public events of other kind were held, and over 200 articles on the initiative appeared in the press and online. The local community came back to the factory, finally re-opened, to visit it. Following the three months event, many of the partners who had contributed to the project decided to transfer their own commercial activities within the site, renting the spaces. The site came back to life and was returned to the local territory, re-activating it.

In the next three years (2012-2014) the experience was replicated by DC in other sites (“Blocco di Taibon” in 2012, “Spazio Casso” in the Vajont area in 2013, the “Ex Villaggio Eni” in Borca di Cadore in 2014) with similar enduring outcomes.

Opening up the working method of *Dolomiti Contemporanee*: of tensions and cultural attitude

While the data collection and analysis are in progress, some preliminary results seem already to emerge from a first, reflexive analysis of the accounts, observations and documents gathered so far.

Conventional regeneration projects of the Dolomites’ former industrial or residential sites (such as public agencies financing large restorations of these sites) proved to be dramatically insufficient in terms of bringing those sites back to life. In some cases large restorations of old factories took place prior to a thorough reflection on the future destination of the space, hence producing “*containers without a content*” as claimed in a meeting (Obs. 14.10.27) and leading

those initiatives to a failure. Instead, it is a matter of fact that *Dolomiti Contemporanee* managed to reactivate the sites where it operated. What was missing? Or, put differently, what made the birth and the becoming of a project as DC possible and successful, instead?

In the first place, there needs to be a triggering element that Gianluca calls a “*constructive bother*”:

The fact that large sites that have a very high potential lie inert, with nobody able or willing to engage in some rethinking of a new possible usage, is a stupid thing, an irresponsible, bothering thing. And an impoverishment of reality. (GDA 15.01.07)

Second, a “method” must ensue from this bother; and it is by the word “method” that Gianluca makes sense of DC: “*Dolomiti Contemporanee is a working method*”, he keeps stating in many documents and speeches. And it is in the description and in the observation of Gianluca’s working method that the following findings emerged. This method seems to be composed of (a) the capacity to search for, create and keep tensions up, as an ingredient to make a project see birth, grow and keep becoming; (b) the embeddedness of these tensions in a strong “cultural attitude”, as the other essential ingredient to make things happen. In what follows each one of these two main elements will be analysed.

Uncovering the tensions element

Everything seems to start from a thought-action tension in this case. In DC method thought *is* action already. By juxtaposing the DC initiative to the one of typical art curators, Gianluca stresses how in DC the art event (the tangible undertaken action) “*is part of the method*” (Interview 15.02.19), as it coincides with the reflection generated on the whole territory of action:

I am certainly an a-typical curator, one who spends a conspicuous part of his attention in producing structural reflections about the regeneration of complex high potential goods. Often, instead, a typical curator starts his job in a subsequent phase, he works in a space that is already provided and looks at it from within only. Instead, I create the working space while thinking of the value it can get by, at the same time, realizing the so called events therein. In fact, as there is no possibility to distinguish the content from the container in this kind of rethinking process, it is not possible to speak of thought and action separately. (GDA 15.03.21)

“*Analysis cannot be separate from the doing*”, states Gianluca elsewhere (GDA 14.10.19). This coincidence of thought and action can be explained by Gianluca’s continuous hints at how every undertaken action is shaped by thought (he speaks of “*thought practices*”) and shapes thought in turn. The idea of DC generates from thought:

I believe that the idea is everything and that, if correctly thought through and acted with the necessary strength, it can only manifest itself effectively, thus corresponding with a positive reality. The good idea is already a fact in potency. The idea is the reality. If an idea does not work in fact, then it wasn’t an idea. (GDA 15.01.07)

and is explicitly aimed at generating a reflection, both in the practitioner and in the wider community:

The DC project is, basically, a process of mindful reflection [...]. The reactivation of old factories, the production of pieces of art, the sites of my action: all this is not a product, but a process, organic, unitary, of growth and development, of the territory itself, and a reflection, a responsible, operational, necessary one, on its meanings. (GDA 15.01.07)

By thinking itself continuously, action is changing all the time and thought co-evolves accordingly. Clearly, this way of conceiving an entrepreneurial idea is open to unanticipated outcomes and all emergent and incremental behaviour. Thought and action are reciprocally reflexive for success. Thought through actions and enacted thoughts are the *modus operandi* in this case.

This view of coincidence by reciprocal shaping of thought and action immediately implies also a temporal tension: in the doing of DC time is not perceived as discrete and linear, but continuous and overlapping. The idea itself of DC is one that evocatively blends the past (the sites of some kind of former glory) with the future (a new unimagined destination for them) through the present (acts of contemporary arts):

DC, in general, creates a suture between the past time (lost in the present) and the present time (that lost the past), connecting them [...] by rethinking the site and redefining its value within the flux of history, which is permanently in action. [...] If the site is regenerated it is (also) because you enclose its historical value, using its echoes, its memories, to attend the processes of reactivation of the local collective images, as one of the elements necessary for the re-launch of the site itself. (GDA 15.03.21)

But beyond that, in the way Gianluca describes his method, we retrieve an idea of organization as a continuous ongoing accomplishment that rests on this idea of temporal tension: “It is necessary to imagine and re-imagine continuously the meaning and the function of things” (GDA 15.01.07); similarly: “to actuate processes is to realize identity processes posing action in the flux of history” (GDA 14.10.22). This notion of continuous re-imagination excludes stability. In other words, the entrepreneurial act as here described embodies past, present and future at the same time, endurance (e.g. of local and past meanings) and change (regeneration) at the same time – as opposed to a rhetoric of almost only future orientation in mainstream management theory (e.g. “objectives”, “projects”, “mission”, “vision”, etc.).

This in turn implies a rupture-order tension: if endurance and change are co-present, then no possibility of equilibrium is there and rupture is ever present to move a project on – as opposed to a rhetoric of inclusion, convergence, agreement around goals, strategies, etc. of mainstream

management knowledge. Instead, DC experience seems to show how paradoxically an entrepreneur can reach agreement (as a new fragile order) by continuously subverting the perceived one. There are indeed strong calls for rupture and conflict in his wording: e.g. “*to break the schemes*”; “*the cultural impatience against clichés, déjà-vus, mimetic attitudes*” (GDA 15.01.07); “*what I did in Sass Muss was a ‘cultural blitz’*. What I am doing at Casso and at Borca is a sort of ‘permanent occupation’” (Obs. 15.02.27). Rupture with some institutionalized order is therefore intentionally searched for. For example, during the setting up of one of the events at Spazio Casso (one of the sites), the local public institution (Municipality) who was one of the main partners of DC, insisted for the opening event to have Vittorio Sgarbi as a guest (a mediatic, well-known, art critic, a sort of V.I.P. who would have attracted consistent media attention). Gianluca reacted very badly, confronting the local public institution his very project at Casso depended so much from. As he attests, “*through this conflict they understood everything*”. Indeed, the local Municipality of Casso is now one of the strongest supporters of DC views and attitude (Obs. 15.02.27). Gianluca says that every time DC initiates a new project “*reactions are always expected*” (GDA 15.03.21) and explains this as follows:

To use thought through systems and not established praxes or codified models is something that definitely tends to challenge standards and fundamentals of the “normal” organizational life. (GDA 15.01.07)

The tension lies in the fact that, besides rupture and through it, some new order is achieved in the form of “*wide support networks*” and “*shared meanings*” in the territory. DC “*cultural blitz*” unfolds through a strenuous work of taking over an abandoned site by obtaining it from the relevant stakeholders (public or private owners) and proving them of the soundness of DC idea, by enacting it. This inevitably passes through conflict with these stakeholders, but eventually “*most inertias disappear and unthinkable results are achieved*” (GDA 15.03.21), as we could witness in the field.

The expressions “*constructive aggressive thought*” and “*responsible assault*” of the potential of these abandoned sites probably best express this rupture-order tension. What emerges is a need for chaos within the desire for order and vice versa in the view to “*break responsibly*”, and continuously.

Lastly, but crucially, all the above tensions imply an ego-alter tension, as a dialectic between the ego of the entrepreneur/curator and alters (partners, stakeholders of any kind, but also the Dolomites and the abandoned sites) both indispensable to the entrepreneurial project. Indeed, the success of a project as the one of DC requires “*a fool*” (Interview 15.02.19), i.e. a strong personality full of subverting ideas and daring to act, but also a building network of diverse social ties taking the idea up, at the same time. The following statement embodies both these dimensions:

“The project is intrinsically linked to a personal and subjective vision that accomplishes itself through open networks and thought through strategies” (GDA 15.01.07).

Instances of “ego” pervade Gianluca’s accounts and are constitutive to DC (e.g. *“I have to go save another place”* – Interview 15.02.19; *“you need a fool like me. [...] I turn sites on: before nobody sees them; I turn them on and then they see them”* – Obs. 15.02.27), but at the same time it is clear that the success of DC rests on the mobilization of the whole territory around the object-site: *“The sustaining platform of the project [the network of actors] is its foundational architecture, its skeleton”* (GDA 15.01.07); *“everything rests in ideas, without which there is no reality. And ideas are thought by a person alone. Yet, if these ideas are not shared (socialized), no open aim is really achievable”* (GDA 15.03.21).

In one of his accounts, Gianluca explains his work as *“antisocial and ultrasocial at the same time, where the antisocial phase is a constructive necessity to the ultrasocial one”*:

“In some phases of my work, the ones of construction of the sustaining structures to my projects, of cultural and curatorial choices, of the key themes and methods to be adopted and developed, my work is antisocial. For a few months I live alone [on the mountains] with exclusively virtual contacts even with my staff, with artists, with the art world. This is the phase of asociality; it derives from the need to concentrate, it’s method. In those very months I connect with the chiefs of public and private entities who help me in ‘making the bones’ of the project, i.e. I work on the politics of the project. As I open the sites to artists (summer/fall), local population, media, then my project and I become ultrasocial, welcoming, totally opened, just like the sites.” (GDA 15.03.21).

The tension here lies in the fact that ego and alters need each other. DC was made successful by “the territory” (i.e. a network of alters, both material and human, ranging from the local inhabitants, public entities, cultural partner institutions, private firms, volunteers, the mountains themselves, the abandoned sites, etc.) who were however activated (“turned on”) by the entrepreneur (i.e. ego).

Uncovering the cultural attitude element

Opening up the working method of DC allowed for recognizing a series of tensions that animate the entrepreneurial project and, we believe, contribute to explain its success. This is the result of our analytical act of disentangling the main observable dynamics. However, beyond this analysis, the impression is left that there is an underlying key synthetic element to all this, fuelling the above dynamics that wouldn’t probably operate as well without it. This is what Gianluca has in several occasions referred to as “the cultural attitude”. As indefinable as this can be, it seems however clear that a lot of the strength of DC work lies in this element.

“The final outcome is positive, when it is so, right thanks to the ability to integrate organically all of the necessary factors to the rethinking of the value of a site. This is how you determine

the critical mass to sustain the reactivation trend. Profitability is out of this discourse. What is in is knowing how to think of resources, also financial resources, as tools to nurture the cultural attitude, aiming exclusively at the quality and (moral) justice of the undertaken action". (GDA 15.03.21)

Reflexive practices, past-present bridging, order through rupture, ego-alter tensions would be weakened if there wasn't an underlying "*organic cultural reasoning*", or "*inner coherence*" to all this work. And this, in DC experience, is given by culture, here meant as "*the value of a thought, of a being*", the quality of the contents of one's acts, which is what gives "*good activated energy*" (GDA 15.03.21). "*Culture is to cultivate and to cultivate is always a project*" (Interview 15.02.19). Gianluca states that DC is doing culture because they are cultivating a territory as their project.

This cultural attitude can be seen as a strong focus and consciousness for the quality of what one does, which translates into an underlying, organic and passionate view of the whole project in its becoming, a sort of fall in love with the content of one's thoughts and actions. And this is the driver of beliefs, vision, ability to create consensus and eventually succeed, as opposed to strategic analysis of competitive advantage or profitability concern, or marketing-based strategies that drive many of the so called blockbuster art events that Gianluca labels "*false cultural projects*".

Discussion: research-practice reflexivity

These findings allow for a discussion of research-practice reflexivity and learning in a twofold way. In a way, academic research may reflect on itself through this tight engagement with the practice. In another way, and at the same time, the practice of a cultural entrepreneurship experience may reflect on itself through a tight confrontation with research.

Reflexive research: on process, complexity and culture

Certainly, the idiosyncrasy of any process reality does not open up the field to generalizations. Yet, some lessons can be already learnt, when this account of the "making-of" of an entrepreneurial project is confronted to mainstream management theory that portrays organizational phenomena as linear, rational, sequential, and measurable, where the goal is to minimize tensions and contradictions in order to control uncertainty.

First, this case illuminates the processual nature of entrepreneurship and of organizational phenomena more in general in a strong way. By questioning what makes the case of DC work and uncovering a series of tensions that animate it, or even inquiring what DC is and finding out that it is portrayed first of all as method, hence organized thought and action, by its main actor, we strengthen the view according to which it is processes that make phenomena happen, as organizational action is a lived experience that continually unfolds, rather than a substantial entity

with clear definitions. Yet organizations and strategy keep being understood, presented and taught as stable, objective, measurable and rational phenomena. We believe that this is largely a management scholars' responsibility: theories on "what works" feed management practice and shape managerial discourses, whereas theories on "how" those desirable changes can be produced rarely cross the boundaries of academic journals (Langley et al., 2013). Hence a hiatus between research and practice is not only created, but also reproduced over time.

Related to this, there is the issue of the complexity and non linearity of strategizing, here highlighted by the existence or, even more, the essentiality of tensions, with all their paradoxes and contradictions, as a key element of doing strategy work. *Dolomiti Contemporanee* is made possible by collective experiences that evolve continuously only if thought is made action and vice versa (tension 1), through the creative re-construal of shared histories, and the simultaneous generation of alternative futures (tension 2), through rupture and recomposition (tension 3), through the ego of one and the collective participation of a whole (tension 4). Where is the place for linearity, neatly planned actions, formulation, implementation, measurement, correction? Entrepreneurship, strategizing and organizational phenomena in general are rather confounded processes, and can only be so, because this is where meanings are contested and novelty may surge. This story shows that "success" rests largely on tensions and contradictions and that creating them and keeping them up is the key.

Finally, the clear importance of what was called "cultural attitude" particularly struck the academic researcher in this study: the two authors had moments of confrontation and discussion when the academic one, while reconstructing the underlying business model of DC (the network of actors, the resources mobilized, the politics of the project, the vision of the main actor, etc.) was focusing the attention on the importance of the underlying, often tacit, managerial conditions of the project (Lusiani & Zan, 2014). However, something was missing to this picture, something that could explain the peculiar success of this initiative. Eventually, as seen, this was found in the cultural attitude. This made the academic researcher reflect on the limits of management knowledge preconceived frameworks and categories and on the big absence of this notion of "cultural attitude", as the king ingredient to entrepreneurial attempts, calling for the importance, perhaps, of a humanistic approach to understand entrepreneurship or organizational phenomena more in general.

Process, complexity and culture: none of these are new elements *per se* to organization and management studies, of course; however, this case reinforces the importance of these elements that keep animating theoretical debates, while escaping mainstream academic teaching and consulting, i.e. the larger places where research and practice could meet.

Reflexive practice: on cultural management

In this co-authored study we also experimented a way to have a practitioner engaged in questioning his own practices, reflecting on his role as a curator/entrepreneur and making sense of the organizational becoming he is part of. Indeed, the fact of having had to scrutinize his own work for a year, acting from a dual perspective (the researched and the researcher), provided Gianluca with an opportunity of sensemaking, that induced him to reflect on his method, seeing more clearly some of the elements that make his project work – namely, tensions and cultural attitude.

The main consideration that Gianluca better focused during this journey has to do with his management skills. As a curator/entrepreneur he is a manager of a large project. The most salient thing he started seeing more neatly is that he knows how to manage, organize, strategize because he knows *“how to do culture”* – and not vice versa. He got to believe that it is not some management skills acquired through formal management training that can make up a sound cultural project; on the contrary, cultural attitude has the primacy and the management of the project is a derivative function: *“I am moved exclusively by ideal, intellectual, cultural, critical aesthetical objectives. And because I can ‘think culture’, because my idea is good, then I can also imagine the organizational solutions, the strategies, the tactics to enact it”*.

Concluding remarks

This research is in progress and much more reflexive learning may surge from this collaboration, both on the research and on the practice side.

We wish to conclude this paper with a methodological note on this peculiar experience where a professional can be at the same time object and subject of the same study, as both researched and (interim) researcher. This overlapping of modes has so far produced a direct critical exchange between research and practice, but also, in some instances, destabilization and conflict of roles and views. We believe that this is fruitful. By working as interim and partial researchers, the cultural entrepreneurs like Gianluca who participated to the wider research project brought into a Management Department views, skills, attitudes, languages, cognitions that are often substantially different from the views, languages, cognitions and so on of academic knowledge, and vice versa. Diversity triggers critical thinking, it enriches experiences and processes. But this comes with some costs and many difficulties in the process. Probably, the biggest one lies in the fact that practitioners as Gianluca tend to reason and work in a holistic, totalizing way, that hits hard against the analytical attitude of academic thought. This synthesis versus analysis tension, this tacit versus spoken knowledge, has probably been one of the most charming and demanding challenges of this peculiar research experience.

Additionally, a conclusive note that is relevant for both research and practice also derives from this study: the relevance (and the beauty!) of studying strategy practice in “management-free” contexts, like artistic ones. Management-free contexts are just free from a formalized management training, not from managing acts. Studying how strategizing occurs without a formal management training (which by the way is what had always been occurring in humankind history before the “invention” of management as a discipline in the XX century) can enrich management knowledge, as it provides the encounter not only with other rationalities that imbue how a project is thought and run (e.g. aesthetic, professional, curatorial ones), but also with fresh insights on management practices themselves, even when they are not called so. At the same time, practitioners like curators or cultural entrepreneurs that often see management as “something else” might discover how it is not so far from what they are already doing, although often not calling it so.

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