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Entrepreneurship as an art of subversion



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Summary This paper proposes subversion and resistance as two fundamental aspects of entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial process. Taking a start in the established notion of subversive activities in art, we outline their main expressions and consequences in the entrepreneurship setting. We further address the accompanying issue of resistance, and define and illustrate its role in art and the introduction of novel business ideas. Ultimately arriving at the concept of artful entrepreneurship, we suggest the analysis of subversion and resistance as a promising but so far neglected avenue of research in entrepreneurship studies.

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“Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art.”

(Andy Warhol)

Art and entrepreneurship have recently been compared and several analogies discussed between these human practices (Scherdin & Zander, 2011). Most of these discussions are dealing with the creative element of the two activities (Bonnafous-Boucher, Cuir, & Partouche, 2011) and how this creativity is developed in specific environments, for example where there are high levels of uncertainty (Meisiek & Haefliger, 2011).

Much less has been said about the fact that both creative artists and entrepreneurs must alter and transgress the operating rules of a field (Brenkert, 2009) so as to change the status quo (Bureau & Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2013). Among artists,

this is especially true in the case of ground-breaking or revolutionary new ideas that challenge contemporary conventions and norms (Lindqvist, 2011). Artists aspiring more radical shifts in artistic expressions must then often face and overcome hostile reactions and institutional environments (Wijnberg & Gemser, 2000). Similarly, the entrepreneur engaging in creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1994 [1942]) must be prepared to take on the role of the diverging figure (Bureau & Fendt, 2011), or even the role of the rebel (Fayolle, 2004), and surpass inhibitions and fears of being called an iconoclast (Bureau & Fendt, 2012). In some cases, the entrepreneur can find himself completely marginalized by society and be forced to create *pirate organizations* (Durand & Vergne, 2010).

Some authors have addressed the subversive dimension of artistic and business entrepreneurship (Bonnafous-Boucher et al., 2011; Hjorth, 2003; Smilor, 1997). Yet, while the concept is widely known and applied in art it has received but marginal attention in the entrepreneurship literature (Bureau, 2013). To illustrate the huge discrepancy between the worlds of art and entrepreneurship regarding the intensity of the debate on subversion, the outcome of two queries made on Google produces more than 4 million results for the

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association “art and subversion” or “subversion and art” whereas there are only 2 (!) occurrences for “entrepreneurship and subversion” or “subversion and entrepreneurship”.¹

If subversive attitudes and activities are needed to launch and develop new ideas and projects, whether in art or entrepreneurship, resistance is found on the other side of the coin. It is a well-known phenomenon in art, where throughout history different artistic styles have had to fight against conventions and established institutions. Despite the fact that resistance appears as a central element in many entrepreneurs’ stories about the development of their businesses, it has nevertheless been discussed very sparingly in the entrepreneurship literature (for an exception, see [Berglund & Gaddefors, 2010](#)).

To capture the “drama of entrepreneurship” ([Hjorth, 2007](#)), we extend the parallel between art and entrepreneurship to argue that just like many artists, many entrepreneurs incorporate subversive attitudes, behaviour as well as activities in the development of their projects. We further explore the concept of resistance, how it is connected to subversion, and how it may affect the unfolding of the entrepreneurial process. The ultimate aim is to highlight how the two concepts offer broad opportunities for better understanding, conceptualizing, and empirically exploring hitherto marginalized aspects of the entrepreneurial process.

Rather than building up a full metaphor, which typically involves “a more extended reach in terms of the domains of knowledge and language use connoted or drawn into the comparison” ([Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011, p. 1705](#)), we suggest a form of analogy in the sense that we transfer information from a specific domain – e.g. art – into a new domain – e.g. entrepreneurship ([Tsoukas, 1993](#)). Using analogical frames creates new categories of understanding to foster new perceptions of a phenomenon (e.g. subversion). This work helps to leverage specific similarities in relationships between these two domains ([Gentner, 1983](#)). In this specific case, we refer to a heuristic analogy which “attempts to capture the dynamic nature of a situation without necessarily specifying concrete courses of action” ([Tsoukas, 1993, p. 332](#)). The main purpose is not so much to offer instrumental solutions for practitioners (at least in this first stage) but to show how and in which parts the explanatory structure ([Gentner, 1983](#)) used to address subversion in art could be transferred to entrepreneurship.

The paper is organized in three parts. In the first part, we discuss and argue for the existence of a subversive dimension of artistic and entrepreneurial activities. We then turn to the issue of resistance to outline its conceptual foundations and multi-faceted sources. The third part then introduces the notion of artful entrepreneurship, which by capturing the elements of subversion and resistance also defines two fundamental and core mechanisms of the entrepreneurial process.

Subversion in art and entrepreneurship

“That which comes into the world to disturb nothing deserves neither respect nor patience.”

(René Char, 1948)

The etymology of the term subversion, stemming from the low Latin *subversio*, means “to overthrow,” and can be defined as the literal and figurative destruction of the established order.² In old French, the word *subvertisseoir* designates the person who overthrows.³ In the 20th century, the word was used in a variety of historical contexts: Cold War, decolonization, *avant-garde* artistic movements, and sexual revolutions. While there is no legal definition of the term per se, beyond art the word is used as a conceptual notion in many different fields, such as sociology, political science, law, history, and literature.

Despite this diversity in usage, meaning and occurrence, the field of business studies barely uses this term, or only in very rare cases or rather anecdotal fashion. The absence of the term is intriguing, as the conditions (both necessary and sufficient⁴), which are required to create a potential of subversion are very similar in both art and entrepreneurship.

The subversive potential of art

“I am a subversive being at all times.”

(Salvador Dali)

In discussing the subversive potential of art, we would like to reveal the intensity and the diversity of questions that are raised to support the coming discussion on the subversive dynamics of entrepreneurial activities.

Beyond this preliminary remark, we would like to underline that we do not consider art as a well-defined and homogeneous field. Art can only be understood through the analysis of certain practices and representations in “specific configurations, specific regimes of identification, that allow for certain social functions or certain political possibilities” ([Rancière, Wright, & Dronsfield, 2008, p. 3](#)). Obviously, there are many different kinds of art which mandate various types of audience responses ([Carroll, 2000](#)). To take this difficulty into account, we will always introduce very specific examples taken from the art world to avoid a list of general assertions.

Having said that, we would like to emphasize that subversion has been analyzed across many and very different artistic areas: for example, researchers have studied the subversive dimension of art in literature ([Booker, 1991; Godin, 1996](#)), poetry ([Godin, 1996](#)), painting ([Bonnett, 1992](#)) but also in theatre ([Chafra, 2009](#)) or cinema ([Gutman, 2011](#)). Moreover, the question of subversion is discussed within various *spatiotemporal* contexts: in the 21st century with the evolution of art in China ([Wiseman & Yuedi, 2011](#)), in the 20th century – with the *avant-gardes* of the beginning of the 20th century with artists like J. Joyce ([Lachaud & Neveux, 2009](#)), the Surrealists ([Weisgerber, 1984](#)) or later

² <http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/subversion>.

³ <http://micmap.org/dicfro/chercheur/dictionnaire-godefroy/subversion>.

⁴ “A condition A is said to be necessary for a condition B, if (and only if) the nonexistence of A guarantees the nonexistence of B” (<http://www.sfu.ca/~swartz/conditions1.htm>). “A condition A is said to be sufficient for a condition B, if (and only if) the existence of A guarantees the existence of B” (<http://www.sfu.ca/~swartz/conditions1.htm>).

¹ Search executed on the 10th of January 2013.

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