

Ambivalent entrepreneurs: arts-based social enterprise in a neoliberal world

Arts-based
social
enterprise

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the social turn in contemporary capitalism and contemporary art through the lens of art-based social enterprises (ASEs) that aim to create positive social benefits for young people experiencing forms of marginalisation, and which trade creative products or services to help fulfil that mission. A growth in ASEs demonstrates a growing interest in how the arts can support social and economic development, and the ways new economic models can generate employment for individuals excluded from the labour market; extend opportunities for more people to participate in art markets; and challenge dominant market models of cultural production and consumption.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper considers a number of challenges and complexities faced by ASEs that embrace a co-dependence of three goals, which are often in tension and competition – artistic practice, social purpose and economic activity. It does so by analysing interviews from staff working with 12 ASE organisation's across Australia.

Findings – While the external forces that shape ASEs – including government policy, markets, investors and philanthropy – are interested in the “self-sufficient” economic potential of ASEs, those working in ASEs tend to prioritise social values and ethical business over large financial returns and are often ambivalent about their roles as entrepreneurs. This ambivalence is symptomatic of a position that is simultaneously critical and affirmative, of the conditions of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism.

Originality/value – This paper addresses a gap in social enterprise literature presenting empirical research focussing on the lived experience of those managing and leading ASEs in Australia.

Keywords Social enterprise, Creative economy, Art-based social enterprise

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

This paper considers the *social turn* in contemporary commercial, market-based activity that has contributed to widespread interest in the possibilities of social enterprises (SEs) as vehicles for generating both profit and positive social impacts. In Australia, as in the UK, the USA, Canada and elsewhere, the term “social enterprise” emerged in academic discourses at the turn of the millennium while, as a commercial model, SEs began to flourish in the hospitality, environmental, arts and other sectors. To date, the most comprehensive survey of social enterprise activity in Australia estimated that by 2010, 20,000 SEs were operating across diverse markets – accounting for between two and three per cent of national GDP (Barraket *et al.*, 2010). A majority of these SEs targeted young people experiencing varied forms of socioeconomic disadvantage (just under 50 per cent of the total) and were clustered in the a. education and training, and b. arts and recreation industries (Barraket *et al.*, 2010). A burgeoning interest in art-based social enterprises (ASEs) for addressing situations of youth unemployment and marginalisation have attracted considerable interest and support from government, business and philanthropy sectors as models for promoting economic, social and creative participation.

A notable expansion of the SE sector is traced to reverberations following the global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008. The GFC elicited popular criticism of neoliberal capitalism and cultivated an interest in how capitalism could be tamed and reworked to contain widening inequalities, and ameliorate its socially fraying, if not destructive, effects. Edited collections such as *Civic Capitalism* (Hay and Payne, 2015, p. 6) examined the possibilities of reorientating or “remoralising capitalism” to promote social, environmental and economic sustainability (Crouch, 2013). Key tactics include facilitating more equal access to markets and an inclusive redistribution of economic growth (Hay and Payne, 2015). SEs encompass these ideas and they are evident in the proclamations of organisation’s such as Social Traders, which supports and advocates for the SE sector in Australia. Social Traders refer to the *finding Australia’s social enterprise sector* (FASES report) in defining social enterprise, which explains that SEs “exist to create jobs for disadvantaged Australians” and “are businesses that trade to intentionally tackle social problems, improve communities, provide people access to employment and training, or help the environment” by “using the power of the marketplace” (Social Traders, 2019). According to the Social Traders website, a business is a SE when it:

- has a defined primary social purpose, environmental or other public benefit;
- derives a substantial portion of its income from trade; and
- reinvests 50 per cent or more of annual profits towards achieving the social purpose

The notion of rehabilitating capitalism through models such as SEs, however, has attracted substantial criticism. Many have questioned the capacity of market-based approaches to redress issues of inequality that are themselves an outcome of a market logic that has acquired persuasive ideological force with the ascendancy of neoliberalism over the past few decades. In this respect, SEs may be akin to paradigms of ethical consumption and fair trade; just as the individual “ethical” or “fair” purchase affirms a moral or political value while still deploying an ideology of market-based consumer choice, SEs present a similar problematic of both contesting and affirming the facility of capitalist enterprise to redress inequalities. While neoliberalism was initially understood as a project of privatisation and deregulation to expand the functioning of markets, with the state having a potentially restraining influence, its unfolding effects have been a remaking of the state in ways that extend and facilitate the operation of markets in everyday life (Higgins and Lerner, 2017;

Cahill, 2014; Wacquant, 2012; Peck, 2010). Rather than shrinking the significance of states in economic, social and political life, a notable feature of contemporary neoliberal capitalism (especially within post-war welfare states) has been the ways in which the apparatus of statecraft is increasingly mobilised to assert the legitimacy of market logics and commercialise ever-increasing arenas of personal and social life (Wacquant, 2012). This includes adopting market models to reconceive how social support is best provided.

This context for SEs is evident in the strong approval and support that they are attracting from governments and other funders, such as philanthropic bodies, although it comes with expectations that organisation's and programmes in the social sector should be resourceful and self-sufficient (Bielefeld, 2009). Despite this ideological backdrop, much scholarly interest in the potential of SEs has focussed on exploring their potential economic benefits, while the capacity of the model to redress disadvantage receives limited attention. This includes the apparent inability for SE models to shift the ways in which markets generally operate. This leaves SEs subject to complex tensions in their need to generate profit *and* social outcomes in contexts where the circumstances of participants mean they can struggle, for different reasons, to participate in marketised relations. On top of these challenges, they are also competing with commercially oriented enterprises for limited resources including customers, staff and capital.

As previously noted, creative and arts-based activities have been popular fields for developing SEs targeting young people experiencing a range of disadvantages. However, ASEs are presented with a range of tensions in both working with participants experiencing disadvantage and facilitating creative practices that have forms of market value. Understanding how these tensions are navigated, thus, offers insight into the potential of SEs to redress social inequality (Leslie and Catungal, 2012). In what follows, the paper explores complexities and tensions that are present in operating and sustaining arts-based enterprises that involve the multiple and frequently conflicting goals of creative practice, economic activity and social purpose. It does so by drawing on interviews undertaken in 12 organisation's across Australia working in this field. In particular, the analysis focusses on the perspectives and strategies adopted by those working in ASEs, who are often ambivalent about their roles as entrepreneurs. This ambivalence is symptomatic of a position that is simultaneously both critical and affirmative of the conditions of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism within which SEs are positioned (Comunian, 2009). It also speaks of the long-standing aesthetic ethos of the value of creative practice as autonomous of and contradictory to market imperatives [for a recent discussion of this see O'Brien (2014)].

Given this terrain, how do those involved in these organisations manage and address these tensions and complexities? What are their priorities in doing so? What are the risks, both to individuals and to the organisations themselves in forging a way through such tensions? The conditions experienced by Australian ASEs represent a local manifestation of global pressures. The specific challenges in an Australian context include a lack of both government funding and policy support for the SE sector (Barraket, 2016), and a relatively small philanthropic sector. In this sense, an Australian lens provides a snapshot of the increasing difficulties faced by SEs globally, especially as government funding continues to retract in the wake of "big society" ideologies (Powell, 2013), forcing greater competition for philanthropic funds (Kerlin, 2010).

To contextualise the analysis first, the article outlines the context of ASE development and operation, and the relationships between commerce, artistic practice and social enterprise. It then discusses the experiences of people who have established and led ASEs across four sets of issues, namely, organisational aims and structures; creativity and social

impact; conceptualising youth disadvantage and marginalisation; and navigating commercial imperatives. These four sets of issues emerged through our analysis of the interview data as the most dominant areas of discussion, while also being common foci for ASE managers. In concluding, the article suggests that ASEs are negotiating, reinforcing and potentially reworking market logics. The hybridity of social enterprise models can be a strength; in terms of forging a revised sense of the relations between creative practices, social inequalities and market values and in moving beyond the entrenched ethos of art for arts' sake. However, there is little evidence that SEs models are having any radiating effects in transforming the wider operation of the markets in which they are obliged to compete (Monclus, 2015; Oakley, 2006; Dees and Anderson, 2006). It thus falls on those who manage and work within ASEs to attempt to reconcile frequently irreconcilable objectives.

Enterprising the social and the creative

In the context of the global consolidation of market neoliberalism over the past few decades, the model of social enterprise has become deeply appealing to funders including government because it seems to offer a market solution to entrenched social problems that were once almost exclusively addressed by the state and charitable organisations. Indeed, the promise of developing models of welfare provision that are economically “self-sufficient” is doubly appealing, as it suggests a form of capitalism that sustains the social fabric and the free market. Nevertheless, despite the ideological alignment of social enterprise with neoliberalism (Terjesen *et al.*, 2012), it is a model that also suggests possibilities of an alternative economy and of reforming, if not transforming, neoliberal capitalism. For this reason, the terminology of social enterprise and the framework of market engagement it suggests has been increasingly embraced in the name of a range of broader political aims connected with environmental sustainability, global equity, social inclusion and social justice. Here, social enterprise is understood as both challenging a purely profit-oriented ethos of market engagement and providing a funding source for political advocacy and engagement (Golob *et al.*, 2009). On a more practical level, social enterprise models have been seen to also provide ways to generate employment for individuals excluded from the labour market, extend opportunities for people to engage in education and employment, and drive the consolidation of local and micro economies.

A number of theorists of social enterprise point to these social and, in some cases, non-commercial motivations of such activity. Douglas, for example, contends that “SE [. . .] is not a charitable business but rather a cooperative practice that commits to a common good” (Douglas, 2015, p. 21). Similarly, Barraket, a leading scholar of social enterprise in Australia, notes that some SEs “are explicitly concerned with contesting market power” (Barraket, 2016, p. 76). In the related field of ethical production and consumption, Humphery has observed a similar dynamic operating within a number of “ethical” businesses that are “aligned to a disposition of gaming the commercial mainstream – of playing it, precisely through using some of its techniques, while avowedly cheating some of its imperatives” (Humphery, 2017, p. 98).

All this is not to suggest that social enterprise is an intrinsically subversive model but rather recognises the tensions in pursuing both profit and social purpose (Nicholls and Teasdale, 2017). While some of the external forces that frame the ways in which SEs operate, government policy, markets, investors and philanthropy are almost always primarily interested in the economic potential of social enterprise, many SEs themselves prioritise social values, ethical business practices and an approach that is often critical of market capitalism. This can provoke a deep ambivalence for those involved in the strategic management and everyday operation of SEs.

Accompanying the *social turn* in contemporary commercial activity, there has been a parallel social turn in contemporary art practice. Also, emerging around the turn of the millennium, a shift towards socially-oriented arts practices gained momentum and force in response to the GFC of 2008. This “turn” reflects an explicit critique of the distribution of power in contemporary capitalism and rising inequality (Sholette, 2011). This has occurred in the context of ongoing debate over the cultural value of the arts (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). For the state and the market, art is increasingly conceived and rationalised as a cultural practice that contributes to economic development (Van der Pol, 2007; O'Brien, 2014), while creativity has become the standard bearer of innovation within new business practices (McRobbie, 2016). Yet, art has been increasingly positioned also as addressing community, environmental and cultural needs and values (McQuilten and White, 2016). The growth of ASEs globally reflects this diversely motivated interest in how the arts can support social and economic development and how new kinds of economic arrangements can support the art sector. More broadly, ASEs are one component of a strong reassertion of the social and economic value of art and cultural practices (Crossik and Kaszynska, 2016). In the context of developed economies like Australia art has been vigorously used in supporting economic participation for communities experiencing economic exclusion – demonstrated by the success of community-based, indigenous art enterprises and arts organisations working with young people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and other groups vulnerable to economic, social and cultural marginalisation (Cooke, 2018; Montgomery, 2017).

As noted above, compared to counterpart social turns in the UK and Europe, the arts and social enterprise sectors in Australia are relatively under-supported by government policy and funding (Barraket, 2016; Radbourne, 2002). In the USA, the ASE sector receives limited government funding, however, this is supplemented by a strong philanthropic sector that is highly supportive of the arts. There are particular pressures on ASEs in Australia because they must appeal to multiple and diverse stakeholders, including government, philanthropy and community supporters, for funding, as well as attending to growing and sustaining the activities of their organisation.

While most SEs aim to generate employment opportunities and pathways for their participants, this is particularly difficult in the arts, a sector where precarity is the norm (McRobbie, 2016; Raunig *et al.*, 2011; De Peuter, 2011). In fact, for the arts, social enterprise is seen as a model that might possibly redress this very precarity by shifting emphasis from profit to social values (McRobbie, 2011; Wilson, 2014). This then creates a paradoxical position for ASEs in that they are working to reduce the precarity of contemporary market capitalism but are doing so under the conditions of precarity itself: with minimal resources and limited, often programmatic and short-term funding (Kavanagh *et al.*, 2002). Further, the emerging artists they support must be prepared for a precarious external environment. Many ASEs are, therefore, focussed on “income generation”, rather than job creation, and supporting artists to develop income streams and entrepreneurial skills that are relevant to the market contexts that frame creative activities. This point of difference is not widely acknowledged in the academic or industry-oriented literature, which overwhelmingly portrays social enterprise models as congruent with conventional strategies of employment creation (Barraket *et al.*, 2016).

There is currently limited research focussing on SEs as a form of economic activity in Australia, particularly in terms of their operational dynamics and their potential contribution to economic and social change. Available research points to a major gap in understanding the social impact and value of the practical work undertaken by SEs (Campbell *et al.*, 2011; Munoz *et al.*, 2015; Mason and Barraket, 2015). Accordingly, Munoz

et al. (2015) argue that there is a need for greater understanding of the complexity of social enterprise models and “the mechanisms through which they generate well-being”. While Mason and Barraket (2015, p. 144) acknowledge that SEs do, in part, challenge the very norms guiding approaches to economic development: “part of the fascination of SEs lies in their complexities and hybridity that enable individuals and communities to create solutions that may or may not heed the rules that shape SE field development”. In other words, the lived complexity and innovation of SEs can surprise and subvert the norms and assumptions of the social enterprise sector, making it a dynamic, creative and critical field of practice. This suggests a move away from a one-dimensional evaluation of the social enterprise endeavour (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). The dominance in Australia and elsewhere of economic and technocratic perspectives in the policy and investment space, however, has resulted in a narrow focus on assessing SEs in terms of economic performance. As a result, there is limited understanding of the experience of managing, working and participating in these organisations, and the challenges that are experienced and benefits that can be generated. The article turns, now, to address these issues.

Method

The data collected for this article was drawn from interviews of people working in 12 ASEs. The sample was sourced through a Web directory developed by Social Traders in 2010 – the *Social Traders Finder* – which has compiled a database of over 5,000 SEs across Australia. This directory identifies organisations that have deliberately adopted the model and language of social enterprise to raise their profiles and reach potential markets and procurement opportunities. SEs are listed by products and services-based categories and the criteria used to identify appropriate ASEs was: *young people + creative arts + training/education/employment programmes* across all States in Australia. A Google search of ASE was also carried out searching key words, namely, social enterprise, arts social enterprise, creative/performance social enterprise, community enterprise and arts community organisations. Finally, a snowball sampling strategy was used once interviews commenced identifying organisations that may not be registered with Social Traders or have an online presence.

In total, 20 ASEs that met our inclusion criteria were contacted firstly via email with information about the study and then, if appropriate, with a follow-up phone call to arrange an interview. Key staff, from 12 organisations across three Australian states agreed to participate in the research. Most of these informants had roles that combined executive leadership with creative direction, with a number being founders of their organisation. In this article, interviewees are referred to as “managers” – even though this does not always encapsulate the scope of their organisational role. Managers were informed that their individual interviews would be anonymous, however, there was potential for their organisation’s to be identified because of a relatively small pool of youth-focussed ASEs in Australia, a few of which have developed high profiles in their communities. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted around three key discussion areas:

- (1) organisational questions;
- (2) conceptual questions addressing their approaches to art/creativity, marginalisation/disadvantage and entrepreneurship; and
- (3) discussion of operational challenges and opportunities.

To minimise risks of SEs being identified through their involvement in the study, quotes have been carefully selected to illustrate analytic and interpretive points from the qualitative

data that were generated. A numerical coding system has been used in the article to link quotes to our data to minimise risks of organisations or managers being recognised. Numbers have been randomly assigned and do not correlate with the order in which the SEs are listed in Table I. The interviews explored opportunities and challenges across three broad areas of their activity, namely, creative practice; fund-raising and supporting participants experiencing varied situations of disadvantage and marginalisation. While taking a critical perspective on the issues explored in this article, the authors remain respectful of the high workload, creative integrity and social commitment that sustain ASEs involved in this study.

The lived experience of art-based social entrepreneurs

The ASE managers that were interviewed frequently described their work as challenging. They were usually working across multiple sectors (arts, youth health and well-being, community development, education, social enterprise and employment provision) that each used specific terminology and concepts and required distinctive skillsets. The potential for ASEs to bring together social missions and business acumen depends on an ability to multi-task and navigate multiple pressure points. Experiences described in the interviews suggested the hard work of managing ASEs involves juggling competing priorities, namely, creating high-quality artistic outputs; generating revenue and providing socially-inclusive and supportive environments that met the needs of the young people they work with. Considerable effort, adaptability and commitment from staff is required to run organisation's with limited resources, staffing and funding, integrating diverse priorities and engaging with a complex network of stakeholders. Many of the ASE managers interviewed expressed ambivalence towards their ability to achieve all of their desired artistic, social and financial objectives in the context of these pressures.

Organisational aims and structures

All of the ASEs had a strong focus on young people in varied situations associated with forms of disadvantage and marginalisation.

Art form	Social cause	Trading income	Philanthropic support	Arts grants	Disability funding	Not for profit	Self-funded	Government funding
Visual art	Disability	X	X	X	X	X		
Visual art	Disability	X	X		X	X		
Creative writing	Socio-economic	X	X			X		X
Media production	Homeless youth	X	X			X		X
Media production	Cultural diversity	X					X	
Video/media	Young changemakers	X					X	
Video/media	Socio-economic	X	X			X		X
Fashion	Migrant/refugees	X	X	X		X		
Fashion	Migrant/refugees	X	X	X		X		X
Dance	Socio-economic	X	X	X		X		
Dance/performance	Socio-economic	X	X	X		X		X
Dance/performance	At-risk youth	X	X			X		

Table I.
Descriptions of ASEs in the sample, including the type of art form, target group and funding sources

Across our sample, varying intensity of involvement in ASEs was required from participants. A number of enterprises worked with small groups of 5-10 participants over extended periods of time, and a few worked with large groups of participants over a series of events or as audiences. In total, 10 of the organisation's provided forms of social support that was important for facilitating participation (for example, support for travel to attend ASEs, youth workers providing social support and meeting needs for accommodation and mental health issues). These organisation's recognised that establishing social stability was important in being able to develop artistic skills. This takes time and requires the integration of forms of support with guidance and tailored approaches to training. Some ASEs had strong links with social workers/case workers to provide emotional and other support [2, 5]; in one ASE, staff had upskilled to provide this support [1]. Managers that did not have these support mechanisms embedded in their programmes reported a range of challenges when the participants' needs for support could not be met.

Half of the organisation's aimed to be self-sufficient through trading income, while the other half reported having realistic expectations of cultivating a mixed revenue base through a mixture of business activity, government and/or philanthropic grants and other sources of funding. These two approaches to income generation are consistent with data from the FASES report, which found that SEs tended to divide between those that do not perceive any conflict between profit-making and social goals, and those that do (Barraket *et al.*, 2016)[1]. Nine of the organisation's operated as not-for-profits, and the proportion of trading income generated through business activities across all of the organisation's ranged from 20 to 80 per cent. Only two of the SEs were largely self-funded, while a further two were dependent on government funding through the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The bulk of SEs, however, cobbled together funds from diverse sources, namely, five were assisted mainly through small, project-based government arts grants; and 10 of the 12 enterprises consistently received philanthropic grants. While there was a reluctance to detail the exact amount of revenue generated, 10 of the 12 organisation's participating in this study were generating less than 50 per cent of their income from trade. A third of our sample operate as non-profits with a separate social enterprise "branch" that raises funds for ongoing organisational costs and specific programmes. However, despite this dual model, separating the enterprise arm of an organisation did not appear to correspond to higher levels of trading income.

The ASEs engaged in a range of entrepreneurial activities. Two sold artworks created by participants through outlets linked to the organisation. Another two ASEs designed, manufactured and sold clothes, and four provided fee-for-service or consultancies that channelled profits into an associated ASE. A further four derive income from ticket sales for performances. These activities are not mutually exclusive and many of the ASEs pursued multiple revenue streams. Moreover, capacities for income generation was moderated by needs for social support among participants. For example, the potential to reach large numbers of potential consumers, and therefore, increase profit margins had to be considered alongside the complex needs of participants and their capacity to produce at scale. Despite differences in size, creative focus and social objectives, the ASEs in this study share some common goals. These include providing pathways into training and employment and developing skills for starting a business or social enterprise [2, 8, 3]. All, of the organisation's had strong views that the arts can be an important vehicle for engagement and participation, and that opportunities for artistic expression could give "voice" to young people.

It was also common among the SEs to have charismatic, committed and energetic founders with recognised skills and experience. The skills and networks of founders proved

crucial for attracting and securing business opportunities and funding. However, reliance on these pivotal figures could present limits in an organisation's ability to grow and diversify. This was because it was difficult to find people who matched the extraordinary commitments of time and hard work that these individuals contributed across strategic management, fundraising and programme delivery activities. As one ASE manager telling explained,

I talk about the fact that we may not continue – not because I don't want it to happen but unless you put a boundary around some of this stuff and say what you won't do I think the chances of going down paths that are more likely lead to burnout is ever increased[4].

Another said:

[...] there's a tension in terms of making it work, [...] in getting enough revenue in to make it work. [...] The tension is having enough you know [...] business-know-how - because it's bloody hard [5].

These comments were offered in the context of recognising the positive potential of using art to engage young people and foster social and economic impacts. Yet, many of the ASE managers were overwhelmed by the work involved in maintaining a social enterprise and integrating the varied goals.

In summary, the ASEs offer diverse activities that involve young people with varying, and frequently high, needs for support to sustain their involvement. Many managers described struggles to develop personnel structures that ensured growth and sustainability. Insecure revenue streams, in particular, impacted on how organisational activities were conceived and developed and heightened tensions in achieving arts practice and social goals.

Creativity, the arts and social impact

In the wake of expanding interest in the potential of community arts practice over the past few decades, some artists have expressed concern that art is being misused to band-aid the impacts of neoliberal economic policies and the shrinking of the welfare state (Gielen, 2013; Merli, 2002; Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). This recuperative aspect of art draws on insights that involvement in the arts is associated with developing personal skills, improving "job readiness" or promoting physical and mental health (O'Brien, 2014; Cameron *et al.*, 2013). The normative agenda informing this interest in creative practice can distort or even contradict, other kinds of values that are linked to the expressive, aesthetic and political possibilities of art – a concern that was reflected in the interviews. Concern about art's utility in addressing social and community problems is further complicated by a tendency for community-based arts to be seen as inferior or inadequate, in terms of aesthetic value and quality by authorities in the artworld (Bishop, 2006).

Heightening potential tensions between the purposes of art, the viability of many ASEs depends upon immediate kinds of economic value to be extracted from arts activities in ways that present further tensions for managers and creative directors. These tensions between social impact and artistic merit can be perceived as difficult to reconcile. One ASE manager, whose ASE received health funding, observed:

So, it's pretty challenging to talk through because the nature of our company, always the high art outcome is kind of here, but all of this health and community and mental wellbeing is sitting there as well [1].

Similar sentiments were expressed by other ASE managers who needed to respond to market demand to generate sales while maintaining artistic integrity and quality and be inclusive of artists with diverse experiences and abilities. These tensions required careful navigation.

Some participants expressed deep frustration, if not resentment, towards the constant need to justify their activities in instrumental, rather than artistic, grounds and being obliged to deploy concepts of “marginality”, “inclusion” and “community” to explain the significance and value of the artistic work. As one ASE manager put it:

If, say, companies like us actually just had more access to larger amounts of funding [...] You could just work with the artists you are working with without constant justification.

Indeed, one SE carefully tailored their language to appeal to different stakeholders: “we are all about the disadvantage in the non-profit sector and we are all about the art in the arts sector”[8]. Another ASE manager described their organisation’s efforts to promote the high quality of its artistic output, without avoiding the potentially negative connotations of serving “community”. As they stated, “we are not interested in making community-engaged dance. It’s just dance [...] There is that expectation that the outcome will be very professional. It would not be community art”[1]. This response echoes the longstanding sense of art and creative practice as exceptional, the value of which is both irreducible to a calculative logic and valued by way of aesthetic excellence [for a recent discussion of this see [O’Brien \(2014\)](#) and [Crossik and Kaszynska \(2016\)](#)].

For other participants, however, responding to tensions between the social and aesthetic value provided an opportunity to challenge negative perceptions among some towards the worth of “community” art. These participants believed that artistic merit was not necessarily diminished by the work having social value. Explaining their organisation’s success in supporting a number of programme participants to establish careers as artists, a manager commented:

I see the social impact in that. Number one, we get to sustain the work that we do [...] but also you’re actually changing the perception about the capacity of artists with intellectual disability [3].

Some ASE programmes understand marginalisation as situations where participants possess latent talent but lack access to support and resources that could enable it to be realised. These ASEs valued inclusivity but were aware of the challenges of generating creative outcomes with strong artistic merit *and* marketability. One ASE described staff as collaborating closely with their artists to ensure the quality of the work that was produced:

We will help them with drawing. We’ll help them with design. We help them with an idea, but the paintings are 80 per cent done by the artists themselves. So, it’s always a question like, “Did they do that just by themselves?” Some of them, yes, but not all of them, and we’re always honest about that, so it’s in collaboration[6].

This leads to a central question for many of the ASEs: how realistic is it to have goals of generating employment opportunities or pathways for young people in the creative industries when participants lack capacities to mobilise their creativity without having access to intensive forms of artistic and social support? This is particularly relevant to the arts sector, which is notoriously associated with conditions of short-term, unreliable and precarious employment ([Throsby and Petetskaya, 2017](#); [McRobbie, 2011](#); [Raunig *et al.*, 2011](#)).

Given these challenges, managers insisted that transitioning participants into employment is not necessarily the primary mission of many of their ASEs, although some

are cautiously optimistic about the “employability” and commercial value of the creative skills they are imparting. For example, one ASE manager described how they are teaching film-making and design skills that are increasingly desirable in an expanding commercial creative industries sector that has “more and more roles for people”[5]. They further observed that giving young people the skills for creative expression is important but insufficient. Young people experiencing disadvantage also need opportunities to turn their interest in creative practice into employment opportunities in creative industries:

If we are going to give people creative tools, let's give them commercial tools as well. Let's give them the ability to turn that into food on the table, turn into money in the pocket.

Other participants also emphasised the commercial potential of learning arts activities:

We don't just want to be [doing] community development and using arts just as a tool [...] we're on about developing the artists so that they can work in their own right or excel in their own field[8].

Such views were often tempered by the realities of the creative industries labour market and situations of participants in some programmes. These ASE managers are doubtful towards the likelihood of “successful” transitions into paid work:

[I]t's a wonderful outcome if they decide they want to leave the program and they want to be an independent artist but, like, most of them can't catch the train on their own, or can't really write[3].

In response, rather than focussing on transitions to mainstream employment, some ASEs aimed to generate employment opportunities for participants *within* the social enterprise. At their most visionary, ASEs sought to challenge the norms of mainstream employment (and related, business) practices. One participant explained this approach by critiquing the marginalising effects of market logics for young people with varied abilities and needs:

Addressing marginalisation is not so much about addressing the subject who is marginalised, but addressing [the] mainstream to let the subject in, you know. Stop pushing people away [...] we understand how [the] market does that and we're trying to reshape it a little[9].

The need to reform commercial practices within a mainstream creative economy was a common theme in the interviews, at the same time that ASEs were reluctantly obliged to subscribe to current expectations of commercial practice in their own business models.

Across the sample, ASE managers veered between excitement and frustration at the potential for arts-based enterprise to engage young people at an individual level, transform market structures and generate positive social outcomes. This echoes wider, longstanding and unresolved ambivalence among artists in valorising the aesthetic, economic or social value of art. ASE managers were frequently conflicted about their artistic priorities: emphasising artistic merit and quality seemed to benefit young people in terms of their career aspirations but could come at the expense of addressing more explicitly their social circumstances.

Young people, marginalisation and community

There was a diversity of circumstances of disadvantage among young people involved in the SEs that were linked to household poverty, place-based disadvantage, forced migration and resettlement, living with disability and family dynamics. These circumstances are generated through complex and varied pathways. The significance of the material and social implications of these situations in strategies for redressing inequalities was another

site of ambivalence among ASE managers. Addressing social disadvantage was central to the mission of the ASEs in our sample, yet managers struggled to talk about how it informed the ways they constructed and operated their programmes. The ASE managers were hesitant to use words such as marginalisation and disadvantage to explain young people's situations, expressing concerns that this language further stigmatises both the ASEs (from a market point of view) and the young people they work with. Terms such as "engagement" and "disengagement" were generally preferable as was made clear when one ASE manager explained:

I think "marginalization" can put the person there rather than the society [...] We can marginalise people by the way we describe them [...] How do we take someone who's been disengaged through social and cultural circumstances and how do we engage them?[5]

This shift in focus from disadvantage to engagement avoids young people having to talk about their personal situations. It also enables participants to be repositioned in new frames of meaning, such as being creative rather than objects of pity. Another ASE manager explains, "we have a real ideology here that we do not really talk a lot about what's happened in the past". Another describes trying to avoid explicit language about social disadvantage, proposing:

[...] what if we make a very exclusive exhibition and we curate work here, and we had a showing in the inner city and we don't – we don't mention disability, so we just market it like any other contemporary art show [3].

Another manager talks about their artists as "creative outcasts": "the oddballs that have just come and found each other [...] in a really positive way, such as the very creative, bit weird and artistic types"[1].

In part, this resistance to use the language of marginalisation and disadvantage relates to the ways in which ASEs are expected to talk about disadvantage to funders in terms that can be perceived as being limiting or in fact perpetuating stigma. One ASE manager explains:

I mean in the philanthropic sector you really have to, you know, repeat that language back to people in terms that fall within their funding: vulnerability, disadvantage, marginalisation and diversity, inclusion, all these things. But when you are always putting that up front, what are you saying to the people you're working with about their self-perception, or their neediness? [...] You're constantly articulating the disadvantage[5].

The entrepreneurial and artistic aspects of ASEs are, therefore, seen as important for engaging participants in ways that challenge the labels and conventions of social welfare models for youth services. One ASE manager explains:

It's really dynamic here, and so people come here and they can feel like they're part of something that's really successful, that isn't kind of daggy [like] a drop-in centre, but they get very similar services[2].

There is a common perception that ASEs can empower young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to become successful in their own rights, rather than by virtue of being "helped". As one ASE manager explains, "if we do create this environment, these guys can be creative professionals"[5].

The risks of this approach, however, are that the accumulated realities of social, economic and other disadvantages are overlooked with implications for how young people are able to effectively engage with programmes. This was evident among the organisation's that were described as being "for-profit", which embraced more overtly capitalist models of

operating, and where managers did not proffer a critique of capitalist credos. These organisations had limited direct engagement with young people experiencing disadvantage. This suggests that achieving entrepreneurial success can come at the cost of explicitly addressing social purpose.

Despite ambivalence towards the language of disadvantage, most ASEs have specific target groups they aimed to support. This included homeless youth, young people with refugee-backgrounds, Aboriginal communities and people with disabilities. These groups all experience different forms of exclusion that are embedded in diverse dynamics and life-world conditions, which impact on mental and physical health and well-being. Young people involved in these ASEs can have complex needs and some ASEs may be ill-equipped to provide the kinds of social support required. ASEs responded to this in different ways. Some involved social workers and youth workers in the running of the programmes, although this entailed additional costs that further impede their ability to generate revenue.

Some ASEs trained staff to avoid engaging with the social problems of their participants. The manager explained:

We were getting called at 3 a.m. with somebody, you know, wanting to commit suicide and all of this other stuff and it really got to this point where we had to change how we worked[12].

Staff was instructed not to give their mobile numbers to participants, and a system for providing referrals was developed so that staff did not have to respond to crisis situations. Other ASEs focussed on up-skilling staff so that they were better prepared to understand participants' needs. One ASE manager describes how a staff member was compelled to get training:

There was like a couple of kids with severe anxiety, one of them had an eating disorder [...] she realised that she actually didn't have a lot of skills that she needed. So she went and got youth mental health first aid training [...] we do inevitably become counselors[1].

Another ASE manager describes the struggle to support staff employed for their artistic skills to facilitate the involvement of participants, noting "we're not careers and that's a big issue. [...] It is very difficult"[6]. Many ASE managers nevertheless reflect that staff often manage to transcend these difficulties, "one of our strengths is, I would say, a sensitivity of all our staff, and our capacity to communicate sensitively with a complex range of people"[3].

It remained evident that across the ASEs there was a highly uneven understanding of the impacts of disadvantage on participants' capacities to engage with the kinds of enterprising activities that were offered. One ASE manager reflected on why young people from low-income neighbourhoods were not involved in a programme for disadvantaged young people:

I guess we could do more work in trying to get into the [...] suburbs that are the more low socio-economic [...] but I guess the main barrier is that those kids, unless we pick them up, they won't be able to come to rehearsals. We've had a few kids like that in the past who are very keen, very talented, but their parents don't really give a shit[1].

Other managers also noted the difficulties of engaging young people when their parents were not supportive or parents had different ideas of what constituted "art"[8]. The disadvantage experienced by youth involved in ASEs frequently extends to their families who may have limited exposure to creative practices and programmes. Frustration that was expressed towards parents of young people is suggestive of a limited insight into lived experiences of socio-economic disadvantage in their families and neighbourhoods where there may be limited resources and opportunities to engage with creative practices.

On the other hand, a potential strength of ASEs is that they use artistic practice to shift interest in young people away from the deficits of their situations. As one ASE manager describes:

I want these guys to experience producing at a high level because when you start to see what you can create at this level, you start to place value on your work. And then by extension, you start to place value on yourself. And when you place value on yourself, you're more motivated to go to the next step[5].

Art is offered as a strategy for engagement, as a source of pleasure, developing diverse social connections and creating pathways into further education and training (Winner *et al.*, 2013; Montgomery, 2017). This may explain the ambivalence of ASE managers, who simultaneously adopt and negate the idea of being disadvantaged, just as they ambivalently affirm and are critical of business and entrepreneurship. Implicitly acknowledging this conflicted positioning, one ASE manager argues for SE having realistic expectations:

So we're really lucky, [...] particularly in our leadership team and around us, we have people with a similar ideology who will do this work as best as they can but don't pretend one, we're saving the world and two, it will go on forever[4].

Enterprise as a necessity

The final site of ambivalence that this article considers is why, despite having registered with Social Traders and engaging in marketing strategies associated with business models, many of the managers interviewed are reluctant to describe their organisation's as SEs (Williams, 2007). One reason may be the way in which social enterprise is defined and understood in Australia, correlated directly to the proportion of income generated by the organisation. In 2018 Social Traders implemented a more rigorous definition of SE that required organisation's to demonstrate that they derive a "substantial" income from trade. Drawing on the FASES report of 2010, they stipulated that trade should account for "50 per cent or more if trading for more than five years; or 25 per cent or more if trading for three to five years; or a genuine and demonstrable intention to generate 50 per cent or more if trading for less than three years" (Social Traders, 2019; Barraket *et al.*, 2010). This income threshold did not apply to most of the ASEs interviewed. It also does not reflect international policy and practice (Dacin *et al.*, 2011).

This requirement presents an almost impossible hurdle for many ASEs, which operate in a sector that is already under pressure financially and reliant on large amounts of volunteerism and unpaid labour. Sholette (2011) describes this as the invisible but monumental "dark matter" of the art world. Trading activities for a majority of the ASEs surveyed in this study (10 out of 12) was estimated to raise between 10-40 per cent of the organisation's' income. Managers drew attention to the fact that "generally, art does not pay"[6]. Using art to promote social and economic inclusion for young people experiencing marginalisation and to generate revenue is an even more challenging proposition. It requires intensive amounts of time and energy to provide training and support and produce quality outcomes. As one ASE manager explained:

We scrape over the line every month [...] [but] I know I've done [...] a good job when, one of our artists completes a painting and is so delighted by it[6].

This focus on personal and social impacts that were generated was shared among most of the ASEs and managers were well aware of the commercial implications of this approach. As one ASE manager explained, "you're probably not always creating the best business

because we really always want to have a social impact”. [12] This dilemma was summed up well by another manager:

You’re trying to create social change like a charity would, you’re trying to run a business like a business would. And you’re saying that these two things can go together[10].

The difficulties of profiting from art, combined with an overriding social purpose, undermines the social enterprise status of ASEs under current industry and policy definitions. Across the ASEs that were interviewed, managers used the descriptor “social enterprise” somewhat opportunistically to describe the multiple funding channels they pursued to fund and support the work of their organisation’s. It is also likely that organisation’s feel compelled to adopt models – and deploy language – evoking concepts of the enterprise to appeal to funders across the business, philanthropic and government sectors. Writing from the UK and European perspective, [McRobbie \(2016, p. 11\)](#) observes that marketising – or at least being *seen* to be entrepreneurial – is “a necessity rather than a choice”. As one ASE manager observed:

Funding’s getting more and more competitive, no-one wants to fund arts [. . .] it’s tough. And so, thinking of having a business stream can be seen as solution. But it’s also tough[12].

What is also operative here is an element of happenstance – and this underscores the comparative commercial inexperience of many ASE workers. Entrepreneurialism is not an ambition or “calling”, but serendipitous, while social enterprise is a post facto designation. As one manager put it; “And I kind of thought, perhaps, we need to start a business [. . .] And people started to say to me, what you’re trying to do is a social enterprise”[5]. This is, perhaps, not uncharacteristic of many SEs more generally. A recent Australian study of social enterprise in the ethical retail and services sector has documented a similarly circumstantial and ambivalent adoption of commercial and business models in the pursuit of social and political goals ([Humphery, 2017](#)).

A reluctance to deploy the language of enterprise is also linked to political values. The arts have long been characterised by a critical and suspicious relationship to capitalism and commerce – despite the contradiction of its deep reliance on art markets ([McQuilten and White, 2016](#); [O’Brien, 2014](#)). While art is produced, circulated, consumed and disseminated within an economic system – depending on money for its creation, for the livelihood of its makers, and for its distribution – profit-making is rarely the primary goal of artists and arts workers in the sector. This was clearly evident in the interviews, with ASE managers quite critical of how some SEs operate and the unabashed commercial motivations driving them. Models of SE where an organisation runs a profitable business and donates the proceeds attracted particular criticism. Managers spoke of these SEs as paying lip service to social engagement and drew on the concept of “green washing”, where marketing strategies promote perceptions that a product is environmentally friendly, to describe some SEs as “social impact washing” to heighten the appeal of a product or service to consumers. From this critical perspective, some ASEs in this study conceded that their organisation’s were more aligned with a not-for-profit value system, rather than an entrepreneurial one; encapsulated by one manager who insisted; “But I think the reality is that we’re also very much a not-for-profit”[3].

The issues discussed in this section – such as the difficulty and undesirability, of commercialising processes of creativity and social interventions and support – points to fundamental tensions in concepts of social enterprise. SEs are aiming to redress enduring social issues of structural inequalities, while the scope of preferred solutions is being constricted to those that involve more concentrated commercial activities. This leaves SEs

navigating the troubling contradictions between art, social purpose and commerce that this article has been exploring while papering over the ways in which the logic of advanced capitalism is deeply implicated in how inequality is manifesting. This includes a license to disregard the social consequences of privileging profit and economic growth above all else. The struggles for SEs to generate sufficient revenue is inevitable and speaks to the failures, and disinterest, of markets and, increasingly, government policies to address social inequality.

While espousing commitments to commercialisation, ASEs are deeply reliant on philanthropy, government funding, individual and community donations, and the undervalued labour of staff and volunteers. Philanthropic and government funders are particularly powerful in setting agendas, as one ASE manager explains:

[They say] “here’s the money. You can have it if you do this, and you have to do this and you have to reach these people” [...] You definitely see organisations changing their focus or taking on new things to meet the [demands of] funders rather than to meet the beneficiaries’ needs[12].

There are also perceptions that funders, both philanthropic and government, are only interested in ASEs that can eventually become self-supporting. One ASE manager observed, “they’re always expressly interested in getting you going and then sending you on your way”. [11] This idea of self-sustainability is supported by definitions of social enterprise that stipulate specific capacities to generate revenue. ASE managers, thus, report that funders are particularly interested in the business-side of ASEs, including their ability to grow by scaling up activities and overlook the social impacts that are being achieved. As reported by one manager, this emphasis on entrepreneurship “gets inflated by funders, funders love it, so we’re always going “here’s the new business plan” to show that we can be self-sustaining and get the private dollars”[8]. Compounding this, corporate investors, may not have the experience to grasp the significance of social outcomes or to understand the constraints of art enterprise to achieve varied social and commercial outcomes. They rely on the idea of “scaling up” [3] as the pathway to income security. As one ASE manager observed, “I think that SEs can be pushed into, grow-grow-grow-grow”[2].

What is apparent across all the interviews is that social enterprise is a highly competitive environment, with ASEs in fierce competition for philanthropic and government funding, corporate customers who have budgets for products and services, and specific consumer markets. One manager voiced a common concern by complaining that ASEs were “using our energy to be in competition with our professional peers and our communities – it’s really troubling”[4]. A pernicious consequence of this competition is the need to market to both funders and customers various forms of marginalisation and to metaphorically (and sometimes literally) parade the marginalisation experienced by ASE participants to appeal to funders and find markets for products and services. One manager observed ASEs must appeal to the social consciousness of funders and customers while maintaining “the dignity of ourselves and the young people that we’re supporting”[5]. This raises considerations of whether some forms of disadvantage are more appealing to funders and customers than others, with risks of eclipsing the needs of some social groups. The ethical implications of such marketing of disadvantage are alarming, while beyond the scope of this article, are an important topic for future research. A connected area of future research indicated by this discussion is the need for deep analysis of how SEs manage their relationships with funders, the complexity of negotiating different approaches and priorities from different funders, and power imbalances in dealing with funders – a key source of the ambivalence that ASE managers describe.

One further dimension of framing the social engagement of creative practice as enterprise activity – as commerce – is the reconstitution of creative practice labour. The financial and resource limitations of ASEs have an immediate impact on the conditions of work for staff, in particular for those managing the complex demands of operating such organisation's. ASEs have also, of necessity, demanded the development of a range of competing skills – business and organisational management, social policy acumen and social care provision. Frequently relying on the contributions of volunteers to get by, many ASEs have ongoing struggles to provide regular employment and career pathways to staff and avoid burnout against relentless needs for multi-tasking for staff [4, 10, 11]: “the challenge is keeping on going, not harm people and do a good job”[4].

It is this challenging work that helps to explain a multi-dimensional ambivalence at the core of the entrepreneurialism involved in ASEs. The sheer changeability of bridging the domains of creative practice, social impact, and enterprise underscores this dilemma – a dilemma evoked by one manager:

It's vastly different if I'm talking to the CEO of Lendlease, versus if I'm talking to an Aboriginal Elder, versus if I'm talking to a 14-year-old kid who's just come out of jail [juvenile detention]. [...] not just me but for others in the organisation, my role and theirs often is incredibly multi-hat wearing[7].

Conclusion

This article has addressed key gaps in the literature on SE by considering the experience, attitudes and challenges of those managing and leading 12 ASEs in Australia. Situated in the cross-currents of an expanding international SE sector, shrinking funding for the arts locally and growing concerns about disengagement of young people from labour markets, ASEs experience conflicts and tensions in their organisational aims, their creativity activities, their attempts to address youth disadvantage and their pursuit of multiple revenue streams (Knell and Taylor, 2011). By considering the perspectives of those working in this complex space, the article explores the ways in which ASEs are navigating, reinforcing and occasionally challenging dominant market logics.

ASEs offer promising models of social engagement, particularly for young people who are disengaged from mainstream education and employment. The hybridity of the model is its strength, bringing together entrepreneurial skills and creative activity with the potential to shift focus from the deficits of young people and to instead promote their professional and artistic development. However, the multiple and conflicting goals of these organisation's present enormous challenges for managers and staff involved, both at organisational and personal levels. Further, these challenges are not yet supported at a policy or sector level. As Barraket and Furneaux (2012, p. 234) argue, “this hybridity, which is a presumed strength of SEs' innovative capabilities, is undermined by the limited capabilities of policy regimes to embrace hybridity”.

The SE sector and philanthropic sector's expectations that SEs will meet significant income generation targets are unrealistic. ASEs offer the potential to generate positive social outcomes for participants experiencing disadvantage but they struggle to perform competitively in markets. This struggle is linked to both the nature of art and its relation to commerciality and the market, and also to the time and resource intensive nature of working with young people experiencing marginalisation. As a result, of the organisation's participating, those with a “for-profit” focus had little to no direct engagement with young people experiencing disadvantage. Inversely, the organisation's with a strong focus on high artistic quality and professionalism struggled with resources to address the complex social

needs of their artists and participants, therefore, putting at risk their potential to create social outcomes.

These struggles speak less to the failure of ASEs to achieve the goals of the broader SE sector and more to the failure of the market to solve social problems. Here lies a core paradox of SE itself – a model built on the assumption that capitalism can be harnessed to mitigate the impacts of capitalism. This helps in understanding the ambivalence of ASE managers, who are trying to navigate a paradoxical economic ecosystem, while also seeing an opportunity for social and artistic outcomes through the SE model. Many ASE managers are not only ambivalent but also openly critical of the neoliberal forces that they work within.

Note

1. The report notes, “Forty-two per cent agreed or strongly agreed that goals to achieve commercial growth can sometimes be at odds with the desire to fulfil their mission, while an equal Forty-two per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement” (Barraket *et al.*, 2016).

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