7 Product in place

“Art is mysterious, but selling art is even more mysterious. The object itself is bought and sold, handed from one person to another, and yet countless factors are at work within the transaction. In order to grow in value, a work of art requires a particular psychological climate. At that moment, SoHo provided exactly the right amount of mental heat for art to thrive and for prices to soar. Expensive work from every period must be impregnated by the intangible—an idea of worth. This idea has the paradoxical effect of detaching the name of the artist from the thing, and the name becomes the commodity that is bought and sold. The object merely trails after the name as its solid proof” (Hustvedt 2003: 70).

PLACE IN PRODUCT

Creative industries are, in ways unlike other sectors of the economy, influenced by their place of origin (Molotch 1996, 2002, 2003). The characteristics of their localities critically affect the aesthetics and functions of creative products as place qualities (i.e., the aesthetic, natural, material, social, or technical elements
of the locale) become constitutive of the nature of the particular creative products. Molotch calls this “place in product” and clarifies: “The nature of a place affects what stuff can actually be because locale contains the ingredients, including subtle ones, that go into making up goods. And because […] places differ from one another, so does the stuff they produce” (Molotch 2003: 161). Creative industries tend to draw on local traditions and mental associations in their production and consumption practices. Often such differences provide a specific uniqueness to the product, yielding place-based comparative advantages. Danish design, for example, is aesthetically different from Italian design. The techno music that originated in Detroit differed from the Chicago electro and house music. Chelsea galleries pursue a different curatorial practice than the more experimental Williamsburg galleries. Thus even on intra-metropolitan level, creative industries and their practices can be influenced by their place of origin. Place-based differences may provide the embeddedness which characterizes the sense of belonging and external images inherent in clusters. Local innovative capabilities draw from the territorial history and characteristics and booster clusters to pull ahead. Local entrepreneurs become known for their specific collective style and through that superior to competitors thus the whole cluster may acquire a dominant market position.

The quantitative growth of a cluster is largely related to the perception of a unique style. The success of style development functions as a magnet for other entrepreneurs to locate there. Evans claimed at the 2005 “Creative Clusters” conference “Everyone associated with a successful cluster shares in its reputation, and so new arrivals get a free gift, a small boost to their kudos, just for turning up and joining in. A cluster’s reputation is the key indicator of its sustainability” (Evans 2005: no page). In other words, an association between goods and place yields a kind of “monopoly rent” for local businesses (Molotch 1996). It provides uniqueness and, if considered desirable, helps companies to grow. Thus, besides the infrastructure that every cluster provides, new entrepreneurs will also be able to associate their companies and goods with established place-based symbols and signs that re-value their products and services. Geographic origin branding distinguishes goods and aligns them with specific, geographically-determined, characteristics of worth.
Hence the question this chapter addresses is whether the interviewed creative entrepreneurs align their companies and organizations with any images and if so of what kind. What benefits do they see in such practices? What is the role of collective images and identities in entrepreneurial practices? What role do they play in the development of intra-metropolitan creative industries clusters?

**Creative identities**

During this research all creative entrepreneurs were asked to describe their work and in what way it differs from other creative work of places. Is it influenced by specific place-based qualities? And if so, in what way do the interviewed believe it adds to the uniqueness as well as value of their work?

In general all interviewed creative entrepreneurs claimed their work to be unique and different from their competitors. Moreover, some organizations that do not produce work but are mediators and distributors (e.g., galleries, theaters or concert halls) saw their singularity not only in the creative work they show but also in their organizational structures. Many of them talked about the inspirations they draw from their locations in the form of people-watching, daily encounters with local residents and other creative entrepreneurs as well as the architecture and history of their location. Most of the interviewed associated their locations with a specific form of freedom, an escape from pressures that are characterized as both physical and mental. In all the case study neighborhoods the interviewed creative entrepreneurs described the benefits of being removed from more tense real estate markets as well as more commercial intra-metropolitan creative industries clusters like Mitte or Manhattan.

However does their identification with location make them identifiably South Bronx graphic designers, Wedding musicians, Friedrichshain theater companies, Long Island City screenwriters? Amongst all four case study areas, the South Bronx has the strongest creative, style based identity due to its history as the birthplace of mambo and salsa, graffiti and rap. One of the interviewees explained:

“What it used to mean to be a Bronx artist I think is hip-hop. See, hip-hop was born here. I mean it’s incredible that you can attribute a whole worldwide culture to one place. It’s pretty amazing. [...] It grew out of
the late 70s and it developed a reputation that was very particular to what is was doing. Although, it wasn’t place-oriented. It was place-oriented in that it was the Bronx, but it was happening all over the Bronx. It wasn’t happening in a place. So the Bronx acquired an ambience rather than somewhere to go. That’s the way the Bronx has always been artistically. It has always been, you know, you go here or you go there or you go here or you go there and there is no established place for it. There is just ‘You say Bronx – We say hip-hop’. Before that ‘You say Bronx – You say degradation.’ And before that ‘You say Bronx – You say nothing. You say outside of the city’” (personal interview, 03/06).

Because of that history South Bronx creative entrepreneurs engage most strongly with the question of place-based identity. Whilst Friedrichshain, Long Island City and Wedding creative entrepreneurs relate to their location mainly by being a place-specific entity, many South Bronx creative organizations consciously engage with the neighborhoods’ cultural history. Creative businesses that serve directly to a South Bronx audience especially see themselves as South Bronx entrepreneurs in a creative way, meaning that their products are rooted in the neighborhoods’ cultural history, which they artistically represent. For instance, Pregones Theater has a “presence in the South Bronx and it is also a product of the South Bronx” (personal interview, artistic director, 02/06). Its work is rooted in the local Latino culture especially Puerto Rican culture, performed in English and Spanish and geared towards the Bronx Latino community. In addition, the interviewed creative entrepreneurs who grew up or worked for a long time in the South Bronx all identified themselves and their work very strongly with the neighborhood, its creative forms as well as diverse ethnic population. For them, geographic identity and geographic origin is very closely tied to the history and culture of the South Bronx.

It is the newcomers who have a difficult time expressing this place-based identity, especially when their creative activities do not fit with the South Bronx artistic traditions of graffiti, salsa, rap or, more recently, reaggaton. Some of the interviewed are very cautious about new residents claiming the mantle of the “Bronx artist.” One interviewee complained, “What is a Bronx artist? Is that somebody that makes art about Bronx issues? Maybe my art is about Bronx issues if you want to stretch it. It would be very colonial of people to come into
this neighborhood and call themselves a Bronx artist” (personal interview, 12/05).

Others are aware of their identity as South Bronx creative entrepreneurs, however, they attribute this association to the media that categorizes entrepreneurs according to their location and on cultural institutions that frame exhibitions as well as scholarships around geographic origin.

“I am identified as a Bronx artist. In my resume right now you’ll see these are the shows that I’ve been in. In the last 6 months I’ve been in 6 shows. [...] Those are the six. So four of those shows were in the Bronx. Two of the shows had the word Bronx in the title that I did not come up with. And they were both intense. ‘Bronx Art Now.’ ‘Bronx recognizes its Own.’ But ‘its Own’? Now I am like a Bronx artist. All right, if you want to call me that. I didn’t ask for the title but all of the sudden if you would look at my resume you would say ‘Oh, here is a Bronx artist’ and I’ll take the identity if somebody wants to give it to me but I am not pursuing it and it’s not an identity that I claim, to be a Bronx artist. I am an artist living in the Bronx” (personal interview, 12/05).

The resentment towards calling oneself a Bronx or South Bronx creative entrepreneur is strongly related to the distinction between “native” South Bronx creative entrepreneur and the newcomer. However, while many South Bronx creative entrepreneurs see South Bronx creative activities as still being imbued with salsa, rap, and graffiti and carried out by people of color or Latino origin, the media portrays South Bronx creative entrepreneurs in a very different way. For instance, the New York Times article, “The New Bridge and Tunnel Crowd” (Cotter 2005) does not feature any of those creative traditions. The article focuses solely on newly arrived South Bronx creative entrepreneurs who do not engage with the historic creative styles of the neighborhood. In my interviews all of those portrayed in the article deny a South Bronx identity. One responded with outrage to the question:

“Am I a Bronx artist? These papers! All of the sudden I have a public image as a Bronx artist. If you google me you’ll see Bronx art, Bronx art, Bronx art. I am not a Bronx artist. I am an artist in New York. I live in the Bronx. The Bronx wants to claim as a Bronx artist? Okay, I am not ashamed of it but it’s not like I am making Bronx art. [...] I just got here three years ago. What am I gonna sit here and go ‘I am a Bronx artist.’
Hell no! I am Diaspora. I am somebody that came to New York. And I am in the Bronx. How am I a Bronx artist?” (personal interview, 12/05).

The resistance of this interviewee against a “Bronx” label was twofold: The sculptor did not see his work aesthetically related to the traditional creative forms stemming from the South Bronx as well as believed that a true Bronx artist is either African-American or of Latin-American origin which he is both not.

As past creative forms as well as ethnic origin played such a strong part in the way creative entrepreneurs identified themselves with the South Bronx, I also asked other New York City creative entrepreneurs about their association with ethnic identities. One evening I questioned the board of directors of Local Project (Long Island City, see previous chapter) whose members are all of Latin-American origin about their Latino identity. An agitated discussion developed between two of the board members. The first person (P1) replied,

“It’s just what makes the vibe. Because we are all Latinos.”

(P2, interrupting) “But that’s not bad. That is good!”

(P1), “No no, it’s not bad. But we are not a Latino only organization in the sense that this is only Latin and we don’t want anything but Latin […] I don’t really like to use the Latino word. I don’t like the word because it means too much. And it doesn’t mean what you want it to mean. It means like immigrant, illegal, in New York. I don’t use that word. We are New York urban!”

(P2, interrupting) “But we are underrepresented artists!”

They continued fighting and P1 eventually looked at me and said, “Forget the word Latino, please!” A third person who had been silent so far added “It’s [Local Project] managed by Latin people. We are geographically Latin but that doesn’t mean that your mind is over there.” Finally, P2 ended the discussion with the remark “You say Latin in New York and they think rice, beans, chicken, salsa, and merengue. And we are nothing like that!” (personal interview, 12/05)
The interviewed felt that their work is being evaluated by stereotypes associated with their ethnic origin. They saw this alignment of their work not only decisive but also as devaluation and therefore rejected it. Their strong reaction hints to the perception that mere aesthetics and the quality of work are superseded by superficial and stereotypical categories of worth.

On the other hand, there are also creative entrepreneurs who try to capture exactly those stereotypes and integrate them into their work aesthetically. For instance, one interviewee told a tail about John Ahearn, a very prominent sculptor working in the South Bronx for many decades. Ahearn made “art about Bronx issues” but was later rejected for that by local residents who wished for a different representation of the neighborhood.

“He had his studio totally open to the public and the street and was making life casts of neighborhood people from kids to grandmothers. Where people would participate. He got to be very well known. He had big shows in galleries in SoHo, in museums, exhibits, things like that. But he was very true to that sense. And then of course the neighborhood changed around Walton Avenue. The last sculptural event that he did, was he created some really amazing sculptures of neighborhood characters. One was like, no doubt, a drug dealer. A sinister character with a pitbull. Another one was a girl with roller skates. Another was a, maybe you could say, a loser, a big guy with a big boombox. But they were wonderful sculptures, these neighborhood characters. And he won a foundation grant to place these sculptures on a near wall where everything was being reconstructed and built up again. And the sculptures were put up in the plaza and the neighborhood went nuts. They would have liked role-model types, a businessman going up and down with a briefcase. You can’t control how people perceive what you do when you reach out to the community. But the community has changed and now it rejects you” (personal interview, 12/05).

Overall, local identities are not stagnant perceptions. They change over time according to social negotiation processes and are continually reproduced (Massey 1994). What will be regarded as the next South Bronx dominant creative identity and form of aesthetic expression will be subject of social as well as creative industries market negotiations and power relationships that go well beyond the neighborhoods’ boundaries.