



Article

# 'Absolutely free'? The role of relational work in sustaining artistic innovation

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## Abstract

Drawing on the relational perspective of artistic innovation, which suggests that different types of ties (weak vs. strong) lead to different outcomes in terms of the development and implementation of new artistic ideas, this study uses an in-depth case study of Italian choreographer Mauro Bigonzetti to explore the role of the relational work artists deploy to develop and implement their artwork. We investigate how artists engage in specific relational actions (broadening, bonding, embedding and dis-embedding) with producing organizations, and how these actions lead to innovation over time. The findings suggest that artistic innovation moves through four stages – proximal innovation, fuzzy innovation, established innovation and maintained innovation – sustained by an artist's oscillation between a network characterized by strong ties with few organizations and a network characterized by weak ties with many organizations, depending on the artist's quests for inclusion and differentiation. In this process, a long-lasting relationship between the artist and a specific organization may 'pivot' artistic innovation.

## Keywords

artistic innovation, case study, creative industries, network, relational work

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## Introduction

Innovation, typically acknowledged as an important base for organizational success, is inherently uncertain and risky, since it implies a departure from customary ways of doing things (e.g. Volberda, Van den Bosch, & Mihalache, 2014; Wijnberg, 2004). This dual nature of innovation is ‘writ large in the cultural sector’ (Sgourev, 2013a, p. 551) – art worlds are characterized by aesthetic canons and conventions collectively established by the individuals and the organizations that participate in artistic fields (Becker, 1982). Thus, in pursuing their own artistic ideas, artists face a key dilemma regarding whether to follow or deviate from extant art world conventions. When artists conform to extant conventions and aesthetics they become ‘mainstream’, so that the implementation of their ‘canonical’ ideas becomes much less problematic (Becker, 1976, p. 706). On the contrary, when artists deviate from established conventions, they bear the risk of being ignored or rejected (Becker, 1982).

In line with the idea that innovation is the ‘development and implementation of new ideas by people who over time engage with others within an institutional context’ (Van de Ven, 1986, p. 591), a growing number of scholars have adopted a relational perspective to explore how the social structure in which an artist is embedded could facilitate artistic innovation (e.g. Sgourev, 2013b; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). Drawing on the fundamental tenet that networks of relationships represent both social contexts and conduits for relevant social resources (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1974), extant studies have investigated the relationship between the characteristics of networks of relationships (e.g. strong vs. weak ties) and their outcomes in terms of novelty. However, prior studies have examined this relationship at either a single point in time or a series of time points. In both cases, researchers have underestimated the role of individual agency and failed to provide insight into the process by which individuals can shape their networks of relationships in an attempt to develop and implement their artistic ideas.

This paper, thus, aims at providing a more nuanced understanding of the process by which artistic innovation can be actively sought out and sustained over time by an artist. Drawing on extant literature (e.g. Alvarez, Mazza, Strandgaard Pedersen, & Svejenova, 2005; Becker, 1982; Lena & Pachucki, 2013), we define artistic innovation as *the trajectory deployed over time by an artist’s work in terms of style and aesthetics, which can exhibit different degrees of novelty in relation to different referent conventions – those of a cultural field, those of a particular sub-field, or those an artist imposes on himself/herself*. In line with this definition, we advance a theoretical model in which artistic innovation is the result not of a particular network of relationships (e.g. in terms of strong vs. weak ties), but of the relational work deployed by an artist over time in an attempt to manage their relationships with the organizations operating in the field. More specifically, artistic innovation is portrayed as the result of an artist’s continuous oscillation from a more ‘closed’ network of relationships (i.e. strong ties with few organizations) to a more ‘open’ one (i.e. weak ties with a large number of organizations).

This paper contributes to the extant literature in three main ways. First, we offer a more dynamic understanding of artistic innovation by highlighting the relational work an artist undertakes to develop and implement their artistic ideas. Second, in highlighting the role played by individual agency we show how these actions are triggered by endogenous factors, specifically individual quests aimed at either inclusion or autonomy and creative freedom. Third, we point out how the relationships an individual develops with the organizations operating in the field can affect artistic innovation. Our contribution draws on a specific instance of artistic innovation promoted by one of the most famous Italian choreographers, Mauro Bigonzetti.

## Theoretical Background

Drawing on the idea of art as a collective process (Becker, 1982), an increasing number of scholars have shifted their interest from the study of artists’ individual traits to their interpersonal ties

(e.g. Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Jones, 2010). These studies share the key tenet that a deeper understanding of novel art production should depart from the traditional conception of an artist as a uniquely gifted person and demand ‘that the creative individual be placed within a network of interpersonal relationships’ (Simonton, 1984, p. 1273). However, there is still debate on whether strong or weak ties are more likely to facilitate (or conversely to reduce) artistic innovation. Specifically, extant studies have primarily focused on artistic innovation in terms of either the generation of novel ideas or the implementation of such ideas.

Proponents of weak ties – relationships that involve infrequent interactions with counterparts and low emotional intensity (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003) – suggest that broad-ranging weak ties promote the generation of novel ideas because they facilitate access to new, non-redundant information and diverse knowledge (e.g. Perretti & Negro, 2007; Sosa, 2011). Moreover, because ties act as conduits for socialization into aesthetic conventions and norms of conduct (Uzzi & Spiro, 2005), individuals with weak ties are more insulated from the homogenizing influences of established conventions, and thus are more likely to advance alternative views (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008).

Conversely, proponents of strong ties warn that if weak ties enable the development of artistic ideas that deviate from established conventions, ‘implementing those ideas is another story’ (Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010, p. 48). Because they challenge the established conventions, more innovative ideas have a greater potential to elicit controversy, and thus face a higher risk of being rejected regardless of their intrinsic worth (Sgourev, 2013b). Strong ties, which can act as conduits for mobilizing the social support and the resources necessary to implement their creative ideas, can help artists complete their artwork (Kremp, 2010). Further, strong ties provide other benefits such as reciprocal trust, collaboration, risk sharing and complex knowledge transfer, which in turn support creativity (e.g. Starkey, Barnatt, & Tempest, 2000; Tempest & Starkey, 2004). These results are in line with empirical evidence provided by studies adopting a psychological approach, which suggest that the emotional intensity associated with strong ties facilitates the development of supportive environmental conditions in which individuals experience a higher level of motivation, have greater expectations of reciprocity and are more likely to propose creative ideas without perceiving a risk of ridicule (e.g. Edmondson, 1999; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996).

Although previous studies have paved the way for a better understanding of how artists’ networks of relationships can affect artistic innovation, our understanding of this phenomenon remains incomplete in two important ways. First, previous studies left under-explored the process by which individuals act to change their relationships over time (by creating new relations, strengthening existing ones, etc.) in an attempt to develop and implement their ideas. Even studies adopting a more longitudinal perspective have mainly explored how, at a series of time points, different structural characteristics or network positions lead to different outcomes in terms of innovation (e.g. Cattani, Ferriani, & Allison, 2014; Zaheer & Soda, 2009) without considering the role of agency. Second, previous studies did not investigate how artists’ relationships with the organizations operating in the field affect artistic innovation. While the extant literature acknowledges that artists collaborate with different organizations on a project-by-project basis (e.g. Jones, 2010; Menger, 1999) and these relationships can provide the actors involved with several benefits (e.g. legitimacy, reputation or consecration; Braden, 2009; Giuffre, 1999), to the best of our knowledge no studies have investigated how this kind of relationship affects artistic innovation.

This paper, thus, offers three main contributions to the extant literature. First, we shed light on the process by which individuals interact with other actors in the field in an attempt to develop and implement their ideas. In doing so, we refer to recent studies that show that the benefits of a particular network of relationships may change over time and individuals deploy a set of actions aimed at developing either strong or weak ties depending on different contingent factors (e.g. Fleming, Mingo, & Chen, 2007; Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010). Second, we highlight how endogenous factors (i.e. individual quests and needs) may trigger individual agency. In doing so, we refer

to extant studies on artistic motivation, which highlight how the drivers of individual action in art worlds differ from the drivers of individual action in other industries (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Menger, 1999). In particular, because artists usually strive between the opposing quests for assimilation in the field's norms and conventions and differentiation from others engaged in similar artwork (e.g. Alvarez et al., 2005; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003), we highlight how changes in these quests may trigger different actions through which an individual shifts from stronger ties to weaker ones (and vice versa) over time.

Finally, we follow the suggestion of Delmestri, Montanari and Usai (2005) in their study of the Italian film industry to differentiate between horizontal relations (director–screenplay writer, director–actors, etc.) and vertical ones (director–producing company, director–distributing company) by exploring how vertical relationships affect artistic innovation. We believe this under-explored relational issue can offer new insights because in art worlds the success of innovation rests on the sources of support that an artist is able to mobilize, rather than on the intrinsic worth of works ‘which is always difficult to ascertain’ (Becker, 1982, p. 310). Further, because artists usually move from one employer to the next on a project-by-project basis, forming and ending partnerships in order to support their artistic endeavours and accomplish their professional goals (e.g. Jones, 1996; Svejnova, 2005), the study of how an artist shapes their relationships with different organizations over time can provide interesting insights into the stages in which artistic innovation emerges and is sustained.

## Research Setting and Methods

We adopted a case-based methodology (Yin, 2009). Case studies are ‘particularly well suited to new research areas’ (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 548) and to generating novel theory, because they provide useful insights into answering ‘how? and why? questions’ (Yin, 2009, p. 9). More specifically, the perspective developed here is grounded in an explanatory case study (Yin, 2009) that we conducted on Mauro Bigonzetti, an Italian choreographer of contemporary dance.

Given our research interest, we were concerned with finding an empirical setting that placed a premium on novelty and enabled us to observe how an artist could manage their relationships with producing organizations (i.e. vertical relationships) in order to develop and implement his/her artistic ideas. Contemporary dance is a form of modern dance that emerged in the 1950s. Although originally informed by classical ballet, it has since developed its own peculiar aesthetic grammar characterized by the refusal of the idea of dance as a narrative form of art, suspension of the symmetry typical of the classical ballet, changes in rhythm and speed, and the incorporation of elements from other forms of art (Atler, 1999). The choreographer plays a central role in the dance composition – entering the rehearsal space with ideas about choreography and interacting with other actors (dancers, costumers, light designers, etc.) in developing, refining and implementing his/her ideas (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). Further, choreographers typically collaborate with a variety of companies on a project-by-project basis. Thus, contemporary dance provides an interesting setting in which our phenomenon of interest would be observable.

We focus on a single extreme case (Yin, 2009): Mauro Bigonzetti, an Italian choreographer who has developed and implemented artistic ideas that increasingly deviated from existing conventions of Italian choreography and have contributed to the establishment of contemporary choreography in Italy. Bigonzetti is considered ‘the most important Italian choreographer of his generation’ (*Herald-Tribune*, February 17, 2008) and among ‘the top rank of world choreographers’ (*Montreal Gazette*, July 27, 2013). Bigonzetti’s case is well documented because the events are of recent origin, documental data are available, and all key actors were available for interviews.

Bigonzetti was born in Rome in 1960 and trained as classical dancer. In 1983, he joined Fondazione Nazionale della Danza Aterballetto (hereafter, Aterballetto), which is 'Italy's most famous contemporary ballet company' (*Globe Review*, August 6, 2013). In the last years of his career as a dancer, Bigonzetti created his first choreographies, which conformed to the typical Italian neoclassical aesthetic standards, but also showed 'a degree of novelty' (Poletti, 1991, p. 20). In 1993, he started his career as freelance choreographer. Since his debut 'he showed a style that deviated from the ordinary practices [of] Italian dance' (Pedroni, 2011, p. 335). In later positions and projects, he created choreographies that 'contributed to developing an Italian way of contemporary dance' (interview with Expert 2, March 2012). From 1993 to 2012 Bigonzetti collaborated with 22 ballet companies to create 84 choreographies, at the beginning for smaller and more experimental Italian ballet companies such as Balletto di Toscana and later for more established and internationally renowned ones such as New York City Ballet and Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre.

### *Data collection*

We conducted field work between November 2009 and July 2012, gathering data from multiple sources: interviews, documents and direct observation (see Table 1).

We conducted direct observation between November 2009 and April 2010, visiting Aterballetto, the ballet company where Mauro Bigonzetti was working as resident choreographer, twice a month. We focused on observing Bigonzetti and the dancers during rehearsals and shows, and on attending staff and management meetings. We also identified key informants in both the artistic area and staff services, who became the main sources for documenting and reconstructing the history of Bigonzetti, as well as the main features of the Italian dance industry. After each visit, we wrote observation notes and compared our impressions.

In addition to direct observation, we conducted 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 members of Aterballetto. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Bigonzetti agreed to participate in three interviews lasting 30 to 45 minutes each. Interviews addressed his personal background, his early and current career, his future professional opportunities, the main characteristics of his occupation, his choreographies, his collaborations with other artists, and his relationships with Italian and foreign ballet companies.

At Aterballetto, we conducted interviews with the general director (twice), the artistic director who is also the founder of Balletto di Toscana (twice), the two maîtres, the general secretary and the tour manager. These interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and focused on the organization's history, its main organizational features, the relationship between Aterballetto and Bigonzetti, and Bigonzetti's reputation and artistic style. We also interviewed five dancers (the two with the highest organizational tenure, two who had recently joined the company, and one with average organizational tenure). Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Dancers were asked about their personal background, the main features of their occupation, Bigonzetti's artistic style, and how he works with them to create choreographies.

Finally, we also engaged in informal conversations with four industry experts identified through the first author's personal networks: two general directors of important Italian theatres and two journalists working for renowned industry magazines. With one exception (one of the journalists), we did not digitally record and transcribe these interviews. However, the two general directors allowed us to take detailed handwritten notes. These interviews allowed us to gain insights into the dance industry and the main characteristics of a choreographer's career, and to have data on external points of view about Bigonzetti.

Table 1. Collected data and use in analysis.

Data types (dates)	Amount and sources	Use in the analysis	List of interviewees and their professional background
Aterballetto interviews (Nov 2009–Jul 2012) In-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 members of Aterballetto (Bigonzetti included). Some interviewees were interviewed multiple times	16 interviews for a total duration of 14 hours	To collect information about Bigonzetti's career and background, and the organizational characteristics of Aterballetto. To gather perspectives on the evolution of Bigonzetti's artwork and the main features of his collaboration with Aterballetto and other ballet companies	<p><i>Mauro Bigonzetti</i>  <i>Gianni Ottolini</i>: Member of Aterballetto's Board of Directors (2002–2007); general director of Aterballetto (2008 to present)  <i>Cristina Bozzolini</i>: Founder and director of Balletto di Toscana (1975–2000); artistic director of Aterballetto (2007 to present)  <i>Maître 1</i>: Dancer with Aterballetto (1983–2001); maître of Aterballetto (2002 to present)  <i>Maître 2</i>: Maître of Aterballetto (2005 to present)  <i>General secretary</i>: General secretary of Aterballetto (2005 to present)  <i>Tour manager</i>: Secretary to Aterballetto's artistic director (1997–1999); foreign relations officer of Aterballetto (1999–2009); tour manager of Aterballetto (2009 to present)  <i>Dancer 1</i>: Dancer with Aterballetto (2001 to present)  <i>Dancer 2</i>: Dancer with Aterballetto (2010 to present)  <i>Dancer 3</i>: Dancer with Aterballetto (2007 to present)  <i>Dancer 4</i>: Dancer with Aterballetto (2003 to present)  <i>Dancer 5</i>: Dancer with Aterballetto (2003 to present)  <i>Expert 1</i>: Journalist for a renowned dance industry magazine and lecturer in history of contemporary dance  <i>Expert 2</i>: Journalist for a renowned dance industry magazine and lecturer in history of contemporary dance  <i>Expert 3</i>: Director of a theatre in the North of Italy  <i>Expert 4</i>: Director of a theatre in the North of Italy</p>
Industry expert interviews (Nov 2009–Mar 2012) Informal conversations with four industry experts (two directors of Italian theatres and two journalists) Aterballetto observation (Nov 2009–Apr 2010) Direct observations including company rehearsal and shows, staff and management meetings Documental data (Jan 1990–Jul 2012) LexisNexis® Academic news database; Aterballetto's website, official documents and press archives	Four interviews for a total duration of three hours  12 days in field  153 articles and documents	To gain some insights on the dance industry, on the main characteristics of a choreographer's career, and the evolution of Bigonzetti's artwork  To understand the main features of Bigonzetti's artwork and identify key informants for documenting and reconstructing the history of Bigonzetti  To reconstruct Bigonzetti's career; delineate the main features of his artistic style, and to gain more information about the drivers of his actions and the features of his relationships with the ballet companies he worked for	

In addition to field observations and interviews, we gathered documental information by searching LexisNexis® Academic for newspaper and magazine articles that contained the word 'Bigonzetti' and were published between January 1990 and July 2012. We found 50 relevant articles that provided useful data to reconstruct Bigonzetti's career and to obtain more information about the development and the implementation of his artworks. We also gathered data from Aterballetto's website, official documents and press archives, focusing on articles published in the years Bigonzetti changed his artistic role in Aterballetto or the years before or after these transitions (i.e. 1989–1991, 1992–1994, 1996–1998 and 2006–2008). The final sample included 103 relevant articles that provided data on Bigonzetti's career and his relationship with Aterballetto as well as other points of view on the focal events, which allowed us to compare the opinions expressed in our interviews with those expressed earlier in newspaper and magazine articles.

### *Data analysis*

The data analysis follows the sequence proposed by Langley (1999). Thus, the initial stage of analysis involved compilation of an 'event history' to document 'who did what, and when' (Garud & Rappa, 1994), and a narrative account of Bigonzetti's career, the created choreographies and his relationships with different ballet companies over time.

Next, we conducted an inductive analysis of the qualitative data we collected. Following the iterative process recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990), we travelled back and forth between interview notes, journal articles, direct observation notes and extant theory. The use of multiple data collection methods allowed us to triangulate the data and thus to provide stronger substantiation of our constructs (Eisenhardt, 1989). For example, we compared our interviews with Bigonzetti with the claims that managers of Aterballetto made in our interviews and in the analysed articles, and found consistent evidence on periods when the choreographer truly enjoyed working for Aterballetto and perceived the organizational successes as his own, and periods when the level of emotional intensity between the two parties was lower.

In addition, we independently read the collected data in order to develop a holistic understanding of the case. At several points in time, as we continued to incorporate new data we discussed our interpretations and the emergent themes. In these discussions, we did not seek to measure inter-rater convergence. Rather, we shared and discussed impressions and interpretations of the case until we reached a common understanding and agreement among all three authors. Our interest focused on the way Bigonzetti has managed his relationships with dance companies in order to develop and implement his artistic ideas. Thus, after the general theme of 'relational work' as a set of actions aimed at managing relationships with producing organizations (i.e. vertical relationships) emerged, we continued with a microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), delving into the data for categories and their characteristics.

Categories such as 'relational bonding', 'relational embedding', 'relational dis-embedding' and 'relational broadening' emerged and were refined in a subsequent travelling back and forth between data and theory. 'Relational bonding' refers to the extent to which over time an individual interacts with an organization and the level of emotional effort they spend in such a relationship. In our case, relational bonding is high when Bigonzetti collaborates with and devotes great emotional resources to the relationship with a ballet company he has already collaborated with, and is low when Bigonzetti engages very little in such actions. Therefore, relational bonding affects the strength of a vertical relationship (Granovetter, 1974). 'Relational embedding' refers to the extent to which over time an individual increases the types of relationships they have with another actor in their network, thus increasing the multiplexity of the relationship (Cotton, Shen, & Livne-Tarandach, 2011). The more types of relationships exist between two actors, the higher the multiplexity of the

relationship. For example, relational embedding occurred when Bigonzetti began to simultaneously take the roles of dancer and freelance choreographer in a company where he used to work only as a dancer. ‘Relational dis-embedding’ refers to the extent to which over time an individual decreases the types of relationships they have with another actor in their network, thus reducing the multiplexity of the relationship. For instance, relational dis-embedding occurred when Bigonzetti shifted from fulfilling two positions (artistic director and resident choreographer) to only one (resident choreographer). Drawing on the ideas of Vissa (2012), ‘relational broadening’ refers to the extent to which over time an individual reaches out from extant vertical relationships to develop relationships with new organizations. In our case, relational broadening is high when Bigonzetti develops relationships with ballet companies out of his extant relationships and low when Bigonzetti does little to develop new vertical relationships.

In addition to identifying these categories, we identified the main triggers of Bigonzetti’s relational work over time. We worked abductively (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006), moving from evidence back to the extant literature on motivation to produce artwork (e.g. Alvarez et al., 2005; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007), identifying the emergence over time of different individual quests as the main reason Bigonzetti engaged in the above-mentioned relational actions.

To capture how Bigonzetti’s relational work has contributed to the ‘introduction in the field ... of something new’ (Castañer & Campos, 2002, p. 31), part of the theory building focused on the identification of relevant stages of the evolution of his artwork. The stages had to exhibit variation in the main features of the choreographies, in particular, the extent to which they deviated from the existing conventions of the Italian dance field. For each stage, we identified the relational work of Bigonzetti in terms of relational actions he engaged in and the extent to which he activated such actions.

In addition to the ‘what’ of the model (the characteristics of vertical relationships, relational actions, etc.), we also addressed the questions of ‘who’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ (Whetten, 1989). Finally, selective coding was used to integrate and refine the emerging theory. We ended the analytical process when we felt that theoretical saturation had occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Case Study and Findings

In this section, we describe the main relational actions in which Bigonzetti has been engaged over time as he shaped his vertical relationships, highlighting the factors that triggered these actions, and the effects on his choreographies. The data revealed four stages in the evolution of his artwork. We gave each stage a label that is part of our conceptual work and aims to capture the process of artistic innovation pursued by the artist through his relational work. Table 2 presents a brief description of each stage of Bigonzetti’s relational work and Table 3 provides illustrative empirical evidence on the emergent categories.

### *Stage 1 (January 1990–July 1993): Proximal innovation*

Bigonzetti began his career as choreographer in 1990 when he was 33 years old and a dancer at Aterballetto. He explained: ‘Dancing began to bore me. ... But I felt that I had to do something else, and that something led me to choreography’ (interview with *Dance Magazine*, February 1999). The current general director of Aterballetto noted that undertaking a career as a choreographer is not a common choice among former dancers, explaining that ‘only a small percentage manage to become professional choreographers’ (interview, May 2010). Bigonzetti was very aware of the difficulties of becoming a choreographer, especially in the Italian dance field, where the neoclassical style was still dominant and ‘where contemporary dance is often forgotten in the



**Table 2.** The stages of Bigonzetti's relational work.

	Stage 1: Proximal innovation 1990–1993	Stage 2: Fuzzy innovation 1993–1997	Stage 3: Established innovation 1997–2007	Stage 4: Maintained innovation 2008–2012
Summary of the stages	Bigonzetti is a dancer with Aterballetto, which gives him the opportunity to explore his potential as choreographer. After his successful debut, he continues to reconcile dance with choreography. He creates seven choreographies for different ballet companies (including Aterballetto). His artwork is basically neoclassical with some elements closer to contemporary aesthetics.	Bigonzetti starts his career as freelance choreographer. He collaborates both with Italian and international ballet companies creating 15 choreographies. His artwork features more innovative elements that deviate from the neoclassical conventions. However, his artwork does not always result in a complete departure from existing conventions.	Bigonzetti becomes the artistic director and the resident choreographer at Aterballetto, completely renewing its repertoire. He creates 31 choreographies for Aterballetto. He also reduces his collaboration with other ballet companies. Bigonzetti fully establishes his style within the convention of contemporary dance.	As resident choreographer at Aterballetto, Bigonzetti creates one new choreography per year. He also collaborates with selected high-end ballet companies. His mastery of contemporary style is outstanding, but his choreographies start to show some elements of mannerism.
Individual quest	Inclusion: Bigonzetti wants to explore new professional opportunities as a choreographer, while minimizing the risk of being excluded from the Italian dance field.	Creative freedom: He wants to embark on an in-depth exploration of his artistic ideas.	Independence: He wants to increase his autonomy in pursuing artistic ideas.	Renewal: He wants to renew his artwork.
Relational work				
Relational broadening	Medium – Bigonzetti develops new relationships with different ballet companies.	High – He develops new relationships with many ballet companies.	Low – He develops new relationships only with few international companies.	Medium – He develops new relationships with different ballet companies.
Relational bonding	High – Bigonzetti devotes great effort and emotional involvement to the relationship with Aterballetto.	Low – He works repeatedly with Balletto di Toscana, but he does not devote great emotional involvement to this relationship.	High – He devotes great effort and emotional involvement to the relationship with Aterballetto.	Medium – He collaborates regularly with Aterballetto, but he also devotes time and effort to the relationships with other ballet companies.
Relational (dis-) embedding	Embedding – Besides his role as dancer, Bigonzetti fulfills informally the role of choreographer at Aterballetto.	Dis-embedding – He leaves Aterballetto and works as a freelance choreographer for several ballet companies.	Embedding – He takes the roles of artistic director and resident choreographer at Aterballetto.	Dis-embedding – He leaves the role of artistic director of Aterballetto, while retaining his collaboration as resident choreographer.

Table 3. The stages of Bigonzetti's relational work: examples of empirical evidence.

	Stage 1: Proximal innovation 1990–1993	Stage 2: Fuzzy innovation 1993–1997	Stage 3: Established innovation 1997–2007	Stage 4: Maintained innovation 2008–2012
Artistic innovation	Beethoven's classic <i>Grosse Fuge</i> ... was mirrored in the abstract, pure neoclassicism of Bigonzetti's <i>Pittura per Archi</i> . ( <i>Dance Magazine</i> , May, 1995) <i>Sei in movimento</i> , <i>Prova con Mozart and Turmpike</i> show that Bigonzetti is a choreographer with a clear neoclassical inspiration but also with a need for abstraction. ( <i>Giornale della Musica</i> , June, 1992)	The choreography is blunt, uncompromisingly modern in its development of new expressions that do not deny the past, but assimilate it. ( <i>L'Unità</i> , October 2, 1994) While these passages were clearly stamped with classical technique, elsewhere the choreography displays an almost mongrel-like character ... While it is dynamic, <i>Mediterranea</i> has a weak centre. Bigonzetti has trouble developing a clear focus. ( <i>Globe and Mail</i> , March 28, 1998)	Bigonzetti constructs unconventional and acrobatic bodily shapes from the dancers' limbs. The opening work, <i>Les Noces</i> , set to Stravinsky's awesome score ... The movements are mostly sharp, angular and aggressive. ( <i>South China Morning Post</i> , March 15, 2005) <i>Absolutely Free</i> is characterized by the absence of pre-established patterns ... Moments of strong technical rigor alternate to pure entertainment in a collage of old and new pieces, the result of experiences continuously renewed. ( <i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i> , May 25, 2012)	His [Bigonzetti's] last choreographies created for Aterballetto show some sort of mannerism. His works created for other companies are more interesting. (Expert 2, interview, March 2012) In <i>Oltremare</i> , Bigonzetti recycles the same effects. Foot fetishism and acrobatic body flipping recur. ( <i>New York Times</i> , February 9, 2009)
Individual quest	<b>Inclusion:</b> I [Bigonzetti] am fascinated by the abstract style of Balanchine, Forsythe and Van Manen ... but I believe that even in the most abstract ballet there should be a narrative form. (interview with <i>Giornale della musica</i> , June, 1992) My [Bigonzetti] own artistic vocabulary is classical, and all my works, except for one, are on point. What I am trying to avoid is the lack of essentiality of the classical style. (interview with <i>Sipario</i> , May, 1992)	<b>Creative freedom:</b> I [Bigonzetti] had had many choreographers as source of inspiration, I wanted to find my own style. (interview, November 2011) Bigonzetti wanted to follow his creative ideas ... in doing so he wanted to put himself to the test in different artistic projects and to collaborate with several ballet companies. (interview with Expert 1, November 2010)	<b>Independence:</b> In the last few years, I [Bigonzetti] have had the desire to work on a continuous basis with a group of dancers in order to develop something that can last. (interview with <i>Tutto Danza</i> , Autumn 1997) My [Bigonzetti] 'secret wish'? A company of 18 dancers. I feel more and more the need to collaborate with people who choose to follow me in my artistic journey. (interview with <i>Gazzetta di Parma</i> , February 29, 1996)	<b>Renewal:</b> Working for 11 years as an administrator in Italy is like 22 years in any other country. Oh, the politics! (Bigonzetti interviewed by <i>New York Sun</i> , January 21, 2008) Bigonzetti wanted to create new choreographies in new artistic environments ... he wanted to refresh his ideas. (general director, interview, May 2010)
Relational work	<b>Medium</b> – After his debut as choreographer, I saw his potential and I thought to give him the chance to create a choreography for my ballet company [Balletto di Toscana]. (artistic director of Aterballetto, interview, October 2011) At that time I [Bigonzetti] also wanted to collaborate with other ballet companies, and Aterballetto allowed me to do so. (interview, November 2011)	<b>High</b> – Bigonzetti is a young Italian choreographer who already has nine works to his credit in Europe, but whom Deane [artistic director of the English National Ballet] is now enthusiastically showing in Britain for the first time. ( <i>Sunday Times</i> , May 1, 1994) At the time, I [Bigonzetti] wished to put myself to the test by creating different projects with different companies. (interview, November 2011)	<b>Low</b> – I [Bigonzetti] will also create some choreographies for other ballet companies due to my previously undertaken obligations. (interview with <i>Tutto Danza</i> , Autumn, 1997) In 2002, Bigonzetti created his first choreography for New York City Ballet. (Expert 2, interview, March 2012)	<b>Medium</b> – Mauro wanted to have more opportunities to challenge his artistic ideas in different contexts. (artistic director of Aterballetto, interview, October 2011) I [Bigonzetti] really feel Aterballetto as my own creature. However, I want to travel again. (interview, November 2011)

**Table 3. (Continued)**

	Stage 1: Proximal innovation 1990–1993	Stage 2: Fuzzy innovation 1993–1997	Stage 3: Established innovation 1997–2007	Stage 4: Maintained innovation 2008–2012
Relational bonding	<p><b>High</b> – Bigonzetti really likes to work with Aterballetto. (President of Aterballetto, interview with <i>La Gazzetta di Reggio</i>, July 24, 1992)</p> <p>Bigonzetti had a really strong link with Aterballetto, he had spent several years here experiencing different artistic experiences (general director of Aterballetto, interview, May 2010)</p>	<p><b>Low</b> – It is not the first time that I [Bigonzetti] work with Balletto di Toscana. (interview with Adn Kronos, September 16, 1994)</p> <p>[In this stage] He [Bigonzetti] has worked with us [Balletto di Toscana] but he also wanted to collaborate with other companies. He did not want to have an exclusive relationship with us. (artistic director of Aterballetto, interview, October 2011)</p>	<p><b>High</b> – Today is the beginning of a new era for Aterballetto, we need time to work on a particular artistic style and to create harmony, but we [Bigonzetti and dancers] will manage to do it. Together! (interview with <i>Reporter</i>, October 10, 1997)</p> <p>I [Bigonzetti] created a new group of dancers here in Aterballetto. We are progressively getting to know one another, performance after performance. This is very satisfying. (interview with <i>La Gazzetta di Reggio</i>, August 4, 1998)</p>	<p><b>Medium</b> – Now that we [Bigonzetti and The New York City Ballet] know one another, they can go deeper inside my work and I can go deeper inside them to find who they are and what is best for them. (interview with <i>New York Sun</i>, January 21, 2008)</p> <p>The new international collaborations have contributed to reducing the effort he devotes to our company. (general director of Aterballetto, interview, May 2010)</p>
Relational (dis-)embedding	<p><b>Embedding</b> – When after <i>Sei in movimento</i>, Annodio asked me [Bigonzetti] to create a new choreography, I was very happy to combine such a project with dancing. (interview, November 2011)</p> <p>Besides his role as dancer, Bigonzetti starts to fulfill informally the role of choreographer for Aterballetto</p>	<p><b>Dis-embedding</b> – [During this stage] Bigonzetti left Aterballetto to create choreographies on a project-by-project basis for the most important Italian opera houses, as well as for international ballet companies. (<i>Dance Magazine</i>, February, 1999)</p> <p>He leaves Aterballetto</p>	<p><b>Embedding</b> – Bigonzetti ... was Aterballetto's artistic director from 1997 to 2007 .... Earlier, he was a company dancer for 10 years. (<i>Globe Review</i>, August 6, 2013)</p> <p>He starts to take the roles of artistic director and resident choreographer for Aterballetto.</p>	<p><b>Dis-embedding</b> – Bigonzetti decided to leave the role of artistic director of Aterballetto ... to have more time for his activity as freelance choreographer. (interview with Expert 2, March 2012)</p> <p>He leaves the role of artistic director of Aterballetto</p>

institutional bias for the big splashy productions of Italy's state-financed opera houses' (*New York Times*, March 15, 1998). Thus, even though he wanted to work on the artistic ideas he had learned by being 'exposed [in Aterballetto] to international contemporary choreographic styles that were very different from the established Italian ones' (interview with Expert 2, March 2012), he was unsure how to proceed. We label this quest 'inclusion' because he needed to explore new artistic professional opportunities, while minimizing the risk of being excluded from the Italian dance field.

Aterballetto recognized Bigonzetti's potential as choreographer and provided him with the chance to explore this new professional opportunity while he was still a dancer, a decision that followed its practice under the artistic director Amedeo Amodio of each year providing some dancers the opportunity to create their own choreographies. Bigonzetti informally fulfilled the role of choreographer for Aterballetto between 1990 and 1993, and thus engaged in relational embedding by increasing the multiplexity of his relationship with Aterballetto. In 1990 Bigonzetti used Aterballetto's resources (e.g. technical professionals, rehearsal spaces, dancers) to create his first choreography, *Sei in movimento*; this supports the idea that multiplex ties are particularly valuable for individuals because they increase the pool of available resources (Dahlander & McFarland, 2013). This short choreography of 22 minutes featured a 'rough' style adherent with the neoclassical conventions typical of Amodio's work and the classical repertoire of Aterballetto (see Table 2).

During this stage, Bigonzetti devoted more time and emotional effort to his already long-standing relationship with Aterballetto, thus engaging in relational bonding. In particular, the great sense of attachment he felt in the relationship created a supportive environment in which he felt free to propose ideas that deviated somewhat from established convention. Bigonzetti recounted that 'dancing for Aterballetto really opened my eyes, showing me a reality completely different from Teatro dell'Opera di Roma' (interview with the magazine *Sipario*, May 1992).

During this time, Bigonzetti also began to create choreographies for other ballet companies, thus engaging in the relational action we label relational broadening. For example, in 1991 he created *Turnpike* for Balletto di Toscana (hereafter, BdT), one of Italy's most experimental and innovative ballet companies (Pedroni, 2011). *Turnpike* represented an important moment in Bigonzetti's career because it was his 'first official test as a "real" choreographer: a formalized agenda, dancers available for rehearsals six hours per day, 25 days to create the new choreography' (interview with *Sipario*, May 1992). With *Turnpike*, the influence of the international contemporary choreographers he had worked with as a dancer for Aterballetto became more evident. Bigonzetti introduced some more visible elements of novelty such as sudden changes in rhythm and speed in a choreography that was fundamentally in line with neoclassical conventions: '[*Turnpike*] showed that it was possible to create an Italian neoclassical ballet with a contemporary touch' (*Dance Magazine*, June 1999).

After this experience with BdT, Bigonzetti created *Prova con Mozart* for Aterballetto, which led to another turning point: being the only Italian choreographer invited to present at the Marseille Dance Festival. His choreography for the festival (*Très bien*) was created with dancers from Aterballetto and 'represents a further development of Bigonzetti's artistic style: it is neoclassical for its harmony, beauty and linear movements of dancers, but it also contains some germinal elements of his future artistic style, some tension deviating from neoclassical canons and closer to contemporary aesthetics' (interview with Expert 2, March 2012). Thus, during this stage, Bigonzetti engaged in an exploratory effort around existing Italian conventions (e.g. harmony, beauty, dance as a narrative art), introducing some elements of novelty. Consistently, we label this stage 'proximal innovation'.

At this point, Bigonzetti began to feel the need to embark solely on the profession of choreographer: He stated, 'I feel I must devote more time to choreography, because it is stimulating and exciting' (interview with the press agency Adn Kronos, June 18, 1992). By shifting his focus solely

to choreography, ‘he also wanted to find his own way – to work on the development of the artistic ideas that were just outlined in his first choreographies’ (interview with Expert 2, March 2012). We label this quest ‘creative freedom’ referring to Bigonzetti’s new need to focus on his choreographic activity and to embark on an in-depth exploration of his artistic ideas. However, Aterballetto’s Board and Amodio decided not to appoint ‘the role of Resident Choreographer to Mauro Bigonzetti’ (interview with the newspaper *La Gazzetta di Reggio*, July 24, 1992); thus, Bigonzetti left Aterballetto and in September 1993 embarked on a career as freelance choreographer. We interpret this variation of the individual quest as triggering the shift to the next stage by activating a change in the relational actions deployed by Bigonzetti.

### *Stage 2 (September 1993–February 1997): Fuzzy innovation*

At this stage, Bigonzetti was fully committed to his new artistic career as choreographer, dedicating all his emotional and cognitive resources to developing his artistic ideas and ‘trying to experiment [with] bolder solutions’ (interview with Expert 2, March 2012). He did not maintain any ties with Aterballetto (i.e. relational dis-embedding); instead, he began to collaborate with other ballet companies as a freelance choreographer. During this stage, thus, relational broadening was high. He created 15 new choreographies for eight different ballet companies between 1993 and 1997 (in comparison to seven for three ballet companies during the previous stage).

Working with different ballet companies, the artist had multiple learning opportunities and put himself to the test in different artistic environments. In other words, he exploited the benefits associated with a broad network of weak ties (e.g. Burt, 1992) by becoming connected to heterogeneous artistic circles and collaborating with different professionals who provided him with the opportunity to confront different creative ideas and ways of doing things. In this period of short-lived and diverse collaboration, Bigonzetti started to create choreographies that deviated farther from the established conventions of Italian choreography. For example, *Mediterranea*, the first choreography of this phase and his first evening-length ballet, showed a more innovative style (relative to the choreographies in his first stage) that challenged some of the established neoclassical conventions, such as the pointe shoe aesthetic. As one critic described:

The women here are earthy, with feet planted firmly into the ground in their plies and apt frequently to kick up a leg in a powerfully outlined arabesque. The men, sometimes pictured in duets with one another, are defined more balletically, visibly preparing for their pirouettes. (*New York Times*, March 19, 1998)

Some critics asserted that this style was too confused and stated that ‘Bigonzetti’s work could not stamp a clear style of his own on the audience’ (*Straits Time*, April 22, 1994); however, other critics recognized that *Mediterranea* showed the ‘striving to establish a contemporary idiom in Italy’ (*New York Times*, March 19, 1998). Bigonzetti won the ‘Best Young Italian Choreographer’ award from the Italian magazine *Danza & Danza* for *Mediterranea*. At this stage, Bigonzetti worked frequently with BdT, creating seven choreographies and increasing the emotional intensity of the relationship. He explained, ‘we [Bigonzetti and BdT] are developing a good chemistry: we understand each other perfectly’ (interview with the press agency Adn Kronos, September 16, 1994). However, relational bonding was low since ‘he did not want to have an exclusive relationship with BdT’ (interview with the artistic director, October 2011), and acted as choreographer on a project basis without engaging in relational embedding. Furthermore, Bigonzetti also created choreographies for the most renowned classical ballet companies in Italy such as Balletto del Teatro La Scala and Teatro dell’Opera di Roma. These choreographies were completely different from his other works in this stage because they fully conformed to neoclassical conventions. This variation

illustrates that in this period Bigonzetti was experimenting with different ideas, oscillating between the neoclassical aesthetic and the contemporary one as he strove ‘to search for his own way’ (*L’Unità*, May 29, 1995).

During this period Bigonzetti also started to collaborate with foreign ballet companies. In 1994, he created *X.N. Tricities* for the English National Ballet. The choreography represented a further step in the evolution of Bigonzetti’s style because it featured more innovative elements that deviated from neoclassical conventions while keeping several elements of its aesthetics: ‘[In *X.N. Tricities*] Bigonzetti gives the dancers a lively range of movement, basically a kind of fractured classicism’ (*The Times*, May 2, 1994). In the following years, Bigonzetti collaborated with other important international ballet companies such as the Julio Bocca Ballet Teatro Argentino (Argentina) and the Stuttgarter Ballet (Germany).

During this stage, Bigonzetti’s choreographies were more experimental and deviated further from the existing Italian choreographic conventions. However, he quickly created many choreographies with several ballet companies during this time, and not all of these pieces departed from neoclassical conventions; in particular, three of these choreographies embodied neoclassical ideals. We label this stage ‘fuzzy innovation’ because Bigonzetti experimented with different artistic ideas at a fast pace, ‘introducing an element of discontinuity in the Italian dance field, even though his style was not fully developed yet’ (interview with Expert 1, November 2010).

However, by late 1997 Bigonzetti was feeling some dissatisfaction and fatigue with his activity as a freelance choreographer. He noted:

Being a freelance choreographer has pros and cons. On the one hand, I have a good reputation in the milieu, which allows me to work on several projects with different companies. On the other, these experiences are all really stimulating, but they are also temporary and, thus, I do not feel I am constructing something stable. Every time you have to start up everything: you have to know the dancers and they have to understand your style. (interview with *Tutto Danza*, Autumn 1997)

We label this quest ‘independence’ because Bigonzetti wanted to enhance his professional control over not only the aesthetics of his choreographies, but also the managerial aspects of the artistic projects in an attempt to increase his autonomy in pursuing artistic ideas (Svejenova, 2005). Meanwhile, Aterballetto was facing a difficult period and when Amodio decided to leave the company without granting the performing rights of all the choreographies he had created between 1979 and 1996, Aterballetto asked Bigonzetti to become the new artistic director and the resident choreographer. We interpret Bigonzetti’s new quest as triggering the shift to the next stage by activating a change in the relational actions of Bigonzetti.

### *Stage 3 (March 1997–December 2007): Established innovation*

In March 1997, Bigonzetti began his new experience as Aterballetto’s artistic director and resident choreographer with great enthusiasm despite the difficulties he had to face in renewing the repertoire of the ballet company in such a short time. Bigonzetti engaged in a risky and uncertain project that ‘reset[s] the previous story and ... experience[s] different artistic styles, different choreographic languages, from classical to more contemporary ones, almost 360 degrees’ (interview with *Tutto Danza*, Autumn 1997). To implement the project, he revamped the corps de ballet, changing 11 of 16 dancers; he explained, ‘I want dancers who have a high level of curiosity, who share the desire for continuously experimenting’ (interview with *Tutto Danza*, Autumn 1997). The affective and professional reciprocal knowledge accumulated during Bigonzetti’s previous years with Aterballetto facilitated this transition. Indeed, as suggested by several authors (e.g. Alvarez &

Svejenova, 2002; Sosa, 2011), strong and long-lasting dyadic relationships can enhance reciprocal trust, increase the level of involvement and support creativity, hence facilitating the two parties in undertaking new challenges.

Further, Bigonzetti engaged in relational embedding by taking the roles of both artistic director and resident choreographer. Thus, Bigonzetti had to manage not only the artistic and aesthetic aspects of his artwork, but also the managerial (e.g. daily training, planning of company tours). Finally, he had to work closely with the general director in selecting other choreographers and artists to collaborate with. Such a multiplex relationship entailed Bigonzetti enlarging his control over the creation of the choreographies, also giving him access to the resources required for the implementation of his artistic ideas (Baker & Faulkner, 1991). For example, he used the economic resources of the ballet company to collaborate with famous artists from other disciplines who 'contributed to the development of the new artistic ideas of Bigonzetti' (interview with the general director, May 2010).

Bigonzetti was also engaged in relational bonding. He felt a 'great sense of attachment for this ballet company [Aterballetto], my creature, my artwork' (interview with Bigonzetti, November 2011), and focused most of his effort on creating new choreographies for Aterballetto and on inviting internationally renowned choreographers (e.g. Jiri Kylian, Itzik Galili) to restage their works or create new ones. By developing a strong and multiplex relationship with Aterballetto, Bigonzetti 'used this ballet company as his own kitchen in which to let his artistic ideas develop in order to get the final recipe' (interview with Expert 1, November 2010). In other words, the relationship with Aterballetto provided him with the resources required to implement his own artistic ideas without giving up his autonomy and creative freedom (Alvarez et al., 2005).

The great effort spent implementing his artistic project produced positive results. However, the energy devoted to this vertical relationship left Bigonzetti with little time to pursue artistic collaboration with other ballet companies. Thus, he was progressively less engaged in relational broadening. More specifically, in the first two years of this stage he continued to collaborate with other ballet companies because Aterballetto offered him 'a contract with a certain degree of autonomy' (Mattina, March 13, 1997). After that period, however, he reduced his outside collaboration.

By the end of this stage, Bigonzetti's choreographies showed the features typical of his 'abstract, vigorously athletic, technically daring and occasionally brutally anti-romantic' style (*The Times*, May 2, 2005), marked by the ability to shift across a wide range of musical styles. Critics acknowledged his choreographies as 'an interesting mix of contemporary dance and classical ballet' (Vallone, 2002).

We label this stage 'established innovation', because by the end Bigonzetti had fully established his style within the conventions of contemporary dance. To illustrate, *Romeo and Juliet* – a choreography created in 2006 – represents 'the apogee expression of his style and the symbiosis between him and Aterballetto' (interview with Expert 2, March 2012). Pedroni (2011, p. 336) explained that the choreography was 'a tribute to Shakespeare but it dares to deviate from the original idea'. Thus, in this stage Bigonzetti implemented the artistic ideas he had developed in the previous stage, which deviated from the typical Italian neoclassical choreographic conventions. Aterballetto's artistic director explained that these ideas became influential: 'Bigonzetti introduced in the Italian dance world new ideas that became accepted standards at that time. In the early 2000s, other young choreographers started to follow his style' (interview with the artistic director, October 2011).

By the end of this stage, however, Bigonzetti started to feel the fatigue of managing the strong and multiplex relationship with Aterballetto. The company's President noted that 'after ten years Mauro is tired of his double role. In particular, he is tired of dealing with managerial issues and prefers to dedicate more time to his artistic projects' (interview with the newspaper *L'Informazione*, December 18, 2007). In January 2008, Bigonzetti left the artistic direction of Aterballetto (retaining

his collaboration with the company as resident choreographer) to dedicate more time and effort to his artistic projects. He recalled, 'I wanted to work on two or three choreographies per year, but only with extremely high standards of quality' (interview, June 2010). We label this quest 'renewal' because Bigonzetti wanted to focus on the development of new artistic ideas in an attempt to sustain incessant experimentation. We interpret that this change in individual quest triggered the shift to the next stage by activating a change in the relational actions deployed by Bigonzetti.

#### *Stage 4 (January 2008–July 2012): Maintained innovation*

In accordance with the new employment contract, Aterballetto had the exclusive performing rights for the choreographies created between 1997 and 2007, and Bigonzetti had to create at least one new choreography per year. In the first years of this stage Bigonzetti remained very involved with Aterballetto because he continued to oversee managerial duties such as the selection of new dancers. Bigonzetti, in fact, represented one of the most important attracting factors for dancers; Aterballetto's artistic director explained that 'because of his peculiar style and internationally renowned reputation ... dancers want to come here' (interview with the artistic director, October 2011). However, over the years Bigonzetti progressively reduced the time and emotional resources he devoted to his relationship with Aterballetto, thus decreasing his relational bonding and engaging conversely in relational dis-embedding. The general director stated that 'in the last year Bigonzetti has really decreased the time spent in Reggio; nowadays, he spends almost six months abroad and he does not ask me how things are going for us [Aterballetto] as he used to in the past years' (interview, October 2011).

These relational actions have been paralleled by an increasing relational broadening; Bigonzetti has initiated several new collaborations as a freelance choreographer with international ballet companies. However, Bigonzetti did not limit his collaborations to 'one shot' partnerships, but also collaborated with two ballet companies (Stuttgarter Ballet and New York City Ballet) he had worked with during previous stages. Therefore, in our interpretation, Bigonzetti was engaged in relational bonding with ballet companies other than Aterballetto. Bigonzetti noted, 'I am at home here [New York City Ballet]. I love the company. I love the dancers' (interview with the newspaper *New York Sun*, January 21, 2008). This relational action allowed him to maintain his working method, which is based on the development of his choreographic ideas 'from the distinctive physical, technical and emotional traits of each individual dancer and the corps de ballet, often leveraging improvisation and experimentation' (Scapolan & Montanari, 2013, p.12). Thus, he had the opportunity to 'create a participative environment with the dancers in which he could test his recently developed ideas' (interview with Expert 2, March 2012).

The choreographies created by Bigonzetti in this stage demonstrated his mastery of the art of ballet, affirming him as 'one of the world's leading choreographers, much in demand by major companies' (*Montreal Gazette*, March 12, 2011). For example, *Oltremare* was acclaimed as 'striking in its dramatic and intensely physical modern dance aesthetic' (*New York Sun*, January 21, 2008). Thus, in this stage Bigonzetti affirmed himself as a versatile choreographer with a peculiar ability not only to shift across a wide range of musical styles and authors but also to continuously mix dance with other forms of artistic expression. However, some critics noted signals of creative stagnation in his later choreographies: 'Mr. Bigonzetti ... recycles shticks from other ballets of his own' (*New York Times*, March 19, 2012), because 'the predictability of the ballet's structure overwhelms any surprises' (*Financial Times*, June 15, 2010). Based on his outstanding mastery of contemporary style, and also on the evidence that his works began to show some elements of mannerism, we label this stage 'maintained innovation' because while Bigonzetti tried to pursue some kind of renewal, he remained in his self-imposed conventions of contemporary dance.



In line with a ‘continuous zeal for evolution and professionalism’ (Svejenova, 2005, p. 961), in the final years of this stage Bigonzetti questioned his artistic ideas in an attempt to avoid the emergence of self-produced isomorphic pressures due to the risk of becoming trapped in his own success (Alvarez et al., 2005). So ‘Mauro is now in a moment of quiet reflection, I know him from a while and I know he is thinking he needs somehow a recharge of his creative batteries’ (interview with Expert 2, March 2012).

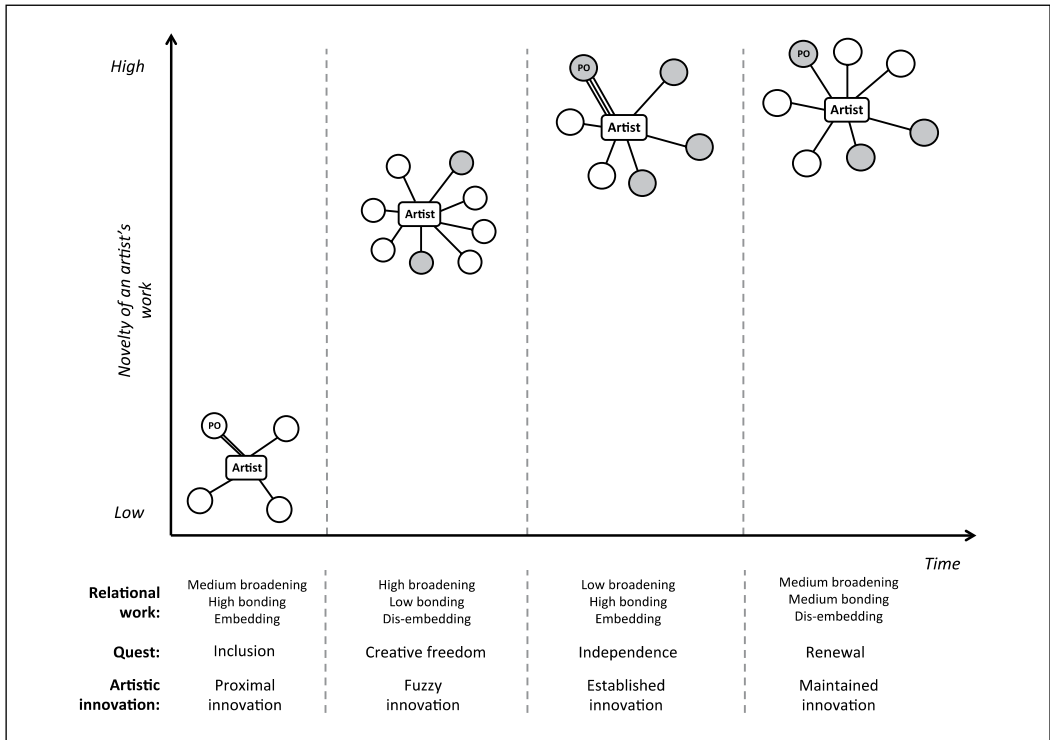
These four stages – proximal innovation, fuzzy innovation, established innovation and maintained innovation – depict the evolution of Bigonzetti’s artwork over time. As summarized in Table 2, for each stage we observed both the characteristics of Bigonzetti’s style and the stage-specific relational actions he deployed to shape his vertical relationships.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study shows how artistic innovation can emerge and be sustained over time by an artist shaping their relationships with the organizations operating in the field (i.e. vertical relationships). More specifically, the findings emphasize that artistic innovation can be depicted as a trajectory encompassing different stages depending on the extent to which the artist’s work departs from existing conventions and introduces novel artistic ideas that contribute to establishing new conventions in the field. We identify four stages: proximal innovation, fuzzy innovation, established innovation and maintained innovation. Changes in an artist’s stage-specific quests (i.e. inclusion, creative freedom, independence and renewal) trigger different actions aimed at creating new vertical relationships (relational broadening), reinforcing existing ones (relational bonding) or adding (relational embedding) or removing (relational dis-embedding) different kinds of ties within an existing vertical relationship. As a result of such actions, a long-lasting but open relationship between the artist and a specific organization may ‘pivot’ artistic innovation. Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical model.

In the first stage, the artist bonds with an organization with which they are already collaborating. The artist leverages the tie, characterized by emotional intensity and reciprocal trust, to gain access to the resources (economic, social, etc.) required to develop and implement his/her artistic ideas. The artist also engages in relational embedding and develops a multiplex vertical relationship with the organization by combining different artistic roles. This role combination contributes to creating and protecting a creative space in which the artist can explore new creative ideas (Baker & Faulkner, 1991). To sustain this exploration, the artist also dedicates effort to developing new relationships with diverse partners (relational broadening). However, because ‘consumers [of art] need familiarity to understand what they are offered’ (Lampel, Shamsie, & Lant, 2006, p. 292) and because the establishment penalizes artists who deviate from extant conventions (Becker, 1982), the artist pursues his/her artistic ideas while reducing the risk of being excluded from the field. In this first stage, which we label proximal innovation, *an artist’s work introduces some elements of novelty but does not violate completely the existing conventions of the field.*

A variation of the individual quest (from inclusion to creative freedom) triggers the shift to the next stage. Because the quest for greater differentiation can motivate artists to act against existing social structures and conventions (Rao et al., 2003), the artist engages in relational dis-embedding, reducing the time and effort devoted to previous strong relationships until their termination. The artist also dedicates more time and effort to developing new relationships with diverse partners (relational broadening), which can provide the artist with the typical benefits associated with a broad network of weak ties such as access to different creative ideas and diverse knowledge (e.g. Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). Relationships involving infrequent interactions and low emotional intensity with counterparts can also reduce the social pressure on the artist to conform to extant



**Figure 1.** A model of artistic innovation.

Note: Organizations are represented as circles. The number of circles represents the number of organizations the artist collaborates with. Circles are white when the artist established the collaboration with the organization during the stage. Circles are filled with grey when the artist has already collaborated with the organization in a previous stage. In the case of multiplex relationships, the lines connecting the artist to the organizations are more than one. The thickness of the lines represents the strength of the relationships. The 'pivot organization' is represented as 'PO'.

conventions (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008). Thus, in the fuzzy innovation stage *an artist's work experiments with different styles and aesthetics at a fast pace (also through a trial and error process), introducing and testing several elements of novelty that deviate to a larger extent from the existing conventions of the field.*

After this period of diversified collaboration, the artist may become fatigued by continuously changing partners, and thus experience a new quest to increase his/her autonomy in developing and implementing artistic ideas by enhancing his/her professional control over the managerial aspects of the artistic projects (Svejenova, 2005). This variation of the individual quest triggers the shift to the next stage, in which the artist engages in relational actions to develop a network of strong relationships, which are better designed for mobilizing economic and social resources (Lingo & O'Mahony, 2010). In particular, the artist dedicates effort to developing a strong and multiplex relationship with an organization that offers the artist the opportunity to simultaneously play an artistic and a managerial role. Role consolidation allows the artist to gain access to both 'business and artistic role resources' (Baker & Faulkner, 1991, p. 282), enlarging his/her control and involvement in the creation of his/her works. Further, going back to the organization where the artist first developed, the artist may exploit an already accumulated stock of resources. In line with the idea of network imprinting (Marquis, 2003; McEvily, Jaffee, & Tortoriello, 2012), because such a

relationship played a critical role in the first stage, it could be regarded as a strong tie even though the artist did not maintain the relationship in the previous stage. In particular, the significant emotional intensity that characterizes such a relationship contributes to the development of environmental conditions that are more supportive of innovation (e.g. Starkey et al., 2000; Tempest & Starkey, 2004). Thus, in the established innovation stage *an artist's work has a unique style and a clear aesthetic that are completely new in relation to the conventions of the field*.

When the artist's work is established in the field, the artist faces the risk of remaining entrapped in the new conventions s/he has helped create (Alvarez et al., 2005). Further, the artist may become fatigued by playing both an artistic and a managerial role because these roles typically draw on different logics that are hard to reconcile within a single individual (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Lampel et al., 2006). Thus, this variation of the individual quest triggers the shift to the next stage, in which the artist engages in relational dis-embedding and leaves the managerial role in order to focus only on artistic activities. The artist also focuses on adding new vertical relationships to his/her network (i.e. relational broadening). Thus, in the maintained innovation stage *an artist's work presents further minor elements of novelty aimed at renewing the style and aesthetics*. Because the artist has a quest for refreshing their work rather than departing completely from conventions, they also devote time and effort to relational bonding with organizations they have collaborated with in previous stages. In this way, the artist can leverage the benefits associated with strong ties such as reciprocal trust and complex knowledge transfer (Starkey et al., 2000; Tempest & Starkey, 2004), as well as reduce the uncertainty typically associated with weak ties (Lingo & O'Mahony, 2010). We label an organization that has a long-lasting relationship with the artist across different stages a 'pivot organization'.

### ***Artistic innovation and relational work***

This study contributes to previous studies that highlighted how the different networks of relationships in which an artist is embedded can support (or conversely reduce) artistic innovation (e.g. Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Sgourev, 2013b). We add to this literature by highlighting the role of individual agency (Boari & Riboldazzi, 2014). Specifically, in line with the idea of work as a purposeful effort in which individuals are engaged 'to manipulate some aspect of their social context' (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012, p. 224), we claim that artists can engage in relational work aimed at shaping their vertical relationships in order to exploit the potential benefits associated with different types of ties (i.e. strong vs. weak) for the development and implementation of their artistic ideas.

Drawing on the definition proposed by Bandelj (2012, p. 176), we conceive relational work as the process that 'includes the establishment of differentiated social ties, their maintenance, their reshaping, their distinction from other relations, and sometimes their termination'. We are not proposing a simplistic model of unconstrained agency, but rather conceptualizing agency as embedded in the social structure it seeks to shape. Our study contributes to a better understanding of the micro side of artistic innovation, and thus complements and extends results from structure-centred research (e.g., Cattani et al., 2014; Zaheer & Soda, 2009).

By highlighting the role played by an artist's relational work, we also enrich the micro theory of creative action, which portrays artistic innovation as the result of individual agency, via which individuals act as institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988) by, for example, developing partnerships and organizations that support their artistic endeavours (e.g. Alvarez et al., 2005; Svejenova, Mazza, & Planellas, 2007). The study improves the understanding of the process through which an artist engages in different interactions with organizations, for example by bonding with organizations that can grant access to the resources needed to implement his/her artistic

ideas or by developing new collaborations with diverse partners to obtain a wide range of knowledge. This study, therefore, offers a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of artistic innovation as the result of an artist's continuous oscillation between a more 'closed' network of relationships (i.e. strong ties with few organizations) and a more 'open' network (i.e. weak ties with a large number of organizations).

### *The role of individual quests*

The second main contribution of this study pertains to recent research showing that the benefits of a particular network of relationships may change over time (e.g. Fleming et al., 2007; Paquin & Howard-Grenville, 2013). We shed light on how endogenous factors, specifically variation in stage-specific individual quests (i.e. inclusion, creative freedom, independence and renewal), trigger changes in the relational work described above.

Our study echoes Svejenova's (2005, p. 947) career model, which suggests that the professional trajectory of an artist can be shaped through authenticity work – 'a set of actions and interactions, which the creative individual undertakes to achieve a distinctive and true-to-self identity and image over time'. In particular, the stage-specific quest for independence described here parallels Svejenova's proposed quest of an artist to enhance their professional control over managerial aspects of artistic projects. This similarity provides additional support to the idea that because innovation in art worlds is risky, artists may try to improve the odds that their artistic ideas will eventually be implemented by claiming 'business and artistic role resources' through role consolidation (Baker & Faulkner, 1991, p.282). However, while Svejenova's (2005, p.947) model explains how artists shape their careers by striving to keep a 'distinctive and true-to-self identity and image over time', we highlight how individuals shape their vertical relationships by striving to reconcile the opposing quests for inclusion in an art world and differentiation from others engaged in similar artwork.

### *Vertical relationships and pivot organizations*

The third main contribution of this study regards the role of vertical relationships. While previous studies acknowledged that artists collaborate with different organizations on a project basis (e.g. Jones, 2010; Menger, 1999) and that these relationships can provide artists with several benefits such as legitimacy or reputation (e.g. Bielby & Bielby, 1999; Giuffre, 1999), we show how organizations play an important role in sustaining the artistic innovation promoted by individuals. By playing different roles in organizations, artists can increase their access to social, cultural and material resources. This study, thus, enriches the extant literature on the concept of 'role as a resource' (e.g. Alvarez et al., 2005; Baker & Faulkner, 1991) by providing additional evidence that artists develop multiplex vertical relationships to deploy role combination and role consolidation in order to mobilize needed resources.

We show that a long-lasting relationship with a specific organization, which we label a 'pivot organization', emerges. Thus, in line with the idea that some relationships in a network are more critical than others (McEvily et al., 2012), we suggest that a long-lasting relationship between the artist and a specific organization may pivot the artistic innovation promoted by an individual over time. Such a long-lasting relationship is neither exclusive nor based on a permanent employment contract, but rather is built on a series of roles that the pivot organization offers to the artist. Therefore, the strength and multiplexity of the relationship varies across time, with changes triggered by individual quests. To make a parallel with a 'loving relationship' between individuals, an

artist's relationship with a pivot organization resembles an 'open marriage'. Two actors initially mature together, developing a strong tie based on mutual affective bonding (Daskalaki, 2010), reciprocal professional knowledge and shared artistic exploration. This imprinting has long-lasting consequences for the individual's professional development (McEvily et al., 2012), but does not prevent them from establishing relationships with many other actors in order to pursue their own quests. Nevertheless, the initial relationship persists over time, even when inactive, and remains 'special' compared to the many others developed by the artist, which may be less emotionally intense even though they play an important role in the development and implementation of the artist's artistic ideas.

### **Boundary conditions**

Our theorization of the process of developing artistic innovation through relational work has applications in other settings, perhaps most clearly in industries such as information and communication technology, and architecture, and in academia, which place a premium on innovation and where the individuals have a high level of inter-organizational mobility (e.g. McLeod, O'Donohoe, & Townley, 2011). In such cases, we would expect to see similar challenges around managing vertical relationships, with individuals oscillating between strong ties with few organizations and weak ties with a large number of organizations in an attempt to develop and implement their ideas, eventually creating long-lasting relationships with relevant partners.

Although this study analyses a long period of time (from 1990 to 2012), our analysis is based on a relevant but partial fragment of the artist's professional experience. Future analysis of the continual evolution of Bigonzetti's career can expand the current findings. Further, some characteristics of our setting might limit the generalizability of the findings. The case we examined illustrates innovation as the trajectory of an extraordinary individual (Bigonzetti) whose relational actions are deployed in a context (the Italian dance industry) where only a few companies offer a stimulating and inspiring environment to artists. Relational work is a necessary but possibly insufficient condition for developing and implementing artistic ideas; two other necessary conditions are unique talent and the existence of organizations that provide extraordinary individuals access to the resources required for the pursuit of their artistic vision. Thus, future studies, even those adopting quantitative methodologies, should analyse whether artists (not those as rare as Bigonzetti) use the same or different relational actions to develop and implement their artistic ideas. In addition, research could explore the idea of an 'open marriage' with a 'pivot organization' in contexts that are characterized by a high degree of competitiveness and in which a large number of renowned companies facilitate the mobility of artists. Another limitation of our study is that it focuses on the relationships that an individual develops with producing organizations (i.e. ballet companies); we did not consider relationships with other individuals (e.g. choreographers, artistic directors, dancers). Thus, further research could analyse the extent to which the relational work we identified can be applied to the relationships an artist maintains with peers.

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## Note

1. The first author is currently chairman of the organization studied in the paper. This fact did not affect ethically or scientifically the research, for several reasons. For instance, he was appointed in June 2010, after the data collection process was initiated. Furthermore, the study benefitted from his appointment since other authors gained easier access to the data necessary for the study. Finally, the act of discussing impressions with a member of the research team who is also a member of the studied organization offered an additional opportunity for a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest since other authors took advantage of his insight on the studied organization by retaining sufficient detachment to produce a trustworthy theoretical interpretation. However, to limit possible influencing on other organizational members, particularly our interviewees, all of the interviews were conducted by one of the other two authors (thus excluding the author/chairman). Moreover, 'open talk' was encouraged by guaranteeing anonymity and non-recognizability of such interviewees both for organization purposes (e.g. we assured that data could not be used for employees' assessment), and for research publication.

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