

Addressing Uncomfortable Emotions through the photo-exhibition *Leaving and Waving* by Deanna Dikeman

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Abstract

Photography conveys emotions. However, while a great deal of attention has been given to the artists' point of view, only rarely these have been explored from the perspective of the viewers of photo-exhibitions. This study focuses on the photo-exhibition *Leaving and Waving*, which took place in three different Italian cities, over the course of five months, after the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collected through a quali-quantitative approach explored the viewers' perspective on the exhibition and the emotions generated through this. Authors argue that visual art and the aesthetic of photography have the potential of engaging a general audience and generating dialogues on 'uncomfortable emotions', such as those derived from loss, detachment, aging, and death. Drawing on social sciences perspectives, this study contributes to raising awareness of the importance of photography in discussing loss in everyday conversation and articulating difficult feelings for individual well-being.

Keywords: Photography, Visual Culture; Emotions, Loss, Detachment, Ageing, Death,

Introduction: Emotions in Photography

The powerful connection that individuals have with photography was firstly theorised by Barthes' work *Camera Lucida* (1981) who advocated for a focus on subjective feelings and an emotional approach to photography. The impact of feelings on the

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study of photography became influential with the work of the feminist scholarship (Sedgwick 2003) and on public feelings (Cvetkovich 2007). With the 'affective turn' (Clough and Halley 2007), talking about emotions in photography became a way to explore the meanings of affects and feelings via visual images (Phu and Brown 2018). According to Phu, Brown and Noble (2019, 3) 'feeling, then is more than just a theme in photography studies or a description of responses to images. Feeling is an analytic tool for thinking and interpreting photography in new ways'.

However, as firstly suggested by Barthes 'the image could not possibly have the same affective force for the reader as it does for [...] the writer' (Phu et al. 2019, 5). Therefore, there might be a difference between the perspective of the authors and the viewers. Based on the belief that artistic expressions allow feelings to take form for the viewers, Weiser ([2004] 2015, 24) states:

'As an artist, it was intriguing for me to find out what they were seeing and feeling, in response to an image that I myself knew very well- but one which they obviously were perceiving far differently than I had ever conceived of. [...] I began to realize that there could never be any way to clearly predict what people might "get" from any of my photos, or what emotions might be evoked in them as they interacted with a particular image'.

Therefore, one might wonder: 'how to capture the feelings elicited by photography from the perspective of the audience?' 'How to enable 'the reader' to articulate their own emotions, when it comes too difficult, troubling feelings?

In fact, within visual art, there are contemporary pieces of artworks that elicit certain forms of troubling, complex feelings, mood and affect that are rarely spoken in

everyday conversation. Adopting feelings as analytical tool for interpreting visual art, this work focuses on photography that might elicit difficult emotions -from now on defined 'uncomfortable emotions'- that might become a tool for and to deepen one's sense of reality (Sontag 2003).

This study is situated at the intersection between emotion and visual art, aiming at shedding light on how photography elicits emotional responses from the perspective of visitors of an exhibition context. This study investigates ways of using photography to address uncomfortable emotions such as those derived by detachment, ageing, loss and death. Within the genre of family photography, these themes have been unintentionally addressed by the artist Deanna Dikeman through the photo exhibition *Leaving and Weaving*, that is worth academic attention to explore how photography, its aesthetic and intentions, can be seen as a tool to elicit conversation on such themes and a way to handle uncomfortable emotions.

'Uncomfortable Emotions' expressed via Visual Art

According to Gordon, emotions are 'socially constructed pattern[s] of sensations, expressive gestures, and cultural meanings organized around a relationship to a social object' (1990, 566-567). Sociologists of emotions (amongst others, Hochschild 1975; Sheff 1977; Kemper 1978) highlight the relational nature of emotions, arguing that the majority of emotions have meanings in the context of our relationship with others and other things in its environment (Thoits 1989; De Rivera and Grinkis 1986; Ahmed 2004; Turner and Stets 2005; Bericat 2016).

It is widely accepted that emotions are considered multidimensional, thus the distinction between 'positive' or 'negative' emotions has been deconstructed (Solomon and Stone 2002). However, some emotions involve negative appraisal - also defined as appraisal of disapproval (Solomon 1993; Scherer 2001). Scholars highlighted how unpleasant emotions provided reasons why people preferred not to think about certain themes (Norgaard 2006) or why these might lead to denial (Cohen 2013). However, it has been argued that contemplating 'negative' emotions – for example anxiety or fears- has a potential for developing a better understanding of the self in relation to others, in terms of developing compassionate engagement (Baugher 2014). Thus, it might be beneficial to address uncomfortable emotions for improving individual wellbeing.

Within the broad range of visual art, photography plays an important role in constructing emotions (Craig 2009; Phu et al. 2019). Hence, there is a plethora of studies, which indicate that photography has been used as a tool to elicit emotional responses (Krauss and Fryrear 1983; Stevens and Spears 2009). Similarly, it has been highlighted how the viewers can use the tool of photography for self-exploration and personal growth (Martin and Spence 1985; Frith and Hancourt 2007). For example, the use of photography to promote self-expression and communication has been explored across different groups of people: in children who struggle to articulate themselves emotionally (Loewenthal 2009), in younger age to support and record changes (Ramptom 2007; Rayment et al. 2019), as well as in later life, to trigger memories (Mitchell 2005). Consequently, it has been emphasised how photography can be used to articulate difficult feelings and emotions, especially with people with physical or cognitive difficulties (Lemon 2007; Berman 2019). In particular, on the

continuum of photo-based healing practices, phototherapy and therapeutic photography involve photographs to elicit communication about emotions (Weiser 1999; 2004, 2018). While phototherapy is defined as the use of photographs during counselling sessions (Krauss and Fryrear 1983; Spence 1986; Loewenthal 2013; 2023); therapeutic photography concerns with self-initiated photo-based activities conducted for self-exploration and personal growth, without the presence of a therapist who guides the experience (Gibson 2018). As Gibson (2018) states therapeutic photography is a popular approach for increasing self-esteem, resilience and self-reliance in a wide range of people. Nevertheless, these approaches can be seen as a form of photo-elicitation (Lapenta 2011) and remark the importance of the structured use of photography within counselling and therapy sessions, with the purpose of enabling clients to explore their emotions and express themselves about topic they would like to talk about (Loewenthal 2023). Thus, there is a relatively lack of understanding on how photography is used to elicit emotions in exhibition contexts, with a few exceptions.

Appraisal theories of emotions (Silvia 2005; Robinson 2005) have sought to explain how people evaluate events (Roseman and Smith 2001), in particular the cognitive process that undergirds the emotional response to art (Silvia and Brown 2007). For example, Silvia and Brown (2007) focus on 'negative' emotions such as anger, fear, disgust, sadness and contempt in response to visual art. Sontag (2003) explains that people turn away from 'unstable emotions' as these generate fears, and suggests the use of photographs to witness the suffering of others 'as objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality' (p. 101). Similarly, Doyle (2013) illustrates

controversial contemporary artworks, deliberately provocative, that produce a dense field of affect and make people uncomfortable, to discuss difficulty and emotions. By introducing her own subjectivity, Doyle (2013) highlights the act of dismissing some artwork or minimising the risk of exposure to these by 'looking away', due to their disturbing emotional difficulty. Bonell and Simon (2007) have addressed 'difficult subject matter' in the contexts of museums, with the aim of engaging a general public audience in painful histories. These scholars highlighted the importance of the exhibition experience that, by expecting an emphatic response, offers to visitors 'new ways of relating with and within the world around them' (Bonell and Simon 2007, 66). Thus, they conclude that 'difficult exhibitions' might encourage the possibility of intimate encounters. The negative emotions elicited by the exhibitions in their study referred to the 'unpleasant and troublesome feelings of grief, anger, shame or horror' (ibid., 68). However, these scholars have focused on a specific historical event, the Holocaust, which might require interpretative abilities to enable identification. Instead, it might be worth focusing on experiences that are more widely familiar to anyone, for example in the context of everyday life (Back 2015).

A further intersection between affect and photography refers to the notion of 'presence in absence' (Runia 2006; Noble 2010) according to which the role of photography is to invoke the presence of the past into the present. Works in this vein are situated within the turn to memory, involving those in front of the camera, as well as the person behind it, to construct a trace of inscription of lived experiences (Runia 2006). In this respect, Ulkuniemi (2007) defines family photographs as a source of autobiographical narratives, usually kept in the home, that are taken for private use.

By using family photographs in art education, she draws on the classification set out by Musello (1979) according to which family photographs are made for: documenting events that are important in their lives; showing unity with people (i.e. photographs function as iconic substitute of a dead person, or relative who lives far away); facilitating interaction among people; identity-building as a means of self expression. Family photographs serve as a model for the good life, as they tend to capture important family events, holidays, celebrations (Ulkuniemi 2007), thus, rarely these concentrate on 'difficult' moments or aging process. For these reasons, the extent to which uncomfortable emotions might be addressed via photography are worth further investigation. Some of these uncomfortable emotions might be those associated with loss of places and people, leaving, detachment, departures or sorrow, loneliness, grief, fear of death, as it will be discussed next.

Uncomfortable Emotions triggered by Loss and Detachment to Places and People

In this study, we refer to 'uncomfortable emotions', such as those generated by loss, detachment, later life and death and we explore these from a wide range of perspectives within the social sciences, in particular, sociology of emotions, sociology of death and dying, human geography and social gerontology.

The mixture of feelings associated with departures from 'meaningful locations' and detachment from significant people are difficult to handle (Agnew [1987] 2014). Studies on the emotional attachment that people have to places discuss how departure from home involves disruption of bonds with the place of origins (Relph 1976; Seamon 1979; Tuan 1991). The concept of detachment from home -and homeland- had been theorised by several scholars who focused on the feeling of nostalgia and

pathos on the environment left behind (Safran 1991; Appadurai 1996; Cohen 2022). Hence, mobility through places, whether temporary or permanent, might imply a feeling of loss (Alsop 2002; Palladino, 2019). Some scholars focused on farewell parties and emotional goodbyes to better handle the uncomfortable emotions derived from the departure (Ward and Kennedy 2001; Marchetti-Mercer 2016).

A further example of the difficulty to handle uncomfortable emotions concerns the attitude to ageing. Hence, in Western societies, there is a tendency to see ageing as a 'burden' or as a problem, simply associated with something to forget (Bytheway 1994; Achenbaum 2015). On the one hand, this leads to ageist societies, shaping stereotypical images of older people, undervalued and discriminated against (Butler 1989; Bytheway and Johnson 1990; Bytheway 2005). On the other hand, negative meanings attributed to later life tend to deny the process of ageing itself even in the imagination (Jones 2011). Consequently, there is a general tendency to deliberately avoid envisioning later life, disassociating themselves from groups of older people (Minichiello et al. 2000; Jones 2006) and not talking about the ageing process at all.

Similarly, the grief that comes with the loss of significant others is an intense emotion, however, we are always more exposed to the denial of death, by not talking about it (Becker 1997). In fact, it is difficult to understand the meaning that people attribute to death and bereavement, as in Western societies they are commonly viewed as a private and personal experience (Durkheim 1897/1969; Halbwachs 1930; Ariès 1975; Rosen 1991). Elias's (1990) notion of *homo clausus*, -such as an isolated individual, who does not see and not hear others- refers to death as an individual

experience that is not shared within the community. By contrast, according to Elias (ibid.), only by sharing the pain associated with death within the community, it is possible to accept death as a constitutive part of life. Nevertheless, in some instances, death has been associated with repression of the emotions (Boltanski 1999), or prohibition of avoiding grief in public (Butler 2003). Hesitating to bring up discussion about death as 'an obscenity to be avoided' (Feifel 1990/2013, 9), scholars of mourning and bereavement have widely agreed on the tendency of denial of death (LaViolette 2003; Brennan 2015). Hence, to some extent, death is considered as the 'last taboo' of our society (Gorer 1955; Morin 2002) and as a result, mourning and grieving for the loss of significant others become unspoken topics. For these reasons, there is the need to find ways of engaging a general audience in addressing themes that are rarely spoken in everyday conversations.

We suggest that it is possible to handle uncomfortable emotions via the use of photography. Specifically, this paper focuses on the work of Deanna Dikeman, who, after the loss of her parents, decides to bring to public fruition a lifetime family ritual, via the photo-exhibition *Leaving and Waving*. The intimate, vernacular style photographs feature her parents waving on the front porch of their family home in Sioux City, Iowa. Deanna and her parents were engaged in the ritual of documenting their greetings via photographs before her departure to Kansas City. As the collection of shooting lasted for 27 years, unintentionally, she documented her parents' ageing process and ultimately their loss. This work is not deliberately ambiguous, paradoxical or strange, -intended to create discomfort as the examples discussed by Doyle (2013)- however, it opened up into questions certain forms of feelings, mood

and affect, or 'uncomfortable emotions' that are rarely spoken in everyday conversation. Therefore, this exhibition enables a better understanding of the extent to which photography can elicit emotions and generate further dialogue on 'uncomfortable' themes, such as detachment, ageing and death.

Moreover, the photographic exhibition took place in three different Italian cities (Campobasso, Rome, Verona), after the COVID-19 pandemic (February to June 2022). This might be considered an historical event that exacerbated resonance to these emotions and themes. Thus, this artwork shows how its emotional complexity is shaped by the historical context in which the exhibition was held. However, before moving on, the following will expand on the photo exhibition from the perspective of the photographer.

Artist's Intention of the Photo-Exhibition

The American photographer Deanna Dikeman adopts a realistic style that focuses on the importance of the ordinary. In fact, in a number of her works -amongst others *Relative Moments*- she captures and documents the everyday life of her family members in their domestic sphere². The exhibition *Leaving and Waving*, firstly launched in 2021, is a section of this larger previous work.

One of this paper's authors was involved in an on-line event to dialogue with the artist about the exhibition prior to its opening in the Italian context. This event, on the 19th of February 2022, via zoom, was open to a wider public, thus, facilitated in both English and Italian³. When asked to introduce herself and her work, Dikeman stated

² Deanna Dikeman's realistic style is influenced by William Eggleston, Emmet Gowin and Stephen Shore's works focused on the importance of everyday life in photography. Similarly, Dikeman's unintended thirty-years collection echoes Patrick Pound's philosophy of vernacular collection as a way to 'gather your thoughts through things'.

³ The on-line event, and the debate that followed, constituted the basis upon which the knowledge of Dikeman's work was grounded. Hence, the authors of the paper were inspired to reflect on this artistic

that her artwork derived from the need of capturing the 'goodbye moments' with her parents and to preserve these memories as long as possible with her, while travelling to the city where she was living. Dikeman explained that in the first instance, there was no intentionality of generating an exhibition behind these photographs. This was just a private ritual amongst family members. She said that the practice of capturing the greetings had a sort of therapeutic function to handle the uncomfortable emotions generated by her detachment from her parents and her family home. Pictures made by her own camera were conceived as idealised souvenirs to keep memories of her family and family house. Only after 27 years, she became aware of the amount of 'moments' captured by her camera, to be able to create a stand-alone exhibition⁴.

In Deanna's work it is possible to identify two main conscious purposes: in the first instance, the intention of capturing the 'goodbye moments' with her family members, via a private ritual of photographing greetings; afterwards, the desire to share her artistic work with the wider public – as such a private ritual shift into a public domain. Hence, it is useful to approach her photography practice in the family context through the notion of rituals (Bourdieu and Whiteside 1990). In fact, Dikeman's photography might be considered a secular ritual within the wider category of 'cultural performance' (Bell 1992, 37). Stressing 'the role of rituals in creation of belongings' (Marshall 2002, 1), the artist developed a ritualization in which her camera became the artefact that facilitates the handling of her emotions. Hence, it is well established on how rituals play an adaptive function (d'Aquili et al. 1979; Laughlin 1990),

practice and its impact on people's life, formulating the research question of this study. The event was recorded and it is currently available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/sgaTm3w9wLE>).

⁴ In this sense, Dikeman's photography is similar to Nixon's works as constituted by periodic photographs and, as in the project 'The Brown Sister' that documents the passage of time of the three women over forty years via casual period photography jects.

retaining intrinsic transformational power (Driver 2019; Davis-Floyd 2022). In line with this literature, the practice of capturing the greetings had a sort of therapeutic function for the artist, helping her to deal with the sadness of leaving her parents and her family home. Secondly, a therapeutic function is also recognizable in her intention to disseminate her work with a wider audience, as the artist asserted that the *Leaving and Waving* exhibition played a significant role in becoming reconciled with her own loss. In fact, after her parents' death, the exhibition was her own way to respond to bereavement, by bringing memories and memorialization up to date, with an emphasis on past relationships that still matter to her in the present. Seen under this light, Dikeman might have experienced bereavement successfully through creative art practices, as theorised by sociologists of death and bereavement who suggest that 'successful grieving [...] involves attempting to reconstruct the fragmentary picture we have of the person we have loved and lost' (Brennan 2015, 298).

As such, as authors we wondered: as the exhibition *Leaving and Waving* played an important role for the artist in addressing themes of loss, detachment, ageing and death, might this similarly be the case for the visitors of the exhibition? What were the emotions experienced by the viewers of the exhibition? This study addresses this knowledge gap.

Photo Exhibition Leaving and Waving

The photo exhibition *Leaving and Waving* took place between February and June 2022 in three different Italian cities Campobasso, Rome and Verona (see also D'Ambrosio et.al 2023). The three exhibitions were organised by the Association "Il Cavaliere di San Biase' (Campobasso) and the latter in collaboration with WSP

photography (Rome) and Grenze Arsenali Fotografici (Verona). These three exhibitions were constituted by a total number of 98 black and white and colour photographs (postcard size, circa 10x20 cm) displayed in a chronological order (Figure 1).



Figure 1- Exhibition in Campobasso, 2022. Photo courtesy of Giancarlo Struzzolino

The photographs mainly featured the artist's parents in front of their own home while waving to say goodbye (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Photograph 3/2004 from *Leaving and Waving*. Photo courtesy of Deanna Dikeman

As this family practice lasted for 27 years, as the pictures progress during the exhibition, the viewers witness the ageing of the characters of the photographs. Towards the end of the exhibition, only one character is in the frame, the mother; as the father passed away (Figure 3).



Figure 3 - Photograph 12/2013 from *Leaving and Waving*. Photo courtesy of Deanna Dikeman

From that moment onwards, the mother is the main character of the pictures, until the end. The last photograph of the exhibition displays only the front door of the house. Both parents have passed away. There is nothing in that picture that recalls the presence of Dikeman's parents who used to inhabit that home, except the memory of such loss (Figure 4).



Figure 4 - Photograph 10/2017 from *Leaving and Waving*. Photo courtesy of Deanna Dikeman

Although the exhibition was replicated in the different cities -and the chronological order of the photographs does not allow changes of the sequence- some elements of discontinuity might have influenced the experience of the audience. On this note, it is important to reflect on the role and aesthetic choices of the curator of the exhibition, Antonella Struzzolino, who shaped the context of the exhibition according to her point of view. Hence, we became aware that the curator played an important role in making choices on the exhibition arrangements. For example, in Campobasso, the atmosphere that prevailed in the art gallery was very emotional also thanks to the choice of the music that enabled introspection. A further example of this is the layout of the exhibition space: the art gallery embedded occasions for dialogue and sharing of feelings and ideas amongst the viewers of the exhibition thanks to the arrangement

of the space. In this image, featuring the art gallery in Campobasso (Figure 5), the chairs at the end of the exhibition were conceived by the curator as an invite for the viewer to stop and reflect on the experience.



Figure 5 - Exhibition in Campobasso. Photo courtesy of Lello Muzio

Methodology

This study adopts a quali - quantitative approach. As mentioned above, information arose firstly, through the on-line event with the artist Deanna Dikeman, secondly, through several informal chats with the curator of the exhibitions, Antonella Struzzolino, thirdly, through the diaries of the events, finally, through questionnaires. The following section discusses the latter tool adopted for data collection.

Questionnaires were built *ad hoc* by the authors and constituted by a mix of closed and open questions to explore, firstly, participants' social and cultural background; secondly, emotions elicited by the photo exhibition. Specifically, the questionnaire was designed to gather visitors' point of view on: the exhibition; their previous knowledge and interest in photography; the emotions aroused through the exhibition and further reflections. In fact, the questionnaire was formulated in such a way as to allow some freedom for the respondents' answers, albeit within grids pre-structured by the researcher.

Visitors of the photo exhibitions aged +18 were invited to fill out the printed copies of the questionnaires left at the entry reception desk of each art gallery. Visitors could be free to engage with the data collection on a voluntary basis. Those who wished to contribute to the data collection could drop the questionnaire into a box, placed at the exit of the art gallery. Participants were provided with an Information Sheet and Consent Form, stating clearly, amongst others, aims of the research process and the right to withdraw at any time, should they wish, by simply not dropping the questionnaire into the box⁵.

The questionnaires were anonymous, to preserve data confidentiality and privacy of the participants. As the questionnaires were dropped into a box, there is no way to link the questionnaires to those who filled these. Personal information was kept anonymous within analyses and write-ups. Data were analysed according to thematic analyses (Alhojailan 2012; Braun and Clarke 2012), as such, by linking phrases or part of clauses with particular labels and, secondly, by organising these within a list of concepts. During the writing process, anonymised quotes from respondents have been translated into English.

A total of 153 questionnaires were gathered in the three venues between February and June 2022. Respondents mainly came from the regions where the exhibition was held: Molise (79), Lazio (32) and Veneto (34); a small number of respondents were originally from elsewhere (8).

Participants of the study were 93 female and 60 male, aged between 18 and 82, with the majority of the respondents between 25 and 45 years old. Several respondents identified themselves as simple visitors of the exhibition (54) while others as photo

⁵ Ethical approval for this study was obtained by Liverpool Hope University (n.7248).

amateurs (60) or professional photographers (39). Some of the respondents had heard about the exhibition through friends (65); some via traditional media (11) or social media (42); and some were involved in cultural associations (35). Most visitors did not know Dikeman's work before the exhibition (133), while only a small minority (20) stated they have met Dikeman or knew her work due to attending prior exhibitions, or via her publications. Most of the respondents stated that the main reason for attending the exhibition was curiosity toward the artist, towards themes addressed, or simply toward photography and art.

Findings

From the data analyses the following findings emerged, that we summarized in the three following key themes: identification; emotions elicited; ways to handle uncomfortable emotions.

Identification

The exhibition was well received amongst those who participated in our research, stating that they mostly enjoyed *'its originality'*, *'the simplicity of the story told'*. Respondents mostly appreciated the *'content over the technique'*, *'the focus on everyday life'*. When asked whether the exhibition met their expectations all participants' answers were extremely positive. For example, they defined it as: *'an intense journey'*, *'minimal but with a powerful message'*.

From our data collection emerged that the majority of respondents expressed a high level of engagement with the exhibition, as some stated they highly identified with the characters of photographs. Statements and fragmented autobiographies included in the questionnaires might demonstrate identification: *'I relate to that, as it describes some*

of the events of my life' or *'since 18 years I have lived far from my original home town, and I have always experienced the greetings of my parents'*. Hence, our findings revealed that the exhibition activated thoughts about the meaning of life and importance of family bonds. For example, some participants answered: *'the intimacy of family relationships attracted me deeply'*, *'I thought of the importance of my family'*, *'this reminded me of the loss of my family members'*, *'I felt very touched as my mother recently passed away'*. Respondents were able to identify significant relationships, for example, a participant stated *'I reflected on the importance of having a partner in life'*. Furthermore, for the majority of the respondents the exhibition awakened the value of family bonds, inspiring them to dedicate *'more attention to the loved ones'*, or *'making a phone call to my mum'*, or *'not lose family bonds'*.

Moreover, the high engagement and identification with the exhibition might be due to the sense of familiarity with people and places captured by Dikeman, as the photographs feature ordinary people in their everyday life. For example, a participant reported: *'I worked with older people in care homes, this story reminds me of the people I worked with'*. Some of the photographs showed, in the background, the front porch of the house, the pathway that leads to the entry of the house, the garage door, and the car parked in front of it. All these elements contributed to create a familiar place for a Western viewer's perspectives, such as those in the three Italian cities. Although some of the respondents who participated in our study revealed a sort of 'exotic' gaze: for example, a male respondent revealed to be intrigued about *'how an American garage is well-organised'* therefore, focused the attention on further details beyond the main characters of the images.

It also emerged that the little format of the photographs (circa 10x20 cm) contributed to create emotional engagement from the perspective of the visitors. Data from our study revealed that the format of the pictures was appreciated as it *'enabled a better view of the passing of time, in a sort of progression'*, *'as in a flux'*, and invited the visitors to get physically closer, *'to get engaged with the exhibition'*, thus this might have stimulated empathy with the characters of the pictures.

Emotions elicited by the exhibition

Due to the high level of engagement and identification, as described above, we moved on considering the emotional impact of the exhibition. Some participants in this respect reported: *'I found myself into a universe of emotions'*, *'it is very sweet and very emotional: it touches your feelings and intimate self'*, *'this exhibition really moved me'*, *'it is heart-breaking'*, *'it is even more profound than I expected'*.

Therefore, we analysed our data, in order to identify the emotions elicited by the exhibition. From our data collection emerged that the photographs provoked deep and troubling emotions, such as nostalgia, sadness, sympathy, regret, but also joy, tenderness, love. In particular, nostalgia is an expression of fulfilment for what has been experienced with the acceptance that it is a pastime that will not return (Wildschut et al. 2006; Stets and Turner 2008). Some respondents answered by saying that: *'this exhibition conveys nostalgia that fills the heart'*, *'I felt nostalgia for moments spent with people who are no longer here'*, *'I felt nostalgia related to my out-of-region departures for study purposes'*. Someone else asserted that *'this exhibition inspires you to reflect on the importance of living fully in every single aspect of life, as some situations will not get back'*.

Participants reported that sadness was elicited in the dimension of the loss for departures from family home: *'sadness for leaving my parent's house'*; *'every time I leave for a trip, my parents greet me at the door and I feel sad'*. Nevertheless, respondents also refer to 'positive' emotions, such as of tenderness (Kalawski 2010): *'This exhibition arouses mixed feelings of happiness and sadness'*, or *'behind those goodbyes there are several sad but beautiful moments'*, *'it prompts me more love and affection'*. As visitors reported, sadness is experienced also for the sense of loss related to the relationship with the loved one, expressed via sympathy (Clark 1987; Lishner et al. 2011): *'I have never cried so much watching photographs of people I never met. I did it for this artist, it's so powerful'*.

Participants also expressed regret, for example: *'I thought about all the times I wanted to hug my parents and I can no longer do it'* or *'I regret I did not take pictures with my relatives'*. This might be interpreted as a missed opportunity, for something that was not done with significant others or simply about the way life was spent: *'I felt sad to think about time that runs away'*.

Ways to handle 'uncomfortable emotions'

Overall, answers include fragmented personal memories and autobiography of those who experienced detachment from familiar places, fear towards their ageing process, or envisioning older age of their own family members, or those who shared their recent grief and bereavement. In particular, some respondents answered: *'this exhibition enables reflection on the detachments from my parents when travelling from a city to another'*, *'the exhibition made me think about my grand-parents' ageing, my grandmother lost her smile when her husband passed away'* or *'importance of having some memories/pictures of my grandfather, passed away, I*

wish I had some, *I fear that this moment will arrive to me too, when my grandmother will pass away*.

Some visitors stated that the exhibition inspired them to open up to new and deeper perspectives of life, developing a genuine understanding about the preciousness of the present moment, as the following statements indicate: *look at the world with different eyes*, *look carefully at what surrounds me*, *learn to appreciate every single moment*. In fact, participants asserted that this exhibition elicited *serenity*, *renewal*, *nourishment* or *a renovated sense of hope* and finally *awareness of how lucky I am in still enjoying my parents' presence in my life*.

When participants were asked to articulate what they 'get' from the exhibition (Weiser, 2004) a current answer referred to the idea of creating a similar collection of photographs of their significant others, to have a tangible memory of them when they eventually would pass away. Participants expressed the will of building and preserving memories *document*, *collect*, *rearrange* and *fix those moments that might be irrelevant, but that will no longer exist*. Some participants expressed the desire to establish new rituals involving family members: *try to do a similar experiment*, *imitate her idea*, *perhaps I will do the same when visiting my grandparents house*, *take a picture of my mother as she greets me*, *develop a project over the years that can show a change*. In this sense, the exhibition was successful in triggering a proactive attitude of desiring to document moments, thus, on the ordinary aspects of everyday life. Furthermore, this might be seen as a way to envision ageing and to carry on during periods of grief by dealing with losses, as participants stated that this intention was generated out of the fear that their loved

once would pass away, or the regret for not having acted that way prior to a bereavement. Hence, one participant answered: *'I don't have a photograph of my grandfather, this project made me think on how much I would love one. I think this will happen to my grandmother, too. From now on, I will take a photograph of my grandmother, on every occasion I will see her.* As such, it appears that Dikeman's exhibition offered a way to handle uncomfortable emotions through creativity as it will be better discussed next.

Discussion

We discussed elsewhere the extent to which Dikeman's photography promoted welfare in the communities (D'Ambrosio et al. 2023). In this paper, we explored the ways in which her work generated emotions from the perspective of the viewers of the exhibition. This study was conceived as a way to stop and reflect on the emotions experienced during the exhibition. During the research design, it was anticipated that, participants could benefit from articulating their feelings and thoughts, by being engaged in the study. In fact, the writing process of the questionnaires encouraged reflection before the exit from the exhibition context. From our data analysis emerged that the exhibition elicited a wide range of emotions, personal memories and reflection on the unsettling complexity of life.

Participants' answers revealed that Dikeman's photographs offer a way to think about intimacy of emotions within family contexts (Fleetwood 2015) that simultaneously record and construct family bonds (Phu et al. 2017). In fact, participants responded positively to the exhibition, by revealing high engagement and identification to it, mainly due to its simple style. This echoes previous research that has shown how art

is appreciated when it is easy to process (Reber et al. 2004), and by virtue of familiarity (Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001). Sense of familiarity with people and places was probably due to the vernacular style of Dikeman's photography that feature ordinary people in their everyday life. In this sense, the influence that the *Leaving and Waving* exhibition had on participants is similar to the one by Lorie Novak's work (among others *Collected Visions*) in encouraging viewers to explore their own history and deepen family relationships via vernacular photography. This refers to pictures produced without any artistic intentions, by non-professional amateurs (Kaplan 2003; Cutshaw and Barrett 2008).

This study demonstrated how it is possible to use family photography to elicit emotions, not only via photo-therapy and therapeutic photographs (Krauss and Fryrear 1983; Spence 1986; Loewenthal 2013; 2023; Weiser 2014; 2018) but also in an exhibition context, by allowing ways for the viewers to articulate feelings. In this respect, our findings shed light on the wide range of emotions elicited by Dikeman's photography, with a specific focus on nostalgia, sadness, tenderness, sympathy and regret. It seems that viewers of the exhibition identified with the Dikemans' feelings, and could relate to her sense of detachment and loss. Consequently, the process of identification and empathy might have facilitated the self-reflection on difficult themes to address in everyday conversation. In fact, although the themes of loss, detachment, aging and death are rarely spoken in everyday life, our research shows that the exhibition allowed deepest and intimate reflections on these themes, thus contributing to individual well-being as providing an alternative way to address emotions via creativity.

By prompting individual memories and biographies, the exhibition appears to have enabled identification with the characters of the photographs. Therefore, possibly due to the high engagement, identification and emotional impact of the exhibition, the photo exhibition activated memories of loss, detachment, ageing and death. Seen under this light, Dikemna's work seems to have contributed to developing compassionate engagement (Baugher 2014). For example, some respondents expressed sympathy for the artist's loss of their parents. As suggested by Walsh and McGoldrick (2013) the influence of loss touches also those who may have never even known the deceased.

In this sense, firstly, we argue that the photo-exhibition was a successful way to address uncomfortable emotions and, secondly, that the research tool, as an invite to reflect on the emotions elicited by it, played a significant role in enabling articulation of difficult feelings. This was shown by participants who expressed fears towards their ageing process, or those who envisioned death, or those who shared their recent grief and bereavement. In these instances, the exhibition inspired participants to channel feelings generated by loss to unleash the creative potential, via generating a similar collection of memories. In this sense the vernacular style of Deanna's photography might have played a role in inspiring the viewers. This echoes the study conducted by Ulkuniemi (2007, 47) who states: 'I tried to give viewers the feeling that they were 'capable of doing the same thing', hoping to encourage them to take and use their own photographs in a new manner'. Thus, we might suppose that the exhibition inspired participants to establish new rituals involving photography with their own family members as instruments of private sentimental devotion to perpetuate the living image of the dear departed one. For example, Deanna's personal

family ritual inspired visitors to replicate this in their own family context to better deal with the detachment from family and friends before departing. This is in line with previous studies in the photography field, as family photographs taken while travelling provide an opportunity to relieve one's experiences later on (Ulkuniemi 2007). Furthermore, Dikeman's photography might have inspired visitors of the exhibition to consider ways of addressing bereavement by attempting to reconstruct a fragmentary picture of people they loved and lost. This resonates with previous research on the extent to which feelings engendered by loss might inspire creativity (Homans 1989; Brennan 2015). According to Brennan (2015), loss related to intimate relationships, such as disappearance of people, places and bereavement, in particular, provide the spur to creativity. Brennan defines creativity as 'the human proclivity for invention, innovation and the capacity and desire to create' (2015, 293). In fact, art and creativity have been used to channel feelings of anger, by creating an alternative, more hopeful and positive reality (Bolton 2008; Watts 2009). Furthermore, creativity appears to facilitate trauma recovery and the on-going relationship with the deceased (Klass et al. 1996; Valentine 2008; Bertman 2017). This might be linked with the role of things in relation to death (Williams 2003; Miller 2010), and the meanings of objects and private dwellings in signifying people and places loss (Hockey et al. 2010; Brennan 2018; Newby and Toulson 2018; Hallan and Hockey 2020). In fact, participants' desire to use photography, as a protection against the ravage of memory, resonates with the need to 'do something' using material objects following death (Brennan 2018). Adding on Musello (1979) and Ulkuniemi (2007) these data contribute to expanding knowledge on the potential use and function of the family photographs, that might help to better deal with addressing uncomfortable emotions.

As such, instead of repressing or denying the uncomfortable feelings derived by loss, ageing, detachment and death, Dikeman's work might be an incentive to value, capture and document those instances via the medium of a camera.

The high emotional response of the exhibition, the high engagement and identification with the characters featuring in Dikeman's photography might be also justified by the historical context in which this exhibition took place in the three Italian cities: the COVID-19 post-pandemic. As our findings have shown, the themes of loss, ageing, detachment and death were emotionally loaded during these challenging times. In fact, the emotional and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely documented (Pedrosa et al. 2020; Prati and Mancini 2021), highlighting a relationship between being in quarantine or self-isolation and mental health issues (Herat 2020). In particular, in Italy, social distancing measures by strict lockdown regulations were implemented to slow down the dissemination of the virus (Briscese et al. 2020). Hence, greetings and physical proximity radically changed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mondada 2020). Moreover, COVID-19 has changed the way in which older people have been conceptualised. Hence, these have been identified as the largest global risk group (Cesari and Montero-Odasso 2020) due to the high number of older adults' hospitalisation in intensive care and mortality rate (Baud 2020). Thus, the social construction of older people has been shaped by the COVID-19, with related risks of objectification (Brooke and Jackson 2020; Eiguren 2021). Similarly, the pandemic has altered the way in which death and dying were perceived in the public consciousness (Brennan 2022). Concurrently, COVID-19 prevented communities from reiterating interaction and traditional rituals (i.e. the practice of

greetings, see Mondada 2020; or prevented social gathering following death, see Brennan 2022) or navigating cultural spaces, such as exhibition and museums. Thus we might suggest that this historical context might have shaped the interpretation of participants of our research. Although this study cannot be considered representative of the entire Italian population, these findings resonate with Doyle's interpretations (2013) according to which the difficult artistic expressions need to be analysed as socially, politically, and institutionally situated. In fact, this research has shown the importance of the moment of time when the photo is viewed, as such, in line with Wisner (2004, 29): 'It is impossible to ever separate out the personal from the sociocultural-political in terms of both the intention of any photograph and also the meaning later assumed to be situated in it'.

Conclusion

This research has shown that photography can be a way to open up dialogue about emotions. Dikeman's photography in the exhibition *Leaving and Waving*, examined in this study, appears to be a successful tool to address and better handle uncomfortable emotions. Hence, this photo exhibition allowed reflection and narratives about loss, detachment, ageing and death, through new ways of processing and sharing the emotions derived from it.

From our findings emerged that the photographs' format and its aesthetic generated a high level of engagement, mainly due to the process of identification, and elicited personal memories that participants reported as fragmented biographies. Identification might be due, firstly, to the vernacular style of photography, featuring ordinary people in everyday practices, secondly, to the aesthetic of the exhibition (i.e.

format of the photographs that encouraged physical proximity, thus engagement), or, finally, due to the historical context in which the exhibition took place (post-COVID-19 pandemic). Thus, themes of detachment, loss, ageing and death were evoked from the participants' perspective. Therefore, we suggest that these themes are complex to address and this requires, not only a trans-disciplinarily approach in research, but simultaneously creative innovations to engage a general audience (see also Palladino 2023). Thus, photography and its multidisciplinary applications might be one of these. In line with works that suggest how a third party detachment may allow for personal reflection (Brennan 2022), a possible interpretation of these findings is that visitors of the exhibition who participated to our research were able to handle uncomfortable emotions generated by the themes of loss, detachment, ageing and death, particularly because of the exhibition context. In fact, it was possible to engage in such conversations with a sort of 'estrangement', as participants were able to detach from their own personal emotions, digested while filling the questionnaire, by contextualising themselves as just visitors of a photo exhibition. Although we do not have enough evidence to support this statement, it might be possible to suggest that exhibition contexts and art galleries might be seen as ideal locations to engage the general public on such uncomfortable themes. On this note, the implications generated by this study, might be used by researchers on these specific themes, curators and practitioners, for further knowledge and for public engagement. Moreover, similar photo-exhibition spaces might provide opportunity to link with support services (i.e. Cruse, Samaritans, Dying Matters in the UK context) both for expressing emotional issues raised by the exhibition or for developing coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, although the questionnaire's questions specifically requested individuals to list a series of emotions experienced, these were able to name a few, but also adding other key themes that are not considered emotions. This might be seen as a lack of knowledge on the definition of emotions, suggesting the need for emotion literacy amongst the population who took part in our study. Thus, this study might suggest that further intervention is needed on an educational level on the role of emotions and the importance of being able to articulate these for individual well-being. Photography might offer useful insights in this sense, hence the knowledge generated via this study might be useful for practitioners' in the field of art or education and public health policies.

However, as the researchers were not in the exhibition space during the data collection, it is not possible to state whether the participants were influenced by other actors involved (i.e. curators or organisers) or simply if they were involved in conversation with each other prior to their answers. Additionally, the methodology adopted was not able to capture 'situated' emotions expressed in different ways (i.e. people crying, getting emotional, the silence, the unsaid). This constitutes a limit of our research, thus, we wish to suggest future research on similar data collection, to consider different techniques (i.e. audio-video recordings, participant observation, fieldworks and reflective summary) to expand this knowledge further.

Finally, it might be interesting to replicate the study with some time-distance, as we are not aware of the long-term effects of the exhibition from participants' perspective. From our data analyses, several themes emerged that were excluded for the purposes of this paper (such as the meaning of memory, the role of rituals and time, emotional

recovery of exhibition context) and that we wish to explore in more detail in future publications.

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