*Welfare in-between artistic expressions and communities: Deanna Dikeman’s exhibition ‘Leaving and Waving’.*

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With the intention to investigate the role of photography in addressing social issues and the function that exhibitions play as an engine of collective action, the research focuses on the analysis of Deanna Dikeman’s exhibition Leaving and Waving. The photo reportage of 98 photographs was conducted over 27 years, through which the artist portrayed her parents at the moment of saying goodbye. This is a creative way that captures ageing, death, family bonds, generational relationships, greetings. The study was conducted by administering semi-structured anonymous questionnaires to visitors of three exhibitions in Italy (Campobasso, Rome, Verona) from February until June 2022. The study addresses the role of new social practices and associations, considering family ties in relational and socio-relational Welfare. The social as such is intended strategically to promote individual and collective well-being through artistic expression.

**Keywords**: *Photography, Social, Third Sector, Welfare.*

**Il Welfare tra espressioni artistiche e comunità: la mostra di Deanna Dikeman ‘Leaving and Waving’**

Con l'intento di indagare il ruolo della fotografia nel sociale e la funzione che le mostre svolgono come motore di azione collettiva su temi globali, la ricerca si concentra sull’analisi della mostra *Leaving and Waving* di *Deanna Dikeman*. Si tratta di un reportage fotografico di 98 scatti, si pone su un continuum temporale di 27 anni, dove l’artista ha ritratto i suoi genitori nel momento del saluto. Pertanto, una modalità creativa che tratta le tematiche dell’invecchiamento, la morte, i rapporti familiari e generazionali, il saluto. Lo studio è stato condotto somministrando questionari anonimi semi-strutturati ai visitatori di tre mostre in Italia (Campobasso, Roma, Verona) da Febbraio a Giugno 2022. La ricerca fa luce sul ruolo delle associazioni per dare risalto all'importanza dei legami familiari in chiave relazionale e di Welfare socio-relazionale, strategico per promuovere il benessere individuale e collettivo tramite il linguaggio artistico.

**Parole chiave**: *Fotografia, Sociale, Terzo Settore, Welfare.*

**Introduction**

Art is widely seen as a tool that can reflect and shape cultural attitudes and beliefs, and might have a powerful impact on individual and collective well-being. This paper focuses on the relationship between Art and Welfare, stressing the importance of arts that involve communities and third sector organisations. In particular, this work highlights the role of the cultural association *Il Cavaliere di San Biase* to create new social links thanks to the photo-exhibition *Leaving and Waving* by *Deanna Dikeman*.

The role of this cultural association has to be interpreted in its aim of involvement and empowerment of the local communities in which the exhibition was held. In fact, the latter was able to identify the needs of the communities and played a proactive role in creating a space of encounter for people in the specific cultural contexts via art-galleries. Thus, it was worthy of research attention due to the effects of artistic production on social context.

Moreover, the relevance of this photo-exhibition needs to be contextualised in the historical circumstances where it took place, such as in three different Italian cities (Campobasso, Rome and Verona), between February and June 2022, after the lockdown caused by Covid-19 pandemic. The need to strengthen relations amongst people in their own communities alongside the will to boost confidence in the re-appropriation of public places were the driving forces behind this project, from the perspective of the cultural Association cited.

As such, this research aims at exploring how Il Cavaliere di San Biase, as a local third sector association, promoted welfare toward the communities involved in the photo-exhibition Leaving and Waving

**Photography and Social relations**

Arts have been used throughout history as a form of communication that can narrate and interpret social phenomena in all their complexity (Thompson, 2012), with significant benefits on health and well-being. In fact, the creative process promotes a sense of self-expression, self-esteem which might contribute to well-being (Bolton, 2008; Zarobe, Bungay, 2017). In addition, art can inspire comfort, and give hope to individuals facing challenging situations (McNiff, 2004). As such, several sociological studies have shown that exposure to and engagement with art can have a beneficial impact on mental health and well-being as recently documented in Fancourt and Finn (2019).

This is the role of arts in relation to (Cultural) Welfare (Alexander, 2020; Grossi, Ravagnan, 2013) as an integrated model of well-being for individuals and communities through practices based on art. As such, it has been shown how art can be used for community development, to provide a space for people to connect with others who share similar experiences, forming social bonds and solidarity (Lowe, 2000). This can help to foster a sense of community and social support, well-being and social capital (Putnam, 2000).

For over a century, photography has been an integral part of society: primarily serving to preserve memories, while also playing a significant role in shaping societal attitudes and beliefs (Becker, 1974; Marien, 2006). In particular, it focuses on subjective emotions and on public feelings (Cvetkovich, 2007; Kim and Bianco, 2007; Phu and Brown, 2018), which have become a powerful tool for promoting well-being.

Indeed, photography has been used for self-exploration, personal development (Martin, Spence, 1985; Frith, Hancourt, 2007) and as a medium for supporting changes of younger people (Rampton, et al. 2007) or to prompt memories in later life (Mitchell, 2005). Hence, the complex bond between photography and welfare has attracted several researchers.

Great emphasis was placed, also, on the role of photography in addressing social and economical issues (Grady, 1996; Pauwels, 2010; Harper, 2019). Indeed, it has been defined as a transformative agent within communities, as such ideas and social ties were made meaningful through visual literacy promotion (Grosvenor, Macnab, 2015).

In recent years, a growing trend of artists has been using their work as a form of activism, to raise awareness of and bring attention to social and political issues (Groys, 2014; Trione, 2022). Art activism refers to the use of art as a tool for social change that promotes social justice (Jelinek, 2014). In particular, photography has been considered a form of activism in Bogre (2012) and Railford (2009) works to address issues of race, gender and politics, to challenge dominant cultural narratives. In this sense, art activism has the power to inspire changes by creating a space for dialogue and reflection on important themes. Through their works, artists can help to create a sense of community and solidarity around crucial issues (Cohen-Cruz, 2002). Art activism helps to promote empathy and social changes, breaking down barriers, creating opportunities for dialogue and well-being. Within this context the following project is situated.

**Third Sector role in Art and Welfare**

Art and photography can enact and foster welfare in different social contexts through the role of Third or Private Social Sector. In fact, the Third Sector (TS) is one «of the most significant implementations of the principle of horizontal subsidiarity: it is an original channel of shared administration, alternative to that of profit and the market, declined for the first time in general terms [as] a true procedimentalization of subsidiary action» (Ascoli, Campedelli, 2021:369-388). TS is a social system based on altruism and no calculation: it is as a set of hetero-centred, hetero-referential behavioural and welfare practices aimed to direct/indirect others well-being.

Horizontal subsidiarity plays a crucial role, referring to the participation of citizens as motivators of social bonding and activators of civic interest. It represents a form of welfare closer to the population. Communities and third sector associations might enact bottom-up social connections and movements (Ibid.).

It comes here in evidence the relational paradigm (Donati, 1983; 2013) stressing the importance of social relationships within society and the role of TS: the relational paradigm considers subjects as agents in a reciprocal, communicative and symbolic acting out of social life dynamics (Donati, 1991). In this sense, TS might be considered in the act of promoting participation and community engagement.

In the photo-exhibitions[[4]](#footnote-4) analysed, there is an intention to raise people’s awareness of the importance of their social relationships, valuing their daily lives. As such, there is an horizontal subsidiary enacted by the cultural association *Il Cavaliere di San Biase*, curating the Italian exhibitions from February to June 2022. The ability of its president, *Antonella Struzzolino*, in activating social resources made possible to launch the exhibition in Campobasso, and also in Rome and Verona, thanks to other local cultural associations (*Wide Shut Photography* and *Grenze - Arsenali Fotografici)*.

Thus, this case study promotes an ethic of responsibility and develops a sense of community: it unpacks the active role of TS associations operating within the communities aiming at enabling social relations, and at leading their needs, by creating a synthesis between individual, family and community history (Gammaitoni, 2006).

**Deanna's exhibition meaning and concept**

*Deanna Dikeman* is an American photographer, based in Kansas City. She devoted her work to the relevance of everyday life. Her most important project is *Relative Moments* in which she depicts her households in a series of thirty-year long ordinary life moments.

From a selection of this former effort, in 2021 she inaugurated *Leaving and Waving*, an exhibition focused on her parents’ greetings: each time she was departing from her parents’ home in Iowa, Deanna took a photo of them on the front porch of their house, in the act of saying goodbye (Fig.1).

The exhibition was made of 98 colour black and white photographs (postcard format, 10x20) in a chronological order.



*Figure 1 - Photograph 3/2004 from Leaving and Waving. Photo courtesy of Deanna Dikeman*

Deanna asserted her private need of capturing those specific instants with her parents, to retain their memory over time. While at the beginning there was no intentionality to generate an exhibition with these photographs, only after 27 years, she acknowledged the potentiality of the growing number of pictures, as inevitably she documented her parents’ ageing process.

The partnership between diverse social actors in the three venues influenced the setting up of the exhibition context, which might have had an impact on the public perceptions. For example, in Campobasso, an affecting ambience was created through a contemplative music selection and the space design encouraged the thoughts and impressions exchange (Fig.2).



*Figure 2 - Exhibition in Campobasso. Photo courtesy of Lello Muzio.*

**Research methodology and participants involved**

For this study data were collected through quali-quanti questionnaires including a range of open and closed questions. The questionnaire is divided into three areas: identification of participants’ socio-demographic information; investigation about visitors’ relationship with photography; study of the social practices prompted by the photographs. In particular, the questionnaire consists of 18 questions, 10 of which are open. Amongst the open questions: 2 investigate the enjoyment of the exhibition and include a first structured part through a likert scale for closed answers (1: not at all; 2 fairly; 3 very much); one is about the reasons that brought the visitors to the exhibition; 2 focus on the photographs; further three aim to investigate emotions, memories and reflections triggered by photographs; the last two are devoted to the inspiration that participants drew from the exhibition regarding concrete actions in their personal sphere and general comments.

The anonymous questionnaire, available in printed copies at the exhibition’s entrance, was targeted to the exhibition’s visitors aged +18. These were voluntarily engaged with the questionnaire or decided not to fill it out, before dropping it into a box, situated at the venue's exit.

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse data. Authors labelled the anonymous quotes, creating a list of main concepts. These include: emotions felt/experienced; memories; importance of family ties; ageing; detachment/loss.

A total number of 153 people participated in the study (93 female and 60 male), primarily from the 3 Italian regions: Molise, Lazio, Veneto.

Respondents’ age ranges from 18 and 82 years old, although mainly aged between 25 and 45. While some participants did not declare their educational background, the majority hold a higher educational degree (University Bachelor’s or Master’s Degree), the rest of them hold a High School Diploma.

Visitors stated they learned about the exhibition via friends (65), social media (42) or because they were involved in cultural associations (35); only a small number knew about the exhibition via traditional media (11). Most of them attended the exhibition as photography enthusiasts (60) while others were simply interested in the exhibition (54). Few of these were experienced photographers (39).

Only a few were familiar with the artist’s work prior to the exhibition, while the majority became aware of Deanna’s photography then (133) or by attending an online event[[5]](#footnote-5) held on 19th February 2022, via Zoom on this event created by the Association (20).

**Major Findings**

This research shows that this exhibition elicited a high level of engagement at different levels.

Overall, most of the participants felt a deep sense of connection and gratitude towards by the association for conceiving the exhibition: *“Thanks to Deanna and to all those who contribute their sensitivity to the dissemination of her work”* (F,25); “*This great exhibition allows deep reflection and empathy*” (F,31); “*Thanks to those who have the sensitivity to have these ideas and share them*” (F,65).

Furthermore, respondents noted that the role of emotions, the meaning of life, and love are universal. They stated that the exhibition activated deep reflections on time relevance, inspiring them to optimize time spent with their beloveds, mainly older family members. Thus, some said: “*These photos leave me with eyes swollen with tears but wanting to run home and spend time with grandmothers”* (F,28*)*.

Some visitors stated that Deanna’s exhibit inspired them to focus more on social relations: “*the importance of family ties* (F,24)”; *“enjoying everyday life with my old mother* (F,59)”; *“going home to hug my parents* (F,25)”*;“taking care of my loved ones* (F,55)”; *“thinking about re-joining the family* (F,30)”.These results illustrate how relational and community welfare were activated. Hence the link between arts and Cultural Welfare (Alexander, 2020; Grossi, Ravagnan, 2013) refers to the context of this exhibition, as it was seen as a space for people to connect with others, activating social bonds, solidarity (Lowe, 2000) and fostering a sense of self-expression, self-esteem, and creativity, which might contribute to well-being (Bolton, 2008; Watts, 2009; Zarobe, Bungay, 2017).

In addition, the exhibition offered visitors a ritual space (Duncan, 1995/2005) through which they experienced the well-known transformative effects of rituals (Driver, 2019; Davis-Floyd, 2022), identified not only in terms of a "sense of enlightenment" or nourishment (Duncan, p. 13) but also in social acceptance (Marshall, 2002) and social adaptation (d’Aquili et al., 1979).

Moreover, exhibition activated new attitudes such as: *“searching for art in everyday life”* (M,36); “*looking carefully at our surroundings”* (F,50*); “remembering and appreciating events and people”* (F,39*); “appreciating some moments of daily life, even if repetitive in appearance with little importance*” (F,40).

Others said they want to imitate Deanna’s practices; they were thinking about a similar photographic project: “*try to do a similar experiment*” (F,45); “*to photograph my parents' entire house, now empty and closed*” (F,67), “*to create a series of photos of our couple*” (M,57); “*I’ll do the same with my trips to my grandparents’ house”* (F,25). In particular, some of them would love to “*document the most important moments with my loved ones and to my parents*” (F,18).

Furthermore, these social practices aiming at tracing a family archive of shared memories might be linked to reflection on the role of technology as a way to cherish memories and enhance relationship with significant ones (Storm, Soares, 2021): “*the exhibition inspired me to print photos and not keep them in my smartphone only”* (F,25); “*to do a storytelling of my life between traditional photography and digital ones”* (F,26).

In line with previous research, our findings show that this event promoted self expression and democratisation of photography (Palladino, Fasulo, 2011) for ordinary people too: they said they want to start new social practices. In this sense, the exhibition and the TS association such artistic expression might be seen as a way to empower individuals in their own communities, by initiating a society transformation. We do not know if visitors actually did what they said they would. Certainly, the exhibition activated reflections and provoked a change in behaviours in family and community.

**Conclusions**

This research focused on the relationship between art, TS and Welfare thanks to Deanna Dikeman’s exhibition, in a critical historical moment such in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, people involved have been exposed to new ways of thinking about social meanings of art, such as the relational manifestations, emotional implications, practices, bonds, actions and reflections in the pragmatic social context.

Thanks to the *Cavaliere di San Biase Association* as a TS Association, Deanna’s exhibition was able to reach the cities identified for research, in a circular awareness. In this sense, associationism is a prompt for social changes. Consequently, Welfare becomes truly horizontal: the social bond is reactivated and it becomes fundamental to the society's growth in order to produce proactive and positive behaviours in one's family and wider circle.

There is also a synthesis between the collective and the individual because of creative communication, activated through photography. In fact, the concept of *Leaving and Waving* deals with family ties, the relations between generations. The photo-exhibition made it possible to create a circulation of relations in the community: visitors felt the sensibility; they were involved in a social narrative to which several people can relate.

Thereby, Welfare is the expression of micro, meso and macro dimensions, as such photography and exhibition creative language represents a way to communicate such dimensions whose levels of participation can be transformative elements of the social itself, for individuals and for communities. In light of these findings, there is the need to invest in photography as a tool for social community change.

However, the limitation of the research related to a distorting bias should be underlined, i.e.. the fact that the study focused on photo-amateurs mainly. Hence, people who are already sensitive to photography and to the topics dealt with. Moreover, it would have been useful to conduct a follow up with the organisation that organised the exhibition. However, at the time of writing, the exhibition is still touring in Italy - with a future event in Rieti - and this might be the focus of future research interest. Further research might examine the activation of the relationship between art and communities from a gender perspective. In this research both the artist and curator of the exhibitions in the different Italian contexts are women. These women had the sensibility to lead these movements and, consequently, produce social empowerment.

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**Table of Figures**

Figure 1 - Photograph 3/2004 from Leaving and Waving. Photo courtesy of Deanna Dikeman.

Figure 2 - Exhibition in Campobasso. Photo courtesy of Lello Muzio.

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4. The photo report was firstly displayed in Italy at the Cortona *On The Move* international photography festival (15 July-3 October 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The on-line event is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgaTm3w9wLE [↑](#footnote-ref-5)